



# CANYON HILLS

COMMUNITY CHURCH

Series: The Book of Mark

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## **Introduction**

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Let's get our Bibles open to the gospel of Mark, chapter 13. I was just really blessed... One of our heroes, one of our global partners, is back in the country right now. About three years ago, one of our staff people just sensed a call in her life to go to a part of the world that very few of us would dare to go, let alone move and live. She has been over there for two years now as one of our gospel partners on the ground, and she's here for a little furlough now.

Jessica, stand up and just wave, and then you can sit down really quick. There's Jessica Ruble, an awesome woman of God. Is Sicilia with you? There you are, right there! Another partner with Jessica in India. Sicilia, stand up. Let's praise God for Sicilia. Awesome. They are both back just for a little bit of a breather, a break. It's always a joy to give honor where honor is due. We're so proud of them and the work they're doing.

We're in the gospel of Mark, chapter 13. We began our verse-by-verse journey through the gospel of Mark on January 8, 2017. Not this year, but a year ago in January. You can do the math. It's close to 16 months. I counted up 54 messages. We now arrive in chapter 13, unarguably considered the most complex and difficult teaching of Jesus in the entire New Testament.

I would be flat-out lying to you if I told you this morning that I was really looking forward to this chapter coming. In fact, my disappointment that Jesus postponed his return until sometime after this morning is very real. I have gone as slow as I possibly could, giving Jesus every opportunity to come back, and he has not done that, so here we are. We don't skip. We just go through verse by verse.

As we always do, I'm going to read the Scripture, but today, I'm going to read the whole chapter. That's a large amount of Scripture. We're going to stand for the reading of God's Word as we always do, except if it's a little difficult for you to stand that long, I'm going to ask you to feel free to just remain seated, in case maybe you have some ailment or your back is hurting. Our tradition doesn't require you to suffer. Now, we can stand for the reading of God's Word, but this is a long passage, so if you just need to rest, please do so. I'm going to read it; you follow along.

**"And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!' And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.' And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?'**

**And Jesus began to say to them, 'See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.**

**There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.**

**And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**

**But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.**

**And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.**

**And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Christ!" or "Look, there he is!" do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.**

**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 in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and**

**glory. 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.**

**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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**

**But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.**

**It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."**

Father in heaven, I pray in the name of Jesus and the power of your mighty Holy Spirit, would you help us to understand? God, help us to know what Jesus means. Help us to know how it applies to our lives. God, we want to be on alert. We want to be awake. We want to be on guard. Teach us now what this looks like. In Christ's name, amen.

There are certain places in Scripture just like this that make us preachers feel very helpless at times. There are a few chapters in Ezekiel, a few chapters in Daniel, and several places in the book of Revelation, but this chapter is at the top of the list of these places in Scripture that cause fear in the hearts of pastors.

Here, Jesus is revealing God's plan for the future. Is it literal or is it figurative? Is it spiritual or physical? Is it in the not-so-far future or is it in the distant future? Is it apocalyptic? Is it prophetic? How much of this is about the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD 70 and how much of this is about the end of time and the return of Jesus?

Leon Morris, a great New Testament scholar and past principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia, has written epic volumes on the Gospels and on the book of Romans. This is what he said in his introduction to Mark, chapter 13. He said something like, "There are some puzzling exegetical problems here." That may be the greatest understatement in the history of the world, Leon! This is not exegetical problems; this is an exegetical minefield as you walk through that reading of what Jesus said all at one time, in one breath, with his disciples.

It has brought centuries of great theologians to their exegetical knees. While I don't put myself anywhere near the list of these giants, I have to confess to you that I have run to several of them as resources, people who have wrestled over time with chapters like this with much greater

understanding than I have, and I will share those references with you as to not pretend that, somehow, I have figured it all out by myself.

I've also had to find comfort in places like 2 Timothy, where Paul writes to his young preaching protégé, Timothy, words of warning and caution, telling him not to become the kind of pastor and the kind of people in his church who are theological nitpickers. In 2 Timothy, he says,

"Don't be the kind of church people or pastor who engage in all kinds of arguments over all kinds of words. That's not going to be helpful to you or the majority of the people in your church, Timothy. Do your best to aim for God's approval, a worker who has no need to be ashamed. Timothy. Deal with the passages, struggling with them when they're hard, rightly handling the word of truth."

