

# Sermon End of Times

## Mark 13:1-8

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The disciples of Jesus were deeply impressed by the mighty temple complex in Jerusalem. 'Is it not awesome', they said to each other. one of the disciples said to Jesus, 'Look, what massive stones! What magnificent buildings!'

In Mark 13, Matthew 24 and Luke 21, we then get a long speech by Jesus about what is often popularly called 'The End of Times'.

I do not know what about you, but I find that topic both attractive and problematic at the same time. It intrigues me, but it also frustrates me. So many contradictory things are said about this topic in our churches.

It is better to listen carefully to Jesus and not add speculation.

### **1. Destruction of temple**

The disciples were awestruck by the Temple. They were from Galilee, and did not often come to Jerusalem, so as outsiders they were probably even more amazed by the magnificence of the temple than those who lived in the city.

The temple building covered 1/6 of the whole city of Jerusalem. The building of it had begun in 20BC - or we should say, the embellishment of the earlier temple had begun in that year. It was the project of King Herod, who wanted to make himself a name. He was hated by the Jewish rabbis, as he was a rather impious man - but even the rabbis admitted that the temple was phenomenal.

And even when Jesus spoke his words, 50 years after the rebuilding had begun, it had not been finished yet.

The central temple building was decorated in solid gold, and with the sun shining on that, the temple was visible from a great distance. It was really the summit of human abilities in art and architecture. Very very impressive.

And it had a feeling of permanence.

Jesus looked at it and said, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

And indeed, in the year 70 the temple was totally razed as Jesus predicted.

Some of the stones Jesus mentioned were 12x4x5 meters big, with a weight of 150 tons. This was written by Josephus, a Jewish historian in those days who gave a vivid eye-witness description of the destruction in his book *The Jewish Wars*.

After Israel conquered East-Jerusalem in 1967, some of their archeologist have actually dug up some of these stones.

The destruction of the temple came after four years of civil war, between 66 and 70AD. Zealous Jewish rebels believed that God would bless their uprisings to get rid of the Romans. The opposite happened.

In the end, general Titus, the son of the Roman Emperor Vespasian, marched in with his troops and they razed the city. The temple was totally destroyed. It is believed that over a million Jews, crowded into the beleaguered city, were killed.

It was the direct result of the decision of the Jewish rebels to take up arms against the Romans. The action of the Jews created a Roman reaction.

But why did God not come to the rescue of his temple? Well, the destruction was also the covenantal punishment by God. In Mathew 23:33-38, Jesus said:

**33** You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

**34** Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town,

**35** so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth [...] **36** Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

**37** "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! **38** See, your house is left to you desolate.

After this, Jesus began to speak about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. As punishment for how the city treated all the servants of God.

Thirdly, the destruction of the temple also had theological value. In the letter to the Hebrews we have read today:

Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart. (Hebrews 11:19-22)

We have direct access to God through Jesus Christ; the temple we enter is the temple of heaven itself. There is no longer any need for a physical temple in Jerusalem. The Perfect Lamb has been sacrificed once and for all. No more need for animal sacrifices. No more need for a temple made of stone. God can be found anywhere through Jesus Christ. So why would there need to be a temple in Jerusalem?

## **2. Troubles for the believers**

The disciples did not understand this yet. They were just impressed by the wonderful buildings. So Jesus shocked them; and they asked:

Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?

When will this happen? And what is the sign that precedes this?

The Jews were very focused on signs. They could not conceive of important events in their religious history without cosmic signs first. Falling stars, the sun turning red, the moon being hidden.

Jesus explained what signs to expect before the destruction of the temple:

Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.

Jesus was here not speaking of wars and earthquakes in our 21st century. He was talking about these disasters as signs that the destruction of the temple would be near.

I have read so many books about the end of times, and often they tell us that there are so many wars today, tsunamis, earthquakes. But Jesus did not speak of today - he warned his disciples how they could know that the destruction of Jerusalem was near. In the year 70.

These are the 'signs' the disciples asked for. If you see this happen, you better make sure that you are not in Jerusalem! And indeed, the followers of Jesus did leave Jerusalem in time.

When Jesus spoke these words, the Roman empire had known many decades of peace. There were hardly any wars. But 40 years later, there was war everywhere, including civil war in the Roman Empire.

Jesus told his disciples, in the same speech, as we can read in Mark 13:30,

**30** Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

The main predictions in Mark 13 were not about us, but about that generation - the generation of the disciples.

Jesus made clear that before this dramatic covenantal vengeance of God, his first followers would be persecuted by their own countrymen - and as we heard from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, that actually was

so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth [...] Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ will put the disciples in an awfully hard position. They themselves are part of the sign of what God is going to do.

They will be tempted by false Christs, they will be persecuted, they will suffer in earthquakes and famines. And that is the sign of the impending destruction of Jerusalem.

Now, Jesus gives us an image of the future as a photographer takes a shot of something in the foreground, but in background we also see things, more unclear and blurred, but real nevertheless.

What is in the foreground is the destruction of Jerusalem and what will happen before this.

But in the background, we see that in the more distant future similar things may be expected. No, not another destruction of Jerusalem. But the life of many Christians today is not very different from the lives of the first apostles.

Doing the will of God today can also put us in a situation of great trouble. And for this world, you and I are also signs that something dramatic and tremendous will happen one day.

Many Christians today face persecutions every bit as severe as the early church. And those who do not suffer often face the temptation of stagnancy, of becoming cynical, to suppose that nothing much is happening in the world in regard to God.

But we must be patient, and wait, for just as he once came to destroy his temple to make a new beginning, so today we also await his coming to finish the work that he has begun. But on a much more global scale.

### **3. Birth pains**

Jesus said about the troubles awaiting the early church, persecutions, famines, earthquakes, that "This is but the beginning of the birth pains."

That Jesus speaks of birth pains helps us to better understand what he is actually saying.

The picture of birth pains had been used in Jewish faith for many centuries when Jews were thinking about how God will bring about the new world of the Messiah. That is the new creation, the age to come, where mercy and peace rule.

The great prophets of the old testament, and many Jewish theologians, spoke of the birth pains that the old world has to go through in order to inaugurate the new world.

Jesus announced this new kingdom of God. And he sometimes stressed that it is near, already here, and at other times, that it is still to come. Like the birth of a child. The child may be already in the womb, and even already in the process of being born, and the woman suffers much, but the child has not been born yet.

With Jesus, the new world, the new creation, has already come - but it is in process to become world wide; and the destruction of the temple was an important sign that the old world is in the process of coming to its end.

And we, today, still live in this in-between time. The new world has come, but the old has not been finished yet.

And the old world, with its wars, and hunger, and earthquakes, and harassment of Christians, and with its injustice, can seem very much alive. And it kicks very hard against any signs of the new world that is coming.

Paul writes about this in Romans 8:

22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

As Christians, we live in this painful pressure-cooker of tension. We groan with the old world and with creation for renewal. We still get sick, we suffer, we have pain.

But we are also enjoying the fruits of the new creation that already exists in God, in Christ, in the Holy Spirit, but it is not completed yet.

So we live in the time that is still signified by birth pains.

## **Conclusion**

In this time, patience is the key word. Not the defeatist patience of 'let us wait and see' but an active attitude. 'Because we see, we eagerly await'.

This is the patience of people who know that the good times of God are certainly coming, and therefore today, even in the midst of this old world, we live as citizens of the new world, with love, faith and hope, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves today.

And we hold on without wavering.

**Amen**