

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: Beware of Deceivers - Mark 13

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are beginning a new series of four talks based upon the closing chapters of Mark's Gospel. Today's talk centres upon chapter 13 and is entitled 'Beware of Deceivers'.

When I first received the programme schedule informing me I that was to speak on Mark 13, my mind immediately took me back some forty years, when I was a student at a teacher training college. I had been employed as a draughtsman in the motor industry, but had made the decision to retrain as a teacher. One of my subjects at this college was divinity, or religious studies, where we had an Anglican clergyman as a tutor. Towards the end of the third term, he gave out the title for a vacation essay, which was to carry a large percentage of the marks for our first year's appraisal. I still remember my perplexity when I read the two-word heading for my extended essay, which was simply, 'Mark 13'.

I cannot remember what I wrote, or indeed the grade that I received on that occasion, yet I do recall that I was conscious of the danger of treating Scripture as the subject of an academic study, without recognising the implications of its structures. Mark 13 certainly falls into such a category for, though scholars have written extensively around it, we must recognise that it carries very real warnings and advice for our progress as Christians going through an unbelieving world.

Our chapter begins with a comment from an unidentified disciple, regarding the magnificent solidity of the Temple, with its complex of porches and courts. Josephus tells us that "it was built of hard, white stones, each of which was about 25 cubits in length, 8 cubits in height and 12 cubits in width". That is, roughly, 40 feet in length, 12 feet in height and 20 feet in width - huge stones indeed! Tacitus, the Roman historian, described it as "a temple of immense wealth". For the Jew, it was at the centre of his worship and understanding of God, so the disciples would not be expecting the answer that we read in verse 2: "And Jesus, answering, said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

This strong statement, which leaves no room for doubt, states that the Temple will be destroyed. The devastation would be complete, as no stone would remain upon another. Such a statement had massive implications because, without the Temple, no sacrifices could be offered, meaning that the whole system of offerings would come to an end.

Please note, that so great was their regard and trust in the Lord Jesus, that the disciples did not question His words, despite the weighty pronouncement He had made. Verses 3 and 4 set the scene for the rest of the chapter which is often called the Olivet discourse because, as we shall read, it was delivered upon the Mount of Olives. I quote, as usual, from the Authorised or King James Version of the Bible: "And as he sat upon the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked privately, Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?"

As the four disciples understood and accepted that the Temple would be destroyed, the two things that exercised their minds were when and how would they recognise that it was about to happen. This latter point is important as we are sometimes under the delusion that prophecy enables us to forecast the future, whereas the teaching of Scripture informs us to be prepared when prophesied events are coming to pass.

We, like the disciples, want to know the signs and times of future events, yet the Lord never really gave an answer in fullness. For the rest of the discourse, He is more interested in preparing them for the coming trials by exhortation and warnings, rather than by supplying signs or dates. Verses 5 and 6 bring us to the title of today's talk: "And Jesus, answering them began to say, Take heed lest any man deceive you; for many shall come in my name, saying I am Christ; and shall deceive many."

I return to my original statement regarding the possibility of academic study of this chapter solely to satisfy the cravings of our curiosity for knowledge of the future. One of the features of true prophetic teaching is an awakened awareness of deception. As one commentator on Scripture has written regarding these verses: "The course of things that prophecy reveals runs counter to all that man would naturally expect. The attractiveness of the false prophet lies in the fact that they ever predict things which fall in with men's desires and seem eminently reasonable."

The words, 'Take heed', in verse 5 are rendered in the New International Version as 'Watch', a word that reoccurs throughout the chapter, emphasising my point that the teaching of Mark thirteen should affect our behaviour and attitude.

Regarding this 'watching', it is important to see that the Lord's admonitions are to make the disciples acutely aware that others will come in His name. This was critically important then, and it is just as important now. The Scriptures clearly identify the Person of the Lord Jesus, so it is necessary for us to know just what the Scriptures say about Him. There are many New Testament verses that tell us that the Lord Jesus is the Son of God, but I quote just one from John 1:14 which says: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

Now, I know that many of our fellow citizens say that Jesus was a good man, but deny that He is divine. Sadly, some who consider themselves Christians also deny this truth. We at 'Truth for Today' however, are convinced that it is at the very centre of Christian belief, and to deny that Jesus is God is to be deceived and to follow another Christ.

