

BE ON YOUR GUARD

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Scripture Reading: Mark 13

Last Sunday we looked at the fourfold vision of Jesus Christ as it is presented in the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation was written to Christians. It is meant to help Christians overcome evil in the face of all kinds of tragedy and suffering.

In the midst of tragedy and suffering, the biggest challenge we face as Christians is not physical survival; rather, it is the challenge of maintaining a witness that is holy. To help us do this, we are given four distinct visions of Jesus Christ. One is a vision of Christ in all His magnificence, encouraging us to keep going when the going gets tough. Another is the vision of Christ as a Lamb who is slain, working to save people as the tragedies of the future unfold. The third vision is one of Christ executing perfect and absolute justice, and that is something no political nation will ever be able to do. God is the only One capable of executing infinite justice, and He will do it at the final judgement. Finally, the last vision is one of Christ with His Church after this world comes to an end.

These are the visions of Christ we need to be able to persevere in holiness in the face of tragedies that are guaranteed to increase in frequency and intensity right up to the time when Christ returns to this earth.

The scripture lesson I chose for this Sunday is also meant to prepare Christians for immanent disaster. However, the application is slightly different. The purpose of the fourfold vision of Christ is to help us persevere to the end. It is to help us be people who overcome. But the appeal of today's sermon is to help us get our priorities straight so that we will do the right thing during times of disaster.

Our Scripture reading today is a record of a private conversation Jesus had with His disciples during the final days before He was arrested. Mark 13:3 says that the conversation took place on the Mount of Olives, just opposite of the temple. The topic of the conversation was about certain stress and upheaval that Christ's followers would be facing in the future. Jesus knew that there would be terrible things happening in the future. And he knew that these things would challenge their faith, so He wanted them to be prepared for the coming of these earth-shaking events.

Of course, the words were not only spoken for the benefit of the twelve disciples, but they were also spoken for our benefit as well. Jesus knew that His words would be recorded and passed down to Christians throughout the ages. I believe He planned it that way, because He knows how difficult it is for us to face things like war and famine and other disasters. When these things happen, Jesus wants His children to remain strong in their faith. Using the words found in our Scripture reading, Jesus wants us to "be on our guards" in the face of distress and upheaval that come with things like war and famine and other disasters. The outline we will follow in our study of Mark 13 will have two points. The first point will be the fact of the distress and upheaval that people must face throughout history. The second point will be the response we Christians should have to the distress and change when disasters come our way.

First of all, let us consider the fact of the distress and upheaval faced by mankind throughout the ages. Jesus introduced this subject to His disciples when He said to them in Mark 13:2, "Do you see these

great buildings (meaning the temple)? Not one of them will left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

To the disciples, those words meant that their lives would be shaken. Certain buildings are far more than just physical structures. Certain buildings actually symbolize the strength of a nation. When such buildings are destroyed, the impact is far more than just financial in nature.

The temple in Jerusalem was not only a beautiful structure, but it also represented the security of the nation of Israel. To the disciples, the destruction of the temple meant the destruction of the nation of Israel, and naturally, they wanted to know when it was going to happen.

So, in Mark 13:4, the disciples asked Jesus, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they—that is the predictions about the destruction of the temple—what will be the sign that these predictions are all about to be fulfilled?” Let us now take a look at the way Jesus answered these questions, noticing first the fact of the distress and upheaval faced by Christians throughout the ages. Concerning this fact, I will first make a few observations, and then I will attempt to interpret some of the prophecies.

This is one of the most difficult chapters in the New Testament to speak on, because different Christian scholars come to different conclusions about its meaning. Regardless of which viewpoint I teach, you will find Christians who will have a different interpretation. Therefore, I think it is important for you to understand how I come to the conclusions that I come to. My conclusions are based upon the following observations:

First of all, I observe from this passage that times of distress and upheaval are certain to happen throughout history and will not stop happening until the world comes to an end and Christ returns again. In Mark 13:7-8 Jesus speaks of wars and earthquakes and famines. At the end of verse seven, Jesus said, “Such things must happen.” And at the end of verse eight, He said that these things will be like birth-pains. That means that, as history marches on, wars and famines and natural disasters will increase in frequency and intensity just like the birth-pains of a pregnant woman.

