

“The God Who Judges”
Mark 13
March 22, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning we continue our series in the Gospel of Mark. We have a long passage before us, because in many ways, this chapter holds together as a single unit – all as an answer to the disciples’ question in verse 4. That said, there’s so much here that we’ll need to just sort of skim over this morning, that I’m already contemplating doing a short evening series where we look at this chapter in more detail.

In any case, after being repeatedly rejected by the Temple leadership, Jesus begins this chapter by pronouncing that the Temple will be destroyed. The disciples ask when this will be, and Jesus gives his answer.

With all that in mind, let’s turn to our text: Mark 13.

As we do, please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{13:1} And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” ² And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

³ And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?” ⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸ 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 the birth pains.

⁹ “But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. ¹¹ And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. 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. ¹³ And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

¹⁴ “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. ¹⁵ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, ¹⁶ and let the one who is in

the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁷ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ¹⁸ Pray that it may not happen in winter. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. ²¹ And then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. ²² For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³ But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

²⁴ “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we rejoice at your word,
like one who finds great spoil.
We know that those who love your law have peace,
and nothing can make them stumble.
And so help us now to keep your testimonies from the heart,
and to love them exceedingly.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:162-163, 165, 167-168]

Introduction

In our passage this morning, Jesus is speaking to his first followers about the future.

The question is: What aspect of the future is he speaking about?

The majority interpretation of this passage has been that Jesus here mixes predictions about the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, with predictions about the end of time – that he sort of switches back and forth between those two different time horizons. [e.g.: Edwards, 386] Some of what he says here was fulfilled in 70 AD. Other parts are about the cosmic end of history that's still to come.

Now, to be fair, biblical prophecy often works this way.¹ But even so ... I'm not convinced that that's what's going on here.

Instead, I find myself more sympathetic to the arguments that Jesus's words here are all about the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, and the events around it. And this interpretation, seems more plausible to me for a few reasons.

We often fail to recognize the cosmic and spiritual significance of the Temple's destruction by the armies of Rome in 70 AD.

The Jewish leadership in first-century Jerusalem had all the appearances of devout religion. But when God himself came to them, in the person of Jesus Christ ... they rejected him. They even crucified him.

Even after all that, God, in his kindness, after Jesus rose from the dead, sent them messengers, proclaiming Jesus's reign and divinity, and offering them forgiveness if they would repent and believe. And still they did not. And so, after a generation of offering them terms of peace, God sent judgment. He used Rome to tear down the Temple, and to destroy Jerusalem. This is the act of historic judgment that Jesus is describing here.

And I think this becomes more clear when we hear Jesus's words with the Hebrew Scriptures in mind – as the disciples would have. Then we begin to see that what may sound at first like strange, cryptic, or history-ending events are actually Jesus using Old Testament language to describe God's work within history.

¹ It's a phenomena that some theologians call "foreshortening," when a prophet tells of different future events that may be separated by centuries, but he doesn't make that distinction in how he lays them out.

You might think of it like this: If you were to stand on the ground, at a distance from the Rocky Mountains, and look at the mountain range, the mountains look to you, like they rise as one large wall before you – all lined up – almost two-dimensional. There may be a lot of mountains in the range, but there doesn't appear to be a lot of depth to the range. But then, if you got in an airplane, and flew over the same mountain range, you'd see there is great depth to the mountain range – that mountains that looked, on the ground, like they were right next to each other in a row, are actually separated by dozens or hundreds of miles across the width of the mountain range.

The idea in foreshortening is that the Bible often gives us prophecy about the future from the vantage point of the ground. It tells us what is coming, but it often blends together those things that will come sooner with those things that will come later.

The shocking message of Mark 13 is that just as God has brought judgment on the pagan nations in the past, so he will, in the first century AD, bring judgment on the Temple and on Jerusalem, for rejecting him [Wright, 349]

Taken as a whole, what I think we see here, is that Jesus is a King who enacts judgment. And we see this in the past, present, and future.

