

Beware, Yet Be Not Alarmed: Mark 13:1-8
 Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
 Sunday, May 15th, 2011

I was not greatly encouraged in my study this week when I read statements in commentaries like this one: “In the Gospel of Mark there is no passage more problematic than the prophetic discourse of Jesus on the destruction of the Temple.”¹ Or in another commentary, that “that is one of the most perplexing chapters in the Bible to understand.”²

This is part of the joy and the stress of preaching through books of the Bible. I get to preach on every passage in the book – that’s the joy of it, and the excitement of it. But the stressful part can come in, too, when there are passages that are hard to understand. This is certainly one of those difficult passages.

I think it will be really helpful to us, though, to see Jesus’ purpose in saying these things. He makes His purpose clear in the strong imperatives He gives—the commands He declares to His disciples. In verse 5 He tells them, “See that no one leads you astray.” And in verse 9, even though it’s translated differently, it’s the same Greek imperative, “be on your guard.” Do you see what Jesus is doing? He is preparing His disciples (and the disciples down through the ages) for the trials and persecutions they will face as followers of Christ. Horrible things are going to happen. Imposters will come along, claiming to be the Messiah. There will be wars and natural disasters. You will be severely persecuted. So be ready! Be on your guard. Be watching for these things.

Now, how are we wired to react to news like that? Bad things are going to happen. It’s going to be like a nightmare come true. What’s our natural response to that? Despair, discouragement, alarm, anxiety, fear.

But notice two more imperatives that Jesus gives in these verses. In verse 7 He commands them, “do not be alarmed.” And in verse 11 He exhorts them, “do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say.” Isn’t that fascinating, and counterintuitive? We are to be on guard, because things are going to be really bad and really difficult. But at the same time we’re commanded not to fret.

I entitled the sermon this morning, “Beware, yet be not alarmed,” basing that title on these imperatives which I think make up the main structure of this passage. Beware, but don’t be alarmed. Be on your guard, but don’t be anxious. This is how Jesus wants to instruct and prepare His disciples for what lies before them. And this is the message for us.

¹ William Lane, *Mark*, page 444.

² James Edwards, *Mark*, page 383.

It's very easy for us to get preoccupied with end time speculations. But that's not the main point Jesus is driving at. Notice that the disciples are asking that kind of question in verse 4, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" In their understanding, the destruction of the temple would be closely connected with *the end*. And they're eager to know what sign will indicate the coming of the end.

But Jesus doesn't give them a straightforward answer. He doesn't give them the kind of information they're looking for. They wanted a sure-fire way to predict exactly when the end would come. It's what people are still foolishly trying to do today. We have a fascination with these things. We want to know the future. But part of our finiteness, part of our limitation as mere humans is that we do not know the future. We are not omniscient. Only God is omniscient. He has exhaustive foreknowledge of the future. We don't.

But still, inquiring minds want to know. What does the earthquake in Japan mean? What do the wars in the Middle East mean? What does the death of Osama bin Laden mean? I was reading this week on a website about the predictions of Nostradamus, where it is claimed that, even though he died in 1566, he predicted 9/11 and other things. And then it goes into predictions about the third Antichrist (the assumption being that Napoleon was the first and Hitler was the second). Nostradamus predicted that a third Antichrist will rise up with the name "Mabus." The website then suggests that if you take the last two letters from "Obama" and the first three letters of "Bush" and you get "Mabus." I'm not even making this up!

Here's my point: Is that the kind of thing we should be spending our time on? Should we be exerting all kinds of thought and energy and concern trying to pinpoint the end of the world? Absolutely not! It's not for us to know, as Jesus tells us very clearly later in Mark 13. What we're to be focused on is purity and perseverance. We need to maintain doctrinal purity and moral purity in spite of the hellish things that may go on around us. We need to persevere to the end. And in the midst of it all we should not be anxious or alarmed.

