

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE OLIVET DISCOURSE IN MARK'S GOSPEL



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During the last week of His mortal ministry, the Savior often frequented the temple. His triumphal entry into Jerusalem led Him to its holy precincts, where He overthrew the money changers (see Mark 11:15–19). It was there that the religious hierarchy attacked His authority (see Mark 11:27–33), that He recounted a number of parables which reprimanded the house of Israel for rejecting Him and prefigured the increasing role of the Gentiles in the kingdom of God (see Matthew 21:33–22:14), that He pronounced a series of woes upon the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocritical actions (see Matthew 23), and that He applauded the widow's mite (see Mark 12:41–44). It was also at the temple that Jesus prophesied of the temple's destruction. In response to a disciple's awe at its magnificence, Jesus declared its "ultimate bankruptcy."¹ "Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Mark 13:2).

Jesus's prophecy attacked the very heart and soul of Judaism. The temple represented the crowning jewel of their religion and the center of their system of rituals. Herod the Great's expansion of the temple and its surroundings were viewed as a masterpiece of architectural achievement. Herod began the project around 19 BC. When Jesus began His public ministry, the project had already been in progress for over forty-six years (see John 2:20) and would not be totally completed until just a few years before its destruction by the Romans in AD 70. It is therefore not surprising that Jesus's prophecy of the temple's destruction elicited questions from His disciples.

The disciples' questions and Jesus's answer are recorded in different forms in each of the synoptic Gospels (see Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5–38). Traditionally Latter-day Saints have gravitated toward the Matthean account because of the Prophet Joseph Smith's reworking of Matthew 24 in the Joseph Smith Translation (see Joseph Smith—Matthew), recorded in the Pearl of Great Price.² The purpose of this chapter, however, is to examine the Markan version, with a particular interest on its teachings about discipleship.

The Olivet Discourse is the name of this exchange between Jesus and His disciples because it occurred on the Mount of Olives just east of the temple. There are some significant points of contact between the Markan and Matthean accounts, but the former has a focus that is different than the Matthean account. It is shorter than the account in Matthew and Joseph Smith—Matthew. It does not include Jesus's teachings on the love of many waxing cold, the necessity of enduring to the end, the parable of the carcass and the eagles, the sign of Noah, nor the parables of the ruler over the household (see Matthew 24:45–51), the ten virgins (see Matthew 25:1–13), the talents (see Matthew 25:14–30), the sheep and the goats

(see Matthew 25:31–46), and the good man of the house (see Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:47–48). However, Mark does include one parable that is not found in the Matthean account: the parable of the watching porter (see Mark 13:33–36).

The Gospel of Mark

Many scholars consider Mark's Gospel to be written to the Saints in Rome and to be the earliest of the four Gospels. They routinely turn to Mark 13 and the prophecy of the destruction of the temple to date its composition to approximately AD 70.³ This was a difficult time for many Christians in Rome under the leadership of Nero. One Roman historian notes that it was unlawful to be a Christian and describes Nero's practice of burning Christian offenders simply as a way to produce light during the night.⁴ It was during this time that tradition holds that Peter and Paul were both put to death. A major focus, therefore, of Mark's Gospel, and particularly the Olivet Discourse, is to acknowledge the costs of discipleship during difficult times and to reassure the Saints that even in such times there is reason to have hope.

The Olivet Discourse within Mark's Gospel

The Olivet Discourse stands out in Mark's Gospel because it is one of only two discourses in an otherwise fast-paced Gospel that concentrates more on the deeds and short, pithy teachings of Jesus.⁵ The fast-paced nature is designed to create a sense of wonder and awe in the mind of the reader about the magnificence of Jesus's ministry. Throughout the text, Mark repeatedly notes that the audience was amazed at the miracles Jesus performed (see 1:27; 2:12; 6:51; 9:15; 10:32; 14:33; 16:8) or astonished at the doctrine He taught (see 1:22; 5:42; 6:2; 7:37; 10:24, 26; 11:28). Jesus's two discourses

in Mark are situated in the midst of either the Galilean (see Mark 4) or the Jerusalem (see Mark 13) ministries. Mark 4 consists of a series of parables that “explore what happens when the message of the kingdom of God is ‘sown’ and why people react to it so differently.”⁶ Likewise, Mark 13 serves to put in a broader context the ongoing tension between Jesus and the religious authorities over His authority and the function of the temple. As one scholar has noted, “The two discourses of chapters 4 and 13 thus allow the reader a pause in the otherwise rapid pace of the narrative to think through the implications of the story so far, and provide a theological framework for understanding the new thing that is happening with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.”⁷

