

81 Mark 13:24-31

A New World Order

Text

“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.

Introduction

Thus far in Jesus' Olivet Discourse, we have seen the context of the disciple's questions and Jesus reply in three forms. First was the landmarks that they could expect to see along the way but which provided no real cause of concern. Second was the actual sign of the coming destruction called the abomination of desolation. Third, and what we examined last week, was the great tribulation. Finally, we will look at the fall of Jerusalem itself.

Last week we had a sneak peak at the fall of Jerusalem when I read a portion of Josephus who mentioned the slaughter of the Jews once the walls were breached. This week we will finish up the material that I believe is tied to the first century. The question that prompted this whole thing was Jesus mentioning the destruction of the temple. This was not just a breaking down of a very nice building, this represented a monumental shift spiritually. Hence, our major focus this week will not be about the physical destruction of Jerusalem, if you are interested in more of that I'll refer you to the works of Flavius Josephus. Rather since the focus of the text is on the spiritual dimension of this event, that is what our focus will be too.

The Case for a Future Fulfillment

There is nothing in vs 24-32 that cannot (should not) be understood in terms of its OT imagery. Our propensity to read it otherwise has more to do with tradition than with exegesis. The question becomes how much interpretive weight should be given to the subsequent Christian meaning of these phrases versus the OT meaning of the phrases? In terms of a pure phrasiological perspective, it could go either way (Carson gives the advantage to the later Christian understanding) but the other textual clues seem to indicate a later subject shift in vs 32.

Each of you has, hopefully read Luke 21, Matthew 24 and are therefore acquainted with them. Hopefully you will also have read Mark 13 at least three times. It is the passage before us this morning which makes many people hedge their bets regarding a first century fulfillment. Ironically, this is passage, as difficult as it is, is perhaps the main reason that I have embraced a first century fulfillment. Before I get to what I believe is the proper interpretation, let me take a moment to present the opposing side so that you understand things better. People look at the verbiage in today's text and feel that it can refer to nothing else but the second coming of Jesus at the end of history. There are great similarities between this passage and other second-coming passages. For instance:

Matthew 13:41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers.

Matthew 16:27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

Matthew 25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

Revelation 6:12-13 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

Revelation 7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.

Revelation 8:12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

This is indeed an impressive collection of texts with some remarkable similarities. There are some very good theologians who take this position. And yet, I remain unconvinced.

The Case for AD 70

Signs in the Heavens

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.

Yes, this has similarities to Revelation 6:12 and 8:12, but this is typical apocalyptic terminology. I recall having a discussion this with someone on this text and I pointed this fact out to which they replied, "Isn't that because it is talking about the apocalypse?" This person was confusing a particular event with a genre of literature. So understand when I say apocalyptic, I am referring to a style of writing. Some examples are:

Isa 13:10 For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.

Isaiah is giving a prophecy regarding Babylon. This was fulfilled in 539 BC. Isaiah later talks about how God is raising up the Medes to do this very act. No one believes that the constellations went away or that the sun was extinguished.

Isa 34:4 All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.

This was judgment on Edom in 703 BC.

Eze 32:7 When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light.

This prophecy begins with, "Son of man, raise a lamentation over Pharaoh king of Egypt." He is to speak this prophecy to him. Again, no one believes that all the stars, the sun and the moon refused to give their light in 568 BC.

Joel 2:10 The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

The immediate context is the judgment on Judah in 586 BC.

Amos 8:9 And on that day," declares the Lord God, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.

This was judgment on the Northern kingdom in 722 BC. (See Keith Matheson, *Dispensationalism*, 142). Finally, in Joel 2:28-30 he says,

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. 29 Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. 30 "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. 31 The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. 32 And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

It is interesting that Peter referred to this very prophecy in Acts 2. When the Spirit descended upon those who were there and they spoke in tongues, some people mocked them saying they were drunk. But Peter replied that what they were witnessing was what was spoken of by the prophet Joel. He then quotes in full what I just read to you, including the bit about the moon turning to blood and the Sun being darkened.

The Son of Man in Power

26 And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

Do I expect Jesus to return as we saw him go? Yes. I do believe that there will be a visible bodily return of Christ in glory coming down from heaven. Yes yes, I believe all that. Yet, God is very often associated with clouds in the OT. His coming on the clouds, or his riding the clouds, is seen as a display of his sovereignty. In proclaiming God as the Lord of creation the psalmist speaks of how he "*lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind.*" (Ps 104). With regard to judgment on Egypt, **Isaiah 19:1** says, "*An oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.*" Concerning his wrath against Nineveh, Nahum 1:3 says, "*The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.*" Most importantly there is

Daniel 7:13-14 I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Thus the consistent OT use is that of a display of power, and most often a display of power in terms of a temporal judgment.

Gathering the Elect

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.

The first thing we need to recognize is that the Greek term *angelos* simply means "messenger." As with all other words, the context must determine its usage.

Mark 1:2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my *messenger* before your face, who will prepare your way,

Luke 7:24 When John's *messengers* had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"

Luke 9:52 And he sent *messengers* ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him.

