

The Future Guaranteed

Mark 13.28-31

Think back to an experience that made you anxious. Can you remember one? Your pulse raced, you had butterflies in your stomach, you wanted to escape, but there was no going back.

Perhaps you had an experience like this whilst being wheeled into an operating theatre on a hospital gurney – that is an anxious moment. Or perhaps you felt this way when your teacher announced your turn to give a speech to the class. Or do you remember when you took your driving test on the road? Reverse parking, three point turns, and all that?

Some of my most anxious moments – which were actually great fun in the end – have come from riding rollercoasters. I love rollercoasters – big ones, fast ones, ones that go upside-down, ones that make your feet dangle, and especially the old fashioned wooden ones that have nothing but a bar across your lap for safety.

But there's one thing about rollercoasters that I never get over – that heartpounding feeling when the chain engages the car and pulls it slowly up that first big hill. More than once, I've wanted to scream, "Stop the ride! I want to get off!" But it's too late. There's only one way back to the station – the twisting, turning, throw-you-back-in-your-seat speed demon way. The anticipation is agonising. Yet, once I clear that first hill, my anxious fear switches to joyful ecstasy, and I want to do it all over again. Something terrifying turns out to be something terrific.

Now I want to talk about the most anxiety-inducing moment the world will ever know – the Day of the Lord. We began talking about this a few weeks ago, and we've heard a lot of terrifying descriptions. The easy part is earthquakes, famines and wars – not much consolation there. The worst part is cosmic chaos – God at long last enforcing holy justice on defiant humanity and shaking heaven and earth in the process.

It is not a pretty sight. Matthew describes it in this way:

Matthew 24:27-28 (ESV)

²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

But please don't think that the Day of the Lord is all doom and gloom. It actually should be an occasion for celebration. Just as the anxiety of the operating theatre results in better health, and the anxiety of the classroom speech results in better education, and the anxiety of the driving test produces better road safety, so, too – and to an immeasurably greater extent – the Day of the Lord results in something positive: a new and perfect world.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

Sermon in a Sentence: **For the believer, it's all good in the end.**

Notice from Mark 13:28-31 that Jesus gives His disciples two fail-proof assurances. Each is a guarantee that for the believer, it's all good in the end.

1. An Unavoidable End (vv 28-29)

Not all endings are bad. I was pretty happy when school ended – how about you? We used to skip and sing a joyful song: 'School's out, school's out, teacher let the fools out.' It wasn't very complimentary, but we didn't care.

Let's project ourselves into the future. Will the end of the world be bad? Or good?

Let's rephrase the question. How bad will it be when injustice is ended? How bad will it be when pain is ended? How bad will it be when sorrow is ended? How bad will it be when death is ended?

The Day of the Lord is the end of all these evils, so it must be good.

Now, with that positive perspective, let's read vv 28-29.

Mark 13:28-29 (ESV)

²⁸ "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. ²⁹ So also, when you see **these things** taking place, you know that **he is near**, at the very gates.

Here is one of the shortest parables Jesus ever told. It is about a fig tree that begins to sprout leaves in the spring – nothing unusual about that. But Jesus uses this ordinary occurrence to illustrate a profound truth. The end is unavoidable. Once the leaves start to sprout, summer is guaranteed – you can't stop the seasons. It is like the chain on the first hill of the rollercoaster – there's no going back.

As we look closer at this short parable, we discern two characteristics of this unavoidable end: it is painfully obvious to all, and it is positively personal to some.

A. Painfully obvious to all

Look at verse 29. Jesus draws the connection between the parable and future reality with two little words: 'these things'.

What are 'these things'? Answer: Everything Jesus has described to this point.

- In verse 2, He said the temple – so admired by the disciples – would be utterly destroyed.
- In verse 5, He warned of deception.
- In verse 12, He spoke of hatred and martyrdom.
- In verse 14, He described abomination that causes desolation.
- In verse 19, He told of great, unprecedented tribulation.
- And in verse 24, He painted a word picture of utter darkness.

Taken together, we would have to say that these signs are unmissable. Everyone living on the earth will be conscious that something big is happening, and that it involves God. To put it another way, God will have the attention of every human being on this planet

Luke brings this out in his record of this same parable.

Luke 21:29-30 (ESV)

²⁹ And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, **you see for yourselves** and know that the summer is already near.

When the leaves begin to sprout on the trees, no-one needs an explanation about what is coming next. It is a universally understood sign – spring is here and summer is coming. So, too, there will be no mystery in the end times. That the end is unavoidable will be painfully obvious to all.

That is the first characteristic. The second is somewhat surprising. An unavoidable end is:

B. Positively personal to some

I am fascinated that Jesus uses a fig tree to sum up His prediction that the end of the world is unavoidable.

