What about the future?

Text: Mark 13:14-37

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**Scriptures:** Daniel 9:24-27; 12:1-13; Mark 13:14-37

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 326, 467, 121, 338, 149b

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#46)

**Occasion:** First sermon of a new year

**Theme:** Having spoken to his disciples on the Mount of Olives about signs of the coming end of this age, Jesus prophesies the fall of Jerusalem, the shaking of the heavens, His return to earth, the gathering of all the elect (at a time known to nobody except God the Father) and calls His disciples to be alert and ready for His coming in glory.

**Proposition:** Do not be surprised by catastrophic world events, but always remain alert and ready for Christ’s return.

**Introduction**

Do you ever think, wonder, or worry about the future? The beginning of a new year is often a time when we look ahead to the days yet to come. These may be personal thoughts about health – physical and spiritual, about work – paid and voluntary, service and sacrifice, or about our relationships with others: family, friends and neighbours. When we think about the future, we may be anxious about the church. When we look forward, we may be uneasy about the state of our nation, spiritually, socially, economically and or otherwise.

As we take a global perspective, we may become troubled by the prospect of war, rumours of conflicts escalating in the Middle East, Ukraine or elsewhere. We might be distressed by the apparent changes in global temperatures, extreme weather events and increasing crop failures. For the sake of others, we may be anxious about growing food insecurity and famine in parts of the world. Theoretical physicist Albert Einstein once famously said ‘*I never think of the future – it comes soon enough*’.

There is certainly a lot to be said for ‘living in the moment’ and not focusing our attention on what is yet to be. Jesus said “*do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble*” (Matt 6:34). In fact, apart from a small percentage of the total revelation of God in the Bible which foretells the future, we don’t know anything for certain about what is yet to happen.

Our text today from Mark chapter 13 is one of the relatively few passages of Scripture that focus on what theologians term ‘eschatology’. Parallel accounts of these prophetic words of Christ are recorded by both Matthew (24:15-25) and Luke (21:20-24) in their gospels. Eschatology is the study of what the God’s Word reveals is going to happen in the ‘end times’. This is an area of intense interest to some Christians who have a consuming fascination with future prophesy and who run the risk of speculating beyond the relatively few details revealed in Scripture. There are other Christians who go the opposite way and avoid ‘eschatology’ almost completely, perhaps because interpreting the ‘end times’ passages in Scripture is far from easy and even with careful diligent and prayerful study, many questions remain unanswered.

In his gospel, Mark has recorded how Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before the Friday when He would be killed. On the Monday, Jesus cleared the Temple of moneychangers. Returning the next day, Tuesday, Jesus taught in the temple in response to questions by those who tried to ‘trap him in his talk’ (12:13). As He left the Temple, one of his disciples said "*Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.*" (Mark 13:1-2).

Jesus then expands on this future prophecy of destruction with what is often called ‘the Olivet Discourse’. He sat down opposite the temple on the Mount of Olives to speak to his disciples about what was going to happen in the future. He begins with signs that will indicate that ‘*these things are about to be accomplished*” (13:4). As we saw in the previous sermon in this series, these signs are:

* False Christ-like figures who will lead many astray.
* Wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes in various places, and famines.
* Persecution of Christians by religious and secular authorities.
* Betrayal and hatred of Christians by members of their own families.

Now in verses 14-37, Jesus prophesies the fall of Jerusalem, the shaking of the heavens, His return to earth, the gathering of all the elect and teaches his disciples how to respond as they wait for the future to unfold. There are three points for us to focus on this morning:

1. Fearful destruction
2. Powerful glory
3. Constant vigilance
4. **Fearful destruction (verses 14-23)**

One of the reasons why Biblical revelation of future events can be difficult to interpret is because of two ‘eschatological’ features called ‘prophetic foreshortening’ and ‘multiple fulfilments’. A helpful way to understand this is to think about looking across an expanse of flat ground to see mountain peaks from afar. From a great distance the peaks can look like they are all equally as far away from you – as though they were in a single line on the horizon. However, as you get closer you see that some peaks are much nearer to you than others. This is how Biblical prophecy tends to function. The view presented in Scripture often includes multiple timeframes at which events are to be fulfilled.

A single passage may include ‘multiple fulfilments’ where the same text points to not just one future event, but two or more. We can see this ‘prophetic foreshortening’ and ‘multiple fulfilment’ very clearly in our text today. For example, Jesus speaks of the ‘*abomination of desolation*’ (v14) which links back to an earlier prophesy by Daniel (11:31): who had predicted a king who would come from the north and desecrate the temple in Jerusalem.

