

# “Focus!”

Mark 13:1-8 (1-37) <sup>1</sup>

Most of you know that Jill is a Registered Nurse specializing in lactation, or breastfeeding. Jill has been an RN for 45 years, but she’s only specialized in lactation for about the last 20 years.

Her introduction to lactation came with learning how to breastfeed our own two children, and that learning followed her learning how to get through labor and delivery without pain medication. There may be other ways to do this, but the path she followed was known as the Lamaze Method, and she not only used it, but she taught it to others for years. I think it was all this personal experience that got her interested in teaching lactation, and God has made her “magically” good at it.

The point this morning, though, has to do with getting through labor without pain medication. The trick to that, I’m told, has to do with learning particular ways of breathing and with developing strong powers of mental focus. The image on which Jill chose to focus was this mountain glen at Linville Falls on the Blue Ridge Parkway, one of our favorite places. And the key word in all this is . . . FOCUS. I’ll be talking about that idea all morning.

There’s another birth-related dimension to this morning’s sermon. Most of you probably know this, but there’s such a thing as “false labor,” or more technically, Braxton-Hicks contractions. Jill had several experiences of Braxton-Hicks with Nathan, our first child, and every time those contractions started, I was absolutely a basket case—no help at all.

When the real moment came, I had our one car up on jack stands with all the wheels off, and Jill came out to calmly say, “I think you’d better put the wheels on.” Happily, when it was the Real Deal, God graciously allowed me to be as calm as I needed to be.

Jill’s labor with Nathan was something like 11 hours long—without any pain medication—and he broke her coccyx in the bargain. One of the things you never know with labor is how many contractions there will be. Sometimes the baby may come with five or ten contractions, but it may be fifty, and it might be several hundred. I wasn’t counting during those long hours, but there were a LOT of contractions. I know all this reminiscing seems pretty random, but everything I’ve said so far has direct reference to our text.

My initial thought was to call this sermon “Wars and Rumors of Wars,” in keeping with Veterans’ Day; but the more I thought about it, “Wars and Rumors of Wars” really misses the main point of this chapter. The main point of Mark 13 is FOCUS.

Chapter 13 is Mark’s version of what’s known as “the Synoptic Apocalypse.”<sup>2</sup> You may remember that apocalyptic literature has to do with “the End Times,” and it is usually vivid

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 11, 2018, Veterans’ Day. Parallel passages include Matthew 24:1-51; Luke 21:5-36.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

<sup>2</sup> The parallel passages are Matthew 24 and Luke 21.

and sometimes bizarre. The main examples of apocalyptic in the Bible are the book of Revelation and the last chapters of the book of Daniel.

The Synoptic Apocalypse is clearly of this genre, but it lacks most of the usual weirdness. Mark's account is the longest uninterrupted teaching in his Gospel, and it seems calculated to dampen and defuse apocalyptic fervor rather than stoking and inflaming it.

The chapter begins as Jesus was leaving the Temple precincts on Tuesday of Holy Week. As He and the disciples were leaving, one of them said, *"Teacher, look! What massive stones! What impressive buildings!"*

*And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another—all will be thrown down."*

Herod's Temple was one of the architectural wonders of the world. Herod had built a huge platform to extend the Temple mount such that the courtyard of the Temple was now about 1200 feet by 1500 feet. At its highest point, this platform towered two hundred feet above the Kidron Valley, and the Temple itself was richly ornamented with gold so that it gleamed like the sun. The Temple area took up one-sixth of the entire area of the city.

When the Roman Army destroyed the city in A.D. 70, the Temple and everything else built on that platform were so thoroughly destroyed that no trace of them remains, and we're not even sure where they stood. Such a thing was absolutely inconceivable beforehand, and Jesus' prophecy thus led to the disciples' incredulous question that then led to this discourse.

Jesus and His disciples crossed over the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives, from which they overlooked the city and the Temple Mount.<sup>3</sup> We're told that He sat with Peter and Andrew, James and John, the first four of the Twelve whom He had called to follow Him, and as they looked over the city, they asked Him when all these things would take place.

