

Sign of the Times, Mark 13:14-23, Time to Be Prepared, 1/22/23

Where were you on September 11, 2001? It's a question virtually every person over 30 can answer. I was asleep in my college dorm room when my roommate woke me up to the shocking news that a plane flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in NYC, which we later found out came at the hands of radical Islamic terrorists. Chaos ensued in the unfolding hours, days and weeks after this brazen attack on American soil, as we were stunned at how this could happen here? How did we miss the signs that this was coming? Hindsight is of course always 20/20, but what has become clear, is that America was unprepared and failed to act upon the many signs of the times.

As Jesus' teaching on the pending destruction of the temple and the end times continues, he has a clear goal- he wants to make sure his followers, both then and now, are prepared for the future. We know this because all throughout the Olivet Discourse, he has been repeating a phrase- "Blepo! Watch out! Be discerning!" In v.1-8 he says watch out for the false signs like wars, natural disasters... then v. 9-13 he says watch out for the persecution for your faith coming your way. And now in verses 14-23, he says watch out to that you don't miss the signs. Don't be caught off guard. He prepares them by telling them three things about the sign of the times: **What to look for, How to Respond and Who is on your side.**

Let me put my cards on the table right here so you understand the interpretative decision I've made as I study this section. I believe that everything Jesus is going to say here has a double dimension to it. I believe there is an historical dimension which happened in 70AD and there is an eschatological dimension to it. Eschatological- just means future, end times aspect to it. Not everyone believes that. Some think this is all historical. Some believe this is all future. So because of my interpretation here it means I believe there is an immediate application for these disciples and original readers AND there is an application that is pushed forward through the centuries to us. And so the interpretative key for us is to **look for the pattern**. Jesus is revealing to us a pattern, a template for what we should expect for the future by pointing us to the past. That's very important as we continue.

What to Look For:

¹⁴ *"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*

OK, well that should cover it, we are all clear on that? Let's close in prayer. You say, "What in the world is the abomination that causes desolation? Where is it standing? And what mountains should we flee to? So we have some work to do. Let's first look at this phrase: **The abomination that causes desolation**. An abomination is something that is considered highly offensive to God. And because of this, it results desolation, that is vacating or desertion of a place. In other words, it's a desecrating act against God that causes a place to be abandoned. Now our translation doesn't quite get this verse right. **"standing where it does not belong"**, it's actually a masculine pronoun- "standing where he does not belong." So what we learn is that the force behind this desecration is a person. And where is this place they are standing where

they shouldn't? Matthew's gospel account tells us specifically that place is the holy place, the temple. Now, your Bible probably has "The abomination that causes desolation" in quotations and the reason for this would have been obvious to the disciples and readers of Mark's gospel- this is a phrase pulled right from the apocalyptic vision of Daniel in chapters 9, 11 and 12. Daniel's prophecy gives us a little more color- **Daniel 11:31 His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation.**

Remember when I said that Jesus is setting up a pattern? By the time that the Gospel is being read, the Jewish people had had at least one pattern of this abomination already. Because in 168 BC, **Antiochus Epiphanes** marched into Jerusalem with his army, and into the temple. He actually went as far as sacrificing a pig on the great altar, he set up a statue of Zeus, and he ordered the Jews to worship it. So Jesus is saying to his Jewish readers, "When you see a figure like Antiochus and his army coming to the temple again. When you see him desecrating what is sacred, that's when you know it's about to go down." Now think about how pertinent this would have been for the readers of Mark's gospel in 67-68 AD, living in Jerusalem. They were within a couple of years of this event happening, this is why Mark adds in the little comment **"let the reader understand."** He's saying, "Church! Be prepared, look at the sign of the times! Remember how it happened back in Antiochus' day? Well it's going to look a lot like that, but it will be worse. So be prepared!" And sure enough all the signs were there by 68AD. The zealots took over the temple and kicked out the priests, the General Titus' roman army was bearing down.

So let's **look for the pattern** for what to expect in the future at the end. Well, it will involve the same evil, abominable spirit that was in Antiochus and Titus when they set themselves up in opposition to God. And it seems that it will involve desecrating a holy place. And this pattern shows us that when this happens God's people will abandon the holy place. This isn't the only place this pattern shows up. We see this same language in Revelation written in 90 AD, after the destruction of the temple. Revelation refers to this person as the "Antichrist." OK, now we have all kinds of questions. Who might the antichrist be? Nate, are you saying there is going to be a 3rd temple in Jerusalem at some point again? I don't want to repeat the same mistakes in past history by predicting who the antichrist is going to be: Martin Luther called Pope Leo X the antichrist, Napoleon, Adolf Hitler, JFK...after all he receive 666 votes at the democratic convention, Mikhail Gorbachev (the mark of the beast), Bill Gates, I'm sure QAnon has their own pick. It's a fool's errand. Yes, I do believe a 3rd temple will be built on the temple mount, and that is not at all a far-fetched idea today, there is plenty of room up there for one. So much more could be said, I want to recommend the book **"The Non-Prophets Guide to the End Times by Todd Hampson**

How to Respond

then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁵ Let no one on the housetop go down or enter the house to take anything out. ¹⁶ Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak.