I don’t think this means that wars will be more cruel in the future than they have been in the past, or that individuals who are experiencing these things will suffer more in the future than they have in the past. I have heard people who have experienced war say that it is like hell. And I believe that feeling is present throughout history in the hearts of people who have experienced the distress and upheaval that comes with war and other disasters.

When Jesus described the distress and upheaval being like birth-pains, He was not saying that people will suffer more in the future than they did in the past; rather, He was describing the fact that these disasters will not stop in the future. In fact, they will continue and they will grow in frequency and cover larger areas of the world until every person living in every nation will eventually be affected. Wars, famines, and natural disasters are certain to happen.

A second observation I would like to make is that, when the Gospel of Mark was written, a time of great distress and upheaval had already begun for the nation of Israel. Most scholars agree that this gospel was written 30 to 40 years after Christ’s death and resurrection, which would mean that it was written some time between A.D. 60 and A.D. 70. This was the time when Nero was emperor of the Roman Empire. In November of A.D. 66 a group of Jews who called themselves “Zealots” rebelled

against the Roman forces controlling Israel and they won an impressive victory over the Twelfth Legion of the Roman army.

But, in those days, to rebel against the Roman Empire meant certain reprisal. Disaster would come, and everyone living in Jerusalem could feel that it was coming. However, people are slow to evacuate a place that has been their home all their lives. They want to hold on to the hope that somehow disaster can be avoided. But disaster was not avoided, and in A.D. 70, the Roman forces returned to Jerusalem with a fierce vengeance. They destroyed the city, tore down the temple, and either killed or deported all of its inhabitants. Christ's prophecy was completely fulfilled.

One other thing we must notice about this period of history is that, after the Zealots had rebelled and defeated the Twelfth Legion of the Roman army, they moved into and occupied the Temple area. According to the historian, Josephus, they allowed people who had committed crimes to roam about freely in the Holy of Holies. And then the climax came in the winter of A.D. 67 and 68 when they set up a clown named Phanni as high priest. According to the history records, it was in response to this kind of behavior that the retired high priest Ananus, with tears, said: "It would have been far better for me to have died before I had seen the house of God laden with such abominations and its unapproachable and hallowed places crowded with the feet of murderers" (War IV.iii.10).

I personally agree with the scholars who say that the "abomination of desolation" that Jesus referred to in Mark 13:14 is a direct reference to the way the Zealots desecrated the Temple in A.D. 66-68. According to one historian, there was a two-year period of time where Christians who took Christ's warning seriously could easily flee the city. But after A.D. 68 people were restricted from fleeing Jerusalem. So the main point I'm trying to make in this observation is that, when Mark's gospel was first distributed among the churches, these warnings were very important and very timely. There was no time to waste.

A third observation I would like to make is that, in Mark 13:4 there are two questions recorded. But according to Matthew 24:3, we see that the disciples also asked another question. They asked Jesus, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

Now, it is almost certain that the disciples believed that the destruction of the temple meant the end of the world. So, as far as they were concerned, to ask how they could know when the temple would be destroyed and how could they know when the end of the world would come were one and the same question. But, of course, we know now that the destruction of the temple and Christ's second coming are two separate events. The thing I observe and want you to observe is that, in Mark 13, Jesus answers all three of the disciples questions. He tells them when the temple will be destroyed and the signs that will appear at the time of its destruction. And He also tells them the signs that will appear at the end of the world. But He cannot tell them when the end of the world will come.

Now, with those three observations in mind, let me make a brief attempt at interpreting these prophecies.

