

Be On Guard - Part 1

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[0 : 0 0] Our scripture reading this morning is from the book of Mark, chapter 13. And if you're visiting with us, it's been our habit to go through the book of Mark these past few months.

And this week and next week, the two sermons kind of go together. So this is our first week in chapter 13, and next week we'll finish chapter 13.

We're going to read from verses 1 to 27. Mark 13.

And as Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, Look, teacher, what wonderful stones and wonderful buildings. And 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. And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, Tell us, when will these things be?

[1 : 0 5] And what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished? And Jesus began to say to them, See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, I am he.

And they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place. But the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.

There will be earthquakes in various places. There will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. 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. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.

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.

[2 : 0 0] 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. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake.

But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 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.

[3 : 12] 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 from the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the earth.

Amen. This is God's word. Amen. So Mark chapter 13 is a chapter that you can lose yourself in. It's the most difficult chapter in this gospel.

And it's one of the most difficult chapters in all the Bible. And I think the right way for us to read this passage this morning is not to say, I'm going to stay here until all my questions are answered.

But it's to say, what is most important? What is Jesus' main point in this passage to his disciples and to you and I? Because I think we can understand that, even if we still have questions.

[4 : 19] And we can understand that without needing to understand everything Jesus says and what we just read. And that's how we can keep from getting lost. And so that's our goal this morning. It's not to answer every question.

You know, we can talk about this after the service if you want to. But the goal this morning is just to ask, what is most important here? And I think the most important thing for us to see in this passage is Jesus is teaching his disciples.

And he's teaching you and I how to live in the in-between. You know, Jesus knows that he's about to go to the cross. And he knows that he's about to leave his disciples. And so he's preparing them for what life will be like in the time between his ascending into heaven and his returning back to earth.

And how they're supposed to live is really simple. He says, be on guard. That's that's the point of the passage. And you know, that's the point of the passage because of how often Jesus says it.

He says in verse nine, be on your guard. Verse 23, be on your guard. Verse 33, be on your guard. Keep awake. Verse 35, stay awake. Verse 37, stay awake.

[5 : 28] So be on guard. It's the drumbeat of this whole passage. It's what it's what holds everything that Jesus says together. And so that's going to be our focus this morning.

And it'll also be our focus next week. Next week, we're also going to talk about being on guard, but looking at the second half of the chapter. But before we talk about what it means to be on guard, and that's what we want to do most this morning.

Before we talk about that, we've got to set the scene because there's a lot of strange things going on here. Right. The abomination of desolation. What is that? And you have to say something about what all that's talking about before you can understand what Jesus means when he says, be on guard.

So what we're going to do is for the next few minutes, I'm going to ask, what is Jesus talking about in this passage? And then I want to offer two ways that Jesus teaches us here to be on guard.

What does it actually mean practically? So first, what is Jesus talking about here? And the right way to enter into this passage is to see that everything that Jesus says in chapter 13 is a response to a very concrete question that the disciples give him at the beginning of the passage.

[6 : 40] So, you know, this opens with Jesus. He's standing at the temple steps. He's just leaving the temple for the last time in his life. He's standing at the temple steps, and his disciples are marveling at it.

And they say, look at this wonderful building. Isn't it amazing? And Jesus doesn't marvel. He says, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.

And we talked a couple weeks ago about the temple, whenever Jesus cleansed the temple. We talked about its majesty and its grandeur. I mean, the temple was, it was the biggest temple in the ancient world. It was, the whole complex was a mile in circumference.

It was, you could fit dozens of football fields inside of it. One stone, one stone that they found at the temple complex was 42 feet long, 14 feet in depth, and 11 feet in height.

All of that to say, this was a temple that was meant to last forever. And so when Jesus looks at his disciples and says, one day all this is coming down, that stuck with them.

[7 : 44] And they weren't going to let that go away easily. And so in the next scene, in verses 3 and 4, they go to the Mount of Olives. And Mark makes a point of pointing out that when you're sitting on the Mount of Olives, you're looking over at the temple.

So they're sitting on the Mount of Olives, they look over at the temple, and they say to Jesus, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?

In other words, Jesus, when is the temple going to come down? You just told us that. When will it happen? And that's the question that Jesus is answering in Mark chapter 13.

And we can look back and we can say, we already know Jesus was completely correct in his prophecy. Because in 70 AD, the temple in Jerusalem did fall.

Titus, the Roman emperor, he laid siege to Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands of people were trapped inside the city. Many people starved. The Roman soldiers invaded the city, killed everyone they could find.

[8 : 47] And those who survived were carted off into slavery. It was the most awful experience the Jewish people have ever been through until the Holocaust.

And you could say that everything that Jesus talks about in chapter 13 is about the fall of Jerusalem. So let me give you just one example. In verse 14, one of the strangest things that Jesus says.

He says, when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be, let those who are in Judea flee the mountains. Now that phrase, abomination of desolation, that's a familiar phrase to Jews because Daniel uses it in the Old Testament.

In Daniel chapter 11, Daniel prophesies an abomination of desolation that came to pass a few hundred years later in 168 BC. And what Daniel was talking about was a king, a Greek king named Antiochus who came.

And he conquered Jerusalem. And in order to insult the Jewish people, he set a statue of Zeus up in the temple. And that was the abomination of desolation.

[10 : 03] And so when Jesus is using that same language, he's saying, listen, that kind of thing is going to happen again here. And when you see that, when you see the abomination of desolation, you need to run.

You need to get out of there. And what's interesting is there's a good bit of evidence that just before 70 AD, there was a mass exodus of Christians from the city of Jerusalem.

Maybe because they saw this prophecy and they knew to get out of the city. So my point here, I know this is almost like a lecture, but I have to make this point for us to understand what Jesus is saying to us.

My point here is that a lot of chapter 3 is about the fall of Jerusalem, something that happened for us thousands of years ago now. But here's where things get a little complicated.

And here's where people start talking about the end times. Because there's a couple things that Jesus talks about in this passage that's really hard to fit into our understanding of what happened in 70 AD.

[11 : 04] So, for example, when Jesus says, in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of creation that God created until now and never will be.

Did that happen during the fall of Jerusalem? Maybe, maybe, but it seems hard to believe that that was the worst thing that's ever happened in the world. And then when you get to verse 26, and Jesus says that we will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.

That didn't happen in 70 AD. So what's hard about this passage is Jesus is talking about events which, from our perspective, have already happened, the fall of Jerusalem.

But he also seems to be talking about things that haven't yet happened. Things like the greatest suffering the world has ