

Main Idea: In Mark 13 Jesus made several predictions that we need to know. Specifically, in Mark 13:9-23 He told His disciples to be on guard for three inevitable challenges.

- I. Danger is coming (9-13).
 - A. Jesus identifies the sources.
 1. There will be religious opposition (9a).
 2. There will be political opposition (9b).
 3. There will be family opposition (12).
 4. There will be universal opposition (13).
 - B. Jesus identifies the reason (9, 13).
 - C. Jesus identifies our responsibilities.
 1. We are to be His witnesses (9b-10).
 2. We are to depend on the Holy Spirit (11).
 3. We are to stand firm to the end (13).
 - II. Desolation is coming (14-20).
 - A. Jesus said Daniel’s prophecy would be fulfilled (14).
 - B. Jesus prepared His followers with practical instructions.
 1. Flee to the mountains (14).
 2. Don’t try to take anything with you (15-17).
 3. Pray it won’t happen in winter (18-19).
 - C. Jesus gave a word of encouragement (20).
 1. The Lord will shorten those days.
 2. The Lord will do this for the sake of His elect.
 - III. Deception is coming (21-23).
 - A. Jesus warned about false Christs (21).
 - B. Jesus predicted they will perform convincing signs and miracles (22).
 - C. Jesus told His people to be discerning (23).
- The Bottom Line: Be on guard until He returns.

I think most people would be surprised if they knew that Jesus spoke the words we’re about to consider as we continue our series today in Mark’s gospel. If you ask the average person, “What message did Jesus preach?” The answer would be, “He preached love and forgiveness and the golden rule. He preached a message of hope and said He had come to give people eternal life.”

And indeed, He certainly did. He did preach a message of love, and exemplified that love by giving His own life as a ransom payment for sinners on the cross. And He promised that whoever believes in Him will escape eternal judgment and enjoy the joy of eternal life with Him in paradise forever.

All true. But He also said that whoever believes in Him will *suffer*. He said that *we* who know Him will suffer. In fact, He predicted plainly that before He returns to earth a second time to establish His kingdom, His people will experience unspeakable, severe tribulation on this earth.

He likens it to birth pains in verse 8. When a woman announces that she’s pregnant, what does she expect? What do we all expect? A precious baby, right? The joyful anticipation of a loving relationship with a new member in the family. All true.

But what else is coming for this woman? Birth pains. Before the joyful celebration, there will be pain.

We understand this reality, and in today’s text, Jesus uses it to teach us some things most people don’t even know He taught. And why does He want us to know? He tells us plainly. He bookends the prediction of the coming suffering with a command He repeats

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the Mark series in 2006.

twice. He says in verse 9, “But be on your guard.” And then He repeats it in verse 23, “But be on guard.”²

This is the Commander in Chief talking to His soldiers. Be on guard. Why? Because the birth pains are coming, and we must be ready. Let’s read our passage.

Scripture Reading: Mark 13:9-23

This week I received an email from a missionary who ministers in the Middle East (I’ll just use his initials, E.F., for security reasons). E.F. said this (in part):

Recently, we have been noticing a lot of disasters in the Middle East, such as the collapse of the water dams in Libya that resulted in 30K dead and missing, plus the destruction of a complete city. Also, the earthquake in Morocco resulted in 10,000 dead and injured. The military academy attack in the city of Homs, Syria, left many officers and their families dead. The civil war in Northern Sudan between the Army and the Sudanese special forces led to the death of thousands of innocent people and millions of refugees. The collapse of the economy in Lebanon devastated that country.

Hear E.F. again. “We have been noticing a lot of disasters in the Middle East.” We’ve noticed it too, haven’t we? It’s all over the news. They are fighting in Israel, and everyone is wondering, “What’s going to happen next?”

It’s the perfect time to look carefully at Jesus’ words in Mark 13. How should we think about the present world situation? What should be our posture as we live?

Be on your guard, says Jesus. Be like sentry at his post. Why? We’re going to heaven, aren’t we? And we’re going to enjoy the kingdom of God, aren’t we? Yes, if we have repented and received the Lord Jesus as our Savior. But before that happens, there will be birth pains.

It’s vital that we put this passage in its context. Mark wrote this passage for second generation Christians living in the Roman Empire. It was not easy to be a Christ-follower in those days. For instance, in AD 64 the notorious emperor Nero made Christians the scapegoat for a fire that burned Rome, which he likely set for his own entertainment. Nero tortured many believers, burning them alive to light the night sky in Rome. It’s worth noting that Nero committed suicide four years later when in the face of revolts.

