

Gripping the Prophetic Future  
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April 13, 2008

Ok, we got 29 minutes—that's my target; and in 29 minutes I'm going to...I'm going to give you a functional grip on the prophetic future, ok? By the time we're done my goal and my intention is that you will be able to step out of here with a clear-headed confidence about what lies ahead, and how to live in light of that; that when the subject of prophesy and future events and the return of Jesus comes to your mind, it's not a clouded maze. You see with clarity and you're able to live with confidence. That's our target and that's our goal today. That's where we're headed with this time. This isn't going to be inspirational. This isn't gonna be motivational. It's gonna be pretty much instructional, 'cause I wanna make sure you get some certain basic things locked in solid whenever the subject of the future comes up.

We're gonna do this by looking very specifically at the teachings of Jesus. We are gonna look exactly at what *He* said when the disciples came to Him and said "What about the future? When is the kingdom gonna come? And what'll be the signs of its coming?" We're gonna look exactly at what Jesus said about that. See, this is a subject area...when you deal with it, there's a lot of opinions. And really, frankly, when I talk with people about it I find that most people...what I find that a lot of 'em have picked up their information from kind of the really exciting alarmist-type literature, the sensational alarms that have been pushed by certain authors in the past. Hal Lindsey in the '70s with "The Late Great Planet Earth"—do you realize that was one of the most best selling books in the entire '70s, was that book? It predicted a date of Christ's return that came and went by. Or I find that if it's not a sensational alarm book like that, it tends to be a novel or a fiction series like "Left Behind," which has been one of the best selling series of books in the past decade.

That's not where you get your understanding of the future. If you follow Jesus, you get your understanding and your approach to the future from what *He* said, and that's what we're going to be doing today. We're going to be looking at the gospel of Mark, chapter 13. And as you open there, let me give you the statement by one of my commentaries, when he introduces this particular chapter. The writer says this: "This is the longest connected discourse in Mark's gospel." It's the longest teaching section in all of Mark. And we've been reading through the gospel of Mark together as a congregation. And we found some teaching sections as we went through. But this is the longest one. It's thirty-seven verses long, of just Jesus teaching. There's no action breaking it up—it's just Him teaching. And then the man, the commentator, makes this statement. He says "...it's also the most difficult." And that's usually what people say when they start getting into prophetic passages, is it's very difficult. And there's reason for that. For example, prophesy tends to come with some powerful imageries and symbolism, and there's references to other passages of scripture that, when you see it you kinda need to know what that passage was indicating and talking about so you can understand this passage. And there's a little bit of that in here.

The other thing that happens when you're dealing with prophetic literature is it tends to give you pictures that come in kind of bits and pieces. I tell people when you're reading prophetic literature it's a little bit like watching a movie preview, and you're getting little clips of what's going to be in the movie but you're not getting all the sequence in between. And you're not getting all the details in between; and you're not even sure how this character came into it, because you're just seeing little clips.

But more importantly when you're dealing with prophetic literature, and you need to understand this, is that oftentimes prophesy was given in scripture to be understood only during and after the events that were spoken of. And there's prophets and there's prophecies that really you will not understand what they're talkin' about 'til you're in the middle of the event or past it. It consistently happened with the disciples when they walked with Jesus. He would say 'this is gonna happen,' and they would be trying to...and they'd get it all wrong 'cause it didn't fit with their plans and their ideas of what things would be, or it didn't fit in their conceptual box. There was things that they had never seen before that Jesus is talkin' about. And then finally it would happen, and they would say "Oh. That's what He was talkin' about." And that's the way prophesy often is.

So yeah, it's gonna be a bit of a challenge, but it's not...it's really not the most difficult passage in Mark. If you just relax and understand we're dealin' with prophesy, what you will find is it's one of the most encouraging because prophesy always gives hope. And that's what we'll be looking at today as we move through Mark chapter 13. We're gonna read it and we're gonna apply it. That's all we're gonna do—read it and apply it.

And we're gonna start with the opening two verses of chapter 13. It goes like this. It says

*As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!"*

*And Jesus said to him,*

...this disciple...

*"Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down."*

Now, Jesus had spent an entire week at the temple in Jerusalem, at the high festival of Passover; and the city had swelled to a population of over a hundred-and-some thousand people, a city that normally had 25- or 30,000 people. It was just packed with pilgrims. And the temple—that huge, huge compound, 30-acres large, with a huge temple at the center of it—was packed with people. And the people came from all over. And there was people like the disciples, who had come from the northern area of Galilee, small little villages. And they had come down here and they were in the big city, and they were seeing the big temple, and they were in awe of what they were seeing, just in awe of it. Some of these stones were 45 feet long, 18 feet high, 14 feet wide. I mean, these are huge stones in this building!

And as they were walking out you can just see these wide-eyed disciples. They've been in there all week with Jesus, and they're walkin' out and they're looking, and they're sayin' to Him, 'Isn't this a magnificent building!' And He says 'There's not going to be one stone left upon another. It's gonna be destroyed.'

They leave the building, and we're told as they were sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple...they went to the hillside that would look back across at the temple and they could see it...and as they were there Peter, James and John and Andrew, four of the disciples, were questioning Him privately. And they came to Him with a question. It was just these four with their Lord, these disciples. These were the longest disciples that had been with Jesus; these were the first ones that had joined up with Him. And they came to Him and they said

*"Tell us, when will these things be?"*

See, when He talked about the temple being destroyed, they immediately thought He was talking about the End. And they go on and say

*"And what will be the sign that all these things are gonna be fulfilled?"*

You know that He's talkin' more than just about the temple, because they're saying 'these things.' And when you go to the gospel of Matthew you'll find that they were...they were talking about far more than just the destruction of the temple. They were talking about the coming of the kingdom...the eternal glory of God's kingdom on earth. They're saying, 'When will that be? And what will be the sign that it's about to happen?' 'Give us a map of the prophetic future,' is what they're asking.

And Jesus responds, and I'm gonna read right through this. And I want you to follow along and hear His words and response to that. He says first of all to His disciples, He says

*"See to it that no one misleads you. Many are gonna come in My name, saying 'I am He!' and they will mislead many."*

Don't be misled. And then He goes on and He says this...

*"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, don't be frightened; those things must take place; but that's not yet the end. For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs."*

They're not the end. They're just the initial beginnings. And then He goes on in the next section, and He's gonna warn 'em not just about...tell 'em that there's not just gonna be things happening among the nations and in the world around them. There's gonna be attacks upon them as believers. He says in verse 9, He says

*"But be on your guard..."*

The idea is 'be watchful'...

*"...for they will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, the gathering places, and you'll stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them."*

'You're gonna be in front of kings, on trial as a way to be a testimony to My reality.' He says

*"The gospel must first be preached to all the nations."*

It's gotta go out everywhere.

*"And when they arrest you," he assures them, "and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it's not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit..."*

... in those settings...

*"...will speak through you."*

And He shows how intense it's gonna get. He says

*"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have their parents put to death. You will be hated..."*

He says "You will be hated..."

*"...by all, because of My name; but listen...the one who endures to the end will be saved."*

Then He has a real significant statement here, and it's one that kinda catches you, and you wonder what's that about. He says,

*"But when you see the Abomination of Desolation standing where it should not be..."*

And then Mark inserts this little comment. He says, "Let the reader understand." Now, you're sitting there as a reader right now and you're saying, 'How do I understand?'

That phrase—Abomination of Desolation—first appears in the Old Testament prophet of Daniel. It spoke of an individual, a ruler who would come and exalt himself as God, and demand to be worshipped. It's a phrase, then, that came to be attached to such a person that was anticipated would come onto history. Eventually the Apostle Paul would speak of this person as 'the lawless one.' Finally, when you get to the book of Revelation, he'll be spoken of as the Antichrist. And individual, a ruler, more powerful than any other, who will establish himself and demand to be worshipped as God—an abomination, repugnant is the idea there, to God; who makes desolate, who leaves everything in his wake a wasteland.