This was first fulfilled in 168 BC when Antiochus Epiphanes set up a pagan altar and sacrificed a pig in the Most Holy Place. A further fulfilment occurred in AD 70 when the Roman general Titus (later emperor) looted and destroyed the temple. In his parallel gospel account, Matthew records Jesus describing the events following the ‘*abomination of desolation*’ as being ‘*great tribulation*’ (Matt 24:20).

There are four different main interpretations about the ‘great tribulation:

1. The entire section (v13-23) describes the great tribulation immediately preceding Christ’s return. This cannot be correct, because the parallel passage in Luke (21:20) ‘*when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near*’ (cf. Mark 13:14) clearly points to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.
2. Verses 14-18 refers to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 – the remainder (or at least 19-20) describes ‘the great tribulation’ that will immediately precede Christ’s return. This idea does not fit the text of Scripture where verses 18 and 19 are clearly joined together as taking place at the same time (verse 18 “pray that it may not happen in winter’ to verse 19 ‘for in those days….’)
3. Verse 14-23 is a single unit only describing the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and nothing else. This idea does not fit with verse 19 ‘*For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be*’. The fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 was a hugely catastrophic event with fearful destruction of people and property. 1st century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus describes the terrible suffering of the inhabitants of the city under attack; young and old were slaughtered in huge numbers. The City of Jerusalem had been a place of refuge in Old Testament times (e.g. Isa 16:3; Jer 4:6; Zech 2:11) under Roman siege it became a place to urgently flee to the mountains from.

Jesus compassionately highlights the vulnerability of women pregnant with children or caring for infants. The dangers associated with fleeing in winter included streams swollen with heavy rains making passage across difficult and dangerous as well as the hardships of keeping warm at night in open country when the temperatures are seasonally low.

The destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 was truly terrible, but was it worse than other terrible times in history: Hitler, Pol Pot, recent death and suffering in Israel, Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan? No… which leads us to the fourth view

1. Verses 14-23 describe both the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and **also** events leading up to the return of Christ. This fits the text. The coming of the Lord Jesus in glory follows the ‘great tribulation’ ‘immediately’ – as Matthew records this prophesy of Christ (24:29). The time frame of the ‘great tribulation’ is one of the points of difference between various ‘end times’ interpretations about the return of Christ another is the timing and nature of the ‘1,000-year reign of Christ’ mentioned in Revelation 20:3

Here is a very brief overview of three mainstream views:

1. Amillennialism – **no** future literal 1,000-year reign of Christ, but a symbolic number covering the entire period between His first and second comings. Many ‘amillennialists’ would see the current age between Christ’s first and second coming as being the period of the ‘great tribulation’ Some would see an intensification leading up to His second coming.
2. Postmillennialism -Christ returns **after** his non-literal 1,000-year reign bringing in a golden age when the majority of the world’s population will come to faith in Jesus.
3. Premillennialism – Christ returns **before** his 1,000-year reign preceded by the period of the ‘great tribulation’

The differences in interpretation between these views results from the understanding of Biblical prophecy, the relationship between Israel and the church, and the order of eschatological (end time) events. Whatever view a person thinks best reflect the teaching of Scripture, it is helpful to remember that eschatology in the Bible is always presented as a motivation for faithful living in the present. That is the main point rather than the details of future timeframes.

Now let’s briefly focus on the meaning of verse 20 “*And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days*”. This is a difficult verse to interpret because the idea of a ‘shortening of the days of affliction’ has no parallel in the Old Testament, nor does Jesus speak of this apart from in the Olivet Discourse (it is found in non-canonical literature, but this is not authoritative so does not help with our understanding).

So what can we say? If God had not sovereignly limited the period of intense tribulation at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, no Jews (elect and non-elect) may have survived, and all of the elect Gentiles may have died. In this God’s mercy is revealed. The trials and difficulties of this life are all of limited duration. They come to an end for all of us when we die physically, and they will come to an end for everyone on this earth when Christ returns, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Powerful glory (verses 24-32)**

There are three related events which Jesus prophesied after ‘that tribulation’. He begins with the words ‘but in those days’ – a phrase used frequently in the Old Testament in association with the ‘end times’ (e.g. Jer 3:16, 18; 31:29, 33:15ff; Joel 2:28, Zech 8:23):

* Disturbances in the cosmos (v24-25) – a darkened sun and moon, stars falling – summarised by ‘*the powers in the heavens will be shaken*’.
* The return of the Son of Man – coming in the clouds with great power and glory.
* The gathering of the elect – from the four points of the compass.

