

about God's Kingdom and enable the name of Jesus to be heard by all, and a conversation with a friend may be as much as the Spirit needs to begin or pursue His work; if we will let Him.

Rejection and hatred.

The last general feature of the life of God's people which Jesus identifies here is the hatred which can build up between family members 'because of My Name' (13:13). It seems strange that Malachi prophesied that Elijah would bring a new era in which 'He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.' (Malachi 4:6). Now the reality is that this may be experienced within the church and certainly in the final glory of God, but in the sinful world in which we still live, the contrast between those who accept Christ and those who reject Jesus will be evident in this kind of friction and trouble. Jesus said it would be the experience of the early Christians and all following, so we must expect that now.

It is hard to give examples of such things because many Christians today know the agony of division and separation due to family break up, and antipathy towards those who possess the Faith. It may seem cold comfort to say that we should expect this, but it is the truth, and the alternative is to reject the love of God and live in a world in which such breakdown is certainly no better just because 'God' is taken out of the equation. It is the lot of all Christians to 'be hated by all', and a little foolish to imagine otherwise, but the prize is unimaginable; salvation itself. 'But the one who endures to the end will be saved.' (13:13)

Application

The wisest response we can make to this passage is to understand that it speaks about us. Yes, it is Jesus' prophetic word about the end times, but it is that part of His prophecy which speaks to all Christians of all time. We have yet to come to that part of this chapter in which Jesus speaks directly about the specific issue of 'when', and what will happen at that time (13:24-36). The coming of our Lord Jesus is still something which is for us, just around the corner, and it is no more or less for us than it was for early Christians. Jesus wanted all of us to know that the persecution and distress we face is part of the suffering which makes us His disciples, and that as we endure this and continue to testify to the Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit, then we are 'saved'! The end will come, and Jesus is with us until then.

There is one feature of this passage which is partially hidden by the translation, but is important and significant. Every so often, you will read the word 'watch' (13:5,9 in this part of chapter 13). As Mark's Gospel continues towards Jesus' death and resurrection, this word crops up with greater frequency; in Gethsemane (14:32f.) and then the 'watches' of the night mentioned before Jesus died; 'evening' 14:17, 'cockcrow' 14:68, and 'morning' 15:1. Later in chapter 13, Jesus tells His disciples to 'beware and watch out' because 'we do not know the day or the hour' of our Lord's coming again (13:33). Alertness and watchfulness appears to be an important characteristic for a Christian; not just for living, but alertness for the things of God, for the work of Christ and His coming again. The message in Mark is unmistakable.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do we treasure too much the 'amazing stones and wonderful buildings' (13:1) we possess, and do they reflect the glory of God?
2. Who are the false prophets of our own day, and how can we make sure that they do not affect us in the church?
3. What kind of persecution have you faced, in your own home, work place or country?

Discipleship

Jesus had to give many warnings within this passage of Scripture, and it cannot have been easy for Him to do this. Even so, it was essential for Him to pass on to the disciples what He knew, and He did this. Continue to write down your own reflections on what Jesus might have felt at this point in the story of His last few days.

Final Prayer

In Your providence, Lord God, keep our families safe from the attacks of the evil one. Grant them such protection by Your Holy Spirit that they may be aware of Your care and love for them at all times; and may the whole church be blessed through the families which make up their number. Thank You, Lord God; AMEN

Prayer

Lead us in doing Your will Lord God. Guide us in our pathways, show us how to speak and what to say, lighten the darkness of this world, and ease the heavy loads we have to bear. We do not ask for an easy life, but rather, we long for Your presence by which we may know we are not alone, but loved and helped along our way. Thank You Lord God. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Forgiveness

Pray for the Lord to make forgiveness a feature of the life of your own church. Too often, people leave things unsaid for fear of bringing strife into the open, and this can lead to much un-forgiveness. This, in turn, can act as a block to God's blessing. Difficult or contentious issues should be dealt with openly so that forgiveness can be offered and received.

Meditation

Where may the human spirit begin to find peace?

- In the company of other believers?
- Whilst doing the work of the Kingdom?
- In the home where love and care abide?
- Lost in 'wonder love and praise'?
- On the streets where we might find Jesus?
- Speaking out for the poor and the oppressed?
- In a quiet place of Bible study and prayer?

Or is it just that peace may be found when we realise
We only have to trust our Lord to receive His love.
For God is there in every circumstance of life,
And when we open our eyes and find Him there;
He is anywhere and everywhere; just there.

Bible Study - Mark 13:1-13

¹ As Jesus was leaving the Temple, one of His disciples said to Him, 'what amazing stones and wonderful buildings!' ² Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be one stone left on another; each of them will be torn down!'