Think about it: Green leaves? The anticipation of summer? Aren't those good things? At this moment in our Australian season, don't you find that thought appealing? I do!

Why then does Jesus use this metaphor for the end of the world? Shouldn't the parable be about leaves falling off in autumn ahead of the cold, dreary darkness of winter? Surely that would be a more appropriate sign.

Except that the end is not universally negative. It will actually be positive for some.

Notice in verse 29 that Jesus equates the parable's 'summer is near' with 'He is near'. (If you are using a NKJ translation, that phrase reads 'it is near'. The ESV translation is preferred in this case. The antecedent is clearly 'Son of Man' in verse 27 – a 'he', not an 'it'.) 'He is near' is personal.

In an additional parable that Jesus told on the same occasion – one Mark does not record, but Matthew does – Jesus likens Himself to a bridegroom (Matthew 25.1-13) coming for His virgin bride. In the parable, five of the virgins were unprepared for His coming and are left behind. That is tragic. But what of the five who were prepared? His personal coming was overwhelmingly positive, was it not?

Again, Luke brings this positive sense out more explicitly than Matthew or Mark.

Luke 21:29-31 (ESV)

²⁹ And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that **the kingdom of God** is near.

There is a subtle, though significant, terminology twist in verse 31. Here we read ‘kingdom of God’ rather ‘it’, ‘He’ or, especially the ‘Day of the Lord’. We know that the kingdom of God is not a momentary judgement (like the Day of the Lord); it is eternal life. That is positive.

So it is not accidental that Jesus features green leaves and warm summer days in this parable. He is intentionally letting in a ray of light to show that the Day of the Lord is something to desire, not to dread. For the believer, it’s all good in the end.

The question that remains is – will the end be good for you? Have you been converted to Christ? Are you ready for His coming?

So the first fail-proof assurance is an unavoidable end – it is obvious to all and positive for some. The second fail-proof assurance is . . .

2. An Indestructible Ethnicity (vv 30-31)

Nearly all Bible scholars admit that verse 30 is one of the most difficult verses to interpret in the whole of the Bible. So I’m going to tell you about my first experience with this verse, before venturing an interpretation of my own. My experience happened at a roller skating rink, of all places.

I was 15 years old, and obsessed with the Bible – Bible prophecy to be precise. While other teenage boys circled the rink trying to work up the courage to ask a girl for a skate, I sat alone in a dark corner with my bright green Gideon New Testament opened to Mark 13.

Then I saw it – a verse of prophecy that I was sure my pastor had never noticed. A verse that gave me the assurance I wanted: the rapture would definitely happen in my lifetime. I was not going to die (barring any unforeseen accident, that is)!

That magical verse was Mark13.30:

Mark 13:30 (ESV)

³⁰ Truly, I say to you, **this generation** will not pass away until all these things take place.

Here is how I interpreted this verse: “this generation” must mean the generation in which the signs occur. Was I living in that generation? What were the signs that would indicate whether or not I was?

“Wars and rumours of wars” (Mark 13.7) – I gave that a tick: we had Vietnam and the Cold War happening. Then there were “famines and earthquakes” -- yes, it all made sense: starving kids in Africa and buildings shaking somewhere in California. “False prophets” -- I knew this had to be Hare Krishna or Henry Kissinger, one of the two. Add all of it up, and I was convinced that I was living in the “End Times Generation” -- the very generation that Jesus said would not pass away, which, of course, meant that we would not die because we were going to be raptured!

I was so excited by my discovery that I rushed out onto the rink to show my youth leaders. One by one I received their affirmation: “That's interesting. I never saw that verse before”; “I hope

you are right. I want to be raptured – and the sooner, the better. If you work out the date, let me know.” I was convinced that God had shown me a secret that no-one else yet knew.

On Sunday, I decided to fill my pastor in on this wonderful insight. Maybe he would want to preach a sermon on it so the whole congregation could get as excited as I was. It only took a breath for him to burst my bubble. “That verse is not talking about the rapture, and it is not saying that you will escape death.”

“Then what does it mean?” I asked.

“It is talking about Israel. The nation of Israel will not be wiped out before the Lord comes. That is why the return of Israel to the Promised Land is so important. Hitler tried to exterminate them, but God is true to His promise in Mark 13.30.”

Little did I realise at the time, but I had just experienced my first theological debate.

The pivotal word in verse 30 is the word “generation” (*genea* in the Greek). There are two basic definitions for this word. Ordinarily it means “people living at the same time” (ie contemporaries). Occasionally, it can mean a “family or race.”¹ These two possible meanings branch into various points of conclusion among scholars that we won’t go into.