Let's take them one section at a time. First of all, look at the words recorded in Mark 13:5-13. In this section, Jesus predicts that many people will come, claiming to be the Messiah. He predicts that there will be disasters. He predicts that Christians will be arrested and punished because of their faith. And Jesus also predicts that people will hate Him so much that they will actually betray their own relatives who use the name of Christ to identify themselves.

It is my opinion that, even though these predictions certainly referred to the events that took place when the temple was destroyed, they could just as well refer to the events that will take place prior to the end of the world. In fact, these things have taken place throughout history in different places and at different times. They are the things that often happen when people are experiencing major upheaval and distress in their lives.

Please take a look at the next section of prophecies recorded in Mark 13:14-23. In this section of Scripture, Christ predicted the appearance of the “abomination of desolation standing where it does not belong.” He predicted the need to leave Jerusalem as quickly as possible, because the time for fleeing would be very limited. He predicted that pregnant women would experience an extra amount of distress and that winter weather conditions would make it even more stressful for people. And Jesus also predicted that there would be false prophets and people falsely claiming to be Christ and that these people would use very convincing techniques to persuade people to follow them.

In my mind, this section of prophecy was given to describe the signs that would take place just before the destruction of the temple. With the exception of the prediction of false prophets and people falsely claiming to be Christ, all the other predictions in this section should not be interpreted as signs that will happen at the end of the world. In this section of Scripture, there is great emphasis placed on the need to flee Judea and run to the mountains. That was good advice, because when the Roman army came to destroy Judea, those who did not run would be killed or deported. But at the end of the world, it will do no good to run anywhere. When you are fleeing for your life, it is best not to be pregnant. And, for those living in Judea, it is best if it doesn't happen in the winter when there are heavy rains. But at the end of the world, when Christ returns again, these things really don't matter one way or the other. So I believe that the prophecies in this section of scripture are the specific signs that occurred before the temple was destroyed.

The following section of scripture begins at verse 24 and ends at verse 27. Verse 24 says, “But in those days, following that distress...” Here Jesus is introducing things that will happen after the things that He had just talked about. And if you read the predictions in this section of scripture, you will notice that they all talk about catastrophic changes that will take place with the sun and moon and stars. When these changes take place, the world as we know it will come to an end. These are the signs that will take place at the end of the age when Jesus returns again. I don't think you will find many Bible teachers who will think different.

But the next section of scripture, that is Mark 13:28-31, is a little harder to understand. A lot of people have trouble understanding verse 30 which says, “...this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.” This seems confusing, because Jesus just talked about the things that would happen at the end of the world. So the big question is, what did Jesus mean when He said, “This generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.” What do the words “all these things” refer to? I personally believe that, in this section of scripture, Jesus was answering the very first question the disciples asked in Mark 13:4. They asked, “When will these things happen?” They asked that question about the destruction of the temple. And now, Jesus was answering them by saying that “these things” concerning the destruction of the temple would happen within their own generation. The words “these things” could not possibly be referring to the second coming of Christ, because Jesus said in Mark 13:32 that “no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

So, in Mark 13, Jesus answered all three questions that were asked. But the true value of this chapter is not to help us understand when these events will happen. We really don't benefit that much by

being able to predict when certain earth-shaking events will take place. We do much better by understanding how to respond to the earth-shaking events when they do happen rather than understanding when they will happen. Knowing that earth-shaking events will happen and that Christ will come again is important. Knowing when then they will happen is less important. But the most important thing of all is to know how to respond to these things when they do happen. The main value of this chapter is to teach us how to respond. The main thing Jesus was trying to do when He said these things was to encourage His disciples to do certain things when the times of distress and upheaval came upon them.

And what were the things they were to do? The key phrase which helps us discover what our response should be to these earthshaking events is "be on your guard." This phrase occurs several times throughout this chapter of Scripture. It first occurs in verse 9. Then it shows up again in verse 23. And finally, we see it in verse 33. When times of distress and upheaval come upon us, we should respond by being on guard.