Some say that Mark recorded these words of Jesus in the 50s. Others favor a later date in the 60s. It doesn’t really matter. In either case, it was a tough time to identify oneself as believer in Jesus. You might lose your job, your family, even your life.

It’s no different for many of our brothers and sisters around the globe in our day either. Listen to this report from March 2023:³

By the time you go to bed tonight, 15 Christians will die today for their faith in Jesus. Ten will be abducted.

These numbers and others (see below) paint a disturbing picture. In more than 70 countries, every day Christians are killed, imprisoned, abducted, sexually assaulted, forced into marriage or forced to leave their homes and even their countries—simply because they have chosen to follow Jesus.

In recent years, violence against Christians has reached an all-time high. Research for Open Doors’ 2023 World Watch List reveals 5,621 recorded cases of Christians killed for their faith. The actual number, however, is likely much higher. It’s extremely difficult to estimate the numbers of Christians killed for their faith. Data remains hard to come by despite Open Doors’ extensive on-the-ground networks. After all, no one is reporting when a Somalian family kills one of their own; or a Christian dies of starvation or beatings in a North Korean labor camp.

² Jesus repeats the same command a third time in verse 33.

³ <https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/stories/15-christians-killed-every-day>

Let this reality sink in. By the time we go to bed tonight, fifteen of our brothers and sisters in Christ will die for their faith in Jesus, and ten will be abducted.

How do you encourage someone to follow Christ when the truth is, choosing to do so may cost them greatly, even their very life? Mark faced this assignment when he wrote this Gospel that bears his name. He's writing to encourage people to give their allegiance to Jesus, no matter what the cost. And how does he do it?

In his Gospel, Mark presents in straight-talk fashion the amazing accomplishments of Jesus. In comparison with Matthew, Luke, and John, Mark doesn't record a lot of Jesus' teaching. He prefers to show us what Jesus did. Why? Because Jesus' life is so compelling that it speaks for itself.

And what did Jesus do? Here's what He did, as Mark sums it up in his theme verse. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)."

When you know that the Person for whom you may die already died for you, it changes everything. When you know that He actually gave His life as a ransom payment to set you free from the eternal hell you deserve, it changes everything. And when you know that death was not the end for Him, nor will it be for you, it changes everything.

So be on your guard, says Jesus to those who believe in Him. Against what? Three inevitable challenges. Jesus wants us to know that, one, **danger** is coming (9-13). Two, **desolation** is coming (14-20). Three, **deception** is coming (21-23).

I. Danger is coming (9-13).

Mark 13 is called the Olivet Discourse because Jesus delivered this teaching from the Mount of Olives, as verse 3 indicates. He spoke these words just a day or so before His crucifixion. He's already told the disciples that the cross is coming for Him. Here's what's coming for them.

Danger. What kind of danger? Look again at Jesus' predictions in verses 9-13. "But be on your guard. For **they will deliver you** over to councils, and **you will be beaten** in synagogues, and **you will stand before governors and kings** for my sake, to bear witness before them.¹⁰ And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.¹¹ And **when they bring you to trial** and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.¹² And **brother will deliver brother over to death**, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death.¹³ And **you will be hated by all** for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

But be on your guard. Notice the second person pronoun "you". It fills this section (we see "you" ten times in verses 9-23). Who is the "you?" In the initial context, Jesus is talking to Peter, James, John, and Andrew, four of the men He chose to be His apostles. He had just told them in verse 2 that the temple was going to be destroyed. They responded by asking Him two questions in verse 4. They wanted to know *when* and *what*, both questions having to do with Jesus' future kingdom plans.

But before Jesus addresses their questions, He predicts something else, namely that they will face hardship. He gives them three insights into the coming danger.

A. Jesus identifies the sources. The danger will come from four antagonists.

1. There will be religious opposition (9a). "You will be handed over to the local councils [lit. 'sanhedrins; the Great Sanhedrin was in Jerusalem, but every Israeli town had its local Sanhedrin; these were the Jewish courts] and flogged in the synagogues."

Ironic, isn't it? A synagogue was supposed to be a place of worship, but Jesus foretold that synagogues would become places of whipping.

You say, "But why would religious Jews beat fellow Jews?"