There is another point about the verses we have read that I wish to add, before we proceed any further into our chapter. The Lord enlarges the range of their immediate question by including the greater issues of the last times and His own coming in glory. This is a feature of many prophecies in the Old Testament, where reference is made to an impending event, yet also includes more than a hint of a final fulfilment in a coming day. Obviously, in the case before us, the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, yet most expositors and commentators agree that the complete fulfilment of these verses will be found when the Lord comes again in glory.

As we move on into the chapter, we must take note that the next few verses are not forecasting the end. Rather do they warn the followers of Jesus, in every age, that we must not expect an easy passage through this world. Wars and rumours of wars, turmoil and disorder that will mark the scene are not signs that the end is nigh. His disciples must expect to witness such phenomena, in addition to being confronted by vigorous persecution by the authorities, because they are Christians. Verse 9 is very clear about that: "But take heed to yourselves; for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten; and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them."

For the next minute or two, I want to focus on the phrase from that verse of "deliver you up", which is repeated in verse 11 and again in verse 12 where it is translated 'betray'.

It was a distinct possibility then, and still is today in some countries, for a Christian to be arrested and brought before the courts for simply being a believer in Jesus. Verse 9 has stated a stark warning of this, while verse 11, which I haven't quoted today, promises the support of the Holy Spirit when such a trial occurs. Verse 12 brings before us the depths of mental agony that will face such Christians when they are confronted with the awful truth that members of their own family have betrayed them. To be a Christian then was no avenue to a comfortable life.

Between verses 9 and 11, which we have discussed, is verse 10; "And the gospel must first be proclaimed among all nations."

Though it is only a short verse, we must note its position between verses 9 and 11. It would seem that the Lord is warning His followers, in every age, that though preaching the Gospel could bring persecution, they must continue to be diligent in preaching, as the good news has to reach every corner of the world.

It would be easy to miss the radical nature of this statement, for here, in this verse the Lord is insisting that the recipients of His message must include the Gentiles. I have just been reading a volume that tries to make out that Paul was the first Christian. If, like the writer of that book, you reject Scriptures that do not follow your preconceived ideas, then you have to admit that you do not believe the Bible. All of the biblical writers, whether Old or New Testament, acknowledge that God desires to bless the Gentiles, especially in a coming day. Meanwhile, the message of the Gospel has gone forth, bringing blessing to all who believe, regardless of race. In the church of the Lord Jesus there is neither Jew nor Gentile, just forgiven sinners, pardoned through the great atoning work of the Lord Jesus on the cross.

Now we have reached verse 14, and can I remind anyone who has just joined us that you are listening to Truth for Today where we are discussing Mark 13: "But when ye shall see the abomination of the desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not, (let him that readeth understand,) then let them that be in Judea flee to the mountains."

We arrive now at a difficult verse, yet one that brings before us the sign that the disciples had asked for previously. There is to be a visible erection of an idol, or something similar, in the Temple, that will be an abomination to the LORD. As a result the Temple, will be deserted and left desolate.

Many questions have been raised as to when this 'abomination that causes desolation' will happen, or if such a prophecy has been fulfilled. My answer is that, like most prophecies, it has a primary and secondary, or even a multiple, fulfilment. Such events as those of AD 66 to 70, when the Roman armies desecrated and destroyed the Temple, would suggest that it has been partially fulfilled. A further manifestation will mark the end times, of which Paul speaks in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10, or the prediction in Revelation 13:14 and 15.

So in summary, I would suggest that for us today it refers to the times that precede the coming of the Lord in glory.

The rest of the discourse is mainly concerned with the two implications of the sign. We shall now consider the first of these implications in verses 15 to 23, which concerns 'the time of the trouble' that Daniel mentions in verse 1 of chapter 12 of his prophecy. It would appear from verse 19 that the Lord is speaking of that time, the time that we call the great tribulation. "For in those days shall be great affliction, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be."

Some think that verses 15 to 18 do not refer to the afflictions mentioned in verse 19, yet to me it seems that the passage is all of one. Even if the admonitions fit neatly into the context of the Roman invasion of AD 66, they also, just as neatly, fit the time of the previously mentioned tribulation and trouble. According to Scripture, the epicentre of the intense devastation will be Judea, so the statement sufficiently describes the end time.

From verses 20 to 23, we learn that God intervenes in this unprecedented catastrophe for the sake of the elect: "And except the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh should be saved: but for the elect's sake, whom he hath chosen, he hath shortened the days. And then if any man shall say to you, Lo, here is Christ; or, lo, he is there: believe him not. For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall show signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect. But take heed; behold, I have foretold you all things."

