

Canyon Hills Community Church
Dr. Steve Walker
Series: The Book of Mark
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Be On Guard
Mark 13:14-23

Let's get our Bibles open to Mark, chapter 13. When we started this chapter a few weeks ago, we saw that Jesus was with his disciples, sitting on a nearby hill, looking across a little valley over at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The disciples just appear to innocently comment on the majesty and magnificence of this structure, and it certainly was majestic and magnificent.

Jesus responds to their innocent comments with what is widely considered to be the most difficult passage in all of Scripture to interpret. It's a prophecy that begins with the future destruction of the temple and all of the tribulation that's going to bring upon the Jewish people, but then, in the same prophecy, Jesus transitions to unfolding the coming of the end of the world and how his followers must interpret the signs and respond to them when these things begin to happen.

Last week, we spent a considerable amount of time talking about the destruction of the temple, which, along with the tabernacle, had been the center of Jewish worship and really the symbol of God's favor upon their nation for at least 25 centuries. Now, Jesus is talking about this thing being destroyed.

Last week, we acknowledged that in the big picture of things, Jesus was declaring two things to the Jewish people by making this prophecy. First, we said Jesus was declaring that *the temple was no longer necessary*. The temple, the sacrificial system, and the animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins were about to be replaced by a better and permanent sacrifice.

Secondly, Jesus was declaring in this prophecy that *the destruction of the temple and the surrounding Jerusalem was ultimately God's judgment upon the Jewish people for rejecting God's Son, Jesus Christ, as their Messiah*. We covered that in a lot of detail last week.

What makes this prophecy so tricky is that Jesus is not just talking about the first century, the time in which he and the people to whom he was speaking were living. He's also simultaneously prophesying about the end of human history, because all through this chapter we see future events being described that are what theologians like to call *two-dimensional events*.

Jesus is talking about future events that are two-dimensional. The things he's saying and the things about which we're reading now have, first, a *historical* dimension to them. In other words, what Jesus is talking about has a very obvious and even an immediate first-century fulfillment. We're going to see that here in just a minute.

Yet each thing he talks about also has this other dimension to it. It's what we call an *eschatological* dimension. That word, *eschatology*, means the study of end things or end times.

Jesus is talking about the same thing, but something that also pushes beyond the first century into the distant future, even beyond us, who are reading this now, 2,000 years later.

R.C. Sproul speaks about this. He says something like, "As we see throughout Scripture, prophecies that pertain to near-term events usually point beyond the immediate context. Later events may actually fulfill the prophecy in a manner that has greater significance than earlier events that also fulfill the prophecy. It seems best, therefore, to read Mark 13 as a dual prophecy of near-term first-century events that typify the final judgment at the end of history."

If you're still with me after all that, let's stand for the reading of God's Word as we attempt to push through Mark, chapter 13, and the prophecies of Jesus. We left off at verse 13 last Sunday. Let's pick it up in verse 14.

"But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.

And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."

Father, I pray with all of my heart that you will help us to see what this means, to understand how it applies to us, and to rightly respond to it so we can honor you and please you. God, I pray for those who are standing all around us with their own trials just flooding their lives right now. I pray that you will increase their faith, deepen their joy and trust that you are on your throne and you are sovereign and in control of this world. Help us, God, never to forget that, I pray. In Christ's name, amen.

Our goal going forward is to make sure we don't miss the big picture. Two days from when Jesus says this he's going to be crucified on a cross. In three days from that he's going to rise from the dead, overcoming death and the grave with power to raise us and give us eternal life. Mark 13 is ultimately a reminder to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus.

We have to actually force ourselves to scoot back from a passage like this at least far enough that we don't miss the glorious hope of verse 26. Did you see it? It's the pinnacle of the whole chapter. Look at verse 26 with me. **"And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."** That's what everything he is saying is pointing to, and we want to keep our eyes firmly fixed on that. That we do understand, correct? He is coming.

Yet before then, there are three things Jesus tells us, at least in this part of the chapter, that I want you to look out for. There are three things to look for as the close of human history draws closer. Then, after we look at those three things, I want to sum it up and give us, hopefully, an application that's relevant for all of us sitting in this room.

1. *The abomination of desolation.* What in the world is that? There's no way you could even say those two words and think they could possibly mean anything good. It's frightening just to say those two words, the *abomination of desolation*. I don't know if there are any other words that could capture the devastation of what this is referring to.