Here's why. Religion sees Jesus as a threat, and rightly so. Jesus is not simply another religious option. Since He is God Himself, He is the only option. Which means that all religions are rivals to Him.

Here's where it came to a head for this particular religion known as Judaism. Every day orthodox Jews affirm, "Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord (Deut. 6:4)." But every day, followers of Christ proclaim, "Jesus is Lord!" And that latter confession is blasphemy to the Jews, and considered worthy of death by some.

Please note that there is *certainty* in Jesus' words. "You *will* be handed over and flogged," He said. And it will be done by *religious opponents*.

But there's another antagonist. In addition to religious opposition...

2. *There will be political opposition (9b)*. "On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them (NIV)." And of course, this happened. When we read the book of Acts, we see the gospel advancing into the Roman empire, and Paul standing before powerful governors and kings like Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and there's indication he even stood before Caesar himself.

Last September, the Dutch evangelical known as Brother Andrew, died at the age of 94. He became known as "God's Smuggler" because he smuggled Bibles into communist countries. He said, "Persecution is an enemy the Church has met and mastered many times. Indifference could prove to be a far more dangerous foe." And this, "There's not one door in the world closed where you want to witness for Jesus... Show me a closed door and I will tell you how you can get in. I won't however, promise you a way to get out."⁴

In case you're wondering, "Why would civil authorities oppose Christians? Didn't Jesus teach His followers to be good citizens?" Yes, He did. But He also taught them that their ultimate allegiance belongs to Him. And sometimes that creates conflict.

For instance, every citizen of Rome had to confess "Caesar is Lord!" or else. But declaring the Lordship of Caesar was something a Christian could not do. Consequently, he suffered the *or else*.

3. *There will be family opposition (12)*. "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death."

We're often told that "blood is thicker than water." That may be true, but the blood of Christ often divides blood relatives.

If a person in Saudi Arabia announces, "I now give allegiance to Jesus the Messiah," his Muslim family will make him feel the weight of Jesus' prediction.

In Luke 12:51-53 Jesus said, "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

The truth is, if you love your family more than Jesus you cannot follow Jesus. That's what Jesus told a crowd of people who were thinking of following Him in Luke 14:25-26. He said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple."

"Your own family members will oppose you," said Jesus. Your brother may betray you. Your father may turn you in. Your kids may make the call that leads to your death. There will be family opposition.

Thankfully, He has given us a *forever family*. It's called the *ekklesia*, the church, from *ek* which means "out of" or "away from", and *kaleo* which means "to call."

⁴ <https://gracequotes.org/author-quote/brother-andrew/>

Literally, “the called out assembly.” This is who we are, beloved, a people that God has called “out of” and “away from” the world.

The church isn’t just a good idea. It’s God’s idea, and we need it for many reasons, including as place of refuge. This is why in some places in the world right now our fellow Christians are risking their lives to assemble together on the Lord’s Day. They know that in the church they are meeting with people with whom they will spend, not simply their earthly existence, but eternity! And they cherish their *forever family*.

Do you? When life gets hard, it’s a wonderful thing to know that you belong to God’s forever family. And Jesus says, it will get hard.

4. *There will be universal opposition (13)*. The NIV says, “All men will hate you because of me.” That’s strong language. *All men. Will. Hate you.*

Which raises the question, why? Why would (and does) the world hate true Christians? Jesus Himself answers that question for us.

B. Jesus identifies the reason (9, 13). He says in verse 9, “*for my sake*.” And then in verse 13, “For my name’s sake.” That’s why the world hates Christians. Because it hates Christ.

You say, “You’re crazy. The world doesn’t hate Christ. Why would the world hate Christ?” The simple answer is because He came to save us.

You say, “I don’t get it. Why would the fact that Jesus came to save us cause people to hate Him?” And the answer is because we all inherently resist the notion that we *need* a Savior. Let me illustrate.

Suppose I came into your house this afternoon and started looking around. Suppose I went to your desk, took out your checkbook and said, “You’re not spending your money the right way. You’re being selfish and careless.” And suppose I went over and pointed at your television and said, “Why are you watching *that*? God is offended by what you are watching.” What would happen? You’d be offended! You’d want to get rid of me.

Jesus came to save sinners, but therein lies our problem. Sinners don’t like to have their sin exposed. But that’s what Jesus did by His perfect life. He *exposed* our sin. And once exposed, sinners don’t want to change. But that’s what Jesus came to do, *change* us so we begin living for God rather than ourselves. And Jesus’ substitutionary death offends sinners, too. Why? Because sinners don’t want to admit they need a Savior. They’re “good” people.