If *genea* means contemporaries, then both the signs for Christ’s coming and His actual coming occur within the span of a single generation. Some scholars say this was fulfilled when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in AD 70 – which was within the generation of the twelve apostles. I disagree with that conclusion because Jesus did not come in great power and glory at that time. Two thousand years later, we’re still living in an imperfect world.

Other scholars who interpret *genea* as contemporaries – including John MacArthur – say that Christ was indicating that the generation living at the time the signs appear will be the final generation – some of them surviving the tribulation to see the return of Christ.²

In this case, Mark 13.30 would be read in this way:

Mark 13:30 (ESV)

³⁰Truly, I say to you, **that generation** will not pass away until all these things take place.

This is similar to the interpretation I took at the roller rink – except I was very wrong about two things:

1. I wrongly thought the signs were for the rapture – but that is not what Jesus is talking about in Mark 13. There are no signs for the rapture, and that is on purpose. The rapture is an incidental event; the return of Christ to the earth is the big event.

1 W E Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Old Tappan NJ: Fleming H Revell Co., 1940) p. 42.

2 Darrell L. Bock, “Luke 9.51-24.53”, in Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 1688-1692; John MacArthur, “Matthew 24-28”, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), pp. 63-67; as quoted in Mayhue, p. 21.

2. I was also wrong about the signs themselves. Earthquakes, famines, wars and persecutions are not signs that the world will end in a single generation. I've called those non-specific signs in this series of messages, because their purpose is to cause all generations to desire the coming of Christ. There have always been earthquakes, famines and wars.

Now I want to make something very clear. There are a lot of books being written and sermons being preached today that make the same interpretive mistake I did at age 15. I'll say this bluntly. When you hear from preachers that the Boxing Day tsunami or the rise of Islam killing off Christians or the fact that Israel is back in the Promised Land are sure-fire signs that we are living in the final generation, don't get too excited. They are misinterpreting Mark 13. Such wild speculation has no basis in Scripture and is wrong.

The specific signs are abomination of desolation, great tribulation and revelation of the Antichrist. Unmissable. And also short lived. These happen within 3.5 years of the end. So let's be careful about reading newspaper headlines into the Scripture.

Honest and responsible scholars like MacArthur conclude without wild speculation that the generation living when those short-term, unmistakable signs happen will not be entirely exterminated before Christ comes. That's one interpretation, and one that I think has merit.

The other is the one my pastor took. *Genea* means family or race – meaning the Jewish race.³ So Jesus is saying the Jewish race will not be exterminated before the end.

This conclusion has historical evidence behind it, because the Jews are still here – despite holocausts. But critics accuse it of being weak in the way it accounts for those two little words we mentioned earlier: these things. Look again at verse 30.

Mark 13:30 (NKJV)

³⁰Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all **these things** take place.

This is the second time Jesus has used this expression. Both times must mean the same thing – He is talking about the signs – which, critics say, confines the fulfilment to as little as 3.5 years.

But to this I would answer, why do we have to confine it so narrowly? Non-specific signs are still signs, so there is no problem with the timeframe. *Genea* can mean Israel. This is the interpretation I take – though tentatively. I conclude that Jesus – talking to Jewish men as He was – is assuring that Israel will not be wiped out. Specifically, He is promising that Israel will be the chief of nations after His coming – the capital of His reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

I like this interpretation because it fits the Old Testament covenants – the Abraham's seed (Jesus) would be a blessing to the whole world, and that David's seed (Jesus) would reign forever from David's throne.

3 Duane A. Dunham, "Genea in Matthew 24.34," *New Testament Essays in Honor of Homer A. Kent, Jr.*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Winona Lake IN: BMH, 1991), pp. 125-141; as quoted in Mayhue, p. 21.

The Jewish race is an indestructible ethnicity – if for no other reason than the fact that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, is Jewish.

Now, having said all that, I don't want you to be distracted from the main point. Whether you agree with MacArthur, or whether you agree with me matters little. What matters most is that Jesus is coming again – guaranteed. Look at verse 31.

Mark 13:31 (NKJV)

³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

So the final conclusion is this: The Son of Man is coming again in glory. When He comes, He will complete our salvation and make us citizens of His perfect, earthly kingdom. In the intervening time, our duty as believers is to persevere and to prepare – to watch and wait.

We have seen, then, that for the believer, it is all good in the end. Jesus has given us two assurances: The End is Unavoidable – the chain has engaged the rollercoaster car and we're going to have a ride – a good ride. And the Ethnicity is Indestructible. Whether you agree with me that this is Israel, or whether you take this to be Christians in the final generation doesn't matter. The point is the same: for the believer, it is all good in the end.

So let's look forward to the coming of the Lord. And let us pray, even so, come Lord Jesus.