

verse 31 follows verse 30. These two verses together seem to be Jesus' way of saying very firmly to the disciples that what He said was true and not to be ignored.

We must therefore treat what Jesus says about watching and being alert for His return as of the highest importance. After the uncertainty which surrounds verse 30, what Jesus went on to say in verse 32 is not open to misinterpretation: no one will know when Christ will come again. We will see the signs of it and experience the sufferings which accompany it, but we are not given to know the eternal secret of when God will finally bring the world to an end and begin His judgement. The examples Mark reports Jesus as giving are not as extensive as those found in Matthew, but they are sufficient to make the point. Everyone must be alert. Instead of being like the vineyard tenants who waited to find out how they could take advantage of the owner (12:1-12), we are to be like servants keeping house, ever vigilant for the return of a loved Master.

Then, in case we have not grasped the point, Mark talks about watching out in 'the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn' (13:35). This is not just a general set of references for our vigilance, even though they might be considered to be just this. This is the exact sequence of the watches of the night (14:17, 14:32f., 14:68, 15:1) which mark Jesus' capture and trial, when He implored His disciples to stay alert (see study on Mark 13:1-13). Clearly, Jesus regarded His own coming suffering and death as a sign of the coming of the End Times!

Application

Living as someone who is expecting Jesus to return at any minute is a serious business. This raises all sorts of questions about behaviour and morality, for how would we like the Lord to come and find us doing the things we do? As a youngster I found this idea very powerful and it prevented me from following the path of life chosen by many of my friends. I could not contemplate Jesus coming at any moment and finding me drunk, for example, and I remember being appalled even at the thought of being tipsy, or smoking, or taking part in anything demeaning. This, more than anything, kept me safe in the world of the late sixties and early seventies when it was becoming easy to live a life of sexual promiscuity, drunkenness and loutish behaviour which has become almost the norm for vast numbers of young people (but by no means all) today.

It is also very important for Christian people to keep alert not just to their own behaviour but to the genuine signs of the Lord's coming. Again, I recall looking up to the clouds as a youngster and expecting the Lord to come there and then. Eventually I gained the understanding that I must live my life in expectancy of this great event, and I continue to do so. My desk is untidy, there are many things I feel I must do, and like everyone else, I can become preoccupied with a variety of things which fill my mind, but I still have a deep sense of anticipation which surfaces from time to time and makes me pray for the Lord to come in His time. I am ever grateful that I was taught about the coming of the Lord from my youth, and I pray that others will hear this word of Jesus and be motivated to live accordingly.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the picture you have of the Lord's coming in glory. Have you ever felt in a moment that this might happen?
2. Discuss verse 31 in your group. What does it mean for Jesus to say 'my words will not pass away'?
3. How can we best live in a manner which is watchful for the Lord's coming, or do you feel that this should not affect how we live?

Discipleship

If you are keeping a 'diary' of reflections as suggested, then think about what Jesus would have felt about the prospect ahead of Him. He was facing His death and resurrection, and eventual ascension into Heaven. He had to think beyond that to His coming again at the End. He was also aware of the Father's will and control of all things. Do you think that while Jesus was human, even He did not know the timing of His coming again?

Final Prayer

All praise to You, Lord Jesus. From when I awoke and through every moment of this day, You have been with me. Remove from me the stubborn self-centredness which fails to hear Your voice at those moments when I most desperately need to hear You speak and take Your advice. Hear my prayer, Lord Jesus: AMEN

Prayer

God of grace and mercy; deal with us gently as we find our way through the perils of this life. Guide us, advise us, nourish us and care for us, so that we are able, day by day, to fulfil our obligations in a good and godly way. In this way, may we give glory to the Almighty God for whom we live, and to whom we will one day return with great joy and happiness: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Forgiveness

Pray today for the leaders of your church, and ask the Lord to bless them with a heart of forgiveness. Leaders can often experience a great deal of rejection and sometimes they fail to forgive almost by default. Pray for your leaders, bless them, and ask the Lord to lead them to a place of forgiveness for any who have hurt them, in whatever way is appropriate.