Friends, this is why in Jerusalem in AD 30 many “good” people nailed Jesus to a cross. And this is why in Wheelersburg in 2023 many “good” people likewise reject Jesus. Oh, they disguise their rejection by creating their own watered down version of Jesus, but they reject the real one, the One who calls us all to repent and believe in Him.

So how should we respond to the danger? Again, Jesus tells us.

C. Jesus identifies our responsibilities. There are three of them.

1. *We are to be His witnesses (9b-10)*. Notice verse 9 (NIV), “You will stand before governors and kings *as witnesses to them*.”

Think about it. Persecution creates opportunities for witness. When a Christian is arrested and put on trial, he is forced to answer questions regarding why he is there. The result is a witness. A testimony about Christ goes forth.

Sometimes when we hear about Christians suffering incredible mistreatment in hostile countries, we may think, “Why doesn’t the Lord do something?” The fact is, He *is* doing something. He is doing exactly what He predicted in Mark 13. He is giving His followers a platform from which to witness for Him. And so, from courtrooms and prison cells in China, in North Korea, in Iran, and all around this planet, Christ is being proclaimed.

It’s happening exactly the way Jesus revealed it would happen. In verse 10 He said, “And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.” The Lord’s intent is for His

gospel to be proclaimed to all the people groups of the world. Tertullian said to his persecutors, “We multiply whenever we are mown down by you.”⁵

You say, “But we’re weak! How can we be faithful witnesses for Him in the face of such hostility?” Jesus tells us how, a second responsibility.

2. *We are to depend on the Holy Spirit (11)*. The NIV says, “Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.”

We mustn’t take this out of context. Jesus’ promise doesn’t excuse a lack of preparation for those who handle the Scriptures.

The late J. Vernon McGee tells the story about a friend of his who was in Temple, Texas to preach one Sunday morning. While traveling he ran into another preacher who happened to see him going over his notes for his sermon.

“Are you a preacher?” he asked.

“Yes,” McGee’s friend replied.

“What are you doing?” the man inquired.

“I’m going over my notes for my sermon,” was the reply.

“You mean that you prepare your sermon beforehand?”

“Of course, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. I wait until I get up there and the Spirit of God gives me a message.”

“Well, suppose the Spirit of God doesn’t give you the message immediately. What do you do then?”

“Oh, I just mess around until He does.”

To which McGee offers this insight. “Friend, I’m afraid there is a lot of messing around today. This verse is not talking about anything like that.”⁶

Rather, Jesus said the Holy Spirit would come to help God’s people give a faithful witness when persecuted. “Just open your mouth,” Jesus said. “The Spirit will help you know what to say.” And He does.

3. *We are to stand firm to the end (13)*. “But the one who endures *to the end will be saved* (ESV).” Sometimes the Bible speaks of salvation in the *past* tense (Eph. 2:8). If we are in Christ, we *have been saved* from the penalty of our sins. But other verses, like this one, speak of salvation in a *future* sense.

Those who have truly been saved will give evidence of it by persevering, by enduring, by standing true to Christ no matter what. And they *will be saved*. Passive verb. He will save them.

Brothers and sisters, our Savior said that danger is coming. And it has come, and will continue to come, for all who come to believe in Him. But He will always be with us and give us what’s needed so we can stand for Him.

Be on guard. Danger is coming. But there’s more, a second challenge.

II. Desolation is coming (14-20).

Notice verse 14, “But when you see the abomination of desolation [it could be translated, ‘the horrible thing which defiles’] standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”

You say, “What’s Jesus talking about? What’s this ‘abomination of desolation’?” What may confuse us didn’t confuse the first hearers. The four disciples talking with Jesus knew exactly what He meant. Why? Because they knew their Bibles. They knew that Jesus was quoting from the prophet Daniel in Daniel 9:27 and 11:31.

⁵ In Wiersbe, p. 155.

⁶ J. Vernon McGee, pp. 157-8.

A. Jesus said Daniel's prophecy would be fulfilled (14). Over 500 years BC Daniel recorded a prophecy indicating a person was coming who would desecrate the Temple and abolish sacrifice there.

Then in the second century BC, the ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (meaning 'illustrious') tried to stamp out Jewish religion and impose Greek religion in Israel. He offered swine on the altar in the Jerusalem temple, set up a statue of Zeus Olympus in front of the Holy Place, and ordered the Jews to worship it.