As well as ‘prophetic foreshortening’ and ‘multiple fulfilments’ there is another feature of ‘end times’ passages of Scripture that makes interpretation challenging – the use of figurative language. Verses 24-27 are deeply rooted in Old Testament prophesy expressed in poetic/symbolic language. Therefore a strictly literal interpretation should be avoided. The cosmic disruption preceding the return of Christ may well have physical elements such as unnatural darkness and changes in the stellar objects, but it is important to know that this is first and foremost symbolic language. In the Old Testament, cosmic disturbances are strongly associated with God’s intervention in history. For example the prophet Joel reveals that at the coming of the Lord “*the sun and moon are darkened and the stars withdraw their shinning*” (Joel 2:10 see also 3:15, Isa 13:10; 34:4; Eze 32:7-8, Amos 8:9).

The next ‘eschatological’ event involves clouds What do you think of when you hear the word ‘cloud’? White fluffy shapes in the sky? Cirrus, cumulus, stratus or nimbus? A mass of miniature liquid droplets, frozen crystals or other particles suspended in the atmosphere about the surface of the earth? On the Mount of Olives, Jesus said ‘*they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory*’ (v26). So will Jesus return to this earth through the cloud filled atmosphere? Perhaps. Maybe we should interpret the clouds literally, but maybe not.

In Scripture clouds sometimes signify divine presence (Ex 13:21; 16:10; 19:9; 24:15-1840:35; 1 Ki 8:10,11; Neh 9:19; Ps 78:14; Eze 1:4; Rev 14:14-16). When Jesus was transfigured, a cloud overshadowed those on the high mountain and a voice came out of the cloud saying, “*this is my beloved Son; listen to him*” (Mark 9:7). When Christ ascended 40 days after his resurrection “*he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight*” (Acts 1:9). The physical return of Christ to this earth ‘in clouds’ may well symbolize his great power and glory.

After Christ’s return, He will “*send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven*” (13:27). The ‘four winds’ refers to the four points of the compass (north, south, east and west) and is a poetic way of saying ‘everywhere on earth’ – ‘from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven’ emphasises this. This phrase includes those elected to salvation who have already died, together with those still on the earth at the time of Christ’s return, are changed in ‘the twinkling of an eye’ (1 Cor 15:52). The great assembly of God’s people is prophesied many times in the OT (e.g. Deut 30:4; Isa 11:11-16; 27:12-13; Eze 39:27,28; Zech 2:6-11) in terms of a gathering in the promised land – foreshadowing what is now revealed by Christ here.

In summary exactly which details in these verses are literal and which are symbolic will only become clear once these end time events have occurred. We know somethings about the future from this prophecy, but by no means all things. Jesus uses a fig tree to help his disciples understand the signs that will precede the words of His prophesy coming true. Just as the branch of a fig tree becomes soft and tender because of the sap that is swelling within it before it produces leaves indicating that summer is near. So, for the disciples, earthquakes, famines, and wars indicated that the coming destruction of Jerusalem was near.

Some of them alive when He spoke these words would be on the earth in AD 70. That is the meaning of verse 30 for them “*Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place*”. Some Bible commentators suggest that ‘this generation’ also refers to the Jewish people – indicating that some physical descendants of Abraham will be present when Christ returns to this earth. Whilst it is highly likely that some of this ethnic group will be present then, it is not clear that the phrase ‘this generation’ refers to them.

Jesus confirms the ‘passing away’ of this physical earth and the surrounding atmosphere with the prophecy in verse 31 “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away*”. The ‘passing away’ of this world does not indicate total destruction but rather renewal/rejuvenation. The ‘birth’ of the new heaven and new earth is also revealed in a number of OT and NT passages such as Isaiah 11:6-9; Rom 8:18-22; 1 Cor 7:31; 2 Peter 3:10, 13; Rev 21:1-5.

So in contrast to the physical world around us which is less stable than we might think and will be transformed into a new world when Christ returns, His Word will always endure without change. So it would be true to say that the Bible is a firmer foundation for you and me than the very ground we stand on. We are wise when we take Jesus at His word, thinking and acting according to His perfect wisdom. Jesus adds in verse 32 “*But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*”.