Jesus' response had several parts: (1) He talked about Signs of the End of the Age; (2) He predicted much persecution; (3) He talked about "the Great Tribulation"; (4) He described the coming of the Son of Man in glory; (5) He told a short parable about a fig tree; and (6) He gave several emphatic exhortations to FOCUS!

Remember that while this chapter has apocalyptic themes, Jesus did not emphasize the fantastic images that usually characterized apocalyptic. Depending on how you count, various commentators identify 17-19 imperatives in these few verses, which is to say that Jesus didn't focus so much on WHEN all this would happen as on WHAT His followers should be doing "in the meantime."

In Mark's account, chapter 13 is Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" to His disciples, which functions in this Gospel as chapters 14-17 function in John's Gospel, as chapter 28 functions in Matthew's Gospel, and as Luke 24 and Acts 1 function in Luke's account. In John, the emphasis is on being united in love with Jesus and with one another; in Matthew and Luke, the emphasis is on taking the Good News to the Gentiles; and in Mark, the emphasis is on FOCUS!!!

In Mark's account, verses 5-23 shift back and forth between talking about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple thirty-seven years later and talking about Jesus' return in glory at the End of Time. It is not always clear which of these is being addressed,

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<sup>3</sup> Some manuscripts suggest that Jesus spent the nights of Holy Week sleeping on the Mount of Olives (John 7:53-8:2).

and scholars have many opinions about these distinctions. Further, Jesus frustrated the disciples' desire—and ours—to have clear signs and timetables about the time of the End.

Jesus didn't tell the disciples what they WANTED to know, but He did tell them what they NEEDED to know; and that's true for us, as well.

Jesus began His answer by pointing out that human history will continue to have “wars and rumors of wars” and that there will be earthquakes and famines in many places. “These are the beginning of birth pains,” He told them, but they are not “the Delivery”; not the End.

Earthquakes, wars, and famines are always happening somewhere; but wars bring death, not the Kingdom of God. Wars and human-created famines such as are happening in our world at this very moment signify nothing more than our persistent and pervasive human sinfulness. We don't know how long the labor will be, but we do know that there will be a “difficult delivery” when the Time comes.

In human history, as in the labor of birthing, the pain gets worse as the process comes to completion, but after that there is a marvelous and joyful New Beginning. My friends, God is still guiding the Creation, and “*The one who endures to the end will be saved*” (Mark 13:13).

Moving ahead in our text, it's not at all clear what Jesus referred to in Mark 13:14 when He talked about “*the abomination of desolation.*” The phrase comes from the book of Daniel,<sup>4</sup> where it refers to the profaning of the Temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 B.C. That profaning led to the Maccabean Revolt that cleansed the Temple, and that cleansing is still celebrated by the Jewish festival of Hanukkah; but all that was obviously already in the past when Jesus spoke these words.

The primary sense of vv. 14-20 probably has to do with the Jewish rebellion against Rome that would result in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The warning is focused on persons living in Judea during a time when the Temple was still standing, not on people living elsewhere and at other times, and Jesus' description has clear application to what actually did happen in that destruction.

At verse 24, though, Jesus' teaching shifted to the time of His return in glory, a time that is still in the future as we sit here this morning. The coming of the Son of Man “*in clouds with great power and glory*” (Mark 13:26) comes directly from Daniel 7:13, and when Jesus later applied that verse to Himself while on trial before the High Priest, His clear claim to divinity provided the charge they needed to execute Him for presumed heresy (Mark 14:62).

The image of clouds as representing God's presence has a long history in the Bible,<sup>5</sup> and God's arrival is often described with images of earthly storms.<sup>6</sup> Various celestial phenomena are also frequently associated with the Day of the Lord, the day of God's Judgment.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus told His disciples that the kinds of signs many associate with the end of the world are indeed birth pains of a sort, but they do not provide a “countdown clock.” “When I return,” He told them, “there will be no mistaking the fact. You won't have to wonder about it. There will be unmistakable signs in the heavens, and I will split the sky like lightning. All the earth

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 9:27, 11:31, 12:11.