In that little phrase, "rightly handling the word of truth," in essence, he's saying, "Take a straight line through the passage, through the Scriptures. Don't get all sidetracked and spin yourself and your people into some theological quicksand." That's how Paul is encouraging Timothy, and I find great encouragement in that. It's certainly appropriate for us as a church, going forward in this chapter.

Today, I want to establish the challenges, the rules, the relevance, the purpose, and the way forward through a chapter like this. This isn't the only place in Scripture that provides us the opportunity to really slow down, but it's certainly here right before us, and I want to deal with it as best we can in a way that all of us, at all stages of spiritual growth, maturity, age, and demographic can maybe understand.

Next week, we're going to jump in all the way into the deep end. Today, we're going to wade into the shallow end. Starting next week, we're going to pull this passage apart in smaller pieces, try to interpret it accurately, and do our best to apply it practically. Let's first talk about the challenges of preaching or teaching a chapter like Mark 13. We could also say just the challenges for all of us to try and understand what Jesus is doing here.

What do I do? I have three choices as I stand before you today. I can get in my preaching airplane. I could hop in the cockpit. I could assume your knowledge of these things are accurate and I could fly over the passage at about 30,000 feet, asking you to peek out the window at some main points of interest, and just stay above the clouds.

We can avoid all the turbulence of the struggle, the difficulty in a chapter of Jesus' teaching like this. In fact, this is what I would very much love to do. I have a feeling many of you would not allow me to do that. You would be sending me so many emails that I might as well just deal with it here with you.

The second choice I have is I can get in my preaching excavator. With chapters like this, we can dig down as far as we can until we hit the bedrock of the passage. We can inspect every nugget and every clue we can find along the way, and it would take us another 16 months just to unearth

the centuries of debate in the Olivet Discourse, or the teaching we have of Jesus sitting over on the Mount of Olives.

Another choice would be I can get into my preaching plow. We can dig down below the surface, past the weeds of the confusion, till we can get to some good soil without losing heart and without missing the whole purpose of what Jesus is saying and teaching altogether. We certainly want to seek certain simplicities as we move along that allow us to keep going with a modicum of hope and clarity.

I'm going to try and stay on the plow as much as I can with us the next couple of weeks. We have to dig down a little deeper than we typically are required to, but I think it's, overall, going to be very healthy, as you'll see as we move along this morning. Let me give us some rules for understanding difficult chapters like Mark 13 and others. There are a couple of study principles I want all of you to remember as you try to apply your understanding to Scripture like this.

We want to, again, keep from missing the purpose of a passage and missing what Jesus is talking about altogether or else we're going to find ourselves kind of entering into this theological Rubik's Cube and we're just going to be spinning in circles, trying to connect all the dots and squares perfectly. That may prove not to be very helpful, so let me give you a couple of quick rules.

1. *The main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things.* Aren't you happy I have a doctorate degree that can tell you things like this? This is more practical than my doctorate degree, to be honest with you. It's something most of you have heard before and just need to be reminded of as you're reading your Bibles. Don't forget the main things are usually the plain things and the plain things are usually the main things.

See, the truth is Mark 13 and other chapters like it have been interpreted in many different ways by many good, devout scholars who all are equally committed to the authority and the inerrancy of Scripture, and yet they all disagree. They disagree with each other. We don't have to be disturbed by that.

We don't have to be discouraged by their disagreement because much of their disagreement (and I have bookshelves on topics like this) is not about the main things or the plain things. Most of their disagreement (not all, but most) are about the details that are inferior to the main things or the plain things.

You remember Deuteronomy 29:29? When Moses wrote these words, he said, "**The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever...**" Look at that for a minute. There are going to be some secret things that God has chosen not to make perfectly clear for us right now, and there certainly are some of those secret things in this passage. We will do our best to understand. We're not going to use that as an excuse, but there are certain things God has not chosen to reveal plainly.

Look back at verse 32. After he says all this stuff, in verse 32, he says, "**But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels...**" Look at the next sentence! Not even the Son, in the humanity of Christ! He says only the Father knows the whens and the wheres, and that's okay.

2. *God's Word is perfect, but none of us are.* In other words, God's Word is infallible, but no individual is an infallible interpreter of God's Word. Just breathe right there. In every dimension, Scripture is perfect. It's perfect in meaning, inspiration, purpose, origin, and power. We believe that.

Yet as for you and me, Scripture describes us this way, in 1 Corinthians 13: "We see in a mirror dimly, but then, after all this happens, we're going to see face-to-face. Now, we know in part, but then, we shall know fully." That's a good rule to remember. This is why our Christian creeds are so important. Creeds are those writings in which Christianity has put together the main things and the plain things so we never forget them.