Let me say that again: Jesus is a King who enacts judgment. And we see this in the past, present, and future.

Jesus Enacts Judgment in the Past

First, we see here that Jesus enacts judgment in the past. And here, I want to argue that what is directly in view throughout this chapter, is the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. [For this interpretation, see: Wright 339-368; Horne, 158-168; Leithart 199-231. I will be heavily drawing from these sources in what follows below.²]

So, let's take a look at this chapter. And as we do, I encourage you to keep the text in front of you as we walk through it.

We begin in verses one and two. After being repeatedly rejected by the Jewish leaders, Jesus leaves the Temple, symbolizing a formal division now between him and the Temple. [Edwards, 386]

On the way out, in verse two, Jesus declares that the Temple and buildings around it – are going to be torn down and destroyed in judgment. This was a shocking message for his disciples to consider.³

Next, Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives. By sitting “opposite” the Temple, Jesus assumes a symbolic posture of judgment. [Edwards, 389] He's also probably intentionally alluding to the words of the prophet Zechariah, who spoke of the day when the Lord himself would gather nations against Jerusalem, in order to destroy it. “On that day” Zechariah says, the Lord's “feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east.” [Zechariah 14:1-2a,4; Wright, 344-345]

² If you're interested in exploring this perspective in a more academically rigorous manner than I'm able to provide within the constraints of a sermon like this, I highly recommend reading pages 339-368 of N.T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*. (Note: It's true, as some of you know, that Wright is somewhat controversial in some Reformed circles because of his interpretation of the Apostle Paul. I myself have read almost nothing of Wright on Paul, so I cannot really speak to that. But I have found Wright's scholarship on Jesus and the Gospels incredibly helpful and (with the usual caveats about not agreeing with everything he says) I would comment his work on the Gospels to you.

³ Though one that was fulfilled even in its specifics. As Josephus would later write about the events of 70 AD, after “Caesar ordered the whole city and temple to be razed to the ground ... All the rest of the wall encompassing the city was so completely leveled to the ground as to leave future visitors to the spot no ground for believing that it had ever been inhabited.” [Josephus, *War* 7.3, quoted in Edwards, 388-389]

And in response to all this, his disciples say to him: “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”

They’re asking: “When the Temple will be destroyed?” That’s the question Jesus is answering here. [Horne, 159] And if, as Jesus speaks, we lose sight of that timeframe, as if to bring us back, towards the end of the passage, Jesus says in verse 30 “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”

The question is about the Temple. Jesus says the answer will unfold within a generation – traditionally 40 years – of when they’re talking. This framing suggests that we should approach this text, in its entirety in terms of the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

The disciples essentially ask for a sign of when this judgment is coming, in verse four. And Jesus begins, in verses 5 through 8 by telling them what won’t be a sign [Leithart, 208]. He says in those verses that there will be wars and rumors of war, natural disasters and all kinds of struggles. But Jesus tells his disciples not to assume that these things are the judgment he’s talking about. God allows conflict and calamity in this broken world for a range of reasons. And there was plenty of conflict and calamity in the forty years between Jesus’s resurrection and the destruction of the Temple. [Edwards, 391-392] But the disciples are told not to jump to conclusions or claim that they can read God’s purposes into every calamity that occurs.

Next, in verses 9 through 13, Jesus warns them that the world will hate them, but they must remain faithful. As one author puts it: “at a time when the whole society is torn with [...] mutual accusation they will find everyone’s hand against them. They will fit into none of the regular parties” of the culture. [Wright, 346-347]

But as they are hated, Jesus assures them in verse 11 that God will be with them. And as he is with them, they are called to three things. They are called to endure, in verse 13, they are called to speak God’s truth, in verse 11, and they are called to share the gospel with others, in verse 10.⁴ Even as persecutions intensify for the early church, Jesus’s disciples are to remain true to their calling: to persevere in their faith, to give an answer for the hope they have within them, and to share the gospel with others.

