

### Mark 13: 1-8 When Your World Is Ready to Fall

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Wow, I bet the disciples were not expecting Jesus to respond in this way. As far as the disciples were concerned, when they came out of the Temple with Jesus and saw it from the outside, they couldn't help but remark on the magnificence of the building, perhaps even with a sense of pride, for it was their Temple. A review of the book, "The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder" written by Ehud Netzer says, "In Jerusalem he [King Herod] built a new temple for his Jewish subjects within a compound unparalleled in size and splendor. Nothing like it has been found in the entire Roman Empire." Unfortunately, we don't have a picture of it to see what they saw, because it was utterly destroyed by the Roman Empire only 40 years or so after Jesus predicted its destruction.

According to a Roman historian, it was a "mountain of white marble adorned with gold, a temple of immense wealth." Surrounding complex included sprawling courtyards, colonnaded courts, grand porches and balconies, covered walkways and monumental stairs.

King Herod had rebuilt the Second Temple to impress the wealthiest and most powerful rulers of the day, but for many Jews, it was the closest point of contact between God and God's people.

And, living under the rule of a foreign empire, such an awesome House of their God must have affirmed and validated their identity as a people. Its existence grounded the life of faith for many. It was the center of their spiritual, religious, and even political life. Sure, their teacher Jesus had argued with other religious leaders there and was critical of the religious system that had come to oppress the poor and the weak and the vulnerable, but it was still their world, their Temple.

But instead of nodding in agreement with the disciple, Jesus asked him, “See those buildings? Every one of their stones will be thrown down. You’ll see.” It must have shocked the disciple: “What is Jesus talking about? How can such magnificent building fall? And is Jesus Okay with the House of God being destroyed?”

Peter, James, John and Andrew, the first four disciples Jesus called to follow him, want to know when this would happen and what signs they would see when the time is immanent.

Now sitting over and against the Temple, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus begins to teach. There, he instructed them on what they are to “watch” and “watch out” for, when Jesus is no longer there physically for them to literally follow. You see, this is the last week of Jesus’ life; Jesus and his disciples had left the Temple for the last time, and soon some of the religious leaders and the Roman officials would together destroy Jesus’ body.

If his teaching here was for the disciples who must follow Jesus without his physical presence in the world, then the teaching is also for today’s Christians. And we, like Peter, John, James and Andrew, would want to know what to look for when our world is ready to fall...

Jesus said to them, when the Temple starts to fall and their world is thrown into chaos, “watch out” for those who show up, self-identifying as a Messiah and saying “I am he! Listen to me!” Jesus is saying, don’t be misled by such false prophets who claim the divine authority and say, “I alone can fix it!” Don’t follow anyone like that; they will lead you astray.

Then, Jesus tells them when they hear of wars and rumors of wars, and when you see international conflicts, and natural disasters like earthquakes and famine (and I would add wildfires and floods and super hurricanes, to update the list), when you experience or witness those things, Do Not Be Alarmed. Because they are not the signs that the end has come. The end is not yet; your world is not falling, despite the appearance. God is still at work.

If all those terrible things would take place and they are not the sign of the end of the world, then what are they? What is really happening when the world appears to be ready to fall? That is the heart of the question disciples didn’t get to articulate but the one Jesus answers. And Jesus gives the answer as the reason why they should not be troubled. All those things that would make them wonder if the world was about to end, are in reality only the beginning of the birth pains, Jesus says.

Birth pains, and just the beginning of it? What Jesus was saying to them was that, when they experience what to them feel like the failure in a massive scale of great human

achievements, like the fall of the splendid Temple, and the failure to navigate difficult relationships with powers surrounding their world, do not lose heart, for it is not the end of the world; their world is not ready to fall. On the contrary, what seems and feels like the end is a beginning of something new.

For the disciples listening to Jesus on the Mount of Olive that day those things had not yet occurred. But for the original readers of Mark's Gospel, they were either in the middle of experiencing, or had experienced the war with Rome and the resulting destruction of the Temple, and their world had just fallen apart, or so it felt.

What is the Temple to us today? What is it for us what the Temple was for the Jews in Jesus' time? For them, it was the center of their spiritual, religious, and political life. It was a tangible expression of God's presence in their midst. It was a symbol of their ideal and their identity as a people, holding their faith.

When I was in central Italy recently, I visited many towns with their cathedrals and churches, filled with amazing pieces of sacred art, beautiful paintings and statues of saints. But the Basilica of St. Peters in Rome surpassed them all in its overwhelming grandeur. It was huge and splendid. Even so, my Protestant mind couldn't help but imagine, with judgment, how such greatness was achieved at the expense of the poor. It was built by the abusive practice of collecting indulgences. Then someone reminded me that, the vast majority of the poor were also illiterate, so it was through these beautiful images, paintings and lifelike sculptures that they learned the story of God and God's people, and I could feel how their beauty conveyed passion and devotion. It is still attracting daily tourists today. In light of Jesus' words, these splendid cathedral and churches, too, shall pass.

We, the Protestants, may have restrained ourselves from building massive cathedrals and decorating them with gold, but we sure built huge and complex human institutions called church denominations, scaffolded by policies and rules and regulations, as they were deemed necessary as the denominational body grew in size and complexity. Now, we are experiencing negative growth and the churches are often said to be "dwindling or dying," though I personally take issue with such expression. Protestant or Catholic, is the decline of institutional Christianity the sign of the end of Christian faith? Or, as Jesus says, are we experiencing the birth pangs and the Spirit is bringing forth new life through our pain of shrinking.

Then, I think of our public life together as Americans. The Jerusalem Temple for the Jews in Jesus' time was the center of political life as well. My mother, who models for me the faithful Christian living, urged me to become naturalized U.S. citizen when I was just fine being a resident alien without the right to vote. My mother believed that Christians were to engage in the life of the world where God has made home in Jesus Christ, and we are to serve him in the community where we lived. In a democratic society, that involves casting one's vote as a citizen, and so I did. Now, I am no longer an observer on the sideline but a fully invested citizen, experiencing the ups and downs as political pendulum swings from one election to another. The morning after the general election, I was right there with the rest of the nation, where roughly ½ of the people woke up and sighed the sighs of relief and hope, while the other half woke up and could hardly get out of bed for fear of the country's future. Is this deep divide a sign of the end of our country?

To our anxious and fearful souls, Jesus reminds us that, our often failing efforts to maintain world order, peace and justice, our often frustrated and frustrating attempts at living in harmony with the natural world, will not bring the world to an end, because in the midst of the chaos we create, and out of the chaos that we fight, God is doing a new thing, yes, even when our world seems ready to fall. It is the birth pain of the kingdom of God.

So, we are not to lose heart, but to bear witness to God's sovereign rule. When our best efforts in fighting evil in the world result in more wars and violence, the suffering and pain are real. So, Jesus gave us his words, do not lose heart, because the end is not yet. It is not over until the Creator says so, and the end is when the Creator makes all things new, and it is more awesome than all that has passed away and the most terrible things we are experiencing.

In the meantime, trusting in that promise, we are to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength, and love our neighbor as an extension of ourselves. In the face of the overwhelming trouble in the world, what we can do from day to day may feel so small and insignificant, but if done with out of our love for God and for the world, it is precisely what God is calling us to do. So, watch and watch out, discern God's will and follow where the Spirit guides. Let the Love of God rule your day. Amen.