<sup>5</sup> Beginning with the theophany in Exodus 13:20-22

<sup>6</sup> Judges 5:4-5; Psalms 77:14-16, 144:1-8; Amos 1:2; Habakkuk 3:3-6, 10-11

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 13:10, 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31, 3:15; Amos 8:9; 2 Peter 3:10

will know, at the very same moment, that I'M BACK!"<sup>8</sup> Jesus' real identity was veiled during His First Advent, but at His Second Advent, the world will see Him as He IS.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus told His friends that there would be no timetable by which calculations could be made. He told them that when the Final Curtain comes down and the labor pains are complete, there will be absolutely no mistaking that fact. And He gave the example of the fig tree as a parable of that coming.

Most of the trees in Palestine are evergreen. There are not many deciduous trees, and the fig tree is the last of the deciduous trees to bud before summer comes. When the fig trees begin to bud, summer has nearly arrived. This is an analogy similar to that of "birth pains." When the birth pains become most severe, birth is imminent. When the fig tree begins to bud, summer is imminent.

Paul would later write that many in Israel would come to faith in Jesus before the End comes (Romans 11:11-24). The fig tree is one of the Bible's symbols for Israel, and some see this short parable as Jesus' confirmation that a great spiritual harvest would be seen in Israel before the End. I don't know whether that's what He meant or not, but I like that idea.

Jesus' main point about His return, though, is that **it will be a surprise**: "*Now concerning that day or hour no one knows—neither the angels in heaven nor the Son—but only the Father*" (13:32). Elsewhere Jesus said that "***the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him***" (Matthew 24:44; Luke 12:40).

The fact that Jesus said He Himself didn't know the time of His return troubles some; but this is entirely consistent with what the Bible teaches us about the Incarnation—about what it meant for Jesus to have experienced human life in every way that we do (with the exception of committing Sin).<sup>10</sup> In the mystery of God's choosing to enter the world as fully human, Jesus emptied Himself of His divine superpowers except in those particular ways the Father chose and revealed to Him.<sup>11</sup>

While many of Jesus' parables, together with other events and teachings in the New Testament, indicated that there would be an extended period of time before His Return,<sup>12</sup> Jesus ended this particular teaching with a renewed emphasis on being watchful, alert, and FOCUSED "in the meantime." His final illustration of this point in our text has to do with a doorkeeper, a watchman charged with guarding the Master's house and with welcoming the Master when He comes:

*"Now concerning that day or hour no one knows—neither the angels in heaven nor the Son—but only the Father.*

***"Watch! Be alert! For you don't know when the time is coming.***

*"It is like a man on a journey, who left his house, gave authority to his servants, gave each one his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to be alert. **Therefore be alert, since you don't know when the master of the house is coming**—whether in the evening or at midnight or at the crowing of the rooster or early in the morning. Otherwise,*

<sup>8</sup> Mark 13:26; Matthew 24:29-30; Luke 17:24, 21:25-28

<sup>9</sup> Colossians 1:15-20; Revelation 1:12-18, 5:6-14, 19:11-16

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 4:15; Luke 2:52; Acts 1:7; Philippians 2:7

<sup>11</sup> The technical word for this is *kenosis*. Of the four Gospels, John most clearly emphasizes Jesus' deity; and John most clearly emphasizes the limitations of His Incarnation (5:19-20).

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 24:45-51, 25:5, 19; Luke 19:11-27; John 21:18-19; Acts 9:15, 22:21, 23:11, 27:24

when he comes suddenly he might find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to everyone: **Be alert!**" - **FOCUS!**<sup>13</sup>

Jesus had previously told another parable that made this same point rather painfully. It was a story of young women who were supposed to greet the bridegroom when he arrived, but they were not prepared when the time came, and they were shut out of the banquet. Jesus concluded that parable with this same warning: "**Therefore be alert, because you don't know either the day or the hour**" (Matthew 25:13).

My friends, it is not our Father's desire that anyone be shut out and miss what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9); but it is indeed possible to miss out. Peter later confirmed that *the day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed. . . .* **The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance** (2 Peter 3:9-10).

The author of Hebrews wrote three times in two pages,

*"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts!"*

*"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts!"*

*"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts!"*<sup>14</sup>

*No creature is hidden from [God], but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account. . . . [But happily,] we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need* (Hebrews 4:13, 15-16).

**FOCUS!!!**

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<sup>13</sup> Mark 13:32-37

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 3:7, 15, 4:7