

March 15, 2026

SIGNS OF THE TIMES AND THE COMING OF CHRIST

Mark 13:1-37

(8 of 15 in a series through Mark 10-16)

In his commentary on the gospel of Matthew, D. A. Carson has noted, “Few chapters in the Bible have called forth more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24 and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21.”¹ If you’ve ever studied the chapter and tried to interpret it, I think you’d see why. This chapter is called the Olivet Discourse, and it’s named that because Jesus taught the material in this chapter while sitting on the Mount of Olives. Now, that’s about where the disagreement ends on this chapter among commentators. Between preaching through Matthew, Mark, and Luke multiple times, I think this morning marks at least the fourth or fifth time I’ve preached this text, and every time, I’ve wrestled with how to understand certain details in the text. Even this week, I went back and forth on how I was going to argue it.

The issue is not in the big themes. All conservative evangelicals believe that Jesus is enthroned over the earth and reigns, that he’s coming back, and that Jesus told us certain things that would take place in the days that precede his return. The disagreement comes over whether or not he’s speaking at certain points about things that would happen in the first century (really within a forty-year-span after he delivers this address), or whether he’s talking about things related to his second coming. But, thankfully, as I noted, disagreements over interpretation don’t have to affect key doctrines of the faith, so we don’t have to get unsettled even if faithful people whom we trust disagree over these issues.

So, let me first set the scene that leads up to Jesus’ teaching, and then I’ll show you where the interpretive issues become tricky. The text begins with Mark telling us that Jesus “came out of the temple,” which I believe is meant to parallel the picture given in the book of Ezekiel of the Lord’s presence leaving the temple prior to its destruction in 586 B.C. In Ezekiel 10-11, the prophet spoke of the glory of the Lord moving away from the temple, bit by bit, until it left and “stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city” (Ezek 11:23). In other words, just as the glory of the Lord filled the temple at its founding, now the glory of God was leaving the temple because it was about to be destroyed in judgment. But what’s interesting for us is that when the glory of God left the temple and “stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city,” that mountain is the Mount of Olives, the very place Jesus goes and sits down after he leaves the temple. In other words, I think Jesus is illustrating by walking away from the temple and sitting on the Mount of Olives that God’s glory has left the temple and that Jerusalem is about to bear God’s judgment.

But it’s not just that Jesus illustrates this; he explicitly says it. As they walk out of the temple, the disciples remark how beautiful the buildings of the temple are, and Jesus responds, “Do you see

¹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew 13-28*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 488.

these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (v. 2). And, of course, that prompts Peter, James, John, and Andrew to ask him privately later, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?” (v. 4).

Now, when they ask this, I have no doubt that they believe that the destruction of the temple must be wrapped up with the return of Christ and end of this age. The main reason to think this is because when they ask the question in the parallel text of Matthew 24, they ask, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matt 24:3). Therefore, Jesus has two issues to address and answer, “When will the destruction of the temple and what are the signs of that, and when will Jesus’ return and the end of the age take place, and what will be the signs of that?” That’s what he does starting in verse 5 and going all the way through verse 37.

But here’s where the tricky elements come into play. There is a good bit of disagreement, among faithful biblical interpreters, as to where Jesus is talking about the destruction of the temple and what will happen in the days leading up to that and when Jesus is talking about his second coming and what will happen in the days leading up to that. Some believe that Jesus is talking about the destruction of the temple (which happened in 70 A.D.) all the way from verse 5 to verse 31, and he only starts talking about his second coming in verse 32.² Now, I’m not going to argue that this morning, but I have gone back and forth on it this week, and I’m more convinced of the interpretation I’m going to give today than that one. Therefore, I’m going to include this explanation in footnotes in my manuscript if you want to go read it later. If I had an hour-and-a-half to preach, I’d walk you through the details of that option as well. Instead, you’ll just have to read it.

So, what I’m going to do is give you how I think this text is structured (as of where I stand today), and then I’ll try to walk through the text and give us the exhortations that Christ gives in the text. In verses 5-23, I think Jesus is describing things that will all take place within the first century (within 40 years of when he’s talking)—including the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple—and things (with the exception of the fall of Jerusalem) that will continue to characterize the entire age between his ascension and his return. Then, in verses 24-27, he speaks of his second coming. And, finally, in verses 28-37 he provides us two parables that speak the imminent nature of his return and the fact that no one knows when it will happen.

² The reason verse 32 marks a break in the minds of those who interpret the text this way is because after providing signs and telling his disciples that they should interpret the signs like the leaves on a fig tree telling us summer is near, he says, “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows.” Clearly at this point Jesus must be talking about the day of his return and the end of the age. After all, he’d been telling them when the temple would be destroyed (within a generation), so to later mention that no one knows when “that day” is going to occur, “that day” must refer to another day than the fall of Jerusalem (i.e. it must refer to Christ’s coming and the end of the age). The only question is whether or not Jesus also refers to his coming prior to verse 32, and I am going to argue that he does.