Here is a glimpse of part of the mystery of Christ’s incarnation. In His incarnation His divine omniscience was limited as He willingly put off the privileges of the eternal Son of God (Phil 2:7), whilst still remaining divine. Only God the Father knows when Christ will return in power and glory. Those who speculate and think they can predict when the end of this age do not understand the plain, literal, language that Jesus uses in verse 32. Why does Jesus tell us some vital things about the future before they occur? So that we would be on our guard (v23), which brings us to our final point:

1. **Constant vigilance (verses 33-36)**

As we’ve seen, understanding the ‘end time’ passages of Scripture takes care, effort and a humble acceptance that not everything is yet clear to us. However, there is an instruction from Jesus to His disciples that is hard to miss in our text because it is repeated, can you see it? ‘*Be on guard*’ (v23, 33), ‘*keep/stay awake*’ (v33, 34, 35, 37). The underlying Greek word in verse 23 translated ‘be on your guard’ means to see, look deeply into, comprehend, perceive. The call is to look at the signs Jesus has foretold and to understand them. In verse 33, the ‘be on your guard’ word is joined to an underlying Greek word translated ‘keep awake’. This word literally means to abstain completely from sleep.

Here is another example of where a strictly literal interpretation would lead us very badly astray. Sleep is essential for human health, although different people do need different amounts. Staying awake for more than 24 hours leads to diminished memory and attention, irritability, and muscle tension. After 72 hours without sleep, perception of the world is severely compromised, and people tend to become depressed and hallucinate. The record for going without sleep was set in 1963 at 11 days, 25 minutes. Because sleep deprivation is so dangerous, the Guinness Book of World Records has wisely removed this category.

‘Keep awake’ is used figuratively here and means to stay spiritually alert, and remain vigilant. This is the meaning of a third word used in verses 24, 35 and 37 and translated ‘stay awake’. Imagine crossing a fast-flowing river by stepping on slippery stones. You need to be careful and alert or you’ll end up going for a fast and potentially dangerous ‘swim’. The Greeks used this word for such a river crossing. So the meaning is ‘*Be on the alert, be cautious, be watchful for hazards*’.

Jesus helps His disciples to understand by teaching us using a parable about a man going on a journey, leaving his home in charge of his servants and commanding the doorkeeper to stay awake. It is vital that the night watch is maintained because it is not known whether the master will come; perhaps in the evening, at midnight, at dawn or early in the morning. It is critical that the Master does not find his servants asleep.

Whilst you and I don’t have live-in servants and a doorkeeper at home, we can readily understand this parable which depicts a situation which would not have been uncommon in 1st century Israel. We, both as a congregation together and as individual believers, need to be prepared for Christ’s return at any time. Just as the doorkeeper was not to be asleep, but actively engaged in his service to the master’s household, so each one of us is called to be active in serving our Lord. American Theologian John Frame has helpfully said (Systematic Theology, p1094) that “*So far as I can see, every Bible passage about the return of Christ is written for a practical purpose –not to help us develop a theory of history, but to motivate our obedience*”.

How then do we apply this command to staying spiritually alert and ready for Christ’s return at any time? Each day of this coming year (and as long as you live on this earth), seek to serve Christ and His body the church with the gifts He has given you as much as you are able to within the constraints of health and your responsibilities to others. In most churches it is often said that roughly 20% of the congregation do about 80% of the work. This is far from consistent with Christ’s call to ‘stay awake’.

Also, each day of this coming year (and as long as you live on this earth), seek to serve Christ and His body the church by living at peace with everyone else, if possible, as far as it depends on you (Rom 12:18). In some churches, there are people who are estranged from others and will not speak with them or pray for them and/or have not forgiven them. This is far from consistent with Christ’s call to ‘stay awake’. Also, in some churches, there are those who profess Christ but who will not repent of their sin, even when others have graciously brought this to their attention (Matt 18:15). They resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8) and will not submit to the Lord Jesus. This is far from consistent with Christ’s call to ‘stay awake’.

There is much more that could be said about what spiritually staying awake includes – in essence we could say ‘all the commands of Scripture’. So hear the Word of the Lord today and know that it is essential that you are constantly spiritually vigilant, watchful and alert. We do not know when Christ will return, but we do know that we are called to be alert and ready at all times because this is what Jesus says to His disciples: “stay awake”. This readiness to love and serve Jesus as we wait for His return with constant vigilance is well expressed in the song day of Judgement, Day of wonders!

“*At this call the dead awaken, rise to life from earth and sea, all the powers of nature shaken by his looks prepare to flee. Careless sinner, what will then become of thee?*

*But to those who have confessed, loved and served the Lord below, he will say “Come near, ye blessed, see the kingdom I bestow; you forever shall my love and glory know*”.

AMEN.