The Olivet Discourse begins as Jesus leaves the temple for the last time. The only further mentionings of the temple in Mark are the charges at the trial and crucifixion that Jesus would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days (see 14:58; 15:29–30), and the pointed mention that when Jesus died, “the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom” (15:38). That Jesus left the temple and went to the Mount of Olives strongly suggests He left through the Golden Gate in the eastern wall. This may be a veiled reference to the dramatic withdrawal of God’s glory from the temple in Ezekiel’s vision (see Ezekiel 10:18–19; 11:22–23). As Jesus and His disciples sat on the Mount of Olives, they would have had an uninterrupted view of the magnificent temple complex. But now that Jesus had withdrawn, the buildings were but a hollow shell of what God had intended for them.⁸

One of the most significant changes between the Matthean and Markan accounts is the questions the disciples ask in response to Jesus’s prophecy of the destruction of the temple. Understanding the respective questions in each of the texts is critical for understanding the intent of Jesus’s teachings

in the rest of the chapter. The Prophet Joseph Smith once taught, “I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer?”⁹ In Matthew the disciples ask two questions: “When shall [the destruction of the temple] be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” (Matthew 24:3). Here we have two distinct questions, the first dealing with events that would take place during the disciples’ lifetime, and the second dealing with the events that would introduce the Savior’s Second Coming. In Matthew 24, and particularly Joseph Smith—Matthew, Jesus’s teachings respond to both these questions and teach about the events that will precede both the destruction of the temple in the first century and the Second Coming. A significant contribution of the Joseph Smith—Matthew account is that it rearranges the material in Matthew to clarify that the prophecies about these events virtually mirror one another.¹⁰

Jesus’s Teachings on Discipleship in Mark’s Olivet Discourse

In Mark, however, the questions are not the same as those found in Matthew. Rather, both questions focus on the destruction of the temple: “When shall [the destruction of the temple] be? and what shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?” (Mark 13:4). Although the Second Coming is discussed toward the end of the chapter, the emphasis in Mark is the destruction of the temple, and the Second Coming takes on a secondary role. But Jesus’s answer is not just about the temple. He also uses the destruction of the temple to teach His followers what it means to be a disciple, what it costs to be a disciple, and what the hope is of being a disciple. This message is of importance not just for Peter, James, John, and Andrew, but for all those who read this chapter (see v. 14).

Jesus's response can be divided into four sections, each introduced by the injunction to "take heed" (vv. 5, 9, 23, 33). The Greek word in each case is the second plural present active imperative of *blepō*. In its basic sense, *blepō* means "to see or perceive." In this discourse, Jesus uses the imperative to show that what He is saying is not sage advice—it is a command. If the disciples are to succeed they *must* understand and follow His directions. He wants His disciples to realize that discipleship brings with it great danger. He wants His disciples to know that fact in advance, to know what forms it will take so they can be prepared and remain strong.

Jesus's first injunction is to "take heed lest any man deceive you: for many shall come in my name, saying that, I am [*egō eimi*]; and shall deceive many" (vv. 5–6). Discipleship requires constant vigilance. A false Christ is any figure or institution that sets itself up as a source of salvation other than Christ or His Church. During the first century, a number of individuals proclaimed themselves to be saviors from the Roman occupation. They gathered large followings but were ultimately unsuccessful.¹¹ A disciple must know the master. Jesus taught that the sheep know their shepherd and "know his voice." Then He declared, "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am *known of mine*" (John 10:4, 14; emphasis added). Disciples of Christ must be constantly focused on Him. If they are distracted from that focus by the things going on around them, then, like Peter when he walked on the water (see Matthew 14:28–30), they will begin to be engulfed by those distractions.