And as they do that, they’re to be careful about their alliances. In verses 14-16 Jesus tells his disciples to watch for when the “abomination of desolation” is “standing where he ought not to be.” When that happens, he says, “let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”

Many read this is a cryptic reference to some sort of major eschatological figure. But again, I think reading this through the lense of the Old testament may suggest otherwise. This phrase, which can be translated “the abomination that causes desolation” [Leithart, 211] occurs multiple times in the Book of Daniel [11:31, 9:27, 12:11], and many have argued that it refers to the defiling pagan worship that occurred in the Temple in the second century B.C., under Antiochus IV. [Wright, 349-354; Edwards, 396] In other words, Jesus is saying that when his followers see that paganism has taken over the Temple, they should not hesitate to flee from it [Leithart, 211-215]. Far from

⁴ I suspect that verse 10 refers to the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman world at this time – the nations within the Roman Empire – rather than the spread throughout the globe, which will come later. [Leithart, 206]

throwing in their lot with the Temple and its Jewish defenders when the Jewish Revolt begins in 66 AD, Jesus’s followers should flee Judea. They shouldn’t choose the lesser of two evils between Jerusalem and Rome. They should leave Jerusalem. Because God is bringing judgment. And like Lot, they shouldn’t even pause to look back, but should instead flee at once. [Wright 535]

And this makes sense in the context leading up to 70 AD. Fleeing then could be helpful. Fleeing at the final coming of Jesus would be no help at all. [Wright, 359]

Because, as Jesus warns in verses 17-20, for those who remain in Jerusalem, those caught up in the judgment, there will be great suffering. These verses are extreme, but Josephus’s account of the siege of Jerusalem confirms just how extreme the suffering of that time was. [Edwards, 400 n.36]

And yet, despite all this, in verse 20, Jesus assures his followers that even as all this happens, God has not forgotten his people. When the judgment of God falls in this life, the righteous often suffer along with the unrighteous. And this can challenge their faith. It can make them feel as if God doesn’t see them – as if God doesn’t care. But Jesus here assures his followers that God does see them, and God does care, and that God has even shaped his broader judgment in Jerusalem to spare his people – his chosen ones, his elect.

But even as he gives them that promise, in verses 21 through 23 Jesus warns his followers against being deceived. Throughout the first century, many rose up and claimed to be God’s anointed – God’s Messiah – to lead the Jews to victory over the Romans. But they were false Messiahs. [Edwards, 391] The threat of being deceived into casting their lot in with the unbelieving Jews, of pegging their future on the fate of Jerusalem, of following a false Savior – that threat was real. And Jesus urges them to resist it.

Then, in verses 24 through 27 Jesus tells them that when judgment comes, it will be he himself who is bringing judgment on the powers of this world. Especially here, when Jesus speaks of the sun being darkened and the moon not giving light, and the stars falling from heaven, and Jesus coming on the clouds, many assume that Jesus must be speaking about his final coming at the end of history. But this assumption fails to read Jesus’s words through the lens of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Because among the Hebrew prophets the language of the sun being darkened and the moon not shining, and stars not giving light – that language is used repeatedly to speak of God bringing down on rebellious nations and their human leaders. The prophet Isaiah repeatedly uses that exact language to speak of God’s judgment on Babylon [Isaiah 13:6,10-11,19; 14:4,12-15; 34:3-4] and the prophet Ezekiel uses the very same language to speak of God’s judgment on Egypt [Ezekiel 32:5-8]. [Wright, 355; Horne, 160-163; Leithart, 219-220] In fact, the Bible often uses the sun, moon, and stars as metaphors for human rulers [Jordan, 53-67] and that’s what we have here too, in Mark 13. Jesus is pronouncing judgment on the leaders of Jerusalem and the Temple, and predicting their downfall: the snuffing out of their light and the end of their reign.

