

80 Mark 13:14-23 The Tribulation

Text

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.

Abomination of Desolation

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.

I argued last week that the abomination that causes desolation was fulfilled by the Roman armies that surrounded Jerusalem (which finally culminated in the desecration and destruction of the temple). To finish off our analysis of that concept I thought it good to exegete Daniel 9 from whence that phrase is drawn.

Daniel 9: 24-27 “Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city,

The first thing we need to notice is that seventy weeks are decreed. This should be understood as weeks of years. Seventy weeks for your people and your holy city. OK, this is about the Jews and Jerusalem.

to finish the transgression,

Jesus spoke in Matthew 23 of how the guilt of all the previous generations would now come upon this generation. This was a filling up of the guilt, a finishing of transgressions.

to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.

Seventy weeks are decreed to atone for sin. The atonement of Christ was the final atonement.

There is no other atonement to which we are looking forward. Whatever the seventy weeks are, they include the atonement of Christ. This atonement is what puts an end to sin. It is what brings in everlasting righteousness.

25 Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. 26 And after the

sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing.

Verse 26 says, "after 69 weeks." Thus it begins to speak of things that take place sometime after the 69 weeks without placing them any more specifically than that. After the 69 weeks, messiah will be cut off and have nothing. Isa 53 talks about how he was "cut off from the land of the living."

And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.

Who is the coming prince? The immediate antecedent is the messiah. I would take the people of the prince to be the Roman armies. **Jeremiah 27:6** "Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him." **Isaiah 45:1** "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him

that gates may not be closed." It is not therefore, unheard of for God to use other nations as his rod of discipline. And when he does that, they can be described as his "servants", or his "anointed," or his "people."

Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed.

What's end? The end of the temple, the end of Jerusalem. Again, these are things that will happen sometime after the 69 weeks.

27 And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering.

To be more specific, Verse 27 goes back and revisits the seventieth week itself. Jesus comes at the end of 69 weeks. What covenant does he make at this time? Well at the midpoint of this week he puts an end to sacrifices and offerings. It seems to me that this is referring to the death of Christ. The writer of Hebrews writes in **Hebrews 10:12**, "when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." Jesus was the once for all sacrifice. Later in **Hebrews 10:26** he says, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." This does not mean that the blood of Christ does not cover our sins if we sin after having been forgiven. The context is about the sacrifice and perfect offering of Jesus in contrast to those sacrifices that were offered year after year. Thus if you go on sinning, there is not another sacrifice that you can go and do. God is no longer accepting the animal sacrifices. Even though the temple has not been destroyed at this point, the author of Hebrews insists that if his audience, under the pressure of persecution, were to return to Judaism, it would do them no good before God. There remains no more sacrifices for sin after Jesus.

The author of Hebrews repeatedly talks about a new and better covenant. It is a more perfect covenant. It is not like the covenant that he made with Israel before. This is a covenant that actually saves. It is a strong covenant. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:25

recounts how Jesus "took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" Hence, it is the death of Jesus that makes a strong covenant as well as effectively puts an end to sacrifices and offerings.

And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator."

The remainder of this verse spells out what will flow out from this inaugurated covenant. The old covenant is done, and Israel, as God's unique people are no more. This does not mean that the Jews are done. Please understand this. The Jews are not done. The covenant that God made with

Abraham finds its ultimate expression in the New Covenant which expands to include the Gentiles. The Jews are not done, but Israel as a theocratic nation are done. Israel as a cultic nation with all the rites and sacrifices and priesthood and cleansing, all of these are done. Hence 70 weeks are decreed. Everything spoken of in verse 24 occurred in the life and death of Christ. The abomination of desolation flows from this decreed end. It follows, as Jesus said, within one generation. Anytime that scripture gives a prophecy with a certain number of years, never has a gap been inserted. Can you imagine God decreeing 400 years that Israel would be in Egypt when in actuality it ended up being 1700 years. Can you imagine trying to pass that off as fulfilled prophecy by saying, "No it really was 400 years, 300 at the beginning, then a 1300 yr gap and then another 100 at the end."? Can you imagine trying to say that the 40 years of wilderness wandering that God decreed for Israel was actually only 39 and there remains to be fulfilled one more year of wandering? Never has God given a time frame but then inserted a gap so wide that it dwarfs the actual prophesied time frame. This means that this must have a first century fulfillment as we have been saying all along.

