

Sign of the Times, Time to be Calm, Mark 13:1-8, 1/8/23

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² "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately,

⁴ "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

⁵ Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many.

⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

December 21, 2012. Does that date mean anything to you? Well, 10 years later most of us probably have forgotten all about it or weren't paying much attention at the time. But it was the supposed date that the world was going to end. The reason is because it was the date the Mayan Calendar ended, and there were groups of people predicting the end of the world. The internet at the time was a-buzz with "evidence" like hurricanes, unrest in the Middle East, solar flares, mysterious planets about to collide. Hollywood even got on the bandwagon making a movie- 2012.

[Switch back to Blank Slide] There were doomsday parties out in the desert in December, and some fanatics up on a mountain in south France awaiting a UFO to pick them up. There was enough of a stir that according to a Reuters Global Poll during that time 10% of the population were anxious about that date.¹ Of course December 21, 2012 came and went just as every other wrong prediction in history. But I say this because it's nice to know that people other than Christians have wrongly predicted the end of the world.

Sadly, Christians have an awkward history of false predictions, doomsday prepping, and getting all worked up into a frenzy about all things end times. Since we have a Baptist heritage, let me pick on us, Pastor preacher, William Miller, first predicted Jesus' return and end of the world on March 21, 1844. When this date passed, a new date was predicted, April 18, 1844. Again the

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20764906>

date passed... but his devout follower, Samuel Snow, derived the date of October 22, 1844.² Each time sadly many people had selling possessions, stopping their entire lives just waiting for these days. The 1900s were filled with predictions, especially during the world wars, some of you are old enough to recall Calvary Chapel founder Chuck Smith and writer Hal Lindsay making predictions about 1980 and then again in 1990...Harold Camping in 2011...the list goes on.

We have a penchant, a curious obsession with the apocalypse, the end of the world. Now let me add a little balance as I pick on our Christian history; studying, meditating on and being prepared for Christ's return and the ushering in of the end of the age is a worthwhile endeavor for Christians. There are at least 300 verses about the 2nd coming of Christ³, portions of Daniel and Revelation are dedicated to this topic, and here in Mark 13 we see Jesus' longest teaching in Mark's entire gospel dedicated to this subject. A healthy perspective on the end provides courage, hope and perseverance in the heart of believers. And so my goal throughout these four weeks is to give us a balanced, biblical perspective by studying Jesus' perspective on end times. Seem reasonable?

Now, I want to take a few minutes this morning before we get into the thick of it to frame this series with some preliminary comments about our approach. **#1 Approach with Humility.** As you read Mark 13 you quickly realize that you are entering one of the most difficult interpretive texts in the Bible. The more commentaries you open, the more nuanced interpretations you will find. **Bible-Centered, Graciously Orthodox.** God's Word is our guide, authority and conscience in everything. We stand firm where it stands firm and remain flexible where it remains flexible. We value a diversity of opinions and thought on secondary theological matters. It's OK if we land in different places, or are unsure.

#2 Approach with Discernment. We want to avoid two extremes: **Interpretative Anarchy:** "This is what it means to me." Everyone makes it say whatever they want it to say based on their own feelings, presuppositions. **Interpretative Tyranny**⁴- Some people will just say, well I don't know what any of this means and so I'm just going to let the Bible expert on Youtube, or the guy with the Ph.D or Pastor Nate tell me what it means. And then what we do is cease to think, and read and study our own Bibles. And so we want to discern together, focusing on this principle: **"Keep the plain things the main things, and main things the plain things."** For example- every Bible expert agrees with two main and plain things. There is a portion of this text where Jesus is foretelling what will happen in the destruction of the temple in 70AD, and there is a portion of this text where Jesus is talking about events that are yet to come in the end. How they slice that may be different, but let's not miss the main and plain things- both are in view to some degree.

#3 Approach as a Disciple. We are not going to merely enter academia and examine the original language, literary context, diagramming sentences... Jesus was training his disciples in chapter 13, all throughout his teaching he is calling them to be watchful, ready, prepared,

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unfulfilled_Christian_religious_predictions

³ From Tim Keller Sermon on Mark 13

⁴ Thanks to Alistair Begg for these terms.

discerning. Jesus did give us this message so that we could try to write books and predict dates... ironically which Jesus doesn't even know, he gave this teach to build resilient disciples when the heat gets turned up. It's about our mission and witness in our community, it's about holding firm to the truth and the gospel.

With that being said, let' dig into the first 8 verses, what I am calling, **"A Time to Be Calm."** Remember, where we are in the Gospel of Mark, we are in the middle of the passion week, just before Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has just finished a heated confrontation with the religious leaders in the temple courts in Jerusalem.

13 *As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"* And they were right. This temple and the temple mount, built by Herod the Great, was magnificent. Josephus, the Jewish historian, said the exterior of the building "lacked nothing that could astonish either the soul or the eyes." He also tells us that the stones were twenty-five cubits long, eight cubits high, and twelve cubits wide.⁵ A cubit is essentially the length of my arm...So you can picture just how massive these stones were. The stones of the temple were ornate, inlaid with gold so that they would glisten in the sun. The temple's architecture, as dazzling as it was, was more than matched by its religious significance. And it is vital that we understand that. We need to realize that for these disciples, the temple was the epicenter of all their Jewish universe. Which made Jesus' next comments even more shocking.