And Jesus says, 'When you see that one, in essence, that lawless one, that Antichrist...'

*"...then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. The one who is on the housetop must not go down, or go in to get anything out of his house. And the one who is in the field must not turn back to get his coat. But woe to those who are pregnant and those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that it may not happen in the winter. Because..."*

...verse 19... 'Because in those days, after that abomination, that lawless one, appears...'

*"For in those days there will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never will."*

In fact,

*“Unless the Lord shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect, God’s people whom He chose, He shortened those days.*

*“And then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ’; or, ‘Behold, He is there’; do not believe him’ for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, even the elect, God’s chosen.*

*“But take heed,” He says, “...behold, I have told you everything in advance.”*

‘I’ve told you this is what’s gonna happen.’ Then He makes this statement, and this is the grand culmination of it all. He says

*“But in those days, after that tribulation,*

*The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling...*

*...from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man...”*

...a reference to Jesus, the King of Glory...

*“...coming in clouds with great power and great glory. And then He will send forth the angels and they’ll gather together His elect from four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of the heaven.”*

Put it on a little time line if you want, like this—a prophetic future looking forward. Two questions: when will all these things be? When will the king come? When will Jesus come in power and glory, and establish the great and glorious eternal kingdom? And what will be the sign of His coming?

As Jesus approaches those two questions He answers the second one first. What will be the sign, what will be the indication that we’re approaching the Lord’s return and the establishment of the kingdom? And He isolates a series of things. For one, there’s going to be birth pangs. There’s going to be wars and rumors of war. There’s gonna be earthquakes. Christians are gonna be suffering. There’s gonna be the gospel pushed forward. There’s gonna be people turning on Christians. And there’s all those sorts of things. And He says they’re just the beginning, the stirrings. And then He says there’s gonna be something very significant, and that’s gonna be that Abomination of Desolation, that individual that sets himself up as a world leader to be worshipped by all. And then there’s gonna be a great, great time of tribulation unlike the world has ever, ever seen. And it’s then, after that, Jesus will return.

It’s a pretty simple scenario. Don’t make it complicated. It’s a pretty simple scenario. Things are gonna get very, very, very bad before they ever get eternally good. Things are gonna get very, very, very bad before they ever get eternally good. The analogy that you could point to, that fits, that you can identify with a bit, is the analogy that Jesus points to when He uses the phrase ‘birth pangs.’ It’s like pregnancy. There’s those first contractions, when finally your wife rolls over and punches you in the ribs and says, “I think somethin’s happening.” You know, and you get out the clock, you’re kinda sleepy-eyed, count the contractions and how many minutes between, and all that sorta stuff. And then there’s the...and then the water breaks. And then comes the hard labor. And then comes the arrival of that new life. That’s the kind of pattern Jesus is talkin’ about here. And He says it must be that way. When you go through here it’ll be said a number of times—it must be this way.

You say, ‘Can it be some other way?’

No. This is the way history will wind down. I mean, we’re a little bit like the apostles when Jesus said, “I must be crucified and die, and then raised from the dead,” and Peter looked at Jesus and said, ‘No way! Don’t talk like that!’ When we talk like this people tend to say, ‘No way! Can’t happen that way! Don’t talk like that!’ Jesus said this is the way it will be. Things are gonna get very, very, very bad before they ever get eternally good.

Now at this point, and I wanna be careful here, at this point there's a real common teaching—and I'd say it probably represents the majority of people in our congregation—would say, 'You know, there's a thing called "The Rapture", and it's gonna happen somewhere around those birth pangs, and God's gonna take us as Christians, the Church, out of the way, up and out of that so we don't go through all that. I understand that teaching, I respect that teaching, and I respect the people who teach it. But I don't accept it. I don't. This is one place I hope I'm wrong, and it's one place I also hope I'm not wrong.

You say, 'Larry, make up your mind.'