So, if I think that the things Jesus says in verses 5-23 will characterize the entire age, then why am I also claiming that these things all took place within the generation of those to whom Jesus was speaking? Well, it's because he actually says in verse 30 that "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." Now, that could include verses 24-27, which is why some have seen that not as a reference to Christ's second coming but to imagery that announces his enthronement.³ But there are reasons I don't find that compelling (some of which I'll note in a second and some of which I've included in footnotes in my manuscript). But, again, if verses 24-27 speak of Christ's second coming, then how can Jesus say in verse 30 that these things will take place within that generation?

Well, if you look at verse 29, the verse right before that statement, Jesus says, "When you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates," which is a reference to his second coming and the fact that Jesus could come any moment. In other words, the "these things" referenced in verse 29 are those things that precede Christ's return. And so when Jesus says "all these things" (v. 30) will take place within this generation, I think he's referring to "these things" that he's just mentioned in verse 29, namely, all these things that precede (but don't include) Christ's return.

So, with the exception of Christ's return, we'll see all the things Jesus mentions in verses 5-23 within the generation of those to whom he is speaking, including persecution against Christ's followers, earthquakes, false messiahs coming along, wars and rumors of wars, world-wide gospel proclamation, and the fall of Jerusalem.

³ Those arguing that verses 24-27 speak of Christ's enthronement rather than his second coming note that this imagery of cosmic upheaval that sounds like the end of the world is found in OT texts that deal with God's judgment on specific nations. For example, in Isaiah 13:9-10, the Lord pronounces judgment on Babylon, but when he speaks of the Lord coming in judgment, he mentions the sun and moon being dark and the stars not giving their light. And so, they say that verses 24-25 is talking about God's judgment against Jerusalem. Then, when Mark tells us that the Son of Man comes in the clouds, this is most clearly echoing the language of Daniel 7:13-14 where Daniel sees a vision of the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days where he receives authority over all nations. Consequently, verse 26 is not about Jesus coming to earth but coming to the Ancient of Days as the God-man, to receive authority over all nations as God's enthroned king, the same idea that Jesus declares when he says in Matthew 28:18 that all authority has been given to him. Then, verse 27 is not about the gathering of God's people at Christ's return but about the Gentile mission that began in the book of Acts to go gather all the Lord's people in the work of the Great Commission, in which one translates "angels" in verse 27 as messengers (i.e. messengers of the gospel) or as a note that angels assist us in the work of the Great Commission.

As I noted, I am quite sympathetic to this view and may well embrace it at some point as I continue to wrestle through this text. However, at this point, I find the greatest weakness of this view to be the interpretation of verse 27 as referring to the work of the early believers in preaching the gospel to the Gentile world. First, that doesn't seem to be the most natural reading of the verse, and angels are often spoken of as accompanying Jesus at his second coming (see Matt 16:27; 25:31; 2 Thess 1:7). Moreover, in Matthew's account of the Olivet Discourse, he writes, "and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call" (Matt 24:31) which only strengthens the view that this is referring to the second coming of Christ as Scripture notes multiple times that there will be a trumpet call at Christ's return (see 1 Cor 15:51-52; 1 Thess 4:16). And, second, if verse 27 refers to the Gentile mission, then one would anticipate the Gentile mission launching at the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but the Gentile mission was in full swing decades prior to that event.

However, I also think that Jesus is describing things that will characterize this entire age, things that didn't stop with the fall of Jerusalem. In other words, there's never going to be a time short of Christ's return when your grandkids sit on your lap and say, "Grandpa, tell me about those days when there used to be wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, and the persecution of Christians." Other biblical texts make clear, for example, that if we desire to live godly lives, we'll be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12). There are two reasons I think that Jesus is talking about things that will characterize this entire age until the return of Christ. First, in verse 7, after noting that we'll hear of wars and rumors of wars, Jesus adds, "This must take place, but *the end* is not yet." This shows that Jesus isn't think talking about the fall of Jerusalem but the end of this age. He's describing what will characterize the days prior to Christ's return. Second, after describing these tumultuous events taking place in the world, he adds in verse 8 that these things "are but the *beginning* of birth pains." In other words, these things will take place in that generation of those to whom Jesus is speaking and they'll continue until the end of this age (with the exception of the destruction of the temple, of course, which only happens once) as if the world is in a labor that began in the first century, and will continue until Christ's return, only finding relief then.