So maybe Jesus doesn't tell the disciples what they were hoping to hear. They were getting out their timelines, ready to chart out the final events before the end. And that's our tendency as well. But instead, Jesus tells them (and us) what we *need* to hear. He encourages us and exhorts us exactly how we need to be encouraged and exhorted. It's not for us to know the specific details or the timing of the end. All we need to know is that we

should be prepared for trials and persecution, and yet we don't need to worry.

That's the gist of these verses. Let's look at them in more detail now. Jesus' message in verses 1-13 is essentially this: First, beware of imposters. Second, be not alarmed by calamities. Third, be not alarmed by persecution. Before we get to His teaching, though, we have to see how it's set up in verses 1-4.

This conversation arises from a question that one of the disciples asked Jesus in verse 1. This is kind of an awkward transition. You remember what Jesus was saying at the end of chapter 12 about the widow's offering. Jesus had said some pretty radical things about the hypocrisy of the scribes, and then He said some radical things about the widow's devotion. Now one of the disciples makes a lame attempt at changing the subject. Can't you just picture this? Jesus has the disciples huddled up, telling them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box." And then they all depart from the temple, probably in an awkward silence. And then one of the disciples, to break the silence, says, "Uh, how about those stones." He's trying to lighten the conversation some. Let's not talk about such weighty spiritual things that make us uncomfortable. Let's talk about the weather. Let's talk about the architecture.

It was amazing architecture. It was an amazing building. Josephus the historian describes it like this, "the outward face of the temple . . . was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look at it to turn their eyes away, just as to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow . . . Of its stones, some of them were forty-five cubits in length, five in height and six in breadth."³ That's about 60 feet in length. Think boxcars. In Jesus' day they had been working on this temple for 50 years, and it was still under construction. It was truly an amazing structure, and it inspired awe in all those who beheld it.

That is, almost all. Jesus is not impressed. He has just cleared the temple, rebuking them all for their hypocrisy. He is now leaving the temple. And in response to this disciples' comment, Jesus tells of the temple's destruction. Again, this is not the kind of response the disciples would have been anticipating or hoping for. "Hey Jesus, cool building, huh?!" Jesus says, "It's gonna burn. It's gonna be demolished." Verse 2, Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." I imagine there was another awkward silence. Sometimes it's hard to have a

³ Josephus, *Wars*, 5.5.6 (quoted in Garland, *Mark*, page 490).

conversation with this guy. But Jesus knows the seriousness of the moment. He knows what is about to happen to Him, that He will be delivered over to death. He knows what is about to happen in 70 AD, that Jerusalem will be demolished. And He knows what will happen throughout the centuries leading up to His second coming. And He wants to speak to His disciples about these things. So He makes this provocative statement that will prompt their question in verse 4.

This is, by the way, what happened to Jerusalem. To quote Josephus again, he says this about what happened in 70 AD, just forty years after Jesus' prediction: "Caesar ordered the whole city and the temple to be razed to the ground All the rest of the wall encompassing the city was so completely leveled to the ground as to leave future visitors to the spot no ground for believing that it had ever been inhabited."⁴ What Jesus said would happen, did, indeed, happen.

Jesus and the disciples then made their way up to the Mount of Olives opposite the temple. They would have had a great view of the temple from that vantage point. And this is what we know as the Olivet discourse. This is the longest block of teaching in the entire Gospel of Mark. The other lengthy block of teaching was in chapter 4, where Jesus taught in parables and talked about the purpose of the parables. One commentator pointed out that in chapter 4 the theme was "hearing." In chapter 13 the theme is "watching."⁵

It is four disciples who come to Jesus privately to ask Him about these things. Peter, James, John and Andrew were the first four disciples Jesus called back in chapter 1. And they are the ones, now, who get to hear this teaching.

Beware of Imposters

Jesus begins, first of all, with a warning about imposters. Beware of imposters. "See that no one leads you astray." Isn't that an interesting way for Him to begin? They want to know about what's going to happen in the future. But Jesus brings the discussion right back to present obedience and persevering in the faith. "See that no one leads you astray." Why is that a concern? Because "many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray."