Under the umbrella of Jesus's first command to take heed, the Savior also reminds His disciples that discipleship must be refined in a world of turmoil: "And when ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet. For nation shall rise

against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows” (Mark 13:7–8). Not all turmoil or natural disasters are indicators that the end is upon us. They are part of the mortal experience. Jesus tells His disciples that when they hear of these things they should “be . . . not troubled.” Jesus’s message is just as poignant for today’s disciples. When disciples hear of wars and rumors of wars, they should not panic, because the Lord is in control.

Apostles and prophets in this dispensation have given similar counsel. During World War II, Elder John A. Widtsoe taught at general conference: “Above the roar of cannon and airplane, the maneuvers and plans of men, the Lord always determines the tide of battle. So far and no farther does He permit the evil one to go in his career to create human misery. The Lord is ever victorious; He is the Master to whose will Satan is subject. Though all hell may rage, and men may follow evil, the purposes of the Lord will not fail.”¹² Elder Jeffrey R. Holland explained: “We should watch for the signs. . . . But we must not be paralyzed just because that event and the events surrounding it are ahead of us somewhere. We cannot stop living life.”¹³ President Gordon B. Hinckley has also taught: “Perilous times? Yes. These are perilous times. But the human race has lived in peril from the time before the earth was created. Somehow, through all of the darkness, there has been a faint but beautiful light. And now with added luster it shines upon the world. It carries with it God’s plan of happiness for His children. It carries with it the great and unfathomable wonders of the Atonement of the Redeemer.”¹⁴

Jesus’s second commandment to take heed addresses the persecution that inevitably follows those who preach the gospel:

Take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and

ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them.

And the gospel must first be published among all nations.

But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost.

Now the brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son; and children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death.

And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. (Mark 13:9–13)

In these verses, Mark ties together a theme that began in chapter 1 and runs throughout the Gospel.

In chapter 1 we read that John the Baptist preached (see vv. 7–8) and was “put in prison” (v. 14). “Put in prison” is a translation of the Greek word, *paradidōmi*, which has the basic sense of being handed over or delivered. We then learn that Jesus, following in John’s footsteps, came “preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God” (v. 14). It isn’t long before Mark introduces us to Judas Iscariot, “which also betrayed [Christ]” (3:19). The Greek word that is here translated as “betrayed” is *paradidōmi*, the same word used to describe John’s imprisonment. Mark is here drawing his readers’ attention to an important theme, one that is lost in the English translation. John, a type of Christ, preached the word, and the result was that he was handed over to his enemies. Likewise, Jesus came preaching the word, and eventually He was also handed over to His enemies (see also 9:31; 10:33; 14:10–11, 18, 21, 41–42, 44; 15:1, 10, 15, which all use the word *paradidōmi*). In Mark 13

we learn that disciples of Christ, as they preach the gospel (see v. 10), can also expect to be delivered up (*paradidōmi*) to the councils (see v. 9) and have brother betray (*paradidōmi*) brother to death (see v. 12). This was certainly not a happy prospect, but it was a reality for Mark's original readers.

The message here is that there is a cost for discipleship. The Savior needs and expects His disciples to be totally committed to Him and to preaching His word. He needs disciples who won't turn away when conditions become difficult. At another time Luke records some very pointed statements that Jesus made about discipleship:

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he *cannot* be my disciple.

And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, *cannot* be my disciple.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?

Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him,

Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.

Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?

Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace.

So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he *cannot* be my disciple. (Luke 14:26–33; emphasis added)

Notice the three times the Savior indicates that those who are not willing to pay the price “cannot be my disciple.” The Greek phrase is *ou dunamai*, indicating that the individual has no power or capacity to be a disciple.

