

Stay in Orbit!¹

By Dr. Dave Neale

Our passage today is located thusly on the map of ideas of the NT.² If you have any deeper interest in today's subject I refer to you quite a number of footnotes in the written mss on line.³

Of the last week or so of his life, this once... only this once... Jesus looks to the near future and gives his assessment of the situation for his followers.

In terms of the nearer context of our passage, in chapter 12 of Mark, just preceding our text today, Jesus sits down by the treasury in the temple and watches the contributions. He is impressed not by the large extravagant givers but by the widow's mite, the one who gave all that she had.

These simple Galileans were much impressed that day as they walked into the temple because, after all, the Jerusalem temple was in the very top tier of public buildings in the Ancient Near East. It's all made of that beautiful warm coloured Jerusalem limestone, quarried locally in the area.

Some of its blocks are larger than those used in the pyramids. It was soft to chisel but hardened beautifully after being shaped. On the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem today you can see some of the Herodian stone in the very lowest layers of the western wall.

¹ "How Do Objects Stay in Orbit?"

An object in motion will stay in motion unless something pushes or pulls on it. This statement is called Newton's first law of motion. Without gravity, an Earth-orbiting satellite would go off into space along a straight line. With gravity, it is pulled back toward Earth. A constant tug-of-war takes place between the satellite's tendency to move in a straight line, or momentum, and the tug of gravity pulling the satellite back.

An object's **momentum** and the force of gravity have to be balanced for an orbit to happen. If the forward momentum of one object is too great, it will speed past and not enter into orbit. If momentum is too small, the object will be pulled down and crash. When these forces are balanced, the object is always falling toward the planet, but because it's moving sideways fast enough, it never hits the planet. Orbital velocity is the speed needed to stay in orbit. At an altitude of 150 miles (242 kilometers) above Earth, orbital velocity is about 17,000 miles per hour. Satellites that have higher orbits have slower orbital velocities." (Nasa.gov)

² If you think of the church year as the face of a clock 12 o'clock is at the top, then we have

- Epiphany – Job
- Lent – The House of Listening
- 8 Weeks of Easter – Profiles of the First Followers
- The Common year (we are in the 25th Sunday of Pentecost)
- Advent

To use the clock analogy, it is 11:30 pm in the church year and that is why in our lectionary we begin to find visions of the ultimate dominion of God. We saw that in our Hebrews series and now we see it in Mark 13.

The gospels are the *heart of the NT* and Mark is the *heart of the gospels*, because Matthew and Luke build their gospels on the literary basis of Mark. The *heart of Mark is the Passion narrative, the last six chapters of Mark*. Because the first 10 chapters are about 3 years of Jesus life, and the last 6 chapters are about the last two weeks of his life.

And then in the middle of the Passion narrative of Mark is *the mysterious chapter 13*. A dark, troubling assessment by Jesus of what is to come. It is singular in its introduction of a seemingly apocalyptic scene to the gospels – which is not a really common feature of his life and teaching.

³ And then both Matthew 24 and Luke 21 rework it in their own treatment of Jesus' life with quite different tones.

The many allusions to Daniel in the NT are mostly in the gospels and Revelation, but they also occur occasionally in Paul. This demonstrates the important influence of Daniel on NT thought. Allusions to Daniel in Mark are thought to be Dn 4:12/Mk 4:32; Dn 7:13/Mk 14:62; Dn 7:13-14/Mk 13:26; Dn 9:27/Mk 13:14; Dn 11:31/Mk 13:14; Dn 12:1/Mk 13:19; Dn 12:11/Mk 13:14.

But Jesus knew what we know today, that is, that temples are tools of politics and wealth. From earliest agrarian times, as soon as priests emerged as arbiters of religion, holy sites were an attempt to appease the gods but also to empower the priestly class and the political powers at play in governing people.



Herod's massive rebuilding of the temple mount about 50 years before Jesus' visit that day, wasn't for God, it was Herod. As Josephus says, the rebuilt and expanded temple complex was "...an everlasting memorial to him [Herod]..." (Antiquities 15:1). He hoped that it would endear him to his subjects and in effect buy their loyalty. And it did to an extent and for a time.

Jesus' disciples remark the grandeur of the majestic structure, ***Look Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!***

He makes the famous observation:

Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here on another; all will be thrown down. (Mark 13:2)⁴

I don't believe that Jesus had any special knowledge about the future. He was "made man." He ***did*** exactly what all the prophets did, he commented on his own times, and ***knew*** only what all the prophets knew, that in the end the dominion of God would prevail and the justice and mercy would will out in the end. I don't think He knew what the future was, he was just astute. That makes this chapter more wonderous to me, not less.

But still, as they wandered back to the Mt of Olives that day and sat watching sun set over the city, the temple in full view, resplendent in its warm glowing limestone, his disciples asked what they usually did.

Tell us when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished. When will the horrible calamities of chapter 13 occur?

Jesus said, ***But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*** (v 32)⁵

⁴ He knew what the temple really was. A political and religious tool in the hands of the elite, now corrupted for gain and currying favour with Rome (***when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand)***) (Mark 13:14).

One of the main causes of the Great Revolt was the corruption within the high priesthood, expressed in many different ways. He will soon call out what they had done to the temple by quoting the OT ***...you have made my house a den of robbers...*** (Isaiah 56:7; Jer 7:11).