You've heard of the Apostles' Creed, right? In the fourth century, the church decided to put together in one place the main teachings of the apostles, and we have the Apostles' Creed. We're going to read it together out loud. There are lots of commas so we know where we can get a breath. Pay attention to the main things and the plain things. Here's what we believe. Here we go.

"I believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day, he rose again. He ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church..."

Stop right there. Not *that* Catholic church. This is lowercase *c*. The word *catholic* means universal or general. We believe the church isn't contained in just one building in one location. Are you with me? Just so we know. We're all on the same page. Let's go back to that.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen." That's what we believe. Those things are main; those things are plain. The greatest things of our faith are not dim, nor are they hidden.

Yet there are parts of Scripture that force us to be reminded that we are not infallible or perfect in our understanding. There are certain good, God-loving, Jesus-loving people who can't accept what I just said. I just said there are certain passages of Scripture that are really difficult to understand, and in our fallibility we just don't know because God hasn't made it perfectly plain yet.

There are people who just don't like that. There are people who say, "God has given us his Holy Spirit. The Word is there. We should understand it all." We can attempt to! The truth is there are

certain places that we can't. If you can't accept that, you only have two choices. I've made up two phrases for the people who can't accept the fact that there are parts of Scripture that are too difficult to nail down.

You could be *dogmatically systematic*, which basically says you can force the passage to mean what you want it to mean. You could squeeze it into your existing presuppositions and say, "This is what Jesus said. This is what he means, because he said this over here and I know what that means, and so this is what this means." You can do that. I'm going to say to you that that's not only not necessary; it could be dangerous. You could miss it altogether.

Alternatively, you could be tyrannically papal. In other words, you can be a tyrant. You can be pope-like and claim your enormous knowledge. You can proclaim your supreme understanding and demand agreement with you. Neither one of these is necessary, and they do not accomplish, I think, the spirit of what God has given us in his Word. Those are the rules. The main things are the plain things. We're not perfect. We may have to admit we're not sure.

Let's talk about the relevance of Mark 13 and chapters like Mark 13 that are really difficult. Here's my greatest fear today. It's that some of you are thinking this right now: "Oh no. I brought a friend to church this morning. Are you kidding me? My friend may be new to Christianity. They're just new to the whole Bible thing. Steve, are you kidding? I was hoping you would say something helpful today, something relevant, or something meaningful. I'm so disappointed in you, Steve."

I get that with all my heart. Believe me. As I sat in my office this week, I was virtually grieving over the fact that we are entering into a place in Scripture that's going to make us slow down like this. Let me try to redeem myself here before you think it's too late.

There's a pastor in Cleveland to whom I love to listen. He's on the radio all the time. His name is Alistair Begg. I don't know if you've heard of him or not, but he helps me to clarify this chapter into one simple main idea. He basically says something like this. "The God who initiated time..." Remember, before time, there was only God. "The God who initiated time broke into time in the person of Jesus Christ." Here's the main idea. *"This God is the one who controls the end of time and the transformation of all that is now into all that will be."*

Look at that sentence. That is the main idea. We're going to come back to it over the next couple of weeks, but what we're reading here is Jesus reminding us that God controls it all, from beginning to very end. When it ends, he's going to take what is now and he's going to make it into what he has always intended it to be, starting with us. That is good, because it tells us the God we love is on the throne of the universe. Nothing is more relevant than that.

See, the Christian conviction is not some view of Jesus living in my heart. It's much more than that. The Christian conviction is transformational in the way we view the history of human existence. That's our conviction. We have to understand things like how we were created, who created us, and why we were created.

As one author wrote, "If we don't get this, then we're just living on this insignificant planet, floating in space somewhere, living with a vast and incomprehensible emptiness." You see, without the answers to the questions, "Where did I come from?" "Why am I here?" and "What happens after this?" all we're left with is a random meaninglessness and/or coincidence. That's all we have left.

Mark 13 certainly includes things and details, like the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. We get that and we're going to talk about that, but Mark 13 is also more plainly and mainly about the confirmation that God is ultimately sovereign over all of history and all of humanity. He's able to deal with the difficult craziness in this world broken by sin, as well as able to speak to the difficult things you may be facing right now. That's what this is all about. That makes this relevant.