So, that's how I see the structure of this text. Well, now, what do we need to understand and do in light of this text? First, we should note that everything Jesus said happened and continues to happen.

Recognize that everything Jesus said did happen and continues to happen

That's the first thing this text should show us. Jesus didn't say things here that failed to happen. His prophetic words have all come about. Jesus said in verses 6-8, "Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of birth pains."

In that first century, there was the Roman conquest of Britain (A.D. 43-47), the Roman-Parthian war (A.D. 58-63), and the war over Jewish revolt (A.D. 66-73). We know there were earthquakes if for no other reason than we can read in the book of Acts that there was an earthquake in Acts 16:25-26 when Paul and Silas were in prison. In Acts 11:27-28 we're told Agabus prophesied a famine that indeed took place in the days of Claudius. And, of course, the book of Acts is also filled with reports of persecution. And of course, all of these things have continued throughout this age.

But perhaps the element that seems most difficult to declare did indeed take place in that generation in which Jesus was speaking is found in verses 9-13. In those verses, Jesus continues the theme of declaring that his people would be persecuted. But then, in the midst of that, he proclaims in verse 10, "And the gospel must first be proclaimed in all nations." Now, obviously we would say this task of gospel proclamation has continued throughout this entire age, but can we really say that the gospel was proclaimed to all nations in that first century? I think so.

Now, I know that modern-day missiologists will sometimes divide the world up into ethno-linguistic groups and note the hundreds if not thousands of people groups that still need to be reached before Jesus returns in light of this verse. And I'm all for making sure we reach them. But I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about here. First, though "all the nations" could mean every ethno-linguistic group, it could also simply be a reference to the nations that make up the world of the Roman Empire. For example, remember in Luke 2:1 when Luke says that there was a census that "all the world" should be taxed that took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem? Well, obviously all the world meant simply all the Roman world.

But it's not just that we could reason that by all nations Jesus meant "all nations in the Roman empire." Paul actually states to the Colossians two times that the gospel has been preached everywhere. He writes in Colossians 1:6 that the gospel "has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing." Then he adds in 1:23 a note concerning "the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven." So, I think Paul is telling us that Mark 13:10 has been fulfilled, though we're always to continue the task of world-wide evangelization.

And there's one other declaration that Jesus makes that did indeed happen as he spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem, which we see in verses 14-19. Jesus says in these verses, "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."

First, we must ask, what is the "abomination of desolation?" This is a phrase that appears three times in the book of Daniel (9:27, 11:31, and 12:11) that refers to a gross act of sacrilege against the Lord, such as defiling worship in the temple. And most thought this was fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC who came into the temple, set up an altar to Zeus, and sacrificed pigs on the Lord's altar. But Jesus teaches here that something greater or even more vile was to come. Therefore, when Jesus (or Mark) notes, "Let the reader understand" in verse 14, I believe he means, "Let the reader of Daniel understand" that he's talking about something that will fulfill Daniel's prophecy in a clearer way.

But what is Jesus, then, saying that would happen and be this "abomination that causes desolation?" Well, we're helped by Luke's parallel of this text. In Luke's account, instead of saying, "When you see the abomination of desolation," Luke says, "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near" (Luke 21:20). Now that is obviously a reference to when the Roman armies came and destroyed Jerusalem. So, it must be that in the events prior to or within the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, someone did something that was even more atrocious than Antiochus to defile the temple as it was destroyed.

So, in verses 15-18, Jesus is telling his disciples that when the armies surround Jerusalem, they should flee to the mountains. Don't waste any time. If you're on the housetop (where the roofs of the houses would have been connected), don't come down, just run across the housetops. If you're in the field, don't waste time getting your cloak. For those who are pregnant or nursing, it'll pose a great challenge. And they should pray it doesn't happen in winter, for that would make fleeing even more challenging. Indeed, he tells us that there will be such tribulation that there has not been any like it before nor after, till the end of the age.

And the fall of Jerusalem indeed fits this. From A.D. 66-70 the Jews were in revolt against Rome. And eventually Roman armies surrounded and laid siege to the city, just prior to Passover when the city had swelled to multiple times its normal population. It was a terrible scene. The Romans would take Jewish prisoners and crucify hundreds of them on a daily basis. Because they laid siege to the city, Jerusalem suffered through times of famine so severe that mothers were reported to have roasted and eaten their own children. But the cries of the mothers to stop the revolt achieved nothing. In fact, a number of zealous Jews went about killing their own people who wanted to end the revolt. Eventually, the Romans made their way into the city and to the temple where thousands of Jews had crowded around the altar, and they were slaughtered. The Jewish historian, Josephus, reports over a million Jews were killed at that time, and D. A. Carson notes, "Never so high a percentage has a great city's population [been] so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the Fall of Jerusalem."⁴ I think this is why Jesus can speak of it as he does in verse 19.