Two New Testament scholars have noted: “Disciples—and, implicitly, all believers—must not passively observe their Lord and what he does. They are not to be seated spectators watching from the grandstand. . . . Rather must they themselves enter the arena after their Lord. . . . Jesus is not a substitute but a leader. He does not do something for those who do nothing. Instead he commands, ‘Follow me’ ([Matthew] 4.18–22; 9.9). This authoritative call leaves no room for considerations of convenience or even self-preservation. Discipleship is a doing of what is right, no matter how irksome the privations, no matter how great the dangers.”¹⁵ President James E. Faust reminded us: “Everything in life has a price. Considering the Savior’s great promise for peace in this life and eternal life in the life to come, discipleship is a price worth paying. It is a price we cannot afford *not* to pay. By measure, the requirements of discipleship are much, much less than the promised blessings.”¹⁶ Although the Savior was handed over because of His preaching, Mark’s Gospel shows that this betrayal was just a precursor to Him receiving His glory. Likewise the Saints, even in their darkest trials, must hold onto the hope that the day will come when the Savior will return in glory and vindicate His disciples.

Jesus’s third injunction for His disciples to take heed comes at the close of a section that describes the crises of events associated with the destruction of the temple. Jesus warns His disciples and all those caught up in the crisis to flee Judea, “For in those days shall be affliction, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be” (Mark 13:19). In the midst

of these turbulent times, Jesus declares, “And except that the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh should be saved: but for the elect’s sake, whom he hath chosen, he hath shortened the days” (v. 20). Here the Savior reminds His disciples that although they are not immune from the tribulations of the world, divine aid will be available to help the elect.

Then Jesus declares that “in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory” (vv. 24–26). Many people, as well as modern revelation, interpret the description of “the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory” to be a description of the Second Coming (see D&C 45:40–59). But in Mark this phrase refers to something that would have an immediate impact on the first-century Saints: “This generation shall not pass, till all these things be done” (Mark 13:30). This phrase refers to a shift of power and glory from the temple and its rulers to the Son of Man. The tension between Jesus and the temple rulers that is so palpable in Mark 11–12 will then be resolved and Jesus vindicated.¹⁷

The establishment of this new order carries with it, however, a change in emphasis so that “he will send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven” (Mark 13:27). While the angels in this verse may refer to divine beings, the Greek word *angeloi* can also be translated as “messengers.” An essential part of discipleship is the call to preach the word of God. As we have noted, Mark’s Gospel begins with both John the Baptist and Jesus establishing the standard for those belonging to the kingdom of God by going out and preaching the word. Speaking specifically to

the priesthood, Elder David A. Bednar teaches: “Proclaiming the gospel is not an activity in which we periodically and temporarily engage. . . . Rather, the obligation to proclaim the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is inherent in the oath and covenant of the priesthood into which we enter. . . . Our very identity as holders of the priesthood and the seed of Abraham is in large measure defined by the responsibility to proclaim the gospel.”¹⁸

Jesus’s final exhortation for His disciples to take heed also includes the injunctions to “watch and pray.” All three of these commands center on preparation for the Second Coming. Mark’s Gospel has a subtle temporal shift in the language in verse 32. In their initial questions, Peter, James, John, and Andrew had asked, “When shall *these things* be? and what shall be the sign when all *these things* shall be fulfilled?” (Mark 13:4; emphasis added). In His response, Jesus frequently referred to the fulfillment of these things (that is, the destruction of the temple) happening in “those days” (see vv. 17, 19, 24). In verse 32, however, the Savior’s language changes from the plural “those days” to the singular “that day” and “that hour.”¹⁹ “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is” (vv. 32–33). Jesus now addresses His Second Coming. He gives the parable of the watching porter (see vv. 34–36), which indicates that disciples be vigilant in watching for the Second Coming “lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping” (v. 36). Then Jesus concludes, “And what I say unto you [that is, Peter, James, John, and Andrew] I say unto all, Watch” (v. 37).