Yet, in spite of that, we don't get the sense here in Mark's gospel that the disciples were unfamiliar with this statement. It's not like it just came out of the blue, out of nowhere. That's because they had heard about this before. They had heard about this their whole lives. Jesus is referring back to Daniel's prophecy (in Daniel 11, specifically, even though there are three chapters of prophecy relating to what Jesus is talking about here).

I want you to see it for yourselves. Keep a mark in Mark, chapter 13. Turn back to Daniel 11, just so you can see it with your own eyes for context. Again, this is right in the middle of at least three chapters that are describing in unbelievable detail what this is all about. We don't have time to cover all of that today, of course.

We're going to stay focused on Jesus in Mark 13, but just for the sake of it, look at Daniel 11, verse 31. He says, "**Forces from him** [whoever "him" is] **shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate.**" Now look at verse 32. "**He** [the person who is doing this] **shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.**" I like that part.

That gives you an idea of why the disciples don't actually look at each other in complete confusion. They have heard this their whole lives. Whoever this is in Daniel, Daniel is prophesying that it involves profaning the temple and the fortress, as he says in Daniel 11. *The fortress* is describing Jerusalem, the city that surrounded the temple. Daniel says it will be an abomination that makes desolate the place he profanes.

Now, all the way forward to Mark, chapter 13, verse 14, Jesus says, "**...when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be...**" He personifies this situation. "Somebody is coming along in the future whom you're going to see standing in a place he shouldn't be." We have three ways to potentially understand it when Jesus said it, and we're going to start with the most confusing one of all.

See, the disciples more than likely believed that what Jesus is talking about had already happened in 168 BC, 168 years before Jesus was born. The disciples' grandfathers and great-grandfathers had lived through what they believed was the fulfillment of Daniel 11 as well as the fulfillment of what Jesus is talking about as still to come. They must have looked at each other that day with Jesus and said, "Is he thinking backward? What's he doing right here?"

You see, most Jewish people believed what Jesus is talking about already happened when Antiochus Epiphanes (try to say that 10 times, really fast)... Antiochus Epiphanes was a guy who came along and decided he wanted to stamp out Judaism, and so he started with the temple by going into the temple and sacrificing pigs' body parts on the holy altar of God.

Then, to top it off, he set up a statue of the Greek god, Zeus, inside the temple and forced the Jewish people to bow down to it and worship it. So, they believed, for the most part, that had already taken place. Jesus takes Daniel's prophecy and pushes it past the 168 years ago, when it was believed that it already happened.

So, the first way to understand this is Jesus is talking about something that happened in the past, and we just have to figure out why. The second way to try to look at this and understand it is that it's going to happen again in AD 70. This is the historical dimension of this prophecy. Just 37 years later, Rome is going to burn it all down into a pile of dust and rubble. The temple in Jerusalem is going to be utterly destroyed in AD 70, which is 37 years after Jesus says this.

The Roman historian, Josephus, who's not a Christian, records the aftermath of the carnage of the destruction in his book, *War of the Jews: Book VII*. "...but for all the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it [Jerusalem] had ever been inhabited."

It was so destroyed that when they tried to find the foundations of the city and the temple, it looked like nobody had ever lived there. He goes on to say that any foreigner who had formerly seen Judea and the most beautiful suburbs of the city could only lament and mourn sadly at the great and luscious city now as a desert.

When Jesus spoke of the abomination of desolation, the disciples, along with the Christians who were reading Mark's gospel a little later, after the resurrection of Jesus, believed whatever Jesus was talking about there was going to happen in their lifetime, because, as you remember, at the beginning of the chapter, we read where the disciples pull Jesus aside and say, "When is this going to happen? What are the signs going to be?"

They're thinking, "Okay, he's not talking about the past. He's talking about something that's going to happen soon." They all believed it would happen. They expected it to happen in their lifetime. So in verses 15-18, Jesus gives in graphic detail what he wants his followers to do when this stuff starts to happen.

Look at verses 15-18 with me. He says, "Let the one who is on the housetop... Don't go down. Don't enter your house. Don't go in there and grab anything. If you're out working in the field, don't turn back and pick up your cloak. O pregnant women and nursing moms, pray that it's not winter when this happens, because it is going to be utterly horrific."

