

## When Will It Happen?

### Mark 13:1-8

<sup>1</sup> As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" <sup>2</sup> Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

<sup>3</sup> When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, <sup>4</sup> "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" <sup>5</sup> Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>6</sup> Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. <sup>7</sup> When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup> 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."

In ancient times and in our time, towering buildings are not supposed to crumble to the ground. Oceans are not supposed to leap out of their sea beds and flood miles inland. The ground is not supposed to shake and ripple. The sky is not supposed to form a funnel cloud and destroy a town. Fires are not supposed to destroy towns named Paradise, and people are not supposed to die because they could not leave soon enough to escape, and millions (maybe billions) of dollars' worth of houses and property is not supposed to be destroyed. Yet all who have watched the World Trade Towers collapse, seen a tsunami flood a nation, experienced an earthquake, suffered through the power of a tornado, or the devastation of wild fires, know that such events happen. Those who provide care for the victims report that all express a profound sense of loss. Not only have they lost loved ones and property, but in a deep and abiding sense they have lost their innocence. They now know that something they once believed to be sure—that a towering structure would stand forever, for instance, or that the ocean would stay securely in its seabed, or a wind or fire cannot possibly destroy their homes into which they put their life savings—is no longer trustworthy. They have lost a foundational belief upon which they once built their lives. No longer will they be able to step on the ground without wondering, if only for a moment, whether the ground is going to remain stable. No longer will they be able to

look up into a darkening sky without wondering if a destructive storm is on its way, or an unexpected fire will destroy all their possessions.

To understand the significance of Jesus' prediction we need to know a little about the building to which he was referring:

*When Jesus came to Jerusalem, the Temple had just been marvelously rebuilt by Herod the Great. The Temple area had been enlarged to a size of about thirty-five acres. Around the Temple area were double colonnades.*

*The Jewish historian Josephus describes the colonnades:*

*"All the cloisters were double, and the pillars to them belonging were twenty-five cubits in height, and supported -the cloisters. These pillars were of one entire stone each of them, and that stone was white marble; and the roofs were adorned with cedar, curiously graven. The natural magnificence, and excellent polish, and the harmony of the joints in these cloisters, afforded a prospect that was very remarkable; nor was it on the outside adorned with any work of the painter or engraver. The cloisters -(of the outmost court) were in breadth thirty cubits, while the entire compass of it was by measure six furlongs, including the tower of Antonia; those entire courts that were exposed to the air were laid with stones of all sorts" (Jewish War 5. 5. 2).*

*The eastern portico was named after King Solomon and the part to the south, which overlooked the Valley of Kidron, was called "Royal." On the east side the high corner was possibly the pinnacle of the temple, mentioned in the story of the temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:5).*

*There were eight gates leading into the temple.*

*Anyone was allowed to enter the outer area, which was therefore called the Court of the Gentiles. The actual Temple was enclosed by a balustrade, and at the entrances to it were warning notices. It says that foreigners have freedom of access provided they do not go beyond the balustrade which went*

*all around the central edifice and which no uncircumcised could cross without incurring the death penalty.*

*Fourteen steps led through the Beautiful Gate to the Court of the women where the poor boxes were, into one of which the poor widow cast her two mites (Luke 21:1-4). Another fifteen steps led up to the famous Gate of Nicanor, to which Mary had brought the child at the time of his presentation; this led through the Court of the Men to that of the priests, which had in its center the altar for the burnt offerings and to the left of it a large basin called the Brazen Sea resting upon twelve bulls cast in bronze. Further steps led up to the actual temple, a comparatively small building. A priceless curtain, embroidered with a map of the known world, concealed from view what lay beyond, and none except the priest on duty was allowed to go farther.*

*It contained the golden altar at which incense was offered and next to it the seven-branched candelabrum and the table with the twelve loaves of shewbread, which were replaced by fresh ones every Sabbath. Beyond it, behind another large curtain, lay the Holy of Holies, which none except the high priest was allowed to enter, and he only on the Day of Atonement. A stone designated the place where once the Ark of the Covenant had stood.*

So when Jesus spoke of the destruction of the temple, it was like saying the Empire State Building, the Sears Tower, the Pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, that building in Dubai would be destroyed!

Poet William Butler Yeats captured this sense of innocence lost in his description of the end times in the opening lines of his poem "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
 Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving the temple, the disciples remark about the large stones and the buildings that appear immovable. Jesus startled them with his prediction that even the great stones that form the temple would one day be thrown down. As they sat together on the Mount of Olives gazing at the magnificent temple, the disciples must have found Jesus' words troubling, if even a little hard to imagine. Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Jesus privately when his prediction would come to pass. In his cryptic style, Jesus warned them not to be led astray by others who would come after him, including some who would claim to speak with Jesus' own authority. Jesus told the disciples not to be worried by wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, or famine, as these were and are signs of the beginning of the end. Jesus did not answer the disciples' question directly. Instead, he set out for them and us a way to live that did and does not focus all of their or our attention on the destruction of the temple or the second coming.

This is the problem with those who, invoking Jesus' name, want to draw all our attention to and focus all our energy on the end of the age. Numerous publications and Internet sites offer formulas for interpreting every tragic event, every hurricane, every war, every famine, every tornado, and every earthquake as part of God's plan for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Various groups have created their own versions of an end-time clock to tell us how close we are to Christ's return. Some provide a "rapture index," claiming that Christ's return is imminent. Others interpret each day's events in light of this text, claiming some secret revelation about God's plan for the last days.

Jesus' warning is more potent than ever. Certainly every generation has heard the voices of those who boldly claim that they are privy to insider knowledge about when Christ is returning. That is what makes the subject of the end times so attractive and so treacherous. We, like the disciples, want to know when these things will happen and can become so focused on discerning the signs of the times that we neglect our more important mission to witness to the gospel today.

Kathleen Norris writes about how the word "eschatology" confounded her for a time, leading her to focus far too intently on the events of the day as she tried to discern the formula. Eventually she found her way through her fear of the end times, coming to regard Christ's return as life affirming in ways more subtle than any dictionary definition could convey. She writes:

What I mean is this: an acquaintance of mine, a brilliant young scholar, was stricken with cancer, and over the course of several years came close to dying three times. But after extensive treatment, both radiation and chemotherapy, came a welcome remission. Her prognosis was uncertain at best, but she was again able to teach, and to write. "I'd never want to go back," she told her department head, an older woman, "because now I know what each morning means, and I am so grateful just to be alive." When the other woman said to her, "We've been through so much together in the last few years," the younger woman nodded, and smiled. "Yes," she said, emphatically. "Yes! And hasn't it been a blessing!"

So how does one survive the devastation of an aggressive cancer diagnosis or other illness, the crashing down of a building, or the aftermath of a natural disaster, or the numerous other situations and challenges that confront us? How does one survive the loss of innocence? How does one live in the midst of competing voices, all full of passionate intensity, claiming that these are signs of the end of the age? Our focus must not be on the signs themselves, but rather on the one who is to come—the one who enables us to look up after such devastation and claim the certainty of blessing. Things may seem to have fallen apart. It may appear that anarchy has been loosed on the world. Nevertheless, the center will hold and—much to our amazement—we will discover that we have much faithful work to do. **Rodger Y. Nishioka**

Jesus did not answer the question of Peter, James, John and Andrew; neither does he answer our question when we also ask: "Tell us, when will this be?" What he does give us the example of his life and love – that he will be with us and give us the grace and

strength to live our lives and do our ministry. We can live our new lives in him without fear and anxiety! Jesus has told us, as his followers, we can trust that God is in control. Thank God for his love and assurance!

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