Meditation

(a reflection on the need for pastoral care)

Hear those cries of human souls when they reach the end of road, and
In the name of Christ, keep caring:

Hear those who cry from deep within because they cannot tell a single soul,
In the name of Christ, stay close:

Hear those who cry and weep out loud because there's nowhere left to turn,
In the name of Christ, offer love:

Hear those who cry alone by themselves because there's no-one left to tell,
In the name of Christ, keep visiting:

Hear those who are ashamed to cry at all because of their fear of someone close,
In the name of Christ, be watchful:

Hear those who cry just to gain attention because no-one has ever loved them,
In the name of Christ, don't reject them:

Hear the cries which echo in your own soul For you've known some of this yourself;
In the name of Christ, accept help.

Bible Study - Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ 'But in those days, after that suffering, "the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." ²⁶ Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then He will send out the angels, and gather His chosen ones from the four winds, from the farthest points of the earth to the farthest points of heaven.

²⁸ 'Learn this lesson from the fig tree: as soon as its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that He is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Amen, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² 'However, no one knows about that day or the hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be watchful, stay alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going away on a journey; He leaves home and puts His servants in charge, each with his own work, and orders the doorkeeper to keep watch. ³⁵ So, watch, for you do not know when the master of the house will come; in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. ³⁶ May He not find you sleeping when he comes suddenly; ³⁷ for what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Review

In each of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (see Matthew 24 and Luke 21), these words, or some variation of them, are the highlight of Jesus' prophetic description of His coming again. As such, they are of immense importance to the Christian Church of every subsequent generation. In our studies of Mark's Gospel prior to this it is as if time progressively appears to slow down as Jesus describes about the terrible events accompanying the end times, speaking about the horrors of war (13:8,15-19), persecution and the perversion of religion (13:12-14, 20-23). Much of what Jesus describes here has always been true of times of crisis in the church and in the world, and the repeated nature of these things should not make it hard for us to accept that a time will come when God will decide to bring a final end to our fallen world. Certainly, most of what we have read in chapter 13 accurately describes the Maccabean revolt in 164BC, the sacking of Jerusalem in AD70, and many horrors of humanity since. One day, it will come to an end.

In this passage, Jesus describes the end of all things (13:24f.). This is no longer a description of what happens repeatedly in history, but the 'End', as determined by God Himself. The imagery of verses 24 and 25 are found in many Old Testament texts (e.g. Isaiah 13:20 and Psalm 97:1-5) where they clearly look beyond the present to God's final judgement of His people and all creation. Then, in verse 26, Jesus quotes from the famous vision of Daniel in which the kingdoms of this world are replaced by a heavenly Kingdom under the authority of 'one like a Son of Man' (Daniel 7:13). Jesus spoke of Himself, and from verse 27 He added images of harvest reminding us of His previous teaching, but adding that angels will be sent out to gather in God's 'chosen' from every part of the world. At the End, the Lord will be reunited with His own.

This picture of harvest continues into verse 28, and although the connection between the behaviour of fig trees and harvest may not be very clear to us (we will look at this later), this does indeed point to a harvest. Jesus used this example to appeal to His disciples to be on the watch; 'when you see these things happening, you know that He is near ...' (13:29). However, this is where we have a problem. A plain reading of verse 30 can appear to contradict everything we have just said; 'this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.' What does this mean? For if Jesus meant this exactly as it seems, something is very wrong, because Jesus appears to prophesied that the End of the world would definitely take place during the lifetime of the disciples, but in reality, they have long since died and it has not yet happened!

There is indeed a mystery here, and this whole prophecy of Jesus sweeps backwards and forwards in history with a command of time that is completely different from our own. Jesus was declaring an everlasting truth about His coming again, not looking to give us clues about when it would happen, but to warn us about expecting His return, something that can happen at any time. The highlight of His speech is this much neglected verse: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.' This is one of the few places in the Gospels where Jesus talks with the authority of the Father, and He declares an eternal truth. He concludes with the famous words that Christians should always seek to live by. Firstly, we do not know when Christ will come again, and secondly, we are to live as if He will come at any moment.

God's people are called to be constantly alert; our Lord will come again in glory. Mark does not include the famous words found in Matthew which talk about His coming like a 'thief in the night' (Matt 24:43); his message is that we do not need to be scared, just alert to the ever present possibility of the 'End'.

Going Deeper

There is an enormous amount written on this passage of Scripture, so no small study of it can encompass this; but there are a number of significant parts of this text which we can easily assess. The thought of the end of all things, however, is a deeply emotive thing for many people, and we must be careful to look at this passage with as much objectivity as possible.

