PEOPLE WILL SEE THE SON OF MAN COMING

Mark 13:1–37

Key Verses: 13:26,27

“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”

To survive, we all need food, water and sleep. But to survive, we also need hope. People create life goals as their hope. There are so many kinds of hopes—hope to go to school, hope to finish school, hope to get a job, hope to get married, hope to have kids, hope to buy a house, hope to retire. But what is a real hope? In today’s passage Jesus describes the world we live in as a dark place, particularly for Christians. But he also mentions a great hope, the hope of his second coming. To many it may sound like a fairy tale, or unnecessary. But to believers it’s our only true hope. In today’s passage Jesus gives signs of the end of the world, but he especially gives us words of warning and encouragement. He promises that he’ll come again in great power and glory, and he promises to gather all those who believe in him, dead or alive, no matter where they may be, to be with him forever. He wants us to believe these promises and have this hope. May God help us to accept Jesus’ words today.

Read verse 1. Just before this Jesus had contrasted the rich throwing their money into the offering box and a poor widow giving her two very small copper coins. He said she put in more than all the others. But now, as he’s leaving the place, this disciple wants him to notice the splendor of the temple. We don’t know which disciple this was, but clearly he hasn’t been listening very carefully. Maybe he’s trying to change the subject and make light conversation. How does Jesus respond? Read verse 2. Jesus clearly is not impressed. He’s predicting that this seemingly permanent and glorious temple would be totally destroyed. Why? It’s because God’s people there had rejected the Messiah God had sent to them. They’d been rebellious to God for a long time, but this would be their final act of rebellion. No doubt this Jerusalem temple was really fantastic. It was known as one of the ancient wonders of the world. It was built by Herod the Great, and it was the third and most glorious version of the Jewish temples built on this site. It was a symbol of great human achievement. But in less than 40 years, in AD 70, to the disciples’ great surprise, God would bring about its complete destruction. Human achievements always seem so impressive, but they give a false sense of security. No human achievement can really be our security or hope.

Read verses 3,4. These four disciples are the ones Jesus called first, so they’ve been with Jesus the longest. When Jesus predicted his own rejection, suffering and death, no disciple wanted to ask him about it. But this time, they’re asking. It shows they’re really listening to Jesus and taking what he said seriously. They don’t fully understand why the temple would be destroyed, but based on his cleansing the temple and his rebukes, they’ve at least got the idea that God isn’t pleased with what’s been going on in that place. Their question must have tugged at Jesus’ heart, because he knows he won’t be able to be with them much longer. And without him, they’re going to be so vulnerable.

What does Jesus say? Read verse 5. Throughout this chapter Jesus repeatedly warns them and us to watch out or to be on guard or to be alert. In this case, he says to watch out not to be deceived. Deceived by what? Read verse 6. He’s warning against false messiahs. False messiahs are people who claim to be God’s promised Messiah and Savior. That may sound totally ridiculous. Who would take such people seriously? But Jesus says they “deceive many.” How do they deceive? Fundamentally it seems to be because they’re so confident. Human beings are kind of like sheep; they tend to follow someone who’s just very confident, even if that person is a very confident liar. But false messiahs are not just Jewish or Christian or Muslim or Hindu religious fanatic figures. False messiahs can be anyone or anything that gives people a false sense of security or a false hope for a better life in this world. If that’s true, then there are so many deceptive false messiahs we all need to be watching out for. A political figure can be a false messiah. A job can be a false messiah. Even unintentionally, a girlfriend or a boyfriend can be a false messiah. Who really gives us hope? Who do we think really meets our every need or truly satisfies our hearts? Only Jesus. We shouldn’t ever allow ourselves to be deceived.

What else does Jesus say? Read verses 7,8. Wars, natural disasters, famines—these things can be really scary. They can make people lose all hope. They also can cause people to think that the end of the world is near. But Jesus tells his disciples and us not to be alarmed. He also teaches us to view such things as just “the beginning of birth pains.” This metaphor has deep meaning. It tells us that just as labor pains are necessary to bring about a beautiful new life, God is using painful hardships in our world like wars and natural disasters for an ultimately good purpose. Even when we’re really suffering we need to trust that God’s in control, that he’s good, and that he’s working out his own good plan.

