

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: March 16th: Mark 13: Some Notes

As always, how we tackle this chapter is in the hands of the leader for that evening; but there is quite a strong case for taking the whole chapter as one reading – despite the fact that there seem to be three sections: 1) The destruction of the Temple, 2) The persecutions of the early Church (and the Church ever since!), and 3), and maybe, some thoughts on the “Second Coming”. One argument for taking the whole thing together is that there is some disagreement about which bits of the chapter are specific to the events around AD 70, and which, if any, bits are about the “last things”. Another argument for this approach is that Jesus very much encourages living every day as if it might be the last day, and very much discourages speculation about the “end of the world”. And one more argument is that the siege of Jerusalem and the persecution of Christians offer enough violence, cruelty, bloodshed and horror to satisfy anyone – without speculating about the stars falling!

Herod’s Temple was still not complete, but it was absolutely huge, with single stones being ginormous even by today’s standards, and with extravagant use of gold and marble. The wow factor was there in abundance. That lot being destroyed was a startling idea. On the other hand, the first Temple had been destroyed; and, since the return from Exile, no Temple had lived up to David and Solomon’s vision of a place where Heaven and Earth met and God made Himself at home. You might almost say that the Jews had come home, but God hadn’t. Moreover, it wasn’t all that long before that Antiochus had turned the Temple into a pagan shrine and a brothel; and the Roman Emperors were always tempted to try the same thing. Jewish freedoms to ignore Caesar worship were unique and remarkable, but fragile.

At the time of Jesus, and familiar to many Jews were not only Old Testament references to Temple destruction and the overthrow of the established order (especially the Book of Daniel), but a lot of more recent Jewish writings about death and destruction. Jesus draws on all this, and sometimes directly quotes it.

The horrors of AD 70 and thereabouts are not good to dwell on, but think Siege of Stalingrad, think of thousands starving to death, think of cannibalism, think of more Jews being killed by other Jews than were killed by Roman soldiers. It was all that much worse because people living outside Jerusalem fled into Jerusalem for safety, and were trapped there. It is good, in contemplating the persecution of Christians, to reflect that the non-Christian Jews suffered all they suffered at this time not just because some of them were fierce nationalists in the face of Imperial might, but because they were determined not to give up both believing and living their faith. When we are tempted to keep quiet in case we get funny looks, think of all those who died (and still die) for their faith.

The First Century is, to state the obvious, a long time ago. Jews and Christians resisting the Third Reich in the 1930’s are only on much more recent example of paying a high price for being themselves.

Jesus clearly knew about His own impending sacrifice, and about what was going to happen to the Temple, and about the persecution of His followers. It is interesting that, in discouraging speculation and encouraging living each day to the full, He says only the Father knows about the “overall timetable”. Perhaps most of his listeners thought in terms of human history, and indeed creation history, in terms of a few thousand years. We have added some noughts to our reckoning of these time-scales. That makes it all the more odd that some Christians just can’t resist speculating about whether the latest round of earthquakes, famines, floods, wars, etc, indicates the “End”. Yes, not least in the interests of the most vulnerable, let us do everything we can to combat global warming, etc. God made us STEWARDS! But the speculation stuff is just a waste of valuable time. Even worse is the attitude of some Christians that it is fine to carry on abusing Creation, because the Creator will sort it all out. STEWARDS are not put here to sleep walk into disaster.

For those of you with Tom Wright’s commentary, do look carefully at what he says about all the Gospels pointing to combination of earth and heaven, with renewal of the earth, rather than a select minority being carried off to heaven – whatever that may be.