

## **The Saints Are Triumphant**

Mark 13:24-31

*by Michael G. Lilienthal*

Dear triumphant saints!

Last week Jesus had been speaking about the time which will lead up to the end of the world. Just before our lesson today he was informing his disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem: “For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be” (Mark 13:19). The tribulation Jesus described, such a great and horrific event, was not going to be the height of the disciples’ lives. Jesus warned them about it so that they would be prepared, for when the Roman empire came to level Jerusalem, they would have to flee, and they would have to watch and be on guard lest they be led astray by the false christs and false gods which would be placed before them. This period of history was horrific indeed. The Jewish historian Josephus describes it:

But when [the Romans] went in numbers into the lanes of the city, with their swords drawn, they slew those whom they overtook, without mercy, and set fire to the houses wither the Jews were fled, and burnt every soul in them, and laid waste a great many of the rest; and when they were come to the houses to plunder them, they found in them entire families of dead men, and the upper rooms full of dead corpses, that is of such as died by the famine; they then stood in a horror at this sight, and went out without touching anything. But although they had this commiseration for such as were destroyed in that manner, yet had they not the same for those that were still alive, but they ran every one through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies, and made the whole city run down with blood, to such a degree indeed

that the fire of many of the houses was quenched with these men's blood.<sup>1</sup>

So horrific was this event that many believed that the end of the world had indeed come. They were not wrong to picture things this way, because the destruction of Jerusalem was described by Jesus as a shadow of the end to come. Similar horrors and visuals would accompany the coming of the world's end, when "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." But Jesus' warnings come with an advantage for us: he says, "But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand" (Mark 13:23). We know what's coming. So we can prepare. Being prepared, we know that we who are **saints** in Christ are already **triumphant**, and this means that **our joy will be complete**, for **we know what the signs signify**.

### I. Our Joy Will Be Complete

Does the end terrify you? At a time, "concerning that day or that hour, no one knows" (Mark 13:32), the signs will be visible in the heavens: you can see the sun, moon, and stars, which seem so immovable, so firm. The sky, like the veil over the world, is torn away, and the whole earth and all the laws of physics which govern it collapse. Can you imagine what it will be like when Christ appears so that the whole world will see him at once? when the angels come at his side and their trumpets are heard by every corner of the earth in the same instant? when all the dead will rise and all the hundred billions who have ever lived and died will stand together?

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, par. 404-406  
(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/josephussack.html>).

There is a reason such a thing is incomprehensible to us: it is a miracle. Jesus describes this time period by saying that “the powers in the heavens will be shaken.” The very laws of physics will crumble with the world, as it all melts away and its limitations with it. Those who object that such things are impossible deliberately blind themselves to the fact that God will end the world as it now stands and something new will be set up in its place.

So it should be terrifying. Did you ever see *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, with Indiana Jones? When the Nazis opened the Ark of the Covenant in that movie, their faces were famously melted off by the divine power. That was a dramatization and a Hollywood interpretation of something divine, and yet, something equally terrifying will occur at the end of the world when the Son of Man returns in glory. Everything will go dark; the world will melt away; the heart-starting trumpet blast of the angel will sound. It will all be a similarly terrifying picture as what occurred in Jerusalem when it was sacked by the Romans just decades after Jesus’ ascension.

But all this terror is limited. It will certainly be the scariest thing anyone on earth has ever seen; but for us, that terror will be overshadowed by the joy of our being gathered by the angels to our Lord: “And then 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.” Who are the “elect”? Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, *even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:3-4). To elect means to choose. The elect are

the chosen. Paul says that *we* are those chosen, the elect, and “In him,” that is, in Christ, on the basis of the work that he accomplished of paying for our sins, washing us clean in his blood so that we stand in the white robes of saints, “we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

How can you be sure you are one of those elect, one of those saints? Paul answers that as well: “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13). Do you believe in Jesus as your savior? Then you are saved, and when the world melts away, that means your deliverance from an evil world into the triumph of the heavenly world.

## **II. We Know What the Signs Signify**

Notice that Jesus’ message to his disciples does not concern the non-elect. When he returns, he says, the angels will “gather his elect.” All the elect, dead and alive (the dead will be raised) are gathered at Christ’s right hand. The non-elect are nowhere to be found. This all does not concern them. For the non-elect, this end, this melting of the world, is only full of terror and dread: let us fix our eyes on the bright hope which is made available to the elect, to those who believe, to those who know what these signs signify.

Jesus in essence tells us that the very nature of the cycles of the seasons is preparing us for the end of the world, if we will watch and guard our souls. He says, “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.” We watch the trees, don’t we? You who hunt, you pay attention, and once the leaves on the trees start to dull from their green color, you know that soon it will be time to go catch your winter’s stock of venison. Yes, we have our 12-month, 52-week, 365-day calendars – but those are based on the cycle of the seasons. Men who observed the turning of the world, the changing of the temperature and air pressure, the reactions of the trees and animals discovered the pattern, the schedule, and recorded it into those calendars.

The point is, those who watch the signs know how to determine what they mean. So Jesus says, “So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.” What are these things? “Men will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray...wars and rumors of wars...earthquakes...famines...you will be beaten in synagogues...brother will deliver brother over to death...the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be...the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (Mark 13:6-25). Jerusalem would fall and the temple would be destroyed. These things would happen already before that generation would pass away. The disciples would witness those very things, and Jesus says, they are signs: don’t let them fall on deaf ears and blind eyes! Know that the end comes!

A lot has been said about just what Jesus means by “generation” in this passage: “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Firstly, it means that the generation, the group of people present and living during that

time, would not pass away, not all die out, before all these signs were made visible. And beyond that, Jesus also points out the “generation” in a larger sense of wicked, sinful man. He once before stated: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign” (Matt. 16:4); and: “For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed” (Mark 8:38). He once bemoaned: “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” (Mark 9:19); and he attested once that the sins of all the forebears, and the murders of all the prophets, would “be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah” (Luke 11:50-51). Sinful man itself will not pass away until all these signs are fulfilled in their entirety.

And he emphasizes again the end of the world: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” It’s an interesting set of phrases here. “This generation,” in the broad sense, sinful man, will not pass away, *until* the end of the world. And at that time, “Heaven and earth will pass away.” However, Jesus’ “words will not pass away,” ever, for any reason. Jesus’ words are twofold. When John had a vision of the Son of Man, one part of the image he described: “from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword” (Rev. 1:16). The same sword is pictured by the writer to the Hebrews: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebr. 4:12).

One side of this sword, which is God’s Word, is the Law, which condemns and destroys the soul of man under the guilty weight of sin. This edge is the executioner’s

edge: you, for your crimes, stand condemned before the judge's seat, and he sends you out to the block, where you rest your head facedown, and the sword comes hurtling downward towards your neck. But the other side of the sword, God's Word, is the Gospel, which is the side that turned the opposite direction, away from your neck and towards the neck of your Savior, Jesus Christ. Although you committed the crime, he stepped in and placed his neck on the executioner's block in your place: on the cross he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" suffering the pain of hell (Matt. 27:46). By the faith which is instilled in your heart by the Holy Spirit coming through that Word of God which will never pass away, you know that that sacrifice was for you.

Therefore, by faith, by the baptism which washed you clean, by the Lord's Supper which nourishes you as heavenly food, and by that eternal Word which interprets for you the signs, you yourself stand triumphant as one of Jesus' saints. Therefore do not fear these end times. Realize what the signs signify: your deliverance and eternal joy — your triumph!

Amen.