The Tribulation

The Flight From It

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.

Thus far, the primary school that I have been opposing is futurism since they are the only ones who take the whole of this discourse to be future. But starting at this verse, many of the remaining commentators begin to diverge. In the five main commentaries that I have been referencing during Mark, all of them see a first century fulfillment in the fall of Jerusalem, but two of them also see a future fulfillment yet to occur. I opt to go with the remaining three in seeing only a first century fulfillment. A double fulfillment is attractive in terms of getting rid of the troublesome verbiage, but it does not easily supply clean lines of application.

William Hendrickson states with much humility, "It is not claimed that any exegete is able to completely untangle what is here intertwined, so as to indicate accurately for each individual passage exactly how much of its contents refer to Jerusalem's fall and how much to the final great tribulation." (Hendriksen, 526). This is exactly the problem. Without being able to discern which verse is talking about which event, the double fulfillment seems little more than interpretive agnosticism.

There are several reasons that I still see the first century in view here. First, while most people who place the great tribulation in the future understand it as a worldwide tribulation, verse 14 limits it to Judea. No one else needs to flee when you see the sign, only those who are in Judea. Second the flat roofs of verse 15 were typical in 1st century Palestine. People would go up to the roof to socialize. Hence the OT rules about putting a rail around your roof to prevent someone from falling off. Most housing today has the sloped roofs.

Third, cloaks also were a typical garment. I suppose that some will insist that these simply stand for whatever sort of modern equivalent we may have. But if that were the case, one would think

that it would be more appropriate to use general terms. One may expect him to say, "don't spend time preparing to leave, just leave. In fact, do not even go back into your house. Just leave." Instead, Jesus mentions several things that fit a 1st century setting.

Fourth, there is great concern for pregnant or nursing women. This is tied to what follows. It is difficult to see why this would be mentioned when, in modern times, people can just get in the car or on the airplane. This seems to assume that flight would be on foot. This does not require a 1st century fulfillment, but it sure fits the 1st century better.

Fifth, Matthew records that they should pray that their flight will not take place on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was still in effect (as opposed to most Christians now celebrating the Lord's day rather than the Sabbath. This is key because there would be no provisions along the way since all businesses would be closed on the Sabbath. The gates also would be closed. This would make travel more difficult.

Sixth, Jesus urges them to "Pray that it may not happen in winter." Edwards notes that it will be difficult for "Anyone fleeing in winter when the wadis - the ravines and gorges - are swollen and impossible to cross." It would be cold and muddy with many ravines impassable. This would be especially difficult for women. Again, this seems to fit a first century setting better since modern cities have paved streets with bridges and storm drainage systems, all of which make winter travel far more tolerable.

The Horrors of It

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.

So if all these things easily fit within a 1st century setting, and if they must be manipulated to fit within a 21st century context, why do some people place it in the future? The answer is in verse 19. When we read that sentence and then scan through history, we may be tempted to say, "But the holocaust was worse therefore this can't be a 1st century fulfillment of scripture is wrong!" That seems pretty tight does it not? Let me suggest to you that this is a misreading of the text. Let me demonstrate this by three points.

First, even if we read it in a concrete way, Lane notes that, "As great as the oppression will be, it is nevertheless not necessary to be immediately followed by the end, for the time will be extended, with the possibility of other, though lesser, tribulations." (Lane, 472). Thus it assumes that there will be many future wars and tribulations, but none of them will be as great. But if Jesus returns immediately after this tribulation, then there is no time to prove the assertion. Second, even if we read in concrete terms, we may be selling short the atrocities that actually happened in Jerusalem's fall.

The noise of those that were fighting was incessant, both by day and by night; but the lamentations of those that mourned exceeded the noise of the fighting. . . . They, moreover, were continually inventing pernicious things against each other; and when they had resolved upon anything, they executed it without mercy, and omitted no method of torment or of barbarity" (Book 5, Ch. 1:5).