So, we can see that everything Jesus said would happen did happen, and these things—as we've noted—have continued to take place throughout this age. We live in a time where there'll always be world upheaval—even as we see in our day—including persecution of Christians, and yet the Lord tells us that he'll cut short these days leading up to this return for the sake of the elect (v. 20), and I'm grateful. So, what do we then do during this time in which we live? Let me list five things, briefly. First, we must obey everything Jesus commands.

Obey everything Jesus commands

Now, of course, I can say this because that's what Jesus tells us in the Great Commission. But I also want to note how crucial it was for those listening to Jesus' words in that first century. Though there were many Christians in Jerusalem in the first century, there were very, very few who died after Rome laid siege to the city. Why? It is because they trusted and obeyed their Lord's words, and when they saw the armies surrounding the city, they fled to the mountains. There can be a temptation to pick and choose what we want to obey from Scripture, but Jesus is our Lord, and even as in the first century, so now, Jesus expects his people to obey his

⁴ Ibid., 501.

commands. It was obviously crucial then, and it's crucial for us as well. Second, commit yourself to God's Word.

Commit yourself to God's Word

Jesus mentions repeatedly that false Christs and false prophets will fill this age. He notes in verse 6 that many will come and claim they're the Christ and adds in verse 21 that "false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders" to lead people astray. And his exhortation in each case is not to be led astray and not to believe them.

Now, I almost said with this point, "See that you're not deceived," but I figured I'd just tell you how not to be deceived, and that's by committing yourself to God's Word. Many people in my lifetime alone have put forth the key the Christian living that includes everything but committing yourself to knowing, remembering, believing, and obeying God's Word. But a number of those very people have gone away from the teaching of our Lord on matters where the culture strongly opposes our Lord's teaching. So, I want to say this clearly. If you don't want to be conformed to this world and its false teaching, then you absolutely must commit yourself to renewing your mind to what God's Word says. Do it privately, and let's make sure we keep doing it corporately. I've often said, "What we prioritize in corporate worship matters, as it shapes us," and that's why the Word is central in our worship (and I hope in our lives privately as well). Let's make sure we prioritize and commit ourselves to the Word of God. Third, don't be shaken by tumultuous world events.

Don't be shaken by tumultuous world events

Our days will be filled with wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, etc. And each time they happen, there can be a temptation to be gripped with fear. But Jesus says in verse 7, "Don't be alarmed" by these things. Jesus told us ahead of time that they'd take place. When people anxiously ask you, "What in the world do you think it means that this war or this tumultuous world event happened?" you can just say, "Jesus told us beforehand this would happen and not to be alarmed. So, I'm just continuing to trust and obey him." Fourth, endure persecution and don't let it stop you from preaching Christ.

Endure persecution and don't let it stop you from preaching Christ

Jesus also mentions persecution, noting in verse 12, "And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." What does Jesus expect us to do when we're persecuted for his name's sake? He tells us to be faithful to him, even to death, because if we endure, we'll be saved. The world may even kill us, but they'll just usher us into the presence of Christ. So endure.

But don't be deceived. We are not merely be defensive against the world's persecution. Rather, we must keep preaching the gospel. They took it to the ends of their known world in the first

century, and we must continue to do that in ours. When persecuted, let it be a reminder to preach Christ all the more. And, finally, live an intentionally faithful life unto Christ as you await his return.

Live an intentionally faithful life unto Christ as you await his return

In verses 24-27, Jesus teaches us that after the days of this age and the tribulation that accompanies it, he will return in power and glory. We don't have to worry about missing that. He tells us that we'll see him. And at that time, he'll send out his angels to gather his people and bring them home. We'll finally be done with the tumult and persecution of this age.

Then, he tells us two parables. The first is about a fig tree, noting that when you see it put out leaves, you know summer is near. So, Jesus says, all the things he's testifying must take place before he returns will indeed take place within the generation of those to whom he was speaking. Now, why note that? I think because he's saying, "Once these things take place, there is nothing stopping me from returning. It could happen any time." We need to recognize that reality. But that's not all.

Then, he adds that no one knows when he's coming—not even the Son of Man in his human mind knows. In other words, he could come any time, but we don't know when. So, what do we do? He tells us repeatedly: "be on guard, keep awake" (v. 33), "stay awake" (v. 35) and "stay awake" (v. 37). That is, we can't put life on cruise control. Rather, live intentionally faithful lives unto our Lord, living as if we are ready for his return at any moment. So, let's make that our aim and proclaim that as we come to the table. Amen.