

BIBLE STUDY HELPS

TITLE: Returning

TEXT: Mark 13:24-37

TARGET: SESSION IN A SENTENCE

Jesus promised to return for His followers.

LOOK UP: FOCUSING THE GROUP

Introduce: What do these items have in common – A waffle maker, an elevator, a doctor's report, a line at the drive thru, water to boil? (Things we must wait on).

Discuss: How well do you handle waiting on something to be finished or for something to be done?

Discuss: Have the current world events caused you to be more patient or less patient regarding Jesus's promise to come again to gather believers unto Himself? What kind of questions regarding Jesus's return have the current world events caused you to ask?

Throughout history, when moral depravity is rampant, disasters strike, persecution is prevalent, or world conflict seems imminent it should cause believers to pause and consider if this might be the time when Jesus would return as He promised. Our current world circumstances are certainly one of those times as we observe the events unfolding in the Middle East and around the world.

Jesus promised His disciples that He would return again to gather His believers unto Himself. For over 2000 years, believers have been waiting for that promise to be fulfilled. Sometimes believers have waited patiently and at times impatiently. Some have questioned whether Jesus was telling the truth or wonder if He has taken back that promise. No matter the case, our circumstances can impact our faith, mind, and emotions as we wait for Jesus's promised return.

After Jesus cleansed the temple in Mark 11, Jesus continued to spend time in the temple area and Jerusalem. During this time His authority was challenged by the religious leaders (Mark 11:27-33). Jesus taught more lessons to His disciples using parables and the things He observed taking place and through the interactions He had with religious leaders in the temple area (Mark 12).

Mark 13 begins with Jesus leaving the temple area with His disciples. Mark 13:1-2 states that, *"As he was going out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Teacher, look! What massive stones! What impressive buildings!"*² *Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another—all will be thrown down."*

One can only imagine what went through the disciples' minds as Jesus said this. Mark also tells us that once they returned to the Mount of Olives the questions from the disciples, and the lessons from Jesus began: *"While he was sitting on the Mount of Olives across from the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?"* (Mark 13:3-4)

This brings us to one of those times when Jesus spoke extensively to the disciples about His promised return. Jesus instructed them about the rise of false teachers who would contradict Jesus's teachings (Mark 13:5-7). He taught them about how things would look leading up to the end-times. The world would be marked with violence, intense suffering, persecution, wars, false messiahs, confusion, chaos, betrayal, and much more (Mark 13:8-23).

Then Jesus tells His disciples of His return in Mark 13:24-37. As we examine the conversation between Jesus and His disciples, consider what you believe regarding Jesus's return and how you can remain hopeful and faithful considering what the world is experiencing today.

LOOK IN: UPACKING THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Someone Read: Mark 13:24-27

²⁴ *"But in those days, after that tribulation: The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not shed its light;* ²⁵ *the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.* ²⁶ *Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.* ²⁷ *He will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."*

Guide:

- When you read how creation responds in the end times, what thoughts or feelings do you have? Are you afraid, excited, or worried?
- Mark drew on verses from Joel and Daniel to help us understand the power of Jesus as God's Son.
- Someone Read: Joel 2:10-13 & Daniel 7:13-14.** How can these verses, along with Mark's passage, help us understand the power of Jesus?
- How does verse 27 correct what many people today assume regarding mankind's relationship to God? (Not all men will be gathered by Jesus, only those who are followers of Christ.)

While salvation is offered to all men, not all will respond to God's free gift of salvation. We must understand that not all roads lead to Heaven as much of our culture tries to espouse. Everyone who dies is not in the "arms of Jesus" or "in a better place." Equally, when Jesus returns, He will not gather everyone unto Himself; He will only gather those who have professed Him as Savior (the elect).

Here is how the Holman New Testament Commentary on Mark describes Jesus's teaching on His return: "All of humankind will see the Son of Man as the ruler of this universe. His major concern will be to gather his people together so they might share in this time of triumph. The phrase, **gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens**, has a dual meaning. Not only will He send his angels to gather His people from the ends of the earth, but apparently those in the heavens who have gone on before will also be with Him to celebrate His triumph."¹

Respond:

- How does knowing that Jesus will return and will gather believers in this manner give you hope, especially considering the times in which we live today?
- How should this passage change the way you live?

Jesus desired to give His disciples hope because He knew what they would be facing. He also knew that all generations of believers would need this same hope as we moved closer His return.

But how will we know that this is going to happen? What are the signs? Jesus gives us the only sign we really need to know that these things will happen. Let's see how He explains this to His disciples by once again using a fig tree as His illustration.

