

Mark 13:14-37: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 April 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Mark chapter 13 verses 14 to 37 But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be, let the reader understand.

Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out. And let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

And alas for women who are pregnant, and for those who are nursing infants in those days, pray that it may not happen in winter. 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.

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. And then if anyone says to you, Look, here is the Christ, or look, there he is, do not believe it.

For false Christs and false prophets will arise, and perform signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard, I have told you all things beforehand.

[1:09] But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then 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.

From the fig tree learn its lesson. As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake, for you do not know when the time will come.

[2:11] It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

And what I say to you, I say to all, stay awake. In Mark 13, Jesus is addressing his disciples' question about when the destruction of the temple that he foretold would occur.

A critical sign of this is the abomination of desolation that Daniel foretold in Daniel chapter 9, verses 24 to 27. The abomination of desolation is the abomination that provokes the desolation of the temple, not the desolation of the temple itself.

Abominations are typically performed by Israel itself. It's the perversion of the bride. It's not the sin of the nations. In the Old Testament, it could be seen in the sins of the sons of Eli, for instance, or the idolatry of the nation in Ezekiel's day.

The abomination of the temple, then, is caused by flagrant sin and or apostasy. And the more specific reference to the abomination of desolation is found in Daniel chapter 11, verses 30 to 35.

[3:31] For ships of Kittim shall come against him, and he shall be afraid and withdraw, and shall turn back and be enraged and take action against the Holy Covenant. He shall turn back and pay attention to those who forsake the Holy Covenant.

Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate. He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant.

But the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action. And the wise among the people shall make many understand, though for some days they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder.

When they stumble, they shall receive a little help. And many shall join themselves to them with flattery. And some of the wise shall stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made white, until the end of the time, for it still awaits the appointed time.

In Daniel chapter 11, the king is Antiochus Epiphanes, an early 2nd century BC Hellenistic ruler of the Seleucid Empire. Yet the abomination of desolation is not directly set up by him, but by forces aligned with him, which may be those who are described as forsaking the holy covenant.

[4 : 45] I believe it's the apostate Jews, particularly the high priests, Jason and Menelaus, who are the ones who set up the abomination that makes desolate in around 168 BC.

This also is connected with Daniel chapter 9, verses 24 to 27. Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and profit, and to anoint a most holy place.

Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time, and after the sixty-two weeks an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing.

And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed, and he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering, and on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.

So we have an earlier desolation, or an earlier abomination of desolation, in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees, and now we have a later one that's being foretold, and I believe this is the one that Jesus is referring to, the events in AD 70.

[6 : 17] And I think there's a candidate described in Josephus, in the Jewish War, book four, chapter three, he writes of the Zealots, that they undertook to dispose of the high priesthood by casting lots for it, whereas, as we have said already, it was to descend by succession in a family.

The pretense they made for this strange attempt was an ancient practice, while they said that of old it was determined by lot, but in truth it was no better than a dissolution of an undeniable law and a cunning contrivance to seize upon the government, derived from those that presumed to appoint governors as they themselves pleased.

Hereupon they sent for one of the pontifical tribes, which is called Enneakin, and cast lots, which of it should be the high priest. By fortune the lot so fell as to demonstrate their iniquity after the plainest manner, for it fell upon one whose name was Phantias, the son of Samuel of the village Apatha.

He was a man not only unworthy of the high priesthood, but that did not well know what the high priesthood was, such a mere rustic was he, yet did they hail this man without his own consent out of the country, as if they were acting a play upon the stage, and adorned him with a counterfeit face. They also put upon him the sacred garments, and upon every occasion instructed him what he was to do. This horrid piece of wickedness was sport and pastime with them, but occasioned the other priests, who at a distance saw their law made a jest of, to shed tears, and sorely lament the dissolution of such a sacred dignity.

[7 : 52] I believe this could be connected to the man of lawlessness mentioned in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 1 to 12, and at this point, when the disciples saw the abomination of desolation set up, the utter perversion of the high priesthood, they were supposed to flee, and it was a good time to flee, because it was just before the zealots summoned the Idumeans to attack the city.

At this point, the Jerusalem Christians fled to the mountains, to Pella in the Transjordan. Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, book 3, chapter 5, writing in the early 4th century, writes, But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafe to approve men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come there from Jerusalem, then as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles and totally

destroyed that generation of impious men.