I hope I'm wrong, 'cause that's gonna be a horrible time. But you know what? I hope I'm right, because that's gonna be one of the grandest, most profound times of God's work upon earth, ever. And to say you won't be a part of that is like tellin' a football player 'You can't be on the field in the last three minutes.' It's like tellin' the soldier 'You get ready for it, but you're not goin' on the beach on D-day.' This is gonna be the most amazing time of world-wide evangelism that has ever occurred in all of human history. There is gonna be a level of God's working that is absolutely astounding.

Jesus said when you see these things, He's near. This is what He focuses on; this is what He talks about. I go with what He's sayin' and what He's teaching here. He puts it like this...He puts it in a fig-tree parable. In verse 28 He says

*"Now learn the parable from the fig tree; when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. Even so, too, when you see these things happening..."*

...you see those birth pangs, and maybe, maybe you're on earth when that Abomination is evident and the tribulation begins, He says when you see these things, He says you know that summer's near.

*"Even so, too, when you see these things happening, you recognize that He is near, He's right at the door."*

...just like the fig tree's sprouting leaves. He makes this unique statement. He says

*"Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all those things take place."*

Commentators wrestle with what He meant by "this generation"—did He mean that group of people He was talking to at that time? Did He mean the whole Jewish people, referring to the race of Israelites as a generation...which is done in other parts of scripture? Or does He refer to the generation that sees these signs? And I think that's what He's speaking of at this point. You see these things, He's near.

Which raises a question—ok, those are the signs, those are the indicators He's drawing near; can we get an idea of when these things will be?

Almost every generation of Christians since Jesus first spoke these words...almost every generation thought they were seein' these signs and Jesus was near. The first generations of Jews, when Jerusalem was surrounded and destroyed by Titus and not one single stone was left on top of another at the temple, literally—they thought for sure this is it. But the Abomination never appeared. Almost every generation of Christians since has looked and thought, 'Maybe this is it.' And there're times of suffering; there're times of desperation and things, of difficulty...they thought, 'Maybe this is it.' It hasn't been yet. And all these things we've seen to this point in time do not compare to how intense it is going to get in that final time.

And even when you start to see those signs, those indicators, I think it's gonna be difficult to say, 'Ok, this is when it's gonna be.' In fact, what Jesus will say...He says 'Listen, that day or hour...no one knows.' No one...He says it, He puts it this way. He says,

*"Of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son..."*

...speaking of Himself...

*"...but the Father alone."*

There is only one in the entire universe that knows when that date will be, and that is the Father. It's something I believe Jesus has chosen not to know; and no angel can know it, and none of us know it. Don't know.

So the question comes, “Ok, if we don’t know the day or the hour we can get an indication from the signs that it’s drawing near; but we don’t know the day or the hour.” What’s the application? Where do we go with this?

Application, I would put it in two steps. Number one is don’t be misled. That’s His lead instruction when He started this teaching with the disciples. He says, “Don’t be misled. There is going to be a lot of people claiming to be the Messiah, claiming to be the Christ.” He says “Don’t be fooled.” Listen, when Jesus returns in clouds with great power and great glory, there is not going to be a single question about it. You’re gonna know it; you’re gonna *know* it. There’s gonna be no confusion. You are not going to miss that. “Whoa! Jesus, did He come?” Fact, I’m convinced that the church, alert and ready, will not miss the Abomination. You’ll recognize it. The first thing is don’t be misled. Don’t run at the latest sensational statement made.

The second, and this is important because this is the one Jesus emphasizes—be on the alert. Let me read that final paragraph in here where He gets to application. And He’s gonna tell you how to live in this...in this reality. He says

*“Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. It’s like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper, the watcher, to stay on the alert. Therefore,”* Jesus says, *“be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or the midnight, or when the rooster crows in the morning—in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. What I say to you I say to all, ‘Be on the alert.’”*

He says it’s like God is...it’s like Jesus, as He’s leaving, He says ‘Here’s your big assignment, Church. Watch for Me. Watch for Me. You’re the doorkeeper.’ And two aspects of that is watching and ready...attentive and ready; ready to respond when He shows up; ready to meet Him, and attentive and watching for His arrival.