³ While He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, opposite the Temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Him privately, ⁴ 'Tell us, when will these things happen? What will be the sign which says that all these things are about to be fulfilled?' ⁵ So Jesus said to them, 'Watch out to make sure that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, "I am He!" and they will deceive many. ⁷ So when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; such things must happen, but the end is not yet. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places and there will be famines. These are just the beginnings of the "labour pains".'

⁹ 'But watch out for yourselves. They will hand you over to the courts, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings because of me to bear witness to them; ¹⁰ and the Gospel must first be preached to all the Gentiles. ¹¹ When they lead you to trial and hand you over, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say. But say whatever is given to you at that time, for it is not you who are speaking, but the Holy Spirit. ¹² Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. ¹³ You will be hated by all because of My Name, but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Review

Jesus had just finished arguing with the religious authorities and teaching in the Temple (ch.12), and He left presumably to return to Bethany at the end of the day. On the way, He sat down on the Mount of Olives and looked at the Temple, reflecting sadly on the coming plight of Jerusalem (13:2). When the disciples questioned Jesus about when His words would be fulfilled, He began a speech which shifts Mark's Gospel dramatically into new territory. Today's

reading is the first within chapter 13, which contains a long speech by Jesus unlike anything we have read anywhere else in the Gospel; we will study the whole chapter in three parts, 13:1-13, 14-23 and 24-36). Our passage today is a mixture of warnings (e.g. 13:7,9,12) and dire prophecies (13:8,10,13) and also words of great comfort and reassurance for all Christians (e.g. 13:11). The speech continues through the rest of chapter 13 and in general, it speaks about the end times and the return of the 'Son of Man' (12:24f.) in glory, using words which remind us of some of the great 'apocalyptic' prophecies in the Old Testament (Daniel 2:28, 7:14f. etc.) and also the language of Revelation (e.g. Rev 1:4-8, etc.).

There is much within chapter 13 of great importance for the church, and in order to help us work our way through a quite astonishing array of prophesies and sayings of Jesus, it is helpful if we put ourselves in the place of the early Christians to whom Mark wrote. The church was in turmoil in the middle of the first century AD because although there was great growth, persecutions had begun; Claudius expelled Jews from Rome in AD49 because of disturbing rumours about Christians. Then Nero infamously accused Christians of starting the fire of Rome in AD64, and punished them by throwing them to the lions (Tacitus, Annals, 15.44.2-8). After Nero, military emperors ruled the Roman Empire with an iron fist, and Jerusalem was sacked in AD70. Most Christians were asking whether this really was all part of God's plan. Did these things herald Christ's return and the end of the World?

Against this background, Mark tells us that Jesus foresaw the problems of the early church and the destruction of the Temple, and He said they were not the end times themselves but the 'beginnings of the birth-pangs' (13:8) which heralded the final coming of Christ and the judgement of God. It is essential for us to understand this because it enables us to find a structure to what Jesus said in Mark 13. In our passage today, Jesus spoke about the suffering of the early Christians before the destruction of Rome, and he described what it would mean for them and the future. Next, (13:14-23, tomorrow's reading) He prophesied about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and what this would mean; and then in the last passage (13:24-36, the reading for the day after next), Jesus finally spoke about the End Time.

This passage gave hope to Christians in the midst of the terrible circumstances of the middle of the first century, and it does the same for all who live in the 'end times' and await Jesus' coming again in glory (as now). The extraordinary thing about this passage is that up to this point in Mark, Jesus had asked people to accept Him as the Messiah on the evidence of His teaching and healing, and His signs and wonders; but this was not the whole truth about saving faith. Chapter 13 prepares us for the final revelation of God's work through Jesus, which shows us that salvation is found not by merely accepting His ministry, but by walking the path of suffering which Christ Himself walked. Before Jesus died on the Cross (Mark 14-16), He warned His disciples that they would have to endure their own suffering 'for Him', and said 'but the one who endures to the end will be saved' (13:13).

It is extremely important that we understand and accept this part of Mark's Gospel, because it introduces us to the truth that faith is not intellectual ascent to a teaching, but the living of a life for God.

Going Deeper

There is much still for us to explore, and we will look at it in the main study verse by verse, but bearing in mind the general structure outlined above. At each stage there is ample opportunity to misinterpret what Jesus says, and many have used these passages to their own ends rather than see how they work in the Gospel Mark presents.