Speaking of the Second Coming, President Hinckley has taught:

It will be a time of great and terrible fears, of cataclysmic upheavals of nature, of weeping and wailing, of repentance

too late, and of crying out unto the Lord for mercy. But for those who in that judgment are found acceptable, it will be a day for thanksgiving, for the Lord shall come with his angels, and the apostles who were with him in life, and those who have been resurrected. Further, the graves of the righteous will be opened and they shall come forth. Then will begin the great Millennium, a period of a thousand years when Satan shall be bound and the Lord shall reign over his people. Can you imagine the wonder and the beauty of that era when the adversary shall not have influence? Think of his pull upon you now and reflect on the peace of that time when you will be free from such influence. There will be quiet and goodness where now there is contention and evil.²⁰

Here is the vindication for all disciples, of any generation, who follow the Savior and preach His word. Discipleship does bring trials and tribulation, but ultimately all wrongs will be righted and Christ will rule as King of Kings.

Conclusion

President Faust taught, “One of the greatest blessings of life and eternity is to be counted as one of the devoted disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.”²¹ Likewise, Elder Neal A. Maxwell rejoiced, “There is no greater calling, no greater challenge, and no greater source of joy—both proximate joy and ultimate joy—than that which is found in the process of discipleship.”²² Although the context of Mark 13 is a discussion of the signs attending the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, Jesus used this time to also help His listeners learn about what it means to be a disciple. By examining Jesus’s four commandments to His disciples to take heed, we can identify areas of discipleship of which He wanted His followers to

pay special attention. Modern disciples have just as much responsibility to prepare for the Second Coming as did those of the first century who prepared for the destruction of the temple. Eusebius indicates that Christians were able to avoid the atrocities because they heeded an oracle, which many believe to be the Olivet Discourse, and fled the city of Jerusalem before the war.²³ I would suggest that Mark 13 can be just as valuable to modern Saints as they come to develop a deep and abiding understanding of, and commitment to, the principle of personal discipleship.

Notes

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1. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 494.

2. See Richard D. Draper, “Joseph Smith—Matthew and the Signs of the Times,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 287–302; David R. Seely, “The Olivet Discourse,” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Five: The Gospels*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 391–404; Kent P. Jackson, “The Olivet Discourse,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ, Volume Two: From the Transfiguration through the Triumphal Entry*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 318–43.

3. Scholars who do not accept the role of prophecy indicate that the only way for Mark’s Gospel to predict the destruction of the temple is if it was written immediately prior to the events or just after they happened (see Dennis C. Duling and Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenesis, Myth and History*, 3rd ed. [Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1994], 298–99). A date of writing

around AD 70, however, is reinforced by Irenaeus's statement from the second century that Mark wrote after the deaths of Peter and Paul (around the mid-60s; see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1). For a Latter-day Saint perspective, see Gaye Strathearn and Frank F. Judd Jr., "The Distinctive Testimonies of the Four Gospels," *Religious Educator* 8, no. 2 (2007): 59–85.

4. See Sulpicius Severus, "Chronicle," in *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire that Illuminate Christian Origins*, ed. C. K. Barrett (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 17; see also 1 Peter 1:7 and 4:12, which may be implied references to this practice.

5. The other discourse is found in Mark 4:1–34 (see France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 13–15).

6. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 15.

7. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 15.

8. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 495.

9. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 276.

10. Draper, "Joseph Smith-Matthew," 290–92.

11. See Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985), 88–189; Kent P. Jackson, "Revolutionaries in the First Century," in *Masada and the World of the New Testament*, ed. John F. Hall and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, Brigham Young University, 1997), 129–40.

12. John A. Widtsoe, in Conference Report, April 1942, 34.

13. Jeffrey R. Holland, "This, the Greatest of All Dispensations," *Ensign*, July 2007, 53.

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day," *Ensign*, May 2004, 83.

15. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. *The*

International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 2:681.

16. James E. Faust, “Discipleship,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 20.

17. See France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 534–35.

18. David A. Bednar, “Becoming a Missionary,” *Ensign*, November 2005, 44.

19. See France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 501–5.

20. Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Need Not Fear His Coming,” *BYU Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1979), 83.

21. Faust, “Discipleship,” 23.

22. Neal A. Maxwell, “Becoming a Disciple,” *Ensign*, June 1996, 12.

23. *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1:201.