Portents of the end of time

There are many passages of Old Testament prophecy which lie behind verses 24 to 26. One of the most important is Isaiah 13:10 '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'. In this prophecy, Isaiah describes 'the Day of the Lord' (Is 13:6) when God would bring judgement on Israel's oppressor Babylon, and if you read the whole prophecy you will discover that it contains many of the themes of Jesus' teaching about the End Times in Mark. The prophecy was initially fulfilled when Babylon was overrun by the Persian king Cyrus, who then released its Judean captives (Isaiah 45ff, Ezra 1:1ff). Jesus, however, saw more in this prophecy than this, and knew that it foreshadowed His second coming and the End of Time.

Another passage comes from Joel 2:10; 'The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining'. This is one of many O.T. prophecies which speak of the 'Day of the Lord' (1:15), and Joel describes it as being like a locust plague which destroyed the land when God's people were not properly prepared. Joel also prophesied that God would resolve the problem of devastation by sending His Spirit; 'I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh ...' (Joel 2:28), as quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:17). There are a number of passages similar to these; Is 34:4, Ez 32:7, Joel 4:15, Amos 8:9, Haggai 2:6,21, and they all speak of the 'Day of the Lord'. It is therefore impossible to think that Jesus used them with any other meaning than God's final 'Day of the Lord'!

The next well known prophecy (13:26) comes uniquely from Daniel 7:13 'I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven'. Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been called the 'Son of Man' (e.g. 2:10, 8:31, 10:45) with authority to establish a Kingdom 'which shall not be destroyed' (Dan 7:14). He had given His life to this ministry, and now as it was drawing to an end, Jesus described Himself as sending out the angels (13:27) to do harvesting (4:29) by the sound of trumpets (Is 27:12-13), and gathering together the chosen people of God.

The Harvest

The sheer intensity and power of these passages in Scripture must be our clue to what Jesus is talking about. It is impossible to examine these passages of Scripture without coming across some of the great themes of Christian faith; salvation, the presence of God with His people in power, and the ultimate authority and control of God over all human affairs. All these things are brought to their final completion on the day that the Lord Jesus comes in glory and God judges all things. For some, this is all too much; but it will indeed be too much for those who are not able to believe that Jesus is their Saviour. What is most sad is that some Christians encourage us to believe that Christ's coming again, the End Times and God's final judgement are all optional extras from the range of religious options available in church. This is not the case, for we are all heading towards an eternal 'harvest'.

Jesus began by talking about the gathering of God's people from across the whole world (13:27). This idea is found in the Old Testament, and comes from the time when it became necessary to try and re-assemble the remnants of the people of Israel after the terrible events of the Babylonian Exile. It is therefore found in passages such as Isaiah 11:11,27:12, Ezekiel 39:27 and Zechariah 10:6-11. Today, some people suggest that a sign of the End Times will be the return of the Jews to Israel and Jerusalem; this is a rather limited understanding of what God will do at the End Times, for our passage today really talks about God gathering all His people (the Church and the Jews as well) as His harvest of souls, ready for Salvation.

The second image of harvest time is not something we easily recognise today, which is the 'lesson from the fig tree' in our passage (13:28,29). The fig tree was one of few trees that lost its leaves in winter, and they came into bud in late spring accompanied by small inedible fruit. In the agricultural year of Palestine, the late arrival of the leaves was quickly followed by the first harvest of the year which was of barley, which took place in early summer. The arrival of leaves therefore indicated the beginning of the year's round of harvests, of which there were many from summer through to the autumn. This means that the reference to 'summer' in verse 28 really points to harvest time, and as such, in this passage, is symbolic of the End Times!

When will the End come?

Everything we have read about the coming of the End Time in Mark's Gospel suggests that Jesus knew that all manner of things would happen in the years after His death which would be catastrophic for the Jewish people, and that His disciples and followers would experience great suffering in their witness to the Faith. He also suggests that this would indicate the coming of the End Time, and He finished with a stern warning that people would not know the timing of the End (13:32-37). It is therefore surprising to hear Jesus say in verse 30: 'Amen, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened' which appears to tell us that Jesus believed that the End would come before those present with Him would die, and either Jesus was wrong or we have misunderstood this passage because the End clearly did not come at that time and we are still waiting!

What I would suggest is that we are looking at the wrong thing within what Jesus says. If for a moment we let go our fixation with 'when' the final End will come, then we can perhaps see that the 'all these things' in verse 30 mean the signs that indicate His coming and the End rather the event itself. This, of course, is the general drift of the passage, and makes sense of the way