James 2:25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the *messengers* and sent them out by another way?

The gathering of God's people is a theme from the OT.

Isaiah 11:12 He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

Zech 2:6 Up! Up! Flee from the land of the north, declares the Lord. For I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heavens, declares the Lord.

Brian Schwertly rightly observes that "both Pentecost and the destruction of Jerusalem are organically connected to the coming of the kingdom with power."¹ The disciples received power to be his witnesses at Pentecost, which itself looked forward to the destruction of Jerusalem.

The destruction of Jerusalem was a physical sign of the spiritual realities that had been set in motion by the death of Christ. Since Jesus was the one for all sacrifice, animal sacrifices no longer meant anything to God. That was true at his death, but it was powerfully communicated in the destruction of the temple. In Christ, God has been assembling a new heavenly Jerusalem, the physical city no longer holds a place of prominence. This was dramatically declared in Jerusalem's decimation in AD 70. Since the death of Christ, God has been gathering his people from every tribe, nation and tongue; Israel as a theocracy was now a thing of the past. The destruction of Jerusalem is God's physical exclamation point that Jesus - not circumcision or priests or sacrifices or feast observances - is everything.

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.

Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple, the disciples asked, "When will these things be?" Everything Jesus has said thus far has had the marks of a first century fulfillment. But now Jesus explicitly says that this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. This was the phrase that I just could not get around. This is why a double fulfillment seems out of the question. If there was a double fulfillment, then you would expect Jesus to say something like, "this generation will not pass away before some of these things take place." But Jesus is stubbornly clear on this matter. All of these things must take place before this generation passes away.

Some people have tried to get around the force of this statement by interpreting it as follows: The generation that sees these signs will not pass away until all these things take place. Thus they believe that these signs have yet to occur, but when they do, then the generation alive at that time will not pass away before Christ returns. They tie this to the budding of the fig tree. They believe that the fig tree represents Israel as a nation. Thus when Israel is reconstituted as a nation, that generation will not pass away. There was great excitement in 1948 when Israel was made a nation once more. From that point they said a generation is 20 years, therefore in 1968 Jesus was coming back. They it was changed to 1978. Then they decided that for sure a generation was 40 years thus in 1988 the rapture was expected. When that came and went they tried 1989 to account for some miscalculation. There are still people trying to hold on to these kind of predictions, but all of them are doomed to fail because the passage on which they base all of this has already been fulfilled. Within 40 years of Jesus prediction the temple was indeed torn down. The term "generation" always means the generation ([Mt 11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36](#)) in which the speaker was speaking. "This" is a proximate adjective. If Jesus meant to refer to a generation 2000 years into the future he should have said "that generation." The fact that he uses a proximate adjective points conclusively to his contemporaries. Jesus prefaces his comment about "this generation" by saying "truly." He is being emphatic so they won't miss the point.

1. Brian Schwertly, "Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation," <http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/Tribulation.htm>.

31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

This certainly has broader application to all of scripture, but here it specifically refers to Jesus' pronouncement of exactly when Herod's temple would be torn down. He could not be more emphatic.

The Meaning

Before I give an application on this text I want to wrap up this section by giving the overall meaning. As I pointed out at the beginning, there is verbal similarity between this event and the second coming of Christ. This is perhaps why many people understand it as referring to the second coming. Aside from the verbal similarities, there is no reason in the text to think this is anything other than a 1st century event. Moreover, we have also see that there is verbal agreement between this AD 70 event and many of the OT events recorded in scripture. Since we have established that this does not stretch the vocabulary beyond what was its normal OT usage, then we should simply follow the time indicators in the text.

"OK" you may say, "the terms and phrases are in line with the terminology of other biblical events, but still, why were these terms chosen? Could this not have been communicated in less grandiose terms?" The answer is yes. However, the cosmic language surely helps convey the greatness of this event.

But there is more to it than that. When looking at verse 24 and its OT imagery, I did little more than note the passages. But it is important to understand that these "lights out" passages (the sun being darkened, the moon turning to blood, the stars falling etc) are in specific reference to the downfall of certain nations. R.T. France states that, "In the original prophetic context, therefore, such 'cosmic' language conveys a powerful symbolism of political change in world history, and is not naturally to be understood of a literal collapse of the universe at the end of the world."

Jesus was enthroned at his ascension. The destruction of Jerusalem is a display of power of this newly enthroned conquering King. Jesus told his contemporaries, "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." All the terminology historically reflects an over-turning of the old political system. With Jesus as King, a new world order begins. The old is gone, behold the new has come.

Application

The application question that naturally flows from this is, "How then are you living as a citizen of this new order?" Do you not understand the grand significance of this spiritual government? How does this spiritual government find its contact in this physical world? These are the questions that I want you to wrestle with. In fact, I believe that sometimes by making the application for you, the affect on your soul is not as great.

I'd like to assign these questions to you as homework. I'd like you to reflect on them. Write them down and answer them this next week. "How then are you living as a citizen of this new order?" How does this spiritual government find its contact in this physical world? I will be asking for your answers next week.

God bless!

