

## MARK 13-14 Study Notes

This chapter (a version of which is found in Matthew and Luke as well) anticipates 3 key earth-shattering events that seem to be intertwined: 1) The death (and resurrection) of Jesus, 2) the fall of Jerusalem (and the destruction of the temple), 3) the end of the present world order as we know it (and the beginning of a new world order ruled by God (the kingdom)).

13: 1-13

From v.1 we enter a different world in terms of what Jesus says. We begin with a prediction of the destruction of the temple. Was Jesus referring to the future Roman revenge on intransigent Israel? Was he pointing to the destruction of the temple as the inevitable result of rebellion against God as Jesus was revealing God to be? Or did Jesus believe he had a role to play in these events? We are not told. But when his disciples ask for more details, the discourse shifts to more cosmic descriptions of the end. Things will get difficult and desperate for people. False prophets will arise and take advantage of people's desperation by leading them astray. Wars will escalate in intensity and frequency. Natural disasters will multiply. For followers of Jesus there will be an added difficulty: persecution by religious and political authorities hostile to the gospel. Even families will be torn apart over their allegiance to Christ. But believers are called to stay alert, focussed on Christ and his way, patient in their affliction.

13: 14-37

This whole passage draws on the imagery from Daniel 7. It begins with allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem, perhaps to attempts by pagan rulers to set up their own monuments in the midst of the temple. Again, there will be false prophets claiming to know the truth and false messiahs claiming to be the one. This time people are warned to flee to the mountains and those who are burdened with infants will find it extra difficult. But then, the discourse shifts once again to cosmic signs of the end. The elect will be gathered together from the four winds by the 'Son of Man.' The discourse ends in seeming contradiction. On the one hand there is a reference to the fig tree and how when it blossoms one knows summer is near. All of these developments and events should be read as signs that the end of the present world order is near. And the end, according to v.30 is not far away. On the other hand, v.32 suggests that no one, not even Jesus, knows when the end will be. Therefore, the disciples are urged to remain watchful, awake, alert, and ready always for a meeting with Christ. This is clearly written for those wondering "how long?" and "when?"

## THE CHARACTER OF DISCIPLESHIP

1) Discipleship is a matter of the heart. When Jesus' disciples comment on the impressiveness of the temple, Jesus responds by pointing to its fragile and impermanent existence. Disciples should not be impressed by large churches, big budgets, or large numbers on the role. True faithfulness is an intangible matter of the heart and will not come in large numbers.

2) Disciples live faithfully for today and do not put too much stock on what may or may not happen tomorrow. Even though Jesus seems to be talking much about the future, his focus is on the kinds of attributes needed for living today as well as discerning the world one is living in today. Discernment is more important than knowledge, even knowledge about doctrine, tradition, and the scriptures. Seeing through things and seeing to the heart of things is the kind of quality most necessary for the living of these days. Jesus uses the example of the fig tree to point to the signs of the times. Discernment is about depth of perception not quantitative knowledge of information. Disciples know how to discern the signs of the times.

3) Disciples trust that God's will or rule, shaped by love, is sovereign and will not be thwarted no matter what the events in our world indicate. The disciples are counselled to trust and not lose hope when they witness all the terrible things predicted to happen. Trust is the basis of hope and it motivates to action and living with purpose. The vision of a compassionate world inspires disciples to live against the stream and against the temptations to secure, protect and enclose themselves out of fear and anxiety.

4) The disciple perseveres in the way of God regardless of so much that happens in life and the world that can discourage and disillusion. Jesus counsels his disciples to endure to the end, but also, to keep awake and be ready. Therefore, perseverance is not just about going on or trudging along. It is about sustaining a sense of the importance of what we are doing for the kingdom - exercising love in little ways and bigger ways, giving and forgiving, spending, and being spent, recognizing our limits but also being pushed to extend them because we know the time is short and the opportunities are precious when they arise.

5) Humility is more important than knowledge for disciples. No one knows, not even Jesus, when and how all these things he is talking about will take place. Virtues like wakefulness, readiness, perseverance, trust, faithfulness, discernment of the truth of things - all of this requires a certain humility about the future and how God's rule of love will be fulfilled some day in some way. But humility also involves openness and openness is also connected to hope. Amazingly, even though there are tough times ahead for the disciples, they will find new sources of hopeful energy through their faith.

## Mark 14: 1-2

In these two verses we have the end result of Jesus' encounter with the religious elite. They have challenged him. He has answered them. They have witnessed the responsiveness of the people to him. And they want to kill him. They are not open to Jesus. Quite the contrary. They see him as a threat to their power and authority. They see him as one whose popularity could incite sufficient unrest to dislodge them from their status as mediators between the Romans and their own people.

## 14: 3-9

The woman's action in this story is one of love for Jesus. Love, when it is genuine, involves giving, and giving involves cost. The question among many who are also present is whether this particular act and the particular costs associated with it are appropriate. A key focal point of Jesus' message is a concern for the poor and a judgment on the lavish wastefulness of the rich. Is this action not also one of wastefulness and lack of concern? Evidently, there is also a place for wastefulness when it is done out of love - a holy waste. This woman offers what she has with reverent awe, love and gratitude toward Jesus. And Jesus responds accordingly. There is an important place for costly acts of love in the kingdom of God, just as there is an obligation to serve the poor who are, sadly, a perpetual presence in the kingdoms of this world. One's obligations on one level do not eliminate the beauty of one's acts on another.

