

# The Beginning of the Birthpangs

*David A. Baer*

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*Text: Mark 13:1-13*

When I was a kid, on hot summer days my family used to go and picnic out at Round Valley Reservoir in Hunterdon County. We'd eat our supper and swim in the lake at the public beach. I have this memory from when I was about 9 or 10 and really hitting my big growth spurt. I remember playing in the water with my father, and playfully jumping up to tackle him. It's the kind of thing kids do, right? When you're young, every big person is a jungle gym. But this time it was a mistake, because I was bigger than I thought, and I caught my father unawares, and he went down under the water for just a few seconds and came up sputtering and—it seemed to me—a little scared. I got a scolding, but what I remember is thinking, "My dad isn't invincible. He's not invulnerable." And that may seem obvious when you're an adult, but to a kid it's a big deal. Because when you're a kid you tend to look to your parents to be this solid, immovable rock. But it's the same when you're grown, when you're an older adult—at every stage of your life there are foundations that you build on that seem absolutely unshakable and permanent. And when you find out that they're not as solid as you thought they were, that they can be shaken, it leaves you shaken too.

Now, I don't think it would have been a healthy thing for me to grow into adulthood treating my parents as though they were indestructible, as though they could withstand my every imposition on them. As I look back on it now, that moment of unsteadiness was part of my growing into an adult relationship with my parents. Sometimes a shaking of the foundations, a testing of the strength and mettle of the things that anchor our life, and a sweeping away of anything that isn't really durable and lasting, is part of growing into maturity. Sometimes what seems at first like the end is really the beginning of something new.

"Teacher, what large stones, and what large buildings!" The disciples gape and point as they take in the sight of the Temple, the largest and most magnificent building they've ever seen. This building is the center of the sacrificial worship system in Ancient Judaism. It's the sign of God's presence among God's own people. The inner sanctuary, the Holiest of Holies, stands some 18 stories tall, guarded by a series of walled courtyards, each more exclusive than the last, with only the priests having access to the altar. It's a structure designed to inspire awe and reverence. Now, it's true that the disciples are fresh from the farm and the fishing boat. These simple folk from the northern hills of Galilee come into the big city of Jerusalem picking hayseeds out of their hair. But what are they doing that we ourselves don't do a hundred or more times in our life? How many times have we put an immense amount of trust, maybe more trust than we ought to have put, in an authority figure, an institution, a job, a relationship? "What large stones, and what large buildings!"

But what impresses the disciples doesn't impress Jesus. "It's all coming down," he tells them. "And in the end there won't even be one stone piled on top of another." That's dangerous talk. That's the kind of talk that can get you arrested and killed. In

fact, one of the accusations the chief priests will make about Jesus in the days to come is that he said he would destroy the Temple. So the inner circle of his disciples wait until they are safely alone and out of the city to ask the rabbi what he meant: "Tell us," they say, "when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" They want to be let in on the secrets that they believe Jesus knows. They want a roadmap, a blueprint for the future.

Now, there's something you have to understand about Jesus' answer. If we hear someone talking about wars and calamities as if they're part of some master plan, we tend to think they're unhinged, and we tune them out. That's the kind of talk we hear from some guy with a Bible and a megaphone standing on the street corner. But in ancient Judaism there was a tradition of preaching and teaching and writing that we call apocalypticism. "Apocalypse" is a Greek word meaning, "revealing," or "pulling back the veil." Among the ancient Jews there were a number of people who believed that God had shown them the secrets of history. When Jesus says things like, "this must take place," and when he foretells disasters like wars and earthquakes, he's speaking as part of this tradition. But the most important thing to understand about this tradition is that it's not about scaring people, but giving them hope. Jesus is offering hope to his disciples. He's offering them a future being created by God that is going to stand when everything else has fallen down.

But where does that hope come from? The disciples want a roadmap, but Jesus is frustratingly vague. Wars and rumors of wars... yes, yes, but which are the ones that matter? Many will come in Jesus' name and lead many astray... yes, but what are their names, and how do we recognize them? The disciples want a roadmap, something concrete they can hold onto in place of the landmarks like the Temple that Jesus says will crumble down around them. But Jesus doesn't give them one.

"This is the beginning of the birthpangs," Jesus says. Now, I know better than to try and convince you that I know the first thing about labor pains. And I know better than to stand up and talk about how inconsequential and trifling they are because of the wondrous miracle of a child coming into the world. There are too many men out there already that get themselves into trouble pretending to know all about women's bodies. Look, Jesus is using a common expression at the time for real, terrible pain. And let's not forget that, although childbirth in our own time isn't anything you could call "safe," in the ancient world it was even more dangerous. But then, as now, it's how we all (most of us, anyway) get here. It's how something new enters into the world: through pain and struggle and danger.

Just because I was curious, I went through all of Mark chapter 13, and I pulled out all of the verbs that Jesus uses to command his disciples. These are Jesus' marching orders through the storm, the chaos, the disorder that he's saying will be part of our future. He says: "Beware... do not be alarmed... endure... be alert... keep awake." Jesus isn't giving us a roadmap for managing or controlling our future. He's asking us to endure and watch for the something new that God is doing. He's asking us not to place our trust in the fragile institutions and people around us, but in the future God is midwifing right among us.

There was an older woman I knew at another church who was suffering from a chronic illness that had her in and out of hospitals, and it caused her a lot of physical pain. "I don't think God wants this for me," she said, "but I believe God can use this, even this." In her own suffering, she found herself growing in compassion for others, and a new clarity about what was and was not important. She felt her spirit was getting stronger, even as her body weakened. She didn't have to tell the story that way, but she did. "Keep awake," Jesus says. And she was awake to God's grace, even in the

unlikeliest season of her life.

The California countryside is ablaze, and people have lost their lives. Masses of people flee danger in their homeland to seek safety only to find indifference and cruelty. Every week brings news of the latest mass shooting. God does not want this. But can learn to tell a story about ourselves where God uses the pain of the world and the pain in each of us to begin birthing something new? Can the suffering of our neighbors move us to become more generous and compassionate? Will the hurt we witness and the hurt we feel numb us, or will it lead us to say, "No more... This has got to change."? Keep awake, Jesus says. When the world around you is shaking, keep awake to the gifts of God that endure. When darkness falls, look for the stars that begin to shine. Keep awake, be alert, endure. It's times like these that give birth to God's future.

God is doing something new in us. Maybe today your life is being shaken up in the way Jesus is talking about. But if not, it's only a matter of time, because that's the kind of world we live in. It's a world that is unfinished, becoming, not complete, even in the places where it is not broken and wounded. We all need the something new that only God can create. Do not be alarmed... endure... keep awake. Grace is being born in you and around you.