

Before and after the end (Mark 13:24-37)

Jesus speaks of end things as a way of contextualizing all the other things in life that feel like endings.

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Confession #1: When I go to the movies, I stay until the end of the credits.

I always hope that there will be a bonus scene after the credits have finished rolling. I will patiently watch as the fancy credits give way to the boring credits, from the names of the big movie stars through the many and various production roles, from gaffer to craft service. I will watch the screen roll to black. And I will hope to be rewarded for my patience and tenacity. The movie proper may have ended, but I will always take the risk of believing that the end is not actually the end.

Confession #2: I am not a fan of Beethoven.

As much as I love classical music, Ludwig van Beethoven has never really done it for me. In part, it is because I frequently get annoyed at the way he ends his compositions, repeating final chords for measures and measures, like an unwieldy series of exclamation points where just one or two would suffice. You can never quite trust the ending to be the ending. And while I appreciate this feature in my moviegoing experience, it turns out that I do not appreciate it in symphonic works.

Confession #3: I don't buy in to end-times predictions, even if Jesus seems to be the one making them.

Sure, Jesus speaks of end times in Mark 13. He alludes to a definitive end of the age, in which the very stars will be shaken from the sky as the Son of Man returns upon the clouds. Jesus says that this cosmic ending is a present-generation reality, something imminent.

But in the same breath, Jesus keeps things vague, speaking of "in those days" and "after that suffering" without expanding on either phrase. Moreover, he warns us not to presume to know the day or hour when these things will take place. He opens the door here to the possibility that the end might just as easily be far off in the future.

I think we misread Jesus's intentions when we treat his words here as a code to be cracked. There is no hidden Google Calendar invitation lurking in Mark 13 that schedules the end of the world for us as if it were just another work meeting, doctor's appointment, or after-school activity.

Rather, Jesus speaks of End Things (capital E, capital T) as a way of contextualizing all the other things in life that feel like endings.

The audience of Mark's Gospel would be the generation that witnessed the destruction of the temple, which would very much have felt like the end of the world. Jesus' followers, across generations, have continued to experience endings that are not yet The End (capital T, capital E).

For them and for us, Jesus' words are a discourse in hope. All the endings that we experience in this life are bound up and vindicated by God's decisive and final sovereignty over all powers and principalities, all risings and fallings of empires, all agents of terror and chaos, and all boundaries of time itself.

God's final word will be one of resurrection, not of destruction. Beyond all other endings that we experience in history, God promises us a stunning bonus scene, a celestial final chord. We persevere through this world's beginnings and endings because we have faith that God's final ending will be a decisive victory for all that is good, beautiful, and true.