"Then did the famine widen its progress, and devoured the people by whole houses and families; the upper rooms were filled with women and children dying of the famine; and

the lanes of the city were full of the dead bodies of the aged; the children also and the young men wandered about the market places like shadows, all swelled with famine, and fell down dead wherever their misery seized them. . . . Thus did the miseries of Jerusalem grow worse and worse every day . . . and indeed the multitude of carcasses that lay in heaps one upon another was a horrible sight, and produced a pestilential stench, which was a hindrance to those that would make sallies out of the city and fight the enemy” (Book 5, Ch. 12:3; and Book 6, Ch. 1:1).

“While the holy house was on fire, everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain. Nor was there commiseration of any age, or any reverence of gravity; but children, old men, profane persons, and priests were all slain in the same manner. . . . Moreover, many, when they saw the fire, exerted their utmost strength, and did break out into groans and outcries. Perea also did return the echo, as well as the mountains round about Jerusalem, and augmented the force of the noise. Yet was the misery itself more terrible than this disorder. For one would have thought that the hill itself, on which the temple stood, was seething hot, as if full of fire on every part, that the blood was more in quantity than the fire, and that the slain were more in numbers than they who slew them. For the ground did nowhere appear visible because of the dead bodies that lay upon it” (Book 6, Ch. 5:1).

“[The soldiers] went into the lanes of the city with their swords drawn and slew those whom they overtook without mercy, and set fire to the houses whither the Jews had fled, and burnt every soul in them . . . they ran everyone through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies.” (Book 6, Ch. 8:5).

As D.A. Carson notes, the greatness of this tribulation need not be a bare counting of numbers, but a density of persecution. As bad as the other wars and concentration camps may be, there were some survivors. But in AD 70 everyone died, and the few that didn't were sold into slavery. 1.1 million were slaughtered, and the remaining 100,000 were brought into slavery. It was complete.

Third, I believe that to read it as the worst thing ever is to read it more concretely than was intended. To read this correctly requires us to hear it with Jewish ears. How would this have sounded to Jesus' disciples?

Ex 11:6 There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again.

Dan 9:12 He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers who ruled us, by bringing upon us a great calamity. For under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what has been done against Jerusalem.

Dan 12:1 “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.

Joel 2:2 a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.

Eze 5:9 And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again. (Fulfilled by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem).

Fourth, with good evidence that this kind of hyperbole was not unusual, I'd like to prove that it is hyperbole with a counter example. Noah's flood. It is described in scripture as a flood that destroyed all of humanity save eight people. All the world's people were destroyed in this one event. Even if we posit a future worldwide tribulation, I know of no one who believes that less than 8 people will survive. Thus on the balance it seems best to understand it along its normal OT usage which fits well with AD 70.

The Mercy In It

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.

Indeed, Rome surrounded Jerusalem. It looked bleak. Then Cestius Gallas who was in charge of the war suddenly and unexpectedly withdrew. But Rome returned in force. It is unknown why they withdrew, it made no sense from a military standpoint. But that temporary withdraw was all the Christians needed to get out of Jerusalem. They saw the armies surrounding Jerusalem. This was the sign they were looking for. And when Cestius Gallas withdrew, all the Christians fled. All the Christians fled from Jerusalem and the rest of the Jews retreated into Jerusalem. They did not believe that its walls could be penetrated.

It seems that the context is that of the destruction of Jerusalem. If that is the case, then it is natural to suppose that "all flesh" means every human in Jerusalem. It is for the sake of the elect that the days were shortened. Clearly there are uses of "elect" which refer, not to all of the redeemed of God, but only to a certain group of the elect.

Were it not for Rome's strange withdraw, none (mostly the elect) would have had no chance to escape. But since the siege was cut short (for a time) the elect could flee. Otherwise all flesh in Jerusalem would have been destroyed.

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.

Jesus gives one final warning. Don't be led astray by those claiming to see Christ.

Application

Although I don't think this has reference to a future 7 yr tribulation, I do think it foreshadows the day of judgment. This event, as all tragedies, should spur us toward a sober self-examination. There will be a day of reckoning when all deeds, all thoughts will be brought before the tribunal of God. It should make us think of how short our lives are. We cannot depend on tomorrow. At the same time, we see God's care for those who are his. We see that even in this most horrible of events, God provided a way of escape for his elect. So it is for all who are in him. Though they may suffer for a time, God will ensure that none of his people fall prey to the ultimate judgment.