

## The Beginning of the Birth Pains

- Mark 13:1-13; 28-31
- I do not have first-hand knowledge of birth pains, let me say that right up front. But I know a little bit about them from my wife, who experienced it 7 times. I know that birth pains point to the fact that childbirth has begun. I also know that the beginning of birth pains does not tell us the exact time the birth will take place. I also know that eventually those birth pains will increase in frequency and in intensity. When my wife went into labor the first time or the seventh time, I didn't confidently set a tee time at the golf course for 6 hours later. For a multitude of reasons, I didn't do that, but the primary reason was I had no idea when our baby would make his or her appearance. So, when Jesus tells his disciples that what is about to happen in their lifetime is the beginning of the birth pains, he did not give them, or us, a timetable, either for the immediate future or the distant future. He gives them and us great hope that God has everything in the future under his control, and great assurance that we do not need to understand everything about it before it happens. We are called to trust and wait and remain faithful. I think Jesus would say, 1-Don't panic or even be afraid. 2-Don't become an end times prophet.
- Mark has arranged this material in chapter 13, led by the Holy Spirit of course, in an ABAB construction. The A refers to immediate future, the destruction of the temple, and the B refers to the distant future, the second coming and the end of the age. James Edwards writes that we can see that part A refers to "these things," and part B refers to "those days." That is why David read two sections of this chapter: they are both part of A and refer to the destruction of the temple and the events that take place between then and the tribulation, when the birth pains will become much more intense. However, parts of each of these sections could be understood to have a double-application, one to the temple and one to the return of Christ. And saints, none of us can claim to fully understand how the events of the distant future, which is much less distant than it was in the first century, will take place. We just cannot do it. So, I would encourage all of us to hold loosely our positions on eschatology, which is the study of last things. The fact that there is a second coming, that Jesus will return for his own and take us to heaven, is a first-tier doctrine. It is an essential of the faith. But the particulars of *how* that will take place? That is not a first-tier doctrine; it is a nonessential which means we can disagree about it and continue to walk together in fellowship.
- Let's look at these passages today under these main points: Temple destruction, Threats to discipleship, and The unstoppable gospel.
- **Temple destruction (verses 1-4; 28-31)**
- The discourse begins when the disciples admire the beauty of the temple and Jesus tells them it will be destroyed so completely that not one stone will be left upon another. This was incomprehensible to the disciples, as the temple was the not just the religious center of Judaism, but the temple and Jerusalem were everything to the Jews. They were sung about, as in Psalm 48: "Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever." (Ps

48:12-14) The Jews could not talk about Jerusalem without talking about the temple and could not talk about the temple without talking about God. Now Jesus says it will all be destroyed! They go to the Mount of Olives, 300 feet above Jerusalem, and the inner circle, Peter, James and John, with Andrew, ask him the same question people have been asking ever since: "When will these things be, and what will be the sign...?" To the disciples, the destruction of the temple could only happen at the end of time, the end of the age. The world would have to end if the temple is taken from them! Jesus knows what they are asking, and so he answers the question about the temple, but he also answers the larger question, about the end of the age. The destruction of the temple is a picture of the arrival of the kingdom of God. We will get to the larger question next week, Lord willing and unless he comes back. They ask, "when will **these things** be?" He answers in verse 30, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all **these things** take place." Again, there are various interpretations of the fig tree parable here and some believe Jesus is also talking about the end of time. But it seems to many, and I like this view, that Mark uses this linguistic pattern, repeating "these things," to refer to the destruction of the temple, which he says will happen in that generation. It did happen in that generation, in AD 70, that Titus brought the Roman army in to destroy the city of Zion and her temple.