From these verses, we also learn the ways and aim of the devil, who would seek to remove the elect from the testimony of Christ. What could not be achieved through violence, the evil one would seek to accomplish through seduction. I urge you, however, to mark the words "if it were possible". Underline them in your mind; underline them in your Bible, if that helps. Shout them to one another for they are deeply enriching words. As one commentator has written: "The true saints will know that the real Christ is not going to hide Himself in some corner, so that men have to say, "Lo, here is Christ: or, Lo, He is there." He will shine forth in His glory at His coming, and every eye shall see Him."

Let us always heed the admonition and never be deceived.

Though we have no time to read the next four verses, they begin with the expression, "But in those days..." which is a common Old Testament expression, with a close association with the end times. They show us that cosmic disturbances will precede the coming of the Lord in glory, though even these will not determine the timing of the event. We know that such happenings have occurred before, such as the time when the sun was darkened on the first Good Friday, when Jesus was crucified. I said previously that we had no time to read from this section, yet I feel that I must quote verses 26 and 27, even if I make no comment upon them: "And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds, with great power and glory. And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, and from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven."

Such words need our holy contemplation, for the return of the Lord to the world that cast Him out, and crucified Him, is breathtaking in its personal and cosmic implications.

Moving on quickly, we come to the four verses which constitute the parable of the fig tree. It emphasises the necessity to remain vigilant regarding the signs of the times. Apparently, the fig tree loses its leaves in winter and, unlike the almond tree that blossoms early in spring, the fig tree blooms much later. When the buds begin to break and leaves appear it is certain that winter is over. The point of the parable is the proximity of summer when the leaves appear. We must always remember that these parables had an immediate meaning, as well as one for His later followers. I have no doubt that the Lord was urging His disciples, even then, to observe what was happening in Jerusalem, and Judea, which would end in the destruction of the city. In this context, however, we do well to take notice of verse 31, where it says: "Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away."

We should remain watchful, so that we are not deceived regarding the signs or false teaching about Christ. It is important for us always to recognise that every word of the Lord is applicable to us today.

From very early times, verse 32 has caused consternation regarding the implications of the confession of ignorance by the incarnate Son. "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels who are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father."

There are two things that can be said about this matter. First, and I am quoting the words of another: "...in this Gospel the Lord is presented as the great prophet of God, and that this was a matter reserved by the Father and not given to Him as a Prophet to reveal."

This commentator goes on to draw parallels with similar statements in Matthew 20:23 and John 5:30, where the words 'Not Mine to give' and 'Not Mine to do' are spoken by the Lord. If we summarise our verse in Mark as, 'Not Mine to know', then these three Scriptures give us some idea of what was involved in the incarnation. We cannot build any theory on the verse we are considering that robs the Lord Jesus of His glory as the incarnate Son of God.

After that rather complex discussion of verse 32, we must quickly conclude our study of Mark 13, as we read verses 33 to 35: "Take ye heed, watch and pray; for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is like a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore; for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at evening, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning."

It is obvious that these verses are concerned with the Parousia or glorious appearing of the Lord Jesus. We have considered at length that the time is not known and that this event will be sudden. The disciples received the injunction to watch, which means that we, in like manner, receive the same injunction. The point of the verses is that we should be found serving the Master, rather than idling our time away, when He comes. No teaching from the Bible is theoretical only; all of its doctrines must affect us in some way or other. The truth of the coming of the Lord ought to impinge upon our attitude and manner of life.

A friend of mine used to illustrate his talks on the Lord's coming with a simple story. He was a fisherman, working out of a port on the east coast of Scotland, and would be away at sea for a few days at a time. When the boats arrived back in the harbour, the men would make their way to their homes grouped around the sea front. Most of the wives would be waiting in their homes, ready to make a meal when the men returned. Just a few of the women would be on the harbour side, watching for signs of the boats returning with their husbands. When they saw them on the horizon, they could go back home and have the kettle boiling and the meal ready. They were the ones who were both **watching** and waiting.

As we reach the end of our talk this morning, I ask these questions of us all. Are we watching? Are we vigilant and on our guard to such a degree that we will not be deceived? Let us hold fast to the Bible, the sure word of God as our only guide. May the Lord bless each one of us this day. Good morning and thank you for listening.

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