

The Last Days



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Mark 12:41–44, Mark 13:1–32, Dan. 9:24–27, Dan. 7:25, 1 Thess. 4:13–18.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send His angels, and gather His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven’ ” (*Mark 13:26, 27, NKJV*).

This week's lesson starts with a very brief story at the end of Mark 12, where Jesus makes a profound statement about a small act by a widow. The main portion of this week's lesson, however, deals with Mark 13, a striking prophecy about the fate of the Jerusalem temple and more. This chapter, along with its parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, tell about the fall of Jerusalem and beyond, even to the end of the world.

What Mark 13 makes quite clear is that the prophecy goes from the time of the prophet, Jesus, to the time of the end, His second coming. This pattern follows what is known as “the historicist interpretation of end-time prophecy,” as opposed to the attempt to put these prophecies in the past or way off into the future.

Like many teachings of Jesus in Mark, the Lord's instruction is in response to a question or a misunderstanding by His disciples. These questions or misunderstandings give Jesus the opportunity to teach truths vital to Christian life and experience. Jesus not only predicts the future but also instructs His disciples both then and now in how to prepare for the coming trials.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 7.

Two Little Coins in the Offering

Read Mark 12:41–44. How much did the widow give, and what did Jesus have to say about that?

The Jerusalem temple was an amazingly beautiful structure. The temple mount dominated the city, and the massive stones involved in its construction are a marvel to this day, some weighing hundreds of tons. The remodeling and expansion of the temple and the temple mount began under Herod the Great around 20 B.C., but the construction and embellishment of the structure continued into the A.D. 60s.

Many people brought large offerings to deposit in 13 chests located in the Court of the Women near the temple. It was here that Jesus was sitting when He saw a widow approach and cast in two *lepta*. This would be equivalent to one thirty-second of a *denarius*, the usual wage for a day laborer. Hence, the woman's offering was quite small.

Jesus, however, was impressed by her offering. Many rich individuals put in large sums, but He did not comment on their gifts as they deposited them. But this widow's offering called forth His praise. He states that she gave more than everyone else. How is that possible? Jesus notes that they gave out of their abundance but she out of her poverty. They had much left; she gave everything she had to live on. This fact makes her gift extravagant, even though its monetary value was tiny.

This story contains a deep lesson about the management of resources. Giving to God's cause does not depend on the actions of leaders to have validity. The religious leadership of the temple was corrupt, but Jesus did not thereby affirm withholding offerings. If ever there were corrupt religious leaders (Caiaphas? Annas?), those at this time were among the worst. And Jesus knew it too.

It is true that leaders have a sacred responsibility to use resources in accordance with the will of God, but even if they do not, those who give to the cause of God are still blessed in their giving, as this woman was.

On the other hand, withholding tithes or offerings when leaders do something displeasing means that the giving is tied to their actions instead of being made in thankfulness to God. However tempting it may be to do that, it's wrong.

What should this story teach us about the importance of being faithful in what we give to the Lord's work?

Not One Stone on Another

Read Mark 13:1–13. How did the disciples respond to Jesus’ statement about the temple, and what is the significance of Jesus’ answer to them?

As we have noted, the temple complex was a truly amazing structure. Josephus notes that the Royal Portico on the south side of the complex had 162 pillars, each of which three men clasping hands could reach around (*Antiquities*, 15.11.5 §§413–414). Jesus says that it will *all be thrown down*. Such a prophecy concerning this amazing structure would sound to the listener like the end of the world.

“As Christ’s attention was attracted to the magnificence of the temple, what must have been the unuttered thoughts of that Rejected One! The view before Him was indeed beautiful, but He said with sadness, I see it all. The buildings are indeed wonderful. You point to these walls as apparently indestructible; but listen to My words: The day will come when ‘there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 627.

The disciples want to know when this prediction that Jesus has made will come to pass. Thus, in Mark 13:4, a small group—Peter, James, John, and Andrew—ask Him for the timing. They want to know when all these things will happen and what will be the sign when they are about to take place.

What is striking in Mark 13:5–13 is that Jesus spends most of His time not in describing the fall of Jerusalem but rather in warning His disciples about what they can expect in their ministry of establishing the early Christian church. It does not sound as though it’s going to be easy either.

In fact, they will be persecuted, put on trial, and some will be killed. But all through this, Jesus indicates that the time is not yet. They are not to be deceived by tumultuous events. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit will give them the words to speak at the right time, even when family and friends desert them.

The takeaway from these introductory words in Jesus’ prophecy is that the people of God are not to fear tumult and trial. They are to be vigilant because God’s Spirit is going to carry them through the trouble.