Read verse 9. On top of false messiahs, wars and natural disasters Jesus also tells us to be on guard for persecution. Persecution is not fun. It means experiencing betrayal, being put on trial, people trying to silence us, and even physical harm. The flogging Jesus mentions here is the forty lashes minus one. People often died from it. Many early Christians were persecuted. They were arrested, jailed, had all their property confiscated, were driven out of their hometowns, burned at the stake, fed to the lions or tortured to death. Today this persecution is not nearly so severe, but Christians are still persecuted, even if it’s subtle. Why? Jesus says here “on account of me.” Because Jesus was despised and rejected, betrayed and abandoned, those who identify with him, who believe in him and love him will be treated the same way. The Bible says that everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2Ti3:12). The Bible says, “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1Pe4:14). We should not try to create persecution for ourselves, but when we love Jesus we should expect it.

While he predicts persecution Jesus also gives marching orders. Read verse 10. It’s kind of counter-intuitive. Jesus says persecution is not the time to go on the defensive and retreat; it’s the time to go on the offensive and advance. In the Book of Acts we see how God repeatedly used times of persecution to get Christians out of their comfortable, self-centered fellowship and scatter to places they’d never go to on their own, spreading the good news about Jesus. God still uses times of persecution to spread the gospel.

Read verse 10 again. This is an important verse. It shows what Jesus wants us to focus on as we live in this world. This verse is not just for professional pastors or overseas missionaries. In fact, the good news of Jesus is spread mostly by ordinary people who share their faith with those around them, anyone who’s never really heard it. In recent times the world has shrunk. We can meet people who’ve come from all around the world just about anywhere. If we take Jesus’ words here seriously, we should make it our priority to get to know people who don’t know Jesus and find a way to share his good news with them. We shouldn’t let persecution make us afraid to share our faith in Jesus.

Read verse 11. Here Jesus comforts us not to worry, but trust in the Holy Spirit to help us. It may seem kind of foolish not to seek wise counsel when we’re being attacked. But relying on the Holy Spirit is the best counsel Jesus could give us. When we depend on the Holy Spirit’s help, not on our own wisdom or strength, that’s when we’re truly spreading the good news of Jesus and when we're at our best at being his witnesses.

Jesus goes on to warn us about the worst kind of persecution. Read verse 12. Why does such betrayal and rebellion come even among our closest human relationships? It’s because when we believe in Jesus, we start to put him first. We start loving Jesus most. And the people who were closest to us start to resent this. They also don’t want to be exposed to the persecution that we’ll have to go through, and so they disassociate themselves from us. Jesus warns about this because he knows that this kind of persecution can shake us and cause us to back down from following him. Read verse 13. Jesus strongly encourages us here to “stand firm to the end.” This means to stand firm in our faith in him, no matter what happens, even if the people closest to us turn on us, even if everyone we know seems to start hating us. To stand firm to the end means to be faithful to Jesus even to the point of death. Usually stubbornness is not so good, but this kind of spiritual stubbornness to be faithful to Jesus is really good.

In verse 14 Jesus mentions an even darker sign that the end is coming. It’s “the abomination that causes desolation.” Jesus is actually quoting here from the prophecy of Daniel (Da9:27; 11:31; 12:11). It was a prediction that someone would desecrate the worship of God in the temple. When Jesus said it, this prophecy had actually already been fulfilled. It happened about 200 years earlier, when a Greek king who was ruling Israel at the time set up the worship of the god Zeus in the temple. But Jesus is saying here that it would happen again in the future. It would happen in AD 70 when the Roman general Titus again desecrated the temple. But many believe this prophecy coincides with the Bible’s mention of the antichrist who will appear just before Jesus comes again. 2 Thessalonians 2:4 says, “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.” Various people in history have done this, right up to this day. So the Bible also tells us that it’s not just a literal person but “the spirit of the antichrist” that has been in the world the past 2,000 years (1Jn4:13). The point is, Christians have to live in a world where there are things that are an abomination. What is an abomination? It is something disgusting and hateful. It’s especially something offensive to God. Inherently it’s something that inverts creation order. Generally, an abomination is to worship material or physical things instead of God himself. If this definition is true, then Jesus’ warning here is very practical and relevant to all of us every day. It’s not about waiting for some kind of dark antichrist figure to appear and cause mass deception; it’s about pulling ourselves out of situations where we can no longer really worship God, when things or people other than God are actually being worshiped.

Read verses 15–18. In one sense Jesus is answering his disciples’ question back in verse 4. He’s telling them the signs that the Jerusalem temple is about to be destroyed. But it would get even worse during the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. The Roman army would surround the city. There would be no more food. People would starve and even resort to attacking pregnant women and newborn babies for food. It would be like the most horrible nightmare. Jesus warned about it with a broken heart. God would bring such suffering to his people because they rejected his love and grace in Jesus.