The Jewish book 1 Maccabees tells the story of what happened in Israel 150 years before Jesus came. It uses this title to refer to this abominable image.

Now Jesus uses it in Mark 13. He says it's going to happen again. He told His disciples, "When you see *the abomination that causes desolation...*" Apparently (although not all Bible scholars agree), Jesus seems to indicate that Daniel's prophecy has multiple fulfillments. Yes, it happened 150 years ago, but the abomination of desolation is going to happen again.

It almost happened in AD 40 when the Roman emperor, Caligula, a man who insisted he was god, proposed to set up his own statue in the temple in Jerusalem. His advisors pleaded with him not to do so, knowing a bloody civil war would result. Fortunately, Caligula died in AD 41 before he could carry out his egotistic plan.

But in AD 70 the prediction did come to pass. The Roman army under Titus surrounded Jerusalem. Jews from the countryside crowded into Jerusalem for protection, yet sadly, in essence, this move led to their death for they were trapped. In the end, as the Jewish historian Josephus recorded, 1,100,000 Jews perished by slow starvation and only 97,000 were taken captive. I can't read in public much of what Josephus recorded due to the graphic description of the horrid conditions, but here's a sampling:

"Then did the famine widen its progress and 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 dead bodies of the aged. The children and the young men wandered about the market places like shadows, all swelled with famine, and fell down dead wheresoever their misery seized them."⁷

In Luke's parallel account, we find additional description of the horrible holocaust that was to happen in AD 70. In Luke 21:20 Jesus declares, "When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near." That's what happened just forty years after Jesus returned to heaven.

And Luke adds this in Luke 21:23-24, "How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."

So in AD 70, Jerusalem was destroyed, including the temple and the Jews' sacrificial system. The times of the Gentiles began. In AD 70 the "abomination that causes desolation" came.

Yet sadly, it would come again. In 135 AD a statue and temple of Zeus were placed on the ruined site of the temple. And as terrible as were the events of 167 BC, 40 AD, 70 AD, and 135 AD, it appears they were but a foreshadowing of a coming final "abomination that causes desolation."

In 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul responded to a rumor that was circulating that the day of the Lord had already come (2). He told the Thessalonian Christians the rumor was wrong, and then told them something was going to happen in the world *before* the second coming of Christ. He said in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, "Don't let anyone deceive you in

⁷ Barclay, p. 311.

any way, for that day will not come until **the rebellion occurs** and **the man of lawlessness is revealed**, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that **he sets himself up in God's temple**, proclaiming himself to be God.”

Ultimately then, the “abomination that causes desolation” refers to the Antichrist, referred to here by Paul as ‘the man of lawlessness’ who will make himself known during a seven year period of time described in the book of Revelation as the Great Tribulation.

Dr. Harry Rimmer used to say, “Coming events cast their shadows before. Straight ahead lies yesterday!”⁸

Titus killed over one million Jews. The Nazis killed six million Jews in their death camps. Stalin killed twenty million. Yet apparently, the worst expression of Anti-Semitism is yet to come.

There's a little phrase in Mark 13 that may help us interpret Jesus' words. It's the simple instruction given in verse 14, “Let the reader understand.” Did Jesus say those words? Or did Mark insert them (in the ESV they are in parentheses)? What's the point of “let the reader understand”?

D. A. Carson suggests that it's the reader of Daniel that Jesus is talking about, not some future reader of His words.⁹ And while I highly respect Carson, I'm not convinced. I tend to think this statement indicates that at least some of what Jesus is telling Peter, James, John, and Andrew is for the benefit of a *future* generation of readers. This is for those who will “read” rather than “hear” these words of Jesus. To that generation Jesus' call to *get ready for desolation* would have special significance.

And how does a person *get ready* for such desolation? Thankfully, our wise and caring Savior answers that question for us in this passage.

B. Jesus prepared His followers with practical instructions. He tells His followers that when they see ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where it doesn't belong, they are to do three things.

1. *Flee to the mountains (14).* That's verse 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.” In other words, when you my followers see the Jewish temple being desecrated, get out of town! Head for the hills! You don't need that temple anyway. As the book of Hebrews indicates, it's obsolete. Jesus Himself is our temple.

2. *Don't try to take anything with you (15-17).* “Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out,¹⁶ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.¹⁷ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!”

