

Getting the 'Three Questions' Right

Psalm 16; Mark 13:1-8

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Are you familiar with Leo Tolstoy's short story *The Three Questions*? It's a parable about a king who wanted to know the answer to three important questions.

- When is the right time?
- Who are the right people?
- What is the most important thing?

The king believed that if he always knew the right time to do things, the right people to do them, and, above all, if he always knew what was the most important thing to do, he would never fail as a king. So he had a competition and invited all the learned subjects of his kingdom to submit their answers to the three questions. None of their answers satisfied the king.

Determined to find the true answers to the three questions, the king visited a hermit who was known for his wisdom. The hermit received only common people, so the king put on simple clothes, dismounted his horse, and left his guards behind. The old hermit was digging his garden. The king, now dressed like a common man, approached and asked the hermit his three questions. The tired hermit kept digging. The king had pity on the hard working hermit, took the shovel from him, and began digging the garden himself. An hour passed. Two hours. The sun began to set, and the king again asked for answers to the three questions.

Suddenly bearded a man burst out of the woods. He was holding his stomach and blood was seeping between his fingers. The king and the hermit opened the man's clothes to find a large wound. They bandaged his wound and gave him water to drink. Exhausted they all fell asleep.

The next morning the wounded man woke and feebly said to the king, “Forgive me.”

The king responded, “I do not know you and have nothing to forgive you.”

The bearded man explained that he was the king’s enemy and that he had followed the king with the intent of killing him. The king’s guards recognized him and wounded him before he fled away. He admitted that he would have bled to death had the king not treated his wounds. Again he asked forgiveness and pledged to be the king’s loyal servant.

Before the king returned to his palace, he spoke to the hermit one more time. “For the last time, wise man, I ask you to answer my questions,” he pleaded.

“You have your answer,” he said. The hermit explained. Had the king not taken pity on the hermit and dug his garden, he would have returned to his horse early, and his enemy would have been waiting and would have killed him. Here are the answers to the king’s three questions:

- The most important time is *now*.
- The most important person is *whoever you are with*.
- The most important thing to do is *good for that person*.

This very moment—right here, right now—is the most important time we have. Whoever we are with is the most important person or persons. And treating them with love and respect is the most important thing we can do.

That sounds a lot like the teachings of Jesus, doesn’t it? It’s a lesson he often tried to teach his disciples. We see it in this strange chapter from the Gospel of Mark, which Allan Culpepper, one of my seminary professors, says is “one of the most debated chapters in the New Testament.” (*Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*, Mark, p. 443)

The key to understanding this chapter and why it is so debated is recognizing the type of literature it is. Mark 13 is what theologians call apocalyptic literature. In fact, some refer to this chapter as “the little apocalypse.” It is the same kind of literature used in the book of Revelation. Think highly symbolic. Exaggeration. The use of cosmic imagery. And a tone of urgency. Jesus used apocalyptic language to warn his disciples of the end of time. There will be wars and rumors of wars, he said. A desolating sacrilege. Tribulation. The sun and moon will go dark. Stars will fall from the heavens. And the Son of Man will come in clouds with great power and glory.

It sounds a bit like the book of Revelation, doesn't it?

Now let me say this. This chapter has frightened some people. If you read this chapter literally, it can be scary. Wars. The sun and moon going dark. Stars falling. But we must read it as what it is: apocalyptic literature. It's symbol, exaggeration, urgency. The real message of this little apocalypse is actually quite encouraging.

Jesus and his disciples had been at the temple in Jerusalem. Remember the confrontations with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. As they left the temple, one of the disciples, who is unnamed, marveled at the magnificent buildings. The temple in Jerusalem was an architectural wonder of the ancient world. It must have been a site to behold. Portions of its walls are still intact. I was honored to see them a few years ago. The stones are massive. The temple was built on the highest point in Jerusalem, the Temple Mount, and must have been quite impressive for the faithful who journeyed there for worship.

Imagine the disciples' shock when Jesus told them this:

Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.

Thrown down? These magnificent buildings? The temple? Surely not!

Magnificent buildings can come down, can't they? The twin towers of the World Trade Center came down on September 11, 2001.

We watched in utter disbelief. We marvel at our buildings, our work, the creations of our hands and minds and machines, as though they will last forever. We look at our great cities and cannot imagine them not being there. We've mapped the genome. Robots are doing surgery. Artificial intelligence will one day run much of our everyday lives. It is possible all of this could come tumbling down?

Not only is it possible; it is certain to come tumbling down at some point. We live in a finite universe. In due time, everything will end. The question for us is not whether an end will come. The question for us is this: is the end a reason to despair or a reason to live?

At the end of this chapter, Jesus told his disciples to "watch" or "keep awake." Four times. Keep awake. Be alert. Watch how you are living because your time is finite. Our lives will one day come tumbling down. So don't let life pass you by. That's the message here. Don't fritter away your days engaged in things that don't matter. The message of this most debated chapter is actually a message of encouragement:

- The most important time is *now*. Recognize that.
- The most important person is *whoever you are with*. Embrace him or her.
- The most important thing to do is *good for that person*. Do it.

As we go into this week of Thanksgiving, let's live in the now. Let us cherish whoever we're with. And let us do good for that person. Because buildings will tumble. Technology will become obsolete. And we too will pass away. But that's okay if we get the three questions right.

Closing Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of life. Thank you for the opportunity to matter. Amen.