This happened in the years leading up to 70 AD, and it continues to happen today. In Acts 5:36 Gamaliel mentions Theudas. We read a little more about Theudas in *The Antiquities of the Jews*, by Josephus. It says that Theudas was convinced he could part the Jordan River, and he was about to lead a large group

⁴ Quoted in Edwards, *Mark*, page 388.

⁵ Garland, *Mark*, page 489.

of folks into the river to attempt this, when the authorities intervened and killed some of them and took Theudas and cut off his head. Josephus also writes about an Egyptian who claimed to be a prophet (or magician), and led many astray.

In recent history we can recall Sun Myung Moon in Seoul, Korea, and his followers, the “Moonies.” Charles Manson and David Koresh also claimed to have messiah-type roles. And recently David Shayler, a British journalist and security service officer, has claimed that he is the messiah. He was proclaimed messiah on July 7, 2007 (07.07.07), and he claims to have divine powers to influence the weather, prevent terrorist attacks, and predict football scores.⁶ That would certainly come in handy with your fantasy football leagues.

There will continue to be many folks like this as the end approaches. Those who claim to have divine powers. Those who claim to have some kind of messianic role. There always have been, and will continue to be, false teachers of various kinds, who mix truth with error, and lead many into heresy. We must beware of false messiahs, false teachers, false gospels that are not the gospel, and to do so we need to fix our eyes on the true Messiah and the true Gospel which is revealed to us in the Bible.

Let me give you two very practical ways to heed this command. The command is, “See that no one leads you astray” (verse 5). Here’s one way to do that. Read your Bible and pray to God. That’s the bread and butter of the Christian life, and yet I wonder how many professing Christians actually read the Bible and pray consistently. I wonder about you, friends, if these disciplines of the Christian life are present in your life.

Last week we read how Jesus chastised the scribes for their hypocrisy. And I think when professing Christians are attending church on Sundays, but not reading the Bible or praying through the week, that’s a recipe for hypocrisy.

And it’s also a recipe for being led astray. If you are not personally familiar with Jesus Christ—His miraculous deeds, His teaching, His death and resurrection, if you do not meditate on what He has done for us, if you do not commune with Him in prayer, then it’s going to be very easy for someone to come along and dupe you into believing something that’s not true about Him. It will be difficult for you to discern if something is counterfeit if you don’t know what’s genuine. We need to know Jesus personally. We need to know the Bible. We need to know the Gospel. And then when someone comes along teaching something that’s not right, we can see that clearly.

A second practical way to heed this command is by becoming a member of a Bible-believing, Gospel-preaching

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Shayler#Claims_of_divinity

church. It grieves my heart and concerns me deeply that so many believers don't see the value in becoming a member of a local church. Folks want to float around from here to there and not feel tied down to one congregation, but can't you see how that leaves you susceptible to being led astray? Someone might respond to that and say, "Oh, I would never be led astray. I know better. I just haven't found a church that's good enough for me yet." Well, that's just prideful. It's arrogant and selfish and far too focused on your individual autonomy.

We need each other, brothers and sisters. We need to be seriously committed to one another. We need to be accountable to one another, so that if someone does begin to be led astray, the body of believers can pull them back in. We need to be in a place where church discipline is practiced, where we love each other enough to go to someone and say, You're in the wrong; repent.

I know that I need to be in a church where there is that level of accountability, where there is that level of commitment to one another. I hope you recognize that need as well. In order to persevere to the end, we need the community of believers. We need the local church. I fear for those who are not connected to a local church in a formal way, because they will be more susceptible to being led astray.

See that no one leads you astray, 1) by reading your Bible and praying, and 2) by becoming a member of a Bible-believing, Gospel-preaching church. Many more things could be said, but those are two practical ways to heed that command.

Be Not Alarmed by Calamities

Jesus gives another command in verse 7, that we should not be alarmed by these calamities. Beware, yet be not alarmed. We need to be on guard, but we shouldn't fret or be anxious. We shouldn't be surprised when all hell breaks loose, because Jesus has told us ahead of time that it's going to happen. Verse 7, "And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed."