Coming out of the Temple

This was the last time Jesus would have been in the Temple, and within Mark's report we find great pathos in the contrast between the disciples eulogy of the magnificent Temple (13:1) and Jesus' own sense of rejection after all that had happened there. He prophesied; 'There will not be one stone left on another; each of them will be torn down!' This sounds harsh, but Herod's new and pretentious great Temple represented a Judaism that had failed to recognise the Messiah and was now irrelevant to God's plan; the 'glory' of God was no longer present in the Temple (see 1 Samuel 4:21 for a description of the 'glory of God' leaving Israel). A new 'Church' of people would now be built on Jesus Himself (12:10:11), and Jesus had foreseen the destruction of the Temple in AD70, when the Romans would set the Temple on fire, and dismantle it stone by stone, for use in their own building projects.

On the Mount of Olives, the traditional 'standing place' of the Messiah (see Zechariah 14:4), Jesus sat not with His favoured three disciples, but the first four disciples He called; Peter,

James, John and Andrew. They asked Jesus to say more about the destruction of the Temple, something they would not have understood. They wanted to know when this would happen and were clearly convinced that such a thing could only happen at the end times (13:4). Some think that Jesus' reply did not address the disciple's question because it spoke more about what would happen rather than when. However, if you follow the background given above, you will see that Jesus did answer the question. The final date of the end times was not His to reveal (13:32f.), but Jesus set out clearly what would happen to the early Christians in the years after His death. Just as He had to walk His path of suffering, they would have to do the same so that the whole world could hear the Gospel (13:10,11); as part of this, the Temple would be destroyed (and all Jerusalem) as a foretaste of what was to come.

False prophets

The first thing that Jesus warned the disciples about was 'false prophets' who would lead God's people astray (13:5,6). The theme of false prophets is found in a number of the Gospels (Matt 7:15, 24:11, Luke 6:26) and also in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 13:6) and the writings of Paul (Gal 2:13 and 2 Timothy 3:6). The characteristic of a false prophet was not merely someone who claimed to have this or that new teaching, but more specifically, someone who claimed the authority of God and thus placed themselves in the position of Christ over others. This is what Jesus meant when He spoke about prophets who would come claiming 'I am He!' (13:6). The words 'I am' in Greek being the same ones used in John's Gospel for the famous 'I am' sayings of Jesus, by which He explained the very nature of God.

The church has always been plagued by impostors, and some have even founded religions based upon their own assumptions about power and authority under God, having begun with Christian faith. In the days of the early church, an impostor named 'Bar Cochba' claimed to be the Messiah and gathered a following, and even the religion of Islam began with a man who felt that he had a greater revelation of God than Jesus Christ (in the 6th century AD). Fanaticism and deviation from the evangelical heritage of the Christian faith has always been a danger and one for which all Christians should be alert; as this passage makes abundantly clear.

Rumours

Much is made even today of the idea that 'rumours of wars' are an essential feature of the days before the coming of Jesus in glory. In this passage, Jesus was well aware that there were rumours of wars in His own day, and we do well to hear what He said; 'the end is not yet' (13:7). Wars were regarded as evidence of God's judgement in Old Testament times (1 Kings 8:37, Jer. 4:11f. etc.), and when we say that 'wars and rumours of wars' are a characteristic of the end times, this is no more true for us than it was of Jesus' own time and also the Old Testament because these things are a result of endemic human sin in the world. It is a mistake to say that Scripture gives us this as a clue to try and find when the end of the world will come. That is a complete misrepresentation of the passage.

The matter is summed up in Jesus' words; 'these are just the beginnings of the 'labour pains'. You will probably find in most Bibles the alternative term 'birth-pangs', but this means the same thing, and it is often mentioned in Scripture (Is 26:17, 66:8, Jer 22:23, Hos 13:13, Mic 4:9f.). In most cases, it indicates that God has started something which would not stop, just as once a pregnancy has begun the consequences cannot be avoided. For us, we live in the 'end times' of God's plan for the world and have done for two thousand years. It may seem like a long time to us, but on current scientific evidence, the end of this world is indeed very much in sight!

The declaration of the truth in the midst of persecution

Verses 9 to 11 are about testimony, and as before, they show Jesus' understanding of what would be required of the early Christians, and through them, even us. Persecution was the background to Jesus' words and those who first read Mark's Gospel would have known the scenario very well. Paul was 'dragged before courts and beaten in synagogues' (13:9 – see Acts 13:43-51, 2 Cor. 11:25), and to this day, many Christians (particularly in countries of strong anti-Christian persuasion) have been forced to justify their faith in front of secular or religious courts of various kinds and in circumstances which have been profoundly hostile. This is the true cutting edge of mission rather than the constant re-alignment of church life which goes under that name within many western denominations and church groups. Moreover, it is the means God uses to bring His Word to parts of the world where no ordinary missionary can go.

This is the true context for God's promise that He will speak through us by His Holy Spirit (13:11). The idea that the phrase 'do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say' is a scriptural justification for lazy preachers is fanciful. The Holy Spirit uses all means to bring