What's the purpose of God's Word? Can we be reminded of this? The Bible is not a religious riddle. It's not a conspiracy. It's not a code that we need to figure out how to crack. He didn't give us his Word to confuse us. What is the purpose of God's Word? What's the purpose of the Bible? Let me give it to you.

1. *It is a clear revelation of a holy God and his plan for the redemption of mankind.* You may want to write that down. That's the main purpose for God giving us his Word. The only reason we know God and know anything about God is because he has chosen to reveal himself to us. One of the main ways God reveals himself to us is through his written Word. The Bible is an understandable message. It's not this incomprehensible mystery.

The problem is that a lot of good people like you in churches like this approach the Bible (*you* may approach the Bible) like people approach a work of art in an art museum. Have you ever been in an art museum, an art gallery, staring deep into the painting to find the hidden meaning, analyzing everything to see how it makes you feel?

You're looking at the stroke pattern of the painting, the structure, the tone, and the shadows. You see all that up there in those pictures? You can see all that, right? There's no need for us to approach Mark 13 quite like that. We're not going to parse every sentence with a microscope to discover the hidden meanings on an atomic level.

Here's some good advice for all of us. Whenever you read the Bible, read your Bible remembering that the whole message, from the table of contents to the book of maps is this message: *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.* That is the thread from "In the beginning..." to the very last words of the book of Revelation. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Don't forget that's the purpose. That's the message. There's another purpose to God's Word.

2. *A changed life, not a collection of theories.* The purpose of God's Word is to change us, to ultimately change us into the likeness of Christ. We have a school of discipleship here at Canyon Hills, and we offer many classes on various Christian theology. We always say in our theology classes that if our theology isn't practical, if it doesn't influence or inform the way we think so



our behaviors become more and more righteous then our theologies are worthless. They're just white noise.

Theology must be practical in the sense that it changes the way we think about God and ourselves and it changes us into living the way God always intended for us to live. You've heard the old saying, "Information without application leads to stagnation," right? That's what Jesus is getting at.

Do you remember back to Deuteronomy 29:29? "**The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever...**" Notice there's a comma after the word *forever*. Jesus finishes the thought now. "**...that we may do all the words of this law.**" The purpose of the Word of God is that we may not just read it, but that we may do it.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he said to the disciples in Mark 13, "No one knows. Not the angels, not even the Son. Wrong question. Don't worry yourself about that. Don't fret yourself about that. I am more concerned for you right now about this: make sure no one leads you astray. Make sure you're on your guard. Make sure you stay awake." That may be the most important thing you hear right now. Stay awake, okay? He says, "Don't get all caught up in the exact whens and whats. Just be ready." Be ready. We can do that.

So, how do we proceed? Beginning next week, as I said, we're going to wade into the deep end of the swimming pool in this. We're going to take smaller bites, a little bit at a time. How do we go through this so we can come out the other side in a couple of Sundays and feel like our hope has gone up and our faith has increased? How can we do that? Here's what we're going to do.

First, *we're going to proceed cautiously* so we don't bring harm to ourselves and others. There's no need for us to be unnecessarily dogmatic or tyrannical with how we approach a passage like this in this topic.

Secondly, *we're going to proceed diligently*. We can't live on spiritual milk alone and expect to grow up. Eventually, we have to eat meat. Sorry, all you vegetarians. Spiritual meat. We have to stop. We have to put down the spoon, pick up the fork and knife, and dig in a little bit. If we just read our Bibles from time to time, hoping to catch a spiritual blessing, we're not going to be of much use to ourselves or others.

The Bible isn't some type of religious bowl of M&M's where you walk by it every once in a while, grab a few, pop them in your mouth, and get a fix. That's not how we read our Bibles. It's not how we're supposed to read them. Now, you can eat M&M's while you're reading your Bible, but just eat the whole bag. Don't just eat a couple. We can't be lazy. That's what I'm saying. I can't be lazy, certainly. It's going to take much more effort to plow this holy ground cautiously, diligently, and...

Thirdly, *we're going to proceed humbly*. There's no room for pride in a passage like this. I love what one author wrote regarding the digging into the difficult parts of God's Word. He says,

"The minute we think we've exhausted the meaning of the passage, we inevitably discover all that we do not know or all that we have misunderstood." It's okay. God's Word is good.

With all that said, we're going to move forward in our faith in a God who does control the end of time. Jesus has given us a peek into what's coming, and we're going to look together and do our best to apply it to our lives right now.