- They ask Jesus about signs, and he gives them to his disciples with the added encouragement, "Do not be alarmed," and "this is just the beginning of birth pains." As James Edwards says, "Mark 13 is not primarily to provide a timetable or blueprint for the future so much as to exhort readers to faithful discipleship in the present." That leads us to the second point...
- **Threats to discipleship (verses 5-13)**
- Verse 5: "See that no one leads you astray." (planan, put out of your orbit). They want to know the future and Jesus warns them about this present darkness, where we can be led astray by men and women, by false doctrines, and by grounding our lives and our beliefs in myths and fables that we find in the culture or on the internet. Beginning with this verse and running through the chapter is an ongoing warning about speculations about the future at the expense of obedience in the present! There are too many examples to count of well-intentioned believers who get caught up in trying to figure out the prophecies to the point that they fail to live in the present. When Jesus says, "many will come in my name," he refers to false gospels, false messiahs, and false Christs. For some, the messiah is education. For others, money. For others, enough guns and provisions to hold off the apocalypse. For others, "spirituality," whatever that means. And yes, sometimes these false Christs have names, like Jim Jones, David Koresh, Sun Myung Moon, and those who preach a false gospel include The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Christ, Scientist.
- Other threats to discipleship come from wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, even pandemics. That generation knew about that and it would get much worse. Famines during the 30's, when the church was an infant. Earthquakes and volcanoes that leveled Pompeii in the AD 62 and 79. Persecutions that the disciples had never experienced before. They will be delivered over to the authorities and beaten, Jesus

says, and “will stand before governors and kings for my sake.” You can read about that in Acts 4 and 5, in Hebrews and in 1 Peter, just to name a few places. Jesus tells them this not to scare them but to give them courage, to anchor their souls in faithfulness. Paul wrote “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Tim. 3:12). And oh, saints, if we are going to be dragged before the authorities, let it be for the sake of his name, not for the sake of our freedom or our ‘rights’! Jesus promises when we are standing before rulers and authorities for his name’s sake, we will be given what to say at that time! The certainty of persecution gives assurance because of the presence of the Holy Spirit, not because we have all the answers figured out ahead of time. (ISIS in Iraq would put the Arabic “N” on doorposts of Christian homes as a warning). Jesus says to us, “Do not be anxious beforehand.”

- Persecution will also divide families. Even brothers delivering over brothers to the sword, a father his child, and children rising against parents to have them put to death. In the Jewish world, your identity was your family: Joshua said, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” A household divided by betrayal and apostasy brought suffering that jeopardized the life and faith of that family at the most intimate level. This happens in families, but also it happens in the Christian family, when one who claims to be a follower of Christ, under persecution, turns on those who truly follow the Lord. It happened in AD 64 under Nero, and in AD 110 under Trajan, when interrogation by Roman soldiers of the nominal believers led to arrests of the true believers. Jesus says, “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.” Loyalty to Christ will continue to be a cause for the world to hate us. But listen to Jesus’ promise: “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” (verse 13) John 10:29, “No one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” We will persevere to the end, not because we hold onto Him but because He holds onto us! And that leads to the final point that is tucked in the middle of Jesus’ teaching here:
  - **The unstoppable gospel (verse 10)**
  - Jesus says, in the middle of this word about persecution, “And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.” The Gospel is the good news, that Jesus was crucified, buried and on the third day rose from the dead. It MUST be proclaimed. Who will go? Who will speak? How blessed are the feet of those who bring good news. To whom? “To all nations.” Ethnos. That means people groups. Every ethnicity, every tribe, and every tongue must hear the Gospel. Jesus says it must FIRST be proclaimed. Two meanings. First, it must be proclaimed before the end. The scoffers say, “Where is his coming?” Peter wrote, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish.” (2 Peter 3:4-10) We have a job to do, and Jesus will not return until it is done. Second, it must FIRST be proclaimed means there is nothing more important than the Gospel and there is nothing more urgent than that we proclaim it until he returns or until our life here is over.
  - Saints, the birth pains have begun. We can rejoice at the birth of our redemption, and the redemption of all of God’s creation, is nearer than it has ever been.
  - Prayer
  - GREET ONE ANOTHER!