I think Jesus is saying, "When these signs start to happen, don't ignore it. Don't try to stop it. Run for the hills." That's what he's saying here. "Get out. Get out of Jerusalem." When you read the historian Eusebius, who is a fourth-century Christian historian, he comments and records that there's absolute evidence to confirm Christians did run from Jerusalem and they escaped to the hills of Pella, beyond the Jordan.

So, the Christians, when all that started to happen, 37 years later, remembered the words of Jesus. They remembered the gospel that was being taught. They saw the signs and they got out, just like Jesus said, but many, most of the Jewish people, stayed and tried to fight and defend against the Romans.

Now, the question is...*Are we to assume that AD 70 exhaustively fulfills this prophecy of Jesus in Mark 13?* Has it happened? Are we done with it now? Is the abomination of desolation over? The answer is possibly, but most likely not. We have to read the rest of Scripture to see the eschatological dimension to this.

I would encourage you to read 1 John and all about the spirit of the Antichrist that will, in the last days, profane the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I would also encourage you to read Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 2, where Paul takes Daniel's prophecy and Jesus' prophecy in Mark 13 and pushes it past AD 70 into the far future, even beyond us! I'll leave you to wrestle with that in your personal study. You're welcome.

2. *The great tribulation.* In verse 19, Jesus says, "**...in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.**" I wonder if you remember what the Jewish people were screaming at Pilate

when he walked Jesus out and said, "Why do you want me to kill this guy? He hasn't done anything."

They just screamed louder and louder, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" So he takes Jesus back and interviews him a little more, saying, "What have you done?" Jesus ignores him and doesn't answer him, because Jesus knows where he's going and why he's there. Pilate comes back out and says, "This guy hasn't done anything deserving of killing him. I don't want his blood on my hands."

Do you remember what they screamed at Pilate? "Let his blood be upon our hands and the hands of our children! Crucify him! Crucify him!" They kept screaming. Here's what Charles Spurgeon wrote about that. He said, "Never did any other people invoke such an awful curse upon themselves, and upon no other nation did such a judgment ever fall."

When we read Josephus, the Roman historian, again, in his record of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple he says the destruction of Jerusalem was a bloodcurdling story of cannibalism and human atrocity more terrible than anything that the world has ever witnessed either before or since. Josephus goes on to write that even Titus, the military commander who carried out Rome's fury on Jerusalem and the temple, seemed to see, in his own cruel work, the hand of an avenging god.

Certainly, AD 70 and all Josephus just described is the more-than-adequate first-century fulfillment of Mark 13 and Jesus' prophecy of the coming tribulation. Yet again, as you read the rest of the New Testament, it tells us the closer we come to Christ's return and the end, the greater these things will be.

A sidebar to verse 20... Would you look at it with me? In verse 19, Jesus says there's going to be this tribulation that's going to happen, and it's going to be horrific (future tense). Then, in verse 20, it looks like Jesus transitions to the past: "**And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days.**" He's saying, "There's going to be a tribulation. It's going to be... *Whew!* And if God hadn't stopped it, the elect wouldn't have ever been saved."

Past tense, future tense, past tense... As you're studying this, you're just going back and forth, thinking, "Where is he going?" It's very easy to get a little confused. Some believe verse 20 is a reference to Noah and the worldwide flood because creation is mentioned right above it in verse 19 and the elect... God stopped at the destruction of the human race just to save Noah and seven of his family members. He did that to save the elect, which would be the coming Jewish nation that would be born through Abraham. God stopped the flood from killing everybody.

Others believe verse 20 is talking about God stopping the Romans from annihilating the whole Jewish nation. The elect he stopped them from annihilating would be the Jews who, in Romans 11, we're told, come to faith in Jesus after AD 70. They see the destruction and the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy, so they say, "Uh-oh. We blew it. We want to follow Jesus." They're saying that's what Jesus is prophesying about there.

Others believe the elect in verse 20 refers to you and me, the New Testament church. He has stopped all the evil. He has put the brakes on Satan. He has held him back so he could save us. If you're still awake right now, there are still others who believe verse 20 is all about the believers, the elect who come to faith in Jesus after the rapture during the final tribulation.

I agree with Dr. Sinclair Ferguson. He's the chancellor's professor of systematic theology of reformed theological seminary. He was also the senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina. This is what he says, and I agree. He says a confession of ignorance concerning the precise significance of some of these statements is nothing of which to be ashamed. Thank you, Dr. Ferguson! I love him. I just want to kiss him, I'm so happy he said that. My confession of ignorance is before you.