What has been your own experience with the trials that come from following Jesus? If you haven’t had any, might you need to ask if you are actually following Him?

The Abomination of Desolation

Read Mark 13:14–18. What clue does Jesus give in figuring out what the “abomination of desolation” refers to?

Jesus comes to the central point about the fall of Jerusalem in Mark 13:14. He refers to “*the abomination of desolation.*” The Lord says that the reader should understand. With these words, Jesus is pointing the disciples to the book of Daniel. This terminology appears in Daniel 9:27, Daniel 11:31, and Daniel 12:11, with a parallel in Daniel 8:13.

Read Daniel 9:26, 27. Who is the “anointed One,” and who is “the prince who is to come” (*ESV*)?

The “anointed one” in Daniel 9:26 (*ESV*) is the Hebrew word *māšīah*, in English, Messiah. In a careful study of Daniel 9:24–27, it is clear that this anointed one refers to the coming of Jesus Christ.

But who is “the prince who is to come,” who brings the desolation of the city of Jerusalem? The city was destroyed by the Roman general Titus. Thus, it seems logical that he is “the prince who is to come” referred to in Daniel 9:26, 27. The two individuals are linked because the way that the Messiah was treated spelled the doom of the city.

What, though, is this “abomination of desolation” that Jesus, referring to Daniel, talks about? Unfortunately, many scholars believe that this abomination refers to Antiochus Epiphanes’s desecration of the temple in the second century B.C. That doesn’t work though. Jesus describes the “abomination of desolation” as something that occurs after His own time here, so it hardly could refer to something that happened two centuries before Christ’s earthly ministry.

Instead, the abomination likely refers to the planting of the Roman pagan standards in Israel during the siege of Jerusalem in the late A.D. 60s. This was the sign for the Christians to flee, which they did.

Just as Jesus predicted, Jerusalem fell. How can we learn to trust Him and the Bible in all its predictions?

The Great Tribulation

Read Mark 13:19. What does this verse refer to?

Mark 13:14, regarding the abomination of desolation, is the fulcrum around which the chapter pivots (see Tuesday's study). Mark 13:19 marks a transition point, as well. It refers to a great tribulation that does not have an equal since the creation of the world. This portends a greater or more extensive persecution than had occurred at the fall of Jerusalem. Mark 13:19 also shifts to the future tense, pointing toward events more distant from Jesus' time.

Just as Mark 13:14 echoes the prophecy of Daniel 9, the great persecution described here in Mark 13:19–23 echoes the prophecies of Daniel 7 and 8, where the little-horn power persecutes the people of God for “a time and times and half a time” (*Dan. 7:25, NKJV*). This prophetic period of 1,260 days is equal to 1,260 literal years (*Num. 14:34, Ezek. 4:6*). This time extended from A.D. 538 to A.D. 1798. In A.D. 1798, Napoleon sent his general to take the pope captive. During this time period of 1,260 years, the little-horn power persecuted and killed those who did not agree with its system of church governance.

Read Mark 13:20–23. What hope does God offer His people during the time of persecution, and what warning does He give them as it closes?

Mark 13:20 speaks of persecution being shortened for the sake of God's people. Historically, the fires of persecution did lessen after the rise of the Protestant Reformation, shortening the time of distress. As the little horn's power waned, more people joined the reforms. But the little horn would rise in power again, as the prophecy of Revelation 13 indicates.

In Mark 13:21–23, Jesus warns of another threat: that of false prophets and false christs, who will arise before He comes back. Jesus warns His followers to beware of them.

At the time Jesus warned about false christs, His movement had barely even begun, and yet, He was able to make such an amazing prediction, which has come true (even today people claim to be Jesus). How should this prediction increase our trust in the Word of God?

The Coming of the Son of Man

Read Mark 13:24–32. What great event is described here?

The great event described in Mark 13:24–32 is none other than the return of Jesus Christ in glory, preceded by signs in the sun, moon, and stars. The New Testament is full of prophecies pointing toward this wonderful event. The apostle Paul describes it in detail in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, where he speaks of those who have fallen asleep in Christ being raised to life and caught up with the living saints to meet Christ in the air. In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle speaks in detail about the reality of the resurrection of the dead, which occurs at Christ’s return.

Peter describes that great day as well in 2 Peter 3:3–13, explaining that the Lord is not slow about His promise but wants all people to come to repentance. And Revelation has vivid descriptions of Christ’s return (*see Revelation 1:7, Revelation 6:12–17, Revelation 14:14–20, and Revelation 19:11–21*). The consistent New Testament teaching is that Christ’s return is personal, literal, visible, and audible. Everyone will see Him when He comes.