The same is true when Jesus speaks about “coming in clouds with great power and glory” in verse 26. In Isaiah 19, when God brought judgment on Egypt, Isaiah describe that coming judgment by

saying “Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt.” [19:1] Jesus again is using Old Testament language to stress that when this judgment comes within history, he is the one behind it – he is the one bringing judgment on Jerusalem through these historical events that unfold. [Horne, 163-164]

Verse 27 in the ESV speaks of Jesus sending out “the angels” to gather in his people – his elect. But here we need to remember that the word for “angel” in both Greek and Hebrew can also be translated “messenger.” This passage, I would argue, seems to be less about an act of heavenly beings at the end of history, and more about Jesus sending his messengers out in mission as Jerusalem falls. [Horne, 166; Matthison, 114]

In verses 28 through 31 Jesus urges his disciples to pay attention to the world around them, and to believe his promise that he is bringing judgment. “All these things” he tells them, will “take place” before “this generation” has passed away. He urges them to stay alert, and not to become complacent.

And then, finally, in verses 32 through 37 Jesus tells his followers not to focus on trying to figure out the future, but to focus instead on being faithful in the present. “You do not know when the time will come” he says. It’s not their place to know. Their job is not to know the future. Their job is to be faithful in the present – to stay alert, to “stay awake,” to stay faithful. [Edwards, 390; 401] Sometime in their generation, judgment is coming on Jerusalem and the Temple. But they don’t need to know exactly when. They merely need to remain faithful. That is Jesus’s charge to the first generation of his followers.

At the start of the text, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple. His disciples ask him when this will happen, and while Jesus reiterates that the coming destruction is, in fact, the judgment of God, while he warns them against allying themselves with God’s enemies when the time comes, while he even says this judgment will come sometime in the lifetime of their generation, even so, Jesus does not give them a magical decoder ring so they know exactly what will happen when. Instead, he calls on them to remain faithful in the present. He assures them that God will be with them by the Holy Spirit [13:11], and that God will not abandon or forget them in the midst of the trials that come. [13:20]

That’s what Jesus is saying to his followers – that is his answer to their question in verse 4.

Jesus is a King who enacts judgment. And he’s done so in the past – he’s done so in 70 AD.

Jesus Enacts Judgment in the Present and Future

But Jesus’s work in this world is not limited to the past. His action as King, enthroned in heaven, is not limited to 70 AD. And so even if the specific events in view in this chapter are limited to the first century, as I’ve argued, Jesus’s words here still have implications for all of us today.

Because Jesus is a King who enacts judgment not only in the past, but also in our present, and ultimately in the future.

Jesus is not just a spiritual buddy for us to call on. He is a King who reigns from heaven. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and even now, he is a King who brings judgment on his enemies in this world.

Which means that with the necessary adjustments, Jesus's words in this chapter have applications for us as well.

Look again at this chapter.

In verses 5-8 Jesus reminds us that life has many hardships and even calamities. But we shouldn't assume they're all the judgment of God. The truth is, most of the time, when trouble comes, we don't know what God is doing. Yes, of course, sometimes God's judgment is the primary thing at work when a disaster comes in this world – that's part of the point here. But also, other times, it's not God's judgment at work. Job's friends saw calamity and were convinced it must be God's judgment. But they were wrong. Verses 5 through 8 remind us that while it's true that God does act in judgment in this world, even so, we must not assume that every calamity is an act of judgment.

In verses 9 through 13, Jesus warns us that even when the world hates us, we must remain faithful. As the Apostle Peter tells us, we should not be surprised when such trials come upon us, as if it's a strange thing. The world often turns on God's people. And as was the case with Jesus's disciples in the first century, so it is with us – when the world turns on us, our calling is simple: we are called to persevere, to give an answer for the hope we have in Christ, and to share the gospel with others. And we don't need to peer into the secret purposes of God in order to do this. Whatever happens, whatever comes, our calling remains simple: remain faithful to Jesus, and speak faithfully about who he is. And as we do, God promises here to be with us by his Spirit, and he assures us that he will not forget us.