He goes on to say something I needed to hear. He said adding a dogmatic assurance to one's interpretation of a passage of Scripture like this is no guarantee that the interpretation is correct. So, he's saying to be careful. If you want to slam your fist or gavel down and say, "This is exactly what Jesus is talking about, and here's why," and you want to tell your people, "Be sure. This is what to believe," just be careful.

Church, I want to tell you I want so badly to be able to do that for you today. Some of you are coming today with sharp pencils and huge notebooks. You've been reading up all week and you know exactly what this means. You want me to tell you what you believe about it is right, and I don't know. I plead ignorance. I wish I could tell you exactly what it means. I'm just not that smart. Remember, we're focused on the main idea, and we're going to get back to that in a minute.

3. *False christs and false prophets.* Verses 21 and 22. We talked all about this last week, because this is the second time Jesus brings it up. I'm not going to linger much longer. Just be sure that the first century saw its share of people all promising to save the Jewish people from all the chaos and carnage that was going on in AD 70, as well as in every century since Jesus, all of which who died with no gain or purpose.

Jesus adds something here that he didn't put in the beginning of the chapter. He says these false prophets and false christs are going to arise and perform signs and wonders to lead people astray. He doesn't say what the signs and wonders are, but they're amazing. They have the wow factor enough to seduce countless people into an eternal damnation of rejection of Jesus.

With all that said, the trumpet warning in Mark 13 is very clear. It's in verse 23. Look at it with me. Jesus says, "Be on your guard. I have told you these things beforehand." If you're going to underline something in your Bible today, that's the thing. You could circle *abomination of desolation*. You could circle the great tribulation and try to pinpoint it and figure it all out. Good. Keep working on that.

Dr. Ferguson is not giving us an excuse to not do the hard work of hermeneutics on these passages. It's just reality. There are some of these things about which God has chosen not to reveal every single detail. We have enough to understand the majority of Scripture and to apply it correctly.

Jesus is saying, "Be on your guard," and it's not the first time. Look at verse 9. Do you remember a couple of Sundays ago, in verse 9? What does he say there? **"But be on your guard."** Look at verse 33. We'll see it again next Sunday, when Jesus says, **"Be on guard, keep awake."** That's probably appropriate for some of you right now.

Here's the main idea. I want to admit to you that I did not come up with this wording on my own. This is something just in my study of this that I thought made a lot of sense. I hope it makes sense to you. Here's the main application of this whole section. *The history of the world is truly his story.* Just wrap your mind around that for a minute. Think about it.

In Revelation, chapter 1, verse 8, Jesus describes himself as **"...the Alpha and the Omega...who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."** I want you to know today that apart from Jesus, his death, burial, and resurrection, we can't make any sense of what's happening in our world. We just can't. There's no way to wrap your arms around the human chaos and craziness of the world in which we live unless you know your Bible and unless you understand that the history of the world is his story.

It goes all the way back to Genesis, chapter 3, verse 15. In the beginning of the story of mankind, we have our first glimpse of Jesus. We have our first glimpse of the gospel of Jesus all the way back at the beginning of this whole thing. This is God condemning Satan. After Adam and Eve fall to Satan's lies, God has a conversation with Satan. Actually, Satan didn't say anything at this point.

God told Satan, **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."** Now stare at that for a moment. At the very heart of human history is this great drama that God just spoke. God is talking here about the second coming of Jesus Christ. That's the woman's offspring. When he comes, he's going to crush Satan's head. The triumph of the return of Jesus Christ will be the final destruction of Satan.

God is prophesying in Genesis, chapter 3. It's the first prophecy of the whole Bible. God is saying, "Satan, you think you've won right now, but in the end, you're dead." That's God. Genesis 3. "He will crush your head," but not before the crucifixion. God says, "Satan, you're going to bruise his heel." That's a reference to the death of Jesus.

Only by the means of the cross could the ultimate victory come for us. On that cross, Jesus rescues us from Satan's domain of spiritual darkness and unbelief. By his shed blood, we are forgiven and rescued from our condemnation before a holy God. By his resurrection after they bury him, we are eternally rescued from our eternal damnation. That's where the victory took place.