When the Romans attacked Jerusalem in AD 70, only those who took heed to Jesus' counsel to flee to the hills survived. Those who headed for the supposed safety of the city of Jerusalem perished. History verifies that many Christians fled to Pella in Perea.¹⁰

3. *Pray it won't happen in winter (18-19).* “Pray that it may not happen in winter.¹⁹ 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.”

It's that last statement that convinces me that what happened in AD 70 is not the ultimate fulfillment of Jesus' prediction. What's happened in Jerusalem to this point is merely a foreshadowing of the coming, terrible desolation in the Great Tribulation.

⁸ Quoted in Wiersbe, p. 157.

⁹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, p. 500.

¹⁰ According to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.3

I know there are godly people whom I highly respect who disagree with what I'm about to say. That's fine, for two reasons. One, I'm not the authority. And two, neither are they. What we all need to do is search the Scriptures to answer our questions, build our answers on what the Scriptures say, remain humble and teachable, and then live in light of our biblical conclusions.

So I personally believe (and this is what our church has taught throughout its history) that Christ will take His bride (the church) out of the world before the seven year tribulation period begins (based in part on Rev. 3:10). This will happen in an event known as the "rapture" (described in 1 Thes. 4:13-18).

If that's true, if the bride of Christ will be enjoying the Bridegroom in heaven while He's pouring out His judgment on the world during the tribulation, what's the point of these instructions in Mark 13? What followers of Jesus will need them?

The book of Revelation gives us the answer. When we read the final book of the Bible, we learn that during the seven year tribulation, in spite of intense persecution, many people will come to faith in Christ, and many of these will shed their blood for Christ (Rev. 7:13-14). Jesus' words in Mark 13 will provide hope-giving, practical guidance for these "readers."

But people facing hardship need more than guidance. They need encouragement too.

C. Jesus gave a word of encouragement (20). "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." As a source of encouragement, Jesus shares these two realities.

1. *The Lord will shorten those days.* Yes, the suffering will be fierce, but it won't last forever. Something else will last forever, as we'll see next time, the Lord willing, and that is the glory of God being enjoyed by His people! And why will the Lord cut short those days?

2. *The Lord will do this for the sake of His elect.* Notice how Jesus refers to His people. He calls them "the elect." It's a beautiful, hope-giving title, and we should use it more often. John did in his letters, such as 2 John 1)("The elder, to the elect lady and her children"). Here Jesus uses it.

Who are the elect? Jesus tells us. They are those "whom the Lord has chosen." Yes, God has chosen a people for Himself. If you are a child of God, it is because *He chose you*. It's mind-boggling yet true. He chose us!

I remember the thrill of knowing that Sherry chose me. Out of all the other potential young men in the world, she set her affection on me. It's a wonderful thing to know that someone has chosen you, has chosen to love you unconditionally.

God's elect are special to Him. It's because of the elect, according to Jesus, that God will choose to cut short the days of tribulation. God's redemption is all about the elect.

Think back to eternity past. It's because of the elect, that God designed the plan of redemption, and eventually gave His Son to die.

On what basis does God choose individuals and make them part of His "elect"? Is it our merit or worth? No. Is it our choice of Him? No, sinners don't choose God, left to themselves. How then? On what basis? The answer is *grace* (2 Tim. 1:9). We're told in 2 Timothy 1:9, "Who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began."

Some shy away from this wonderful doctrine, but Jesus didn't. He used it here to encourage His disciples who would face horrible suffering and intense persecution. Yes, the so-called religious experts are going to ridicule and flog you. Yes, the civil authorities will arrest you and say you are the scum of society. Yes, your own family members will betray you and put you to death. *But know this*. You are God's *elect*! God has chosen you! No matter what the world says about you, the One who matters most

says you are His! And He will not allow you to face more than you can bear. He will cut short those days *for your sake*.

There's one more challenge. Danger. Desolation. *Deception*.

III. Deception is coming (21-23).

Jesus ends this section as He began it in verse 9, with another warning in verse 23, "But be on guard!" Not only will there be danger and desolation, but also deceivers.

A. Jesus warned about false Christs (21). "And then [note the time indicator; at the time of coming desolation] if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it."

This is reality. When crisis hits the world, people frantically look for someone to fix the problem and tend to believe anyone who promises to do so. Think of what's happening in the Middle East even today. How much more so in that coming desolation!

And Jesus says to His followers, don't believe them. There's only one Christ, and it's not them. There's no earthly ruler who can bring about world peace, no matter what they claim. And they won't just make claims, according to Jesus.