## 14: 10-11

We do not really know why Judas sought to betray Jesus. We can only speculate. We can speculate about his revolutionary zealot leanings which expected more of an armed revolution than Jesus was preaching. We can speculate about his possible setting up an opportunity for confrontation between Jesus and the authorities in order to force Jesus to bring about the kingdom. We can even speculate about his growing disillusionment with Jesus' program, or his interest in monetary gain. But whatever his motives were, Judas turns away from Jesus.

## 14: 12-16

The association of the last supper with the Passover meal has rich theological significance for the early Christian community. Jesus himself will become the Passover lamb. In him the way is opened for all people to experience atonement (forgiveness) for their sin. Even though Jesus' death will be motivated by human betrayal, envy, treachery, and brutality, God's purposes for the world will overrule human wickedness. This is a comfort to those seeking for hope and a warning to those wanting to maintain the status quo and their own place of power and privilege over others.

14: 17-25

The atmosphere around the table is charged! Jesus is making accusations: "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." Well who is it? We the readers know, but those around the table do not. They need to question themselves and each other. Am I betraying Jesus? Am I sharing this meal with him while my heart is impure in its allegiance? Jesus adds a warning and a curse. And then he takes a loaf of bread, blesses, breaks and gives it to them. "Take; this is my body." Then he takes a cup and after giving thanks to God he passes it around for all to drink from it. "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many." This is Jesus' last supper with them in the flesh. Only when the kingdom of God is fully come, and God's will fully done in this world will Jesus eat and drink among them again. Yet he has given them what they need until then. In eating and drinking bread and wine in a spirit of inward remembrance, they will be receiving none other than Christ within them afresh, each and every time.

14: 26-31

Jesus is pretty blunt with his disciples – "You will all become deserters." He knows what will happen. He knows that they may want to be faithful followers and good friends, but fear and terror have a way of interfering with deeper principles of courage, loyalty, commitment and faithfulness. It may also be that they were persistent in their refusal to accept what Jesus was saying, namely, that the way to the kingdom was via the cross. This is not a great way to build earthly kingdoms and to market for success. Peter represents the disciples in the extreme. "Even though all become deserters, I will not." Peter has a good heart, but he is ignorant of himself. He has failed to confront his weaknesses. Confronting one's fear and weakness is part and parcel of the way of the cross. Jesus on his part speaks no longer in parable or metaphor, but plainly: "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." Peter refuses to accept this. He will die before he denies Jesus. But who is in denial here?

14: 32-42

This is one of the most profound passages in all of scripture! We find Jesus here at his most vulnerable. He is "distressed and agitated." He is "deeply grieved, even to death." He knows what lies ahead for him. The religious authorities have made it quite clear. Yet Jesus knows that his ultimate destiny lies in the hands of a greater sovereign than the movers and shakers of this world. Is there another way? Could he fulfill his messiah-ship without this last and worst assault of suffering? He knows the answer. But he struggles. He is human after all! But besides his own internal struggle, Jesus must also deal with the disappointing reaction of his closest followers. They are not in touch with Jesus. They have persistently refused to face the developments

Jesus has predicted will take place. Their response is not that of fear. This would imply an acceptance of reality. Rather their resistance to Jesus' destiny (and their own as his followers) comes in the form of denial. They sleep. Their spirits may be willing, but the actions of their flesh reveal their true state of being.

Jesus must come to terms simultaneously with the price of his call to be the incarnation of divine love in the world, as well as the loneliness of this call as his friends are unable to accompany him to the end. It will still get worse.

14: 43-52

Even as Jesus is speaking to his disciples, his accusers come to arrest him. They are led by Judas whose betrayal comes in the form of leading Jesus' enemies to him in secret, at night, outside public view. Jesus does not misunderstand them, but he also takes a moment to comment: "Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." Even though their intent is murderous, God's will for Jesus overrides their purposes. And then something else happens that Jesus has also predicted. His disciples desert him. They flee the scene. One of them even runs away naked in order to get away. Jesus will face this last trial of his life alone.

14: 53-65

What a dreadful scene. Jesus is taken to the high priest for questioning. The council has worked hard at finding anyone who would testify against Jesus. Their witnesses are insufficiently rehearsed. They contradict one another. But they offer sufficient testimony to indicate Jesus' threat to the established order and its sacred center of power: the temple. When pushed to confess his own status before God, of being the Messiah, Jesus declares: "I am." But already he is looking beyond the events that will take place in the next day or so: "you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power," and "coming with the clouds of heaven." The key issue here is still the same one that has accompanied the witness of Jesus throughout the gospel - faith! Can this same person who appears pathetically weak before the ruling powers of the day, abandoned by his closest followers, and reserved in his speech; can this same person truly be who he claims to be? For the people around Jesus that night, the answer was clearly no! The high priest tears his clothes and cries out: "blasphemy!" The last stage of Jesus' suffering in body and soul begins.

If you were among the group of people that night, seeing someone seemingly so weak and helpless, would you believe his confession: "I am"?

14: 66-72

This passage captures the most devastating moment for a disciple of Christ: to be confronted suddenly with the realization that you have betrayed your Lord. To make matters worse, Peter had made bold statements about his allegiance to Jesus. He would never betray him or abandon him. Here he has done both. But let us not misunderstand ourselves as Peter has. Fear, a loss of nerve, weakness, cowardice; these are all part of the human condition. Peter had to confront his human frailty and failure. Only then would he have the inner equipment to deny himself and trust God more completely. We must discover experimentally that we are fundamentally weak and inadequate creatures alone. Only in and through God can we become something of the image in which we were created. Humility and self-knowledge are the path to godliness. But we resist such cross-bearing. We prefer the highroad. It is out of compassion that God breaks through our illusions and brings us to our knees before the cross; for only in this way can we truly discover the God of Jesus who raises the dead.... which means, raising us.