Someone Read: Mark 13:28-31

²⁸ "Learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ In the same way, when you see these things happening, recognize that he is near — at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."

Jesus uses a tree from the region that was a reliable indicator of the seasons. Most of the other trees in Palestine remained green throughout the winter except for the fig tree. The budding fig tree indicated that spring had arrived, and summer was coming.

Guide: Notice the phrases "*when you see these things happening*" and "*He is near—at the door*" in verse 29.

- To what "things" might Jesus be referring?
(The phrase, **these things**, could refer to the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in a.d. 70 or to the events immediately preceding the end of the age. This phrase could relate to the phrase, "all these things," in verse 30. This also could be a dual reference for both the near prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem and the coming end times. If this is the case, then Jesus was referring to the events most likely to affect the believers at that time, which would be the fall of Jerusalem in a.d. 70. But he may have been referring as well to the end times.)²
- What is Jesus communicating by the phrase "*He is near—at the door*"? (He again is most likely referring to both the fall of Jerusalem and the events leading up to the return of Christ.)

¹ Rodney L. Cooper, *Mark*, vol. 2, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 221.

² Rodney L. Cooper, *Mark*, vol. 2, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 222.

Discuss: What things today continually remind us that Jesus' return is growing closer every day?

Jesus goes on to use the phrases in verse 30, "this generation" and "all these things." There could be dual meanings in this verse as well:

1. "This generation" could be applied to humankind in general, Israel, or Christians in general.
2. In this case, "all these things" could refer to the events described in verses 5-23.
3. At the same time, however, the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ all seem to go together. God's desire is that everyone repent. This understanding of "all these things" would make "this generation" mean that the return of Christ is at hand for every generation.

Identify: With all the destruction and change that would take place as we move toward the return of Christ, there is one thing that is certain and never changing. To what does verse 31 tell us He was referring? (His Word)

Jesus wanted us and His disciples to know that, in the midst of all the turmoil, suffering, pain, and other things believers might face as they move toward physical death or His physical return, His Word is always absolute. It will never change, nor will it ever mislead you.

- The disciples came to know this because many of them saw the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. His words as He left the temple were, *"Not one stone will be left upon another — all will be thrown down."* (Mark 13:2)
- You will come to realize how true and reliable God's Word is as you learn it, live it, and watch the pages of it unfold in history.
- God's Word will continually remind you that Jesus is coming back one day and that you can live each day with hope!

With everything laid out, now Jesus needed to give them some instructions regarding how they were to live as they waited for His return.

Read: Mark 13:32-37

³² "Now concerning that day or hour no one knows — neither the angels in heaven nor the Son — but only the Father. ³³ Watch! Be alert! For you don't know when the time is coming. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Otherwise, when he comes suddenly he might find you sleeping. ³⁷ And what I say to you, I say to everyone: Be alert!"

Jesus emphasized to the disciples (and us) that "that day or hour no one knows." We see the signs and we experience the groanings of a fallen, sinful world that is self-destructing, but we don't know when Jesus will return. The angels don't know. And, Jesus, in His humanity could not give His disciples a specific date or timeline.

"Even Jesus does not know. This clearly shows his humanity. Jesus purposely laid aside the exercise of his deity—in this case his ability to know all things past, present, and future—as a consequence of his human existence. Jesus answered one of the key questions of the disciples, "When will these things happen?" Jesus declared that he did not know and they should not worry about it. Even at Jesus' ascension, he clearly said to the disciples that it was not for them "to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7).³

Ask: What word or words did you hear repeated in these verses? Why would Jesus repeatedly remind His disciples to be alert?

Jesus is serious about us being vigilant as we move closer to His return. He emphasized the need to pay attention four times in six verses: Watch! Be alert! (v. 33), therefore be alert (v. 35), do not let him find you sleeping (v. 36), and be alert (v. 37).

LOOK OUT: LIVING OUT THE TARGET

³ Rodney L. Cooper, *Mark*, vol. 2, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 223.

Guide: List distractions or concerns that could keep a person from remaining alert, hopeful, and watchful regarding Jesus's return. How can we safeguard ourselves from these distractions or concerns?

Challenge Options:

- Who could share how today's current world or personal events have caused you to think about Jesus's return? How can Jesus's teaching in this passage help you remain hopeful and faithful?
- Would anyone be willing to share challenges or difficulties you're currently facing? How can the promise of Jesus' return give you hope when as you face these challenges?

As you live your life this week, remember the promises throughout the Scripture regarding Jesus' return. Hopefully this passage from 1 Thessalonians will be an encouragement as you become more alert and watch for Jesus' return:

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18)