Please notice that, in verse 9, "being on guard" means preaching the gospel. The words surrounding verse 9 encourage us by saying that, when wars and disasters come, we need to make a special effort to preach the gospel. The end of verse 9 talks about standing before authorities and giving witness to our faith. Verse 10 says that the gospel must be preached to all nations. And verse 11 assures us not to worry, because the Holy Spirit will give us the words to say. Clearly, the emphasis here is on preaching the gospel.

This does not mean that we should not preach the gospel when things are peaceful, but it does mean that when wars or other disasters are causing great upheaval in society, there is a need to make a special effort to preach the gospel. We must not be distracted by all the change taking place around us; rather, we must focus our concentration and energy on getting the word out.

I personally believe that the reason why we must do this is because people tend to be more willing to respond to the gospel when they are faced with great upheaval and distress in their lives. History has proven this to be so. And it can be argued that the main reason why God allows disasters to happen is to help people become more willing to hear and understand the truth of the gospel.

So our first response to disaster should be to preach the gospel. And our second response is to be on guard against deception. Mark 13:22 warns that there will be many people trying to deceive, and verse 23 says, "so be on your guard." I know that Jesus is talking about the events surrounding the destruction of the temple, but an increase in deception happens whenever there is great upheaval taking place. Mark 13:5 also says, "Watch out that no one deceives you."

I think that there are always people trying to deceive other people, but in times of great distress, they will receive more attention. When people start to panic, it is easier for them to listen to a lie. We must be aware of this and be extra careful to test everything that is being said and done against the Word of God. Of course, we should always do this. But during times of disaster, we must try even harder to do it. We must be cautious not to be swept away by our emotions and go along with the crowd. We must be cautious.

And finally, being on guard means to pray. Verse 33 says, "Be on guard! Be alert!" I believe that the Chinese translation for this verse is more accurate. The Chinese translation says, "Ni men yau jin shen, jing sying chi chyiu." The footnote for verse 33 in our Bibles says that some of the early manuscripts included the command to pray in verse 33. Verse 34 emphasizes the need to keep a

watch at the door while other work is being done. Verse 35-37 talks about the need to watch lest the owner of the house find us sleeping when he returns. I believe all these verses refer to our need to pray during times of great upheaval and distress.

Again, it must be emphasized that prayer is important at all times. But during times when war and disaster are upon us, it is even more important and we must try to make even a greater effort to do pray.

And I think it is easy to understand why we need to pray more during these stressful times. The attacks of Satan become more direct and more intense during these times. Since the fall of the World Trade Towers, some of you have experienced feelings of fear and depression stronger than you have ever felt before. Some people are troubled with feelings of suspicion toward anyone who looks like they are from middle-eastern descent. During times of peace Satan tends to be more subtle. But during times of war and when disasters come, the temptations are direct and fierce and intense. We must depend on prayer to fight these temptations. Prayer is a vital part of God's armor.

And another reason why prayer is so important when faced by war and major disaster is that spiritual warfare for the souls of people increases during these times. I have already mentioned that people tend to be more receptive to the gospel during times of upheaval. This, along with the fact that many of these people will be facing an immediate threat to their lives, makes spiritual warfare for their souls very intense. Both Satan and God know that there is just a very limited amount of time for many people to make a decision for either heaven or hell. We must also be aware of this fact and pray with more intensity.

Witnessing, caution, and prayer: we should respond with these things when faced with disasters that cause upheaval and distress in our lives. This is what it means to be on guard. We are not told to spend extra time trying to figure out when things are going to happen or when certain prophecies are going to be fulfilled. We are not supposed to spend our time and energy stocking up on extra food. Instead, we should concentrate on praying, being cautious, and preaching the gospel.

This chapter of scripture was timely for those who first read it, and it is timely for us. Talking about future disaster is not a comfortable thing to do. We would all prefer to wish the best for the future. But now we are no longer as naïve as we were before September 11. May the admonitions found in this chapter give us the direction we need so that we will do the right thing now and in the future when disaster comes to visit us again.