The other night at dinner we were talking about my upcoming trip to Liberia, and our 2-year-old, Annalyse, (she's almost 3), said, "But Daddy, they're shooting in Liberia." That's a rumor of war. I told her, "They're shooting Libya, but not in Liberia." I appreciated her concern for my safety.

It's interesting, though, that a 2-year-old is already aware of the reality of war in the world. There is always fighting going on somewhere. The news stations are never at a loss of things to report, because of these calamities that Jesus talks about here. Wars and rumors of wars, nation rises against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines.

But notice what Jesus says about these things at the end of verse 7 and at the end of verse 8. At the end of verse 7 He says, “This must take place, but the end is not yet.” And at the end of verse 8 He says, “These are but the beginning of the birth pains.” So the point here is not to get us thinking about a formula for figuring out when the end of the world is going to take place. Do you see that? The end is *not* yet. These are but the *beginning* of the birth pains.

What do birth pains communicate to a woman about the arrival of her baby? When the birth pains begin, what does that tell her? It tells her that the baby is going to be born. But it does not tell her when. Those birth pains can go on for a long time. They may lessen for a time, they may seem to disappear for awhile, and then intensify, and then lessen. And then eventually those pains will intensify and come with greater frequency, and the baby will be born. It’s an interesting analogy for Jesus to use, and there’s an important lesson here for how we should view the signs of the times.

When we read of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Libya and the Ivory Coast and other places, and when we see on the news the devastation of an earthquake near Japan and tornadoes and flooding in our own country, what do these things tell us? They tell us that the end is coming. And that’s a very important thing to be reminded of. They do not, however, tell us *when* the end is coming. We’re not supposed to get out our calculators and spreadsheets and try to nail down exactly when the end is going to happen. That’s not for us to know. But we do know *that* it’s coming, and there have been these reminders down through the ages.

For the first generation of Christians, Jesus’ teaching here was very important so that they would understand that the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD was not the end. Their assumption was that the end of the temple would be the end. But Jesus is telling them, the end is not yet. These are but the beginning of birth pains.

So don’t be like Chicken Little running around saying, “The sky is falling” every time there’s a war or a natural disaster or your political party loses. We shouldn’t be alarmed. We shouldn’t be fearful. And we shouldn’t assume that any particular set of calamities is an indication of the very end.

What we should do, rather, is be reminded again and again that the end *is* coming, and we need to be ready. We need to make sure nobody leads us astray. We need to be on guard. We need to persevere to the end, as verse 13 says. And we need to be ready to meet our Maker, for on that day we will all be judged.

Your life will be examined, and it will give clear evidence as to whether you are trusting in Christ or not. For those who repent of sin and trust in Jesus, there will be forgiveness and a transformed life. That transformed life will be evidence on the last day that you are in Christ, and you will be received into His presence. But for those who do not repent and believe, but continue in sin, that, too, will be abundantly clear. Those individuals will be cast out of God's presence eternally.

This brings us back again to the point of last week's sermon regarding hypocrisy and true devotion. As the end approaches (we don't know when, but we know it's coming), are you just playing the church game, or are you a true follower of Jesus? I can tell you for certain that as the end approaches, it will become clearer and clearer who the fake Christians are. As false teachers arise, as calamities come upon the earth, as persecution ravages the church, those who have been merely going through the motions of Christianity will depart. They will be led astray by false teachings of some kind. They will deny Christ in order to avoid persecution. And it will be easier and easier to discern who the true believers are.

I pray this morning that you are ready for the end of the world. Whenever it may come (possibly soon, or possibly a long time from now), I pray that you will be ready. Repent today of your hypocrisy. Repent of your sinful ways. Put all pretense aside, and humble yourself to rest wholly on the righteousness of another. Jesus Christ is our only hope of righteousness, but we cannot have His righteousness if we continue under the illusion that we have a righteousness of our own. Prepare for the end, friends, by getting right with God today. Repent of your unrighteousness, and put your hope in the righteousness of Christ.