In verses 14 through 16 Jesus warns us, when great conflicts arise, not to put our faith in earthly powers who have not bent the knee to him – no matter how much we have in common with them. Our trust is not to be in earthly princes or unbelieving political movements – whether they are ancient Jewish zealots or modern secular political movements. When real war or culture war breaks out, we may not find a home in either side. In such cases, Jesus calls us to stand apart – to flee to the hills – and to place our ultimate trust in him.

In verses 17 to 20 Jesus assures us that even when great suffering comes, it is not a sign that God has abandoned us. God sees us. God is with us. God will not allow his people to go astray, if we cling to him in faith.

And so, as verses 21 through 23 highlight, we must not turn to false Saviors. Many will claim to speak for God, and tell us that they are here to rescue us. But we must be on guard. And our hope must remain in the Lord himself.

Verses 24 through 27 remind us that in Jesus, we serve a King who judges the most powerful people and institutions in this world. Kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers die or are

deposed. Nations and empires, revolutions and political parties come and go. Though they seem as high and glorious as the sun and moon, Jesus is so powerful, that he can snuff them out at will. Though they seem numerous like the stars, he can shake them until they fall from their thrones. And though we may not see him at that moment, when such changes occur, Jesus is the one who is carrying them out – riding the clouds like a chariot.

But he doesn't tell us when he will do that. He doesn't tell us the timing. As much as verses 28-32 assure the first-century Jews that they will see this in Jerusalem in their own lifetime, verses 32-37 remind us that Jesus doesn't tell us the timing of what he's doing in the world. He doesn't call us to know the future. He simply calls us to be faithful in the present – to “stay awake.”

As you look at the world around you, as you hear of wars and rumors of wars, as you see catastrophes around the world, if suffering comes to you, if temptations and false saviors arise, your calling is not to figure out exactly what God is doing. Your call is simply to remain faithful.

That's what's at the heart of this chapter.

We are to refuse – to flee – from every temptation to trust in a false savior, whether it's an individual, a nation, or a political movement. We are to stay awake and not be lulled to sleep by worldly powers. We are to endure and persevere in clinging to Jesus faithfully. We are to speak truth about who Jesus is. And we are to trust that God is with us, and Jesus is in control, even when it doesn't look like it to our eyes.

That's what the first-century Jews here were called to do in their unique circumstances. And that's what we, as God's people, are called to do, in whatever circumstances we may face.

Jesus brought judgment on Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD.

Jesus has brought his judgment on many nations, and leaders, and peoples, over the centuries that followed. He continues to do that even now.

But each of those judgments has been partial. Each of those judgments has been incomplete. In each of those judgments, the righteous still suffer, and the unrighteous may escape.

But the Bible tells us that such partial judgment, executed by Jesus in history, is not meant to be complete. They're not meant to be the end of the story. Instead, they're all meant to point us forward. They're all to remind us that the same Jesus who brings these partial judgments in this life, will one day bring a complete judgment. The same Jesus who acts now through historical events will one day act directly at the eschaton. The same Jesus who seems to remain hidden behind the works of providence will one day reveal himself clearly.

Because the same Jesus will one day return to earth for good. He will come down from heaven. And then he will carry out the final judgment to which every other judgment has only been a foretaste. He will bring an end to history as we know it. He will raise all people from the dead. And then he will bring a final judgment on all who have rejected him. Then he will grant eternal salvation, and peace, and safety to all who have entrusted themselves to him. And as his enemies

are cast out, Jesus will establish a new heaven and a new earth, where we will dwell with him forever.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is a King who brings judgment. He's done it in the past. He's doing it even now. And he will do it in a final and ultimate way one day in the future.

And so, stay awake. Persevere. Tell others about Jesus, your King.

Whatever may come, cling to Jesus by faith. Because he is with you. And he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.

Jordan, James B. *Through New Eyes : Developing a Biblical View of the World*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988.

Leithart, Peter J. *The Gospel of Matthew Through New Eyes; Volume One: Jesus as Israel*. Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2017.

Matthison, Keith A. *Postmillennialism: As Eschatology of Hope*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999.

Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.