The only way to understand the story of the world in which we live is to understand what is behind all the wars, hatred, every broken marriage, rebellious children, and all that represents the chaos, pain, and hell on earth we see all around us... The only way to make sense of that is to

understand that the Devil is still engaged in destroying the souls of people, blinding their minds in unbelief.

Satan wants more than anything for you not to believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the salvation of your soul. He will try to convince you to believe in anything else. As stupid as it is, he will convince you, "That's better!" The battle isn't over yet, but the victory is already secured. It's guaranteed.

Jesus said it in John 16, verse 33: **"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."** That's the light we live in. The gospel is the only story that never flames out. It doesn't burn out. It's the only story that promises freedom for those who are captive to our sin. It's the only story that promises peace for the brokenhearted, forgiveness for the guilty, grace for the forgiven, and hope for the hopeless.

Jesus is declaring (and we'll see it definitely next week when we get to his return), "No matter how or when all this happens, be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth" (Psalm 46:10). Our God reigns. That's the big idea. The history of the world is his story. We have the good news of peace and happiness, you guys. This is all we have to offer the world.

This week, it just happened that I was listening to a sermon, a podcast, and the preacher referenced a book I'd never heard of. It was called *Against All Odds*. I had just never heard the story he told, so when I got to my laptop, I googled the book to make sure I heard the details correctly.

The book is essentially the prison diary of a man named Armando Valladares. I had never heard of him. He was arrested in 1960 by the communist Cuban government for being anti-communist and religious. He spent 22 years in Castro's gulag. In 1982, he was released at the age of 44, emaciated, and reunited with his wife. He describes being in the prison and the guards coming to take the Christians away to the firing squads every morning. He said his faith and interest in God was nominal until he saw these men going to their deaths.

He writes something like, "They kept going to their deaths with shouts: 'Long live Christ the King!' Those cries of the executed patriots echoing through the 200-year-old dungeons of the prison had awakened me to a new life. Those cries became a potent and stirring symbol of hope. By 1963, the men condemned to death were gagged before being carried down to be shot because the jailers feared those shouts."

Why? Why would the jailers fear those words? The apostle Paul explains it to us in Philippians, chapter 1. He says, "Don't be intimidated by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed but that you're going to be saved, even by God himself, for you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him."

On that podcast I was listening to, the preacher said "Shoot us if you will. There's a hope that stands the test of time and triumphs over the grave." Church, our world needs a hope that big.

Our world desperately needs a hope big enough to make sense of the brokenness and disaster that sin has brought upon humanity and the world in which we live.

Our world needs a hope that big, a hope that gives us a hope for a future world in the presence of God himself, where all of the sin, pain, ugliness, disease, nastiness, and hatred is all gone and washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ on the hearts of those who put their faith and trust in him.

If you are sitting here right now and you don't know this hope, I only have one thing for you. Believe in Jesus Christ. It's your only hope. He's your only hope. He died in your place on that cross so you wouldn't have to. He paid the price for your sin and he rose from the dead, promising that he's going to come again.

If we're still here, he's going to take us to be with him. If we go before he comes, his promise is that we will go to him and live forever in the presence of God. Right where you are, even right now, you can ask Jesus to forgive you, to save you, and to make you new. If you do that, I believe you will leave here with a shout. Let's bow our heads.

Father in heaven, I praise you for those in this room who already believe. I pray, God, that we would have that shout in our hearts. We know you are King and we know, God, that this whole story is yours, going all the way back to the beginning. You have not been surprised by anything. You told Satan that Jesus was coming to do this.

God, I pray that, again, we would leave here with our faith, joy, and confidence deeper. God, for those who came to church today still not sure, still questioning, and maybe cynical or skeptical, I pray that right now, you would give them the supernatural gift of faith to trust Jesus Christ to save them. May today be the day of their salvation, I pray. Have mercy God. In the name of Christ, amen.

The people standing up here right now are here for those of you who sense in your hearts, "Okay. I don't know if I get this whole thing, but I know one thing. I want to believe. I want to trust Jesus to forgive me and save me." If you're at that place right now in your heart, they're here to help you take that first step of faith.

Simply walk up to them before you walk out of this room and say, "I want to believe in Jesus. What do I do next?" They will explain that to you and give you something to go home with and start making sense of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. I hope you'll do that. Almost as much as I hope that, I hope you'll come back next week so we can finish this up together. Don't leave me stranded here at the end by myself, okay? Bring your Bibles and we'll keep going and finish up the chapter. See you then.