² *"Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."* The look of shock and disbelief would have equally or exceeded the look if someone would have predicted the Titanic, the unsinkable ship, would sink in the icy waters of the Atlantic, or the Twin Towers of NY would crumble in a pile of ash. And yet this is exactly what would happen within 40 years of Jesus' prediction, 70AD when Roman General Titus sacked Jerusalem, not one of these massive stones was left on the temple mount. In fact if you come with me to the Holy Land in October, you will stand on some of these broken stones that were excavated just a few years ago. **Picture** Which were pushed off the temple mount and buried just below. And so you can imagine just how shell-shocked the disciples would have been at this notion, it's on all their minds, and they just can't wait to ask more questions. ³ *As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately,*

⁴ *"Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"* The setting of this conversation is on the Mount of Olives, which is why we call this the Olivet Discourse, overlooking the Temple Mount **[Here a scaled model]** of what this view would have looked like from Jerusalem Museum. As they are looking down at the magnificence of the temple- they want to know when is this going to happen. Now to get a fuller insight into their question we need to read Matthew's telling of this event in chapter 24, ³ *"Tell us when will*

⁵ Walter W. Wessel, **"Mark,"** in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 743.

this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Do you see what's happening? The disciples could not imagine a world without the temple. If the temple came down, in their minds the world was coming to an end. So when Jesus says, "This whole thing is coming down," they said, "Well it clearly must be the end of the world! So when is this going to happen? Give us a sign. Give us some indication."

⁵ *Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you.* Notice Jesus isn't first interested in giving them signs of the times is he? Instead, it seems he's going to do just the opposite. He says "Watch out"- Greek word that means to take in information with a calm and discerning outlook. He says, be careful that you don't get taken. Keep your footing, don't get tripped up, anxious, fearful and distracted by all this. Have you see this slogan and it's variations: **Keep Calm and Carry on**...Now most of us probably don't know the origin of this, but you might if you are British. In 1939 the Brits planned to use this as a slogan to help keep the country together, moving forward in case of a German invasion during WWII. Of course the war ended and they didn't need to produce this, however about 20 years ago some bookkeepers uncovered dusty posters and it got disseminated all over the internet. But this was essentially Jesus' instruction. "I know this information sounds terrifying, but keep calm and carry on." He instructs them to keep calm in three ways: ⁶ *Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many.* **1) Keep Calm in Prophetic Confusion.**

⁷ *When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.* ⁸ *Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.* **2) Keep Calm in political confusion.**

^{8b} *There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines.* **3) Keep Calm in climate confusion.**

He says all of these *things are like the beginning of birth pains*, they aren't the end. I've never experienced birth pains...just wanted to make sure you were listening. But I've been witness to the experience twice. Some of you are familiar with what's called Braxton Hicks contractions. And when they happen for first time parents, you think, "here we go!" And some parents will race to the hospital only to have the doctor say, nope you still have a ways to go and kind of embarrassingly you get back into the car. It's just the beginning...and Jesus is saying, stay calm. Don't get anxious, don't stop what you are doing and head to your doomsday bunker, don't sell your possessions. It's not the end!

Now in the coming weeks Jesus will start to give the disciples signs of what to look for, but this opening point is essential for these disciples and for us to develop resiliency as disciples today. Because let me ask you a question, is there anything unique about these three false signs in 30 AD? No! They are all the same today. Any prophetic confusion today? You bet! Prophetic charlatans claiming to be Christ or speak in Christ's name spreading fear, misinformation, speculation on dates, attaching themselves to political leaders or future events. How about political confusion? Wars and rumors of wars, nations against nations? Just a few over the last 2000 years. How about climate confusion? Hurricanes, mudslides, extreme weather events, Ozone layer is depleting, polar ice caps melting, global warming, meteors on their way, human

extinction! You can see why it's easy for Christians today, just as it would have been for the disciples in Jesus' day to get anxious, fearful and distracted from their mission. And to all of this Jesus says, **keep calm and carry on.** I'm in charge. I'm sovereign and in control. Don't worry. Don't get tangled up in all of this stuff and get obsessed with this, don't build your life looking for the next sign, conspiracies...because you will inevitably see what you want to see. All of it has a way of eroding the main thing and distracting our gospel influence. Stay above the fray, because it will lead you astray. Am I saying that we should just plug our ears and be aloof to what's going on in the world? No. Am I saying that none of this has any merit, or that we should ignore global warming or other potential threats to our human way of life? No. Just be careful that it doesn't take you captive. That's not Jesus' posture, it shouldn't be ours.

2 Thessalonians, Paul addresses this issue in the church, people becoming preoccupied with the end times. And notice what was happening. 2 Thessalonians 2:2 *"Do not become easily unsettled or alarmed."* V.3 *"Don't be deceived in any way."* Chapter 3:11 *"We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies."* Paul saying, what benefit is it getting all caught up in this? None- in fact it only leads to distraction from the main mission. What does he encourage them to do instead? 2:15 *"Stand firm and hold fast to our teachings."* 3:12 *"Settle down and earn the food you eat."* 3:13 *"Never tire of doing what is good."*

So, if you are finding yourself preoccupied with world events, internet rumors, conspiracy theories, green movements, so-called prophets coming in Jesus' name, speculative signs...allow the word of God call you back to the main and plain things. **Keep Calm and Carry On.** To fruitful work, diligence, the study of God's Word, to prayer, to church commitment and fellowship, loving others well, witness in our world. These are the main and plain things.

Now as we come to the Lord's Table for communion this morning, I want you to think about this: how could Jesus say to keep calm in the midst of all of this confusion and upheaval? In the midst of existential threats? I mean, it's that just wishful thinking? The reason Jesus can tell us to keep calm is because Jesus faced down the greatest threat for us- the threat of death, the threat of God's wrath, the threat of life without God forever in Hell. He stared it right in the face and took it on, and he defeated it. In the Lord's Supper he says I defeated death and hell for you with my body and my blood.