But the number of calamities which everywhere fell upon the nation at that time, the extreme misfortunes to which the inhabitants of Judea were especially subjected, the thousands of men as well as women and children that perished by the sword, by famine and by other forms of death innumerable, all these things, as well as the great many sieges that were carried on against the cities of Judea and the excessive sufferings endured by those that fled to Jerusalem itself as to a city of perfect safety and finally the general course of the whole war as well as its particular occurrences in detail and how at last the abomination of desolation proclaimed by the prophets stood in the very temple of God so celebrated of old, the temple which was now awaiting its total and final destruction by fire, all these things, anyone that wishes may find accurately described in the history written by Josephus.

But it is necessary to state that this writer records that the multitude of those who were assembled from all Judea at the time of the Passover to the number of three million souls were shut up in Jerusalem as in a prison to use his own words.

[10:04] For it was right that in the very days in which they had inflicted suffering upon the Saviour and the benefactor of all, the Christ of God, that in those days, shut up as in a prison, they should meet with destruction at the hands of divine justice.

Just as the perversion of the priesthood in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes led to judgment upon Jerusalem and its temple, so in AD 70, the perversion of the high priesthood again would lead to a similar fate.

The language of this passage seems so extreme and so cosmic that many people can't imagine it relating to anything other than the destruction of the universe on the last day.

But it needn't be read this way. Those familiar with the Old Testament prophets will know that there are many similar passages that use the same sort of imagery to refer to judgments in history, judgments upon places like Egypt or Babylon.

Isaiah chapter 13 verse 10 speaks of the destruction of Babylon. 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.

[11:11] And again in Isaiah chapter 34 verse 4, all the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their hosts shall fall as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.

Ezekiel chapter 32 verses 7 to 8 speaks of Egypt. When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark. I will cover the sun with a cloud and the moon shall not give its light.

All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord God. We need to be alert to the fact that the fall of Jerusalem is being described like the fall of Babylon and Egypt.

Later in Revelation, Jerusalem will be spoken of as Babylon the Great. We focus upon the coming of the Son of Man often as a downward movement from heaven towards earth, but it is the coming of the Son of Man into heaven itself that is in view here.

The background is that of Daniel again. Daniel chapter 7 verses 9 to 14. As I looked, thrones were placed and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white as snow and the hair of his head like pure wool.

[12:20] His throne was fiery flames. His wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousand served him and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

The court sat in judgment and the books were opened. I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking and as I looked, the beast was killed and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.

As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. I saw in the night visions and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a Son of Man and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. The sign of the coming then is the vindication of the exalted Son of Man by the dispossession of the wicked tenants.

They shall see this coming in the sense of the proof of it. It will be demonstrated in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. All of this is about establishing the new age of the kingdom.

[13 : 36] The angels or literally the messengers will then be sent out to gather from the four winds. It's a new beginning. It's a new covenant order being established and this is referring I think to places like Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 4.

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven from there the Lord your God will gather you and from there he will take you. God is going to gather all of his children. See the same thing in Isaiah chapter 27 verse 13.

After this Jesus speaks of the fig tree.

He's connected the fig tree with Israel earlier. They will see these signs and they should recognise that the time has come. That generation will not pass away until everything has occurred.

There's a time limit on this. Within about 40 years of the time Jesus is speaking everything will have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away but his words will not.

[14 : 40] This maybe refers to Isaiah chapter 51 verse 6. lift up your eyes to the heavens and look at the earth beneath for the heavens vanish like smoke the earth will wear out like a garment and they who dwell in it will die in like manner but my salvation will be forever and my righteousness will never be dismayed.

Recognising the fulfilment of Jesus' words in AD 70 and the specific detail that he gave to his disciples to flee at a crucial moment we should see that Jesus is not a false prophet.

Jesus is not someone who foretold an eschaton that never occurred. This all took place and he prepared his disciples for it and as Eusebius recounts they took that preparation and escaped the great and terrible fate that was suffered by Jerusalem and the people within it.

Jesus concludes the teaching of this passage of the Olivet Discourse by focusing upon the absolute necessity of watchfulness and wakefulness. Everything will seem to be going on as it always has and then suddenly everything changes in a single day.

Your entire world order everything you thought to be so rock solid and certain collapses. When the master of the house comes the servants have to be ready for him. They cannot predict the time of the Son of Man's coming but the signs will be there for the watchful and the faithful and the wakeful servants.

[16 : 06] They're called to be such servants and they're reminded again and again because this is of paramount importance. A question to consider.

The theme of wakefulness is very prominent at the end of this passage. Where else can we see such a theme within the New Testament and how can it give us an insight into the way that the early disciples saw themselves and how we should see ourselves?