B. Jesus predicted they will perform convincing signs and miracles (22). "For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect."

Signs and wonders. That's what the prophets did, and Jesus Himself, and the apostles. But just because a person works a miracle doesn't mean he's from God. False Christs can work (and according to Jesus *will* work) miracles, too. Convincing miracles, deeds that defy human explanation, that could deceive God's elect, if possible.

So Jesus says it again, in verse 23, "But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand." Why did Jesus give these predictions to the disciples? To protect them, and us! From what? From deception.

C. Jesus told His people to be discerning (23). He revealed the truth we're considering so we won't be deceived. God's truth protects us, dear friends. But only if we know it.

For example, the car owner's manual will protect us. It tells us how much oil to put in. But if we don't read the manual, we won't know what to do when the red light blinks on the dash. We might respond, "What's that pretty red light for? Oh, it's probably just reminding me to turn on the radio."

No, it's there to warn us, so we'll fix the problem under the hood.

Brothers and sisters, we are not facing overt persecution in our country, not yet. Our enemy is using different tactics on the American church, as the following story illustrates.

"I saw in a dream that I was in the Celestial City—though when and how I got there I could not tell. I was one of a great multitude which no man could number, from all countries and peoples and times and ages. Somehow I found that the saint who stood next to me had been in Heaven more than 1,860 years.

"Who are you?" I said to him. (We both spoke the same language of heavenly Canaan, so that I understood him and he me.)

"I," said he, "was a Roman Christian; I lived in the days of the Apostle Paul, I was one of those who died in Nero's persecutions. I was covered with pitch and fastened to a stake and set on fire to light up Nero's gardens."

"How awful!" I exclaimed.

"No," he said, "I was glad to do something for Jesus. He died on the cross for me."

The man on the other side then spoke: "I have been in Heaven only a few hundred years. I came from an island in the South Seas—Erromanga. John Williams, a missionary, came and told me about Jesus, and I too learned to love Him. My fellow-countrymen killed the missionary, and they caught and bound me. I was beaten until I

fainted and they thought I was dead, but I revived. Then next day they knocked me on the head, cooked and ate me.”

“How terrible!” I said.

“No,” he answered, “I was glad to die as a Christian. You see the missionaries had told me that Jesus was scourged and crowned with thorns for me.”

Then they both turned to me and said, “What did you suffer for Him? Or did you sell what you had for the money which sent men like John Williams to tell the heathen about Jesus?”

And I was speechless. And while they both were looking at me with sorrowful eyes, I awoke, and it was a dream! But I lay on my soft bed awake for hours, thinking of the money I had wasted on my own pleasures; or my extra clothing, and costly car, and many luxuries; and I realized that I did not know what the words of Jesus meant: “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34).”¹¹

Some forms of deception are obvious, like the fraud who claims to be Jesus. Most are not so obvious yet just as dangerous, like the notion that we can follow Christ and not suffer for it. Let’s take to heart Jesus’ challenges, my friends.

The Bottom Line: Be on guard until He returns.

I would be amiss if I failed to mention that what we’ve considered this morning is not the end of the story. Jesus predicted something else, and if He allows us, we’ll gather next Sunday to ponder this wonderful prediction in verse 26. “At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.”

Jesus is coming again. And until then, be on guard.

Closing Song: #477 “*Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus*” (all four verses)

Benediction of the month: Nahum 1:7 (NIV84) “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.”

Community Group Discussion:

1. This morning we considered Jesus’ words in Mark 13:9-23. After reading the passage again, discuss what stands out most to you.
2. In verses 9-13, Jesus predicts that danger is coming. What kinds of danger, and from what sources? How does He want His followers to respond?
3. Jesus predicts that desolation is coming in verses 14-20. What type of desolation? How would these words have affected the first hearers (Peter, James, John, and Andrew)? How should they affect us? What’s the significance of the parenthesis in verse 14, “Let the reader understand”?
4. In verses 21-23 Jesus indicates that deception is coming. What kind of deception? What does Jesus mean when He says that “false Christs” are coming? What can we do for ourselves and our children to prevent deception and instill discernment?
5. Twice in today’s text Jesus gave the command, “Be on guard” (verse 9, verse 23). What does that mean in practical terms, and what are some implications for how we live this week?

¹¹Tan, P. L. (1996, c1979). *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations : [a treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers]*. Garland TX: Bible Communications.