

Home Group questions on Mark 13

By Phil Bailey

Please feel free to adapt these questions or only use a few of them, as best fits the dynamics of your group. Questions 4-6 are probably the most important to focus on, in terms of grappling with and applying the passage.

1. What was the significance of the temple to God's people and in God's purposes under his covenant with Israel, through Moses?

You might talk of the temple as where God's presence dwelt among his people. The ark of the covenant, in the most holy part of the temple, was God's throne – the mercy seat. From there, he dispensed forgiveness through the sacrificial system and ruled his people via his word, through Moses, the prophets and the written law. A copy of the Ten Commandments was therefore kept in the ark (Ex 25:17-22). Thus, the temple was a key symbol of God's reign in and over creation, alongside the Davidic king. The temple represented God's kingdom, under the Mosaic covenant.

It was also God's presence among his people in the temple which made Israel a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:5). You see this played out in Exodus and Leviticus, where the closer to God's presence a person or an object gets, the more holy it becomes. So the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle is the Most Holy Place (e.g. Ex 26:33-34), the altar of burnt offering becomes most holy (Ex 40:10), and various offerings given to the Lord become most holy (e.g. Lev 2:3). As a kingdom of priests, the Israelites were made holy by their proximity to God, having been called out of the nations as his special possession. But they were also called to be holy in the way they lived, because God is holy (e.g. Lev 11:45). Through their witness as a holy nation, they were meant to mediate God's blessings to every nation, in line with God's promises to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3.

2. How have we seen much of the Jewish leadership fail in their calling throughout Mark's gospel and especially in chapters 11-12?
N.B. the crowd will also reject Jesus in 15:11-15, possibly because they are outraged by Jesus word's about destroying the temple in 13:2 – Jesus was still in public when he said them and was probably overheard, hence the accusations about destroying the temple in 14:58.
3. What have we seen in chapters 11-12 to warn us that judgment may be coming upon Jerusalem?
4. In the sermon, I suggested that Mark 13:24-27 uses symbolic language from the Old Testament to depict regime change: it symbolises the temple in Jerusalem being thrown down and replaced by an exalted Jesus. What were the implications of this for God's kingdom - his reign - in and over creation? Where is his kingdom now centred? Who gets to enter his kingdom and how?
5. In v.27, Jesus' great work as the newly established king is to send out his angels into all creation to gather his chosen people. I take it that is still happening in our lifetimes, though it began during the disciples' 'generation'. Angels may be the ones leading that work (isn't that encouraging!), but we know that we have a part to play too. How can you be joining in that work in our present circumstances?
6. In vv.32-37, Jesus moves on to talk about another day or hour. This may well be the day he's just mentioned in v.31 – where heaven and earth pass away. From the imagery in vv.34-36, he seems to be talking about his second coming as judge. In Revelation 20:11-15, the heavens and earth do indeed flee away on that day! If Jesus' return is immanent and could come any time, how are you challenged to be ready? Where are you most tempted to let your guard down at the moment? Where are you most challenged to fight for growth in godliness, rather than being 'sleepy'?

A note on interpretation: I explained in my sermon that I think all of vv.5-31 refers to the destruction of the temple. This is mainly because Jesus is answering the disciples' questions in v.4, i.e. when will the temple be destroyed and what will be the sign? There is nothing conclusive in the text until v.32 to indicate that he has started describing events further in the future. Note that vv.18, 19 and 24 all refer to 'those days' and Jesus says all of it will take place within the lifetime of the disciple's generation – which the Roman siege on Jerusalem in AD 70 was. V.10 might seem like a sticking point, because we might think that the gospel was not preached to all nations by AD 70 and still hasn't been now! However, we must be careful not to impose the understanding of modern missionary agencies onto the text. In Acts 2:5, Luke tells us that God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven were gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost, when the apostles first proclaimed the gospel publicly. Moreover, they each heard their own language being spoken (v.6)! We should therefore understand Pentecost as the initial fulfilment of Mark 10:13. Of course, like so much prophecy in the Old Testament, there have been and will be further fulfilments as the gospel reaches people groups who were probably unknown by 1st Century Jews and gentiles in the Roman Empire.* But that shouldn't stop us seeing Pentecost as a very significant fulfilment of Jesus' words. Indeed, although it's hard to pin down exactly what Paul meant, he felt confident enough of the gospel's spread to say that it had been proclaimed to every creature under heaven in Colossians 1:23, which was also written before AD 70! Therefore, we must not assume that Jesus won't come back until every people group currently identified as unreached has a church planting movement of its own – not least because we don't know how many people groups were reached by the spread of the gospel in the first few centuries after Jesus' death. The apostle Thomas apparently got as far as China! Moreover, many people groups in North Africa who are now considered unreached had thriving churches until at least the 6th Century, prior to the spread of Islam.

* On this basis we can also say v.26 has two stages of fulfilment – the first when the temple was thrown down and the second when Jesus returns and all his enemies are put under his feet. Therefore, John was also able to pick up on the language of Daniel 7:13 to describe Jesus' second coming as 'with the clouds' in Revelation 1:7.