What, however, does Jesus mean by “this generation” and “that day” or “that hour”? These words have troubled many people because obviously the generation to whom Jesus spoke is long dead.

A number of solutions to this passage have been suggested. Some argue that the word “generation” can refer to a race of people, in this case the Jews. That is to say that the Jewish race would not perish before Christ returns. Another solution is to speak of the generation of people who see all the signs fulfilled as those that will not pass away before Christ returns.

But a simpler solution is to note that in Mark 13:30, Jesus uses the word “this” as in “this generation,” and in Mark 13:32, He uses the word “that” as in “that day and hour.” In Mark 13, the word “this” (*houtos, hautē, touto*) appears more often in verses 1–13, leading to the destruction of Jerusalem. The word “that” characterizes the latter part of the chapter.

Thus, “this generation” most likely refers to the first-century generation, which saw the destruction of Jerusalem, as Mark 13:30 describes. However, Mark 13:32 refers to the second coming of Christ, which is still future and was more distant from the first century. Consequently, Mark 13:32 uses the word “that” to speak of events more distant from the first century.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “On the Mount of Olives,” pp. 627–636, in *The Desire of Ages*.

Many things are happening in the world that are very disturbing. People truly are frightened about what is unfolding. How can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, with a kind of “inside track” on events, use these things to point people to the hope we have in Jesus and the promise of His coming?

“Because we know not the exact time of His coming, we are commanded to watch. ‘Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching.’ Luke 12:37. Those who watch for the Lord’s coming are not waiting in idle expectancy. The expectation of Christ’s coming is to make men fear the Lord, and fear His judgments upon transgression. It is to awaken them to the great sin of rejecting His offers of mercy. Those who are watching for the Lord are purifying their souls by obedience to the truth. With vigilant watching they combine earnest working. Because they know that the Lord is at the door, their zeal is quickened to co-operate with the divine intelligences in working for the salvation of souls. These are the faithful and wise servants who give to the Lord’s household ‘their portion of meat in due season.’ Luke 12:42. They are declaring the truth that is now specially applicable. As Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses each declared the truth for his time, so will Christ’s servants now give the special warning for their generation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 634.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 It’s one thing to give to the Lord’s work. It’s another to give *sacrificially*. What’s the difference, and why is that difference important?
- 2 Why did God not prevent the persecution of His people through the centuries and in today’s world? How does the great controversy motif help us understand, somewhat, why persecution exists?
- 3 What signs of Christ’s coming especially stand out to you in the present world?
- 4 Think about the state of the dead and the fact that the dead sleep until Christ returns. People close their eyes in death, and what is the very next thing they know? How does this idea help us see how, for each person individually, the second coming of Christ is always very near?

“Adventists Are Good People”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Anush worked as a project manager for the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) before Father prohibited her and Mother from worshiping at the Seventh-day Adventist church in their town in Armenia. After he lifted the ban, Anush resumed working at ADRA.

Through her work, Father met a number of visiting Adventist leaders, including the ADRA director for the Euro-Asia Division, which oversees a large swath of the former Soviet Union, including Armenia.

When Anush brought the guests home, Father was impressed to see that they were sincere and well educated.

“Adventists are good people,” he told Anush.

As he got to know the seven women who attended the Adventist house church in his town, he concluded that they also were good people.

Then Anush was accepted into a master’s program at Andrews University in the United States, and the Euro-Asia Division and ADRA agreed to cover her costs. Father was impressed by that as well. He only wanted the best for her.

When Anush graduated, she was appointed ADRA director for Armenia. Father watched as she oversaw a number of projects, and his respect grew for both the Adventist Church and the Adventist lifestyle. He removed tobacco and then alcohol from the small grocery shop that he owned.

Then he got baptized and joined the Adventist Church. It was 21 years since Mother had gotten baptized and nine years since Anush had started praying for Father to find his way to God.

After his baptism, Father met the friend whose question about reading the Bible had shocked him and prompted him to start going to church.

“Did you know that your words change my life?” he asked. “I stopped being a passive Bible reader and got baptized.”

“What are you talking about?” the friend asked.

“You asked, ‘If Jesus came tomorrow, would you say, “I have read the Bible?” Would that be enough?’” Father said.

The friend denied that the conversation had ever taken place.

“I never said that,” he said. “I would never judge you like that. You must have made a mistake.”

At that moment, Father realized that God had spoken to him through his friend, who hadn’t even realized what he had said.

Part of last quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering went to open a center of influence for families like Anush’s in Yerevan, Armenia. Thank you for helping spread the gospel with your offerings. Next week: Father has another dream.