⁵ The meaning of Mark 13:30 is debated, ***Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.*** Perhaps he thought the end would come soon as the plain sense of these words convey, or perhaps "this generation" is in reference not to his own generation but to a future generation.

Sounds a lot like what they said to the Risen Jesus in Acts 1:6: **Lord is this the time you restore us to rule?...It is not for you to know the times and periods...**

It is a matter of historical fact that within a hundred years Jerusalem was no more. Temple gone, all traces of its Jewish past erased as it was reborn as a pagan city Aelia Captitolina, 135 built by Hadrian. A temple to Jupiter was erected on the site of the temple of Yahweh, torn down and replaced by the Muslims in 691.

The same Roman emperor who at the same time was building an 80-mile wall between England and Scotland to keep the “barbarians” out of the Roman empire. Those barbarians were my relatives. Yes!

In response to the disciples’ question of “when” Jesus said three things. These are in the imperative mood in Greek. That is, they have the force of command.

When their world was on the brink of chaos, when corruption was endemic, when political and social fabric of their world was at the tearing point, when **brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death...** (Mark 13:12-13)..... Jesus said:

- **Beware that no one leads you astray** (v 5, βλέπετε, *blepete*)
- **Be alert** (v 23, βλέπετε)
- **Keep awake** (v 37)

I think “alert” and “awake” are understandable. By the way, the verbs are all plural (you pl) as well as imperatival mood. That is to say, I am not able on my own to adequately be awake and alert to the dangers of the chaos. I need the faith community. A communal responsibility to be alert and awake.

The verb also means “see,” (βλέπετε,) a very common word, but here it means “watch, look, beware of.” There is definitely a sense of foreboding. It is intentional how the passage works; the disciples begin by saying “Look at these stones!” And Jesus says do you “See” these stones? Do you really see this for what it is? Same word. *Blepete*. Beware.

Keep your wits about you brothers and sisters. I interpret these imperatives to mean ‘Don’t worry about when, stay present. Stay centered in your life of faith in a God who has sworn an oath to intercede for you in this living moment.’ Dwell in the **vivacity** of the faith.

It is a bit more challenging to understand why he responds to the immense dangers of his day with the warning to ...**beware that no one leads you astray**. On the one hand it is a comment on messianic movements in Judea at this time, which were innumerable (Josephus; Gamaliel mentions Judas the Galilean and Theudas in Acts 5). Do you think that on the Passover week when Jesus died he was the only one crucified for opposing the power of Rome?

The warning is certainly a cautionary note to those who are overly concerned about what is going to happen in the future, be it end-time speculations or simply feeling that need to know what comes next. Very human.

But if the need-to-know gets out of balance in our lives it makes us vulnerable to those who exploit those expectations. In a sense the need-to-know can at times be the opposite faith.

Silly TV preachers and commentators and conspiracy theorists prey on the vulnerable. Some are led astray very willingly indeed. We don't want to be found among them, Jesus exhorts us.

The word for "lead astray" comes from the Greek word πλανήτης, *planētēs*, obviously the word from which we get "planet." A planet is that which wanders in the sky. Stars don't orbit the sun and appear stationary in the sky. Planets do orbit the sun and so appear to move across the sky. "That which wanders." The noun "planet" doesn't occur in the Bible, but the verb form does, quite often with the meaning of wandering aimlessly, or going astray from the right way.⁶

An orbit is a state of equilibrium in which the momentum to go in a straight line off into space (in the earth's case, at 67,000 mph) is counterbalanced by the continual falling into the gravitational field of that body it orbits. Mass, velocity, gravitational pull, all held in a beautiful state of equilibrium. It's physics but it's also a miracle of nature.

The lesson for life that Jesus gives is this: stay centred in your orbit around your faith.

Stay in your orbit around a simple faith in God through Christ. In these days there is a vulnerability to wandering away from centredness in Christ under the influence of a multitude of voices, and to be honest many of which are irresponsible voices.

Don't be too hard on yourself. Did you know that all orbits are elliptical to some degree. Sometimes we are closer and sometimes we are farther. No one is perfect in their orbit to their faith and values.

To be in Christ is to abide in, to aspire to, a state of spiritual equilibrium. The gravitational centre of our faith in the Word of the Oath that Risen Christ is at God's right hand interceding for his children. The forces that pull on us are too numerous to mention. What are yours today?

I said this a few weeks ago, one of the most important factors in my own spiritual equilibrium, one that without which I tend to wander of course, is staying in a strong community of faith. We can't do this alone. The pronouns are all plural.

I close with this [musicians come]

Did you happen to see that passage in Hebrews 10:23 in our readings for the week? I think it is just perfect for this idea of staying in orbit. ***Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope (our orbit) without wavering (or wandering off), for he who has promised is faithful.***

When when when when.

If we call to mind that ***in-the-now*** we have a living mediator with God who intercedes for us in this very moment before God, drawing us to the Throne of Grace (Heb 7:25; 4:16), when doesn't really matter quite so much – because the now is so beautiful.

And when we have the surpassing hope, as our brother Paul said, ***...It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love Christ?*** (Ro 8:33ff)

⁶ Our dear forefathers/mothers in the faith sometimes, ***wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground*** (Heb 11:38). And the Israelites who, as Ps 95 says ***they always go astray in their hearts and they have not known my ways...*** (Heb 3:10).

Nov 12, 2021 1 Sam 1:4-20, 2:1-10; Psalm 16; Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8 ***Stay in Orbit!***

Thanks be to God. Amen