Now, a lot of us can think of examples of being on watch. Some in the military have been on guard duty. What comes to my mind is commercial fishing, and sitting on the nets or on the boat for a night set. And everybody else in the crew is asleep, and you’re supposed to stay awake and watch that boat, watch the other boats around you, watch the net and stay awake. You’re not supposed to fish; you’re not supposed to run the boat or anything. You’re just supposed to stay awake and make sure everything is goin’ ok.

We can think of analogies. We can think of examples. But the question is, “What exactly do I do if I’m gonna wait and be ready? I mean, what should I do tomorrow, Larry, if I really wanna be alert?”

Give you a quick answer—you be a person of prayer. Now I’ll be very specific here. It’s not hard to grasp the prophetic future, and it’s not hard to know what to do to be ready for it. You become a person of prayer, very simply. And I’ll give you the prayer, the specific prayer. Use the prayer that Jesus taught when His disciples came to Him and they asked Him, “Teach us to pray.” And He taught ‘em a prayer, and this is it. He says

*“Pray then in this way. Our Father, who is in heaven...”*

And He gave ‘em six basic requests. *“Hallowed be Your name.”* In other words, ‘May people recognize Your reality with reverence and with rejoicing.’ And then He goes on and this is the one I wanna highlight. He says, *“Pray that ‘Your kingdom come.’”* Ask God to bring His kingdom. That should be a request on your lips when you pray. And you say, ‘Well, how often should I be praying that prayer?’ You should be praying that prayer every day. As you go on down this list and you come to the fourth request, He says, *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* In other words, this prayer is designed to be prayed daily.

You wanna stay alert? What I’d encourage you to do is make sure every single day you pray this prayer, and you include that second request—“Father, Your kingdom come.” Bring your kingdom, God! You start that as a base in your life, and you start doing that on a regular day-by-day-by-day routine, and it will keep you alert, and it will keep you ready; and even more, God will hear that prayer. And as His people call out, He’ll be responsive.

You stop prayin’ that prayer and you will go asleep. You’ll be distracted about everything else goin’ on, and you’ll forget about the kingdom.

This is the teaching of Jesus, ok? This isn’t a little formula book on spiritual life for success. This is Jesus sayin’, ‘Pray this prayer every day.’ I’m convinced if you don’t you’ll go to sleep.

Christian waiting is a really, really weird waiting. Only way I can describe it is an experience we went through with my daughter. Some of you are aware of this, because it was a pretty dramatic process we went through as a family. But she was diagnosed with a liver disease, and she was put on the transplant list. And we were told we would have to wait for her to receive a new liver. And it was a weird, weird, weird wait, because we were told she had to get much worse before she could ever get better. We were told that she had to almost die before she would be given a new liver. And it was the weirdest things, because you're waiting and wanting a new liver and to move on with life; at the same time, you're sitting and waiting for things to get worse. And you can't just stop life. You go on; you get goin', and you plan things and you go for it, and you make the best of every day. And you keep pressing forward, but you know the next day may be worse; and the next day worse. And you're waiting for the day when she's finally so sick that they'll give her a new liver!

That's what the Christian wait is like. We know things are gonna get very, very, very, very bad before they ever get eternally good. And if you spend all your time worried about how bad it's gonna get, you'll waste all the time. What you do is you focus on one great and glorious, grand and mysterious thing, and that is God's kingdom come to earth—Jesus, our Lord, in the clouds, gathering us! And you pray, "Jesus, come. Your kingdom come." And you pray that every day.

Let's stand.

*Our Father in heaven,*

*Hallowed be Your name. May You be recognized for the reality of all that You are with reverence, with rejoicing. And Father, may Your kingdom come—Jesus in His glory, and His power, and His majesty; with Your will worked on earth as it is in heaven, every wrong, every injustice, every inequity, every suffering, every pain done away. Give us this day what we need for this day. Meet us with Your grace that is greater than any sin we've committed. And keep us, Father, from every distraction, every deception, and every device of the evil one.*

*In the name of Jesus, our king, we pray. Amen.*

Go in His grace.