¹⁷ How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! ¹⁸ Pray that this will not take place in winter,

¹⁹ because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again.

How should they respond? In a word, **Flee!** Get out of dodge, don't stop for your belongings, get out of there like a burning house, this is no time for heroes, it's time for survival. Jesus isn't looking for unnecessary martyrs running into trouble. There's enough trouble that will find you just for living out your faith. Survive, you and your families. I like how Alistair Begg puts it, "He wants them to know that there's no reason for them to be fanatical about buildings—namely, a temple—or about places—namely, Jerusalem:

'You're not tied to this building, and you're not tied to this place; you're tied to the gospel. Therefore, endure to the end for the sake of the gospel.'"¹ And Eusebius, the early church historian, records how, in AD 67, with the revolt of the Jews, the believers in Jerusalem *did* make a run for it and fled to the mountains of Pella. They survived and the Gospel spread because of it.

Jesus also said, "how dreadful it would be." And called it a time of "distress unequalled" for Israel. And indeed it was. Josephus, the Jewish historian, in his book *The War of the Jews* describes how 97,000 people in this event were taken captive and 1.1 million perished by slow starvation and the sword. Listen to his own words describing this tribulation. "[It] devoured the people by whole houses and families. The upper rooms were full of women and children dying of starvation. The lanes of the city were full of the dead bodies of the aged. The children and the young men wandered about the marketplaces like shadows, all swelled with famine, and fell down dead wheresoever their misery seized them...A deep silence and a kind of deadly night had seized upon the city."²

And as awful and horrible and distressful as this time was it just sets **the pattern** for the end of the age. We don't have time to go there, but if we examine Daniel 9-12 and Revelation 6-7 for example and we see what it will be like during the time of the Great Tribulation of 7 years in the future, it will be far worse destruction, a worse famine, a worse death than even this one. And the believers living during that day will be instructed to do the same thing. Flee! But as terrible, horrible, very bad and no day this day will be... There is a glimmer of hope and this is really where I want to focus the rest of our time today.

Who is on your side

²⁰ "If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them..." The immediate context of this, Jesus is talking

¹ Alistair Begg, From Sermon on Mark 13, www.truthforlife.org

² Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 5.12.3, quoted in William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible*, Mark 13, <https://www.studyight.org/commentaries/dsb/mark-13.html>

about the Christians who survived this tribulation in 70AD. He wants them to know that it is God who intervenes in human history to rescue and preserve their lives. And again, **Look for the pattern** that we can expect at the time of the great tribulation in the future. That God will intervene to save his people. I believe Jesus' words here are again echoing the prophet **Daniel 12:1** *At that time (talking about the end of the age before Christ comes) Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise.*

There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered.

So to summarize- Jesus is preparing the disciples both then and now- to look for a pattern of desecration of God's holy place by and anti-God world leader, Look for the pattern of the scattering and fleeing of God's people, Look for the pattern of God's rescue of some from destruction.

Title Slide Now this isn't the most encouraging and uplifting and safe for the whole family message you've heard me preach. But the Bible isn't all puppies and rainbows. But it is a good reminder that we need to wake up to reality, this world can lull us to sleep with comfort and distractions. The Bible addresses the reality of a broken world and prepares us for how to live in a world of suffering and pain and face it with resilience AND there is hope if we are looking for it!

It would be easy to look at all this horror, chaos and seemingly pointless suffering and conclude that evil wins, that God is aloof, or worse, incapable of doing anything about it. And if that were true, we should all be constantly filled with terror, anxiety and utter hopelessness about any and all distress and the pending calamity whether in the form of existential threats to humanity or the personal threat of a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. But Jesus interjects to show us that at the center of all this calamity, God is still there, God is intervening, and his eye is on his people, what he calls his elect, his chosen ones. God is for his people.

So here's the question we want to land on. How can we be prepared for times of calamity, whether it is the trials of this life, the calamity of facing our own mortality, or the end of time when it comes, when all seems to be lost and you want to give up? The answer is ultimately located in knowing **who's on your side?**

Romans 8:31 *If God is for us, who can be against us?* Do you remember the Lord of the Rings Two Towers scene Battle of the Hornburg. All seems lost, on the brink of defeat, until Gandalf comes riding on his white horse, Shadowfax, with an army with him? Where did Tolkien get that imagery? From Jesus' words here in Mark 13! That's next week's sermon but spoiler alert- He rides in to rescue with an angel army! When you are facing pain and darkness and trials, is Jesus on your side? When you face down your own mortality, is Jesus on your side? When the existential threat of human existence comes, is Jesus on your side? **³⁷ No, in all these things we**

are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If we have Jesus we have everything, but if we don't have Jesus, there is nothing to protect you from your calamity and tribulation. There is no safety net under the trap door of death and no one to cut short the end of time. I say this out of great love and out of respect for the worth and value of your life, because life is sacred and a terrible thing to lose.

Gospel Invitation.