In another sense, Jesus is describing here what’s known as “the Great Tribulation” that the Bible says will come at the end of the world (Rev7:14; cf. Da12:1; Joel2:2; 2Ti3:1). Read verses 19,20. What’s important here is not just the warning about the greatness of the suffering, but the encouragement that God will shorten those days for his elect, his chosen, precious people. Who are the elect? They are all those who believe in Jesus. People reject and persecute them, but they are God’s elect. They’re the apple of his eye. God is ready to move heaven and earth for their sakes. Sometimes we can be down on ourselves. We should reflect on what it really means to be God’s elect.

Read verses 21–23. Jesus again says to guard ourselves against false messiahs and false prophets. They arise especially during times of intense suffering. People really want the suffering to stop and all the destabilization to cease. They’ll listen to anybody who seems to offer comfort and security, who seems to have power to solve their problems. Jesus warns us again not to be deceived. As the end of the world draws near, there won’t be some secret revelation of the Messiah to some special people.

The signs of his coming will be obvious. Read verses 24,25. This is a loose quotation from the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa13:10; 34:4). It’s what the Old Testament prophecies predict over and over again as “the day of the Lord.” The New Testament repeatedly calls it “the day,” “the day of Christ,” “the day of redemption,” “the day of the Lord,” or “the day of judgment” (Ro2:5,16; 13:12; 1Co1:8, 3:13; 5:5; 2Co1:14; Eph4:30; Php1:6,10; 2:16; 1Th5:2; 2Th1:10; 2:2,3; Heb10:25; 1Pe2:12; 2Pe2:9; 3:7,10,12; 1Jn4:17; Jude1:6). On that day the universe as we know it will come to an end. 2 Peter 3:11–13 reads: “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

But it’s not just about the end of this world and the start of the next. Read verse 26. This is again a fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy. Daniel 7:13,14 reads, “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed.” In Mark’s Gospel Jesus had already predicted that he would come again in his Father’s glory with the holy angels (8:38). Here he says his second coming won’t be a secret—it’ll be obvious to everyone. It won’t be just a collapse of the universe, but the bodily return of Jesus to this world. Revelation 1:7 reads, “‘Look, he is coming with the clouds,’ and ‘every eye will see him, even those who pierced him’; and all peoples on earth ‘will mourn because of him.’ So shall it be! Amen.” On that day people who scoffed at the Christian faith will realize that it’s all true and real. And sadly, it will be too late. Until Jesus comes again, there’s always the chance to repent and believe in him. But when he comes, there’ll be no more second chances. Read verse 26 again. At that time people despised and rejected Jesus because he was a country carpenter from Nazareth and lived as a humble suffering servant of all. But when he comes again, he won’t come that way; he’ll come in great power and glory. He’ll come as the Judge of the living and the dead (2Ti4:1).

Even though he’s described as so powerful and so glorious, he’ll still be our Great Shepherd. Read verse 27. Because of his great shepherd’s heart for those who believe in him, not one of them will be lost or missing. This tells us that his coming will be the greatest comfort imaginable. Wherever we may be, however lonely or abandoned we may feel, he’ll send for us to be brought to him. We’ll get to see our Great Shepherd Jesus face to face. We’ll get to be with him forever. So it’s not a day we should dread; it’s a day of our greatest hope. The Bible repeatedly says that as believers in Jesus we should be eagerly waiting, longing and hoping for this day (Ro8:23–25; 1Co1:7; Tit2:13; 2Pe3:12; 1Jn3:2,3; Jude21; Rev22:20). Are we really longing and hoping to see Jesus?

In verses 28–31 Jesus basically is saying we can be sure of his coming, as sure as summer soon follows after the first buds of spring. Though heaven and earth will pass away, Jesus’ words will never pass away—they’ll all come true. In verses 32–37 he tells us how we can be ready for his coming at any time. The point is not to know when it is, but to be ready for his coming. How can we be ready? We need to be doing our assigned task, the work God wants us to be doing with our lives. We should not be sleeping spiritually when he comes. Luke 21:34 reads, “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap.” We need to take Jesus’ warning seriously. He repeated says here to keep watch. We shouldn’t be consumed with life in this world, but live a spiritual life every day, watching to see if Jesus may come, even today.

So what is our hope? May God help us to believe in the second coming of Jesus, and live with the personal hope to see him and be with him forever. With this hope in our hearts, may God help us to recommit ourselves to spreading his good news to all the people in our world who’ve never heard it, as our first priority. Whatever hardships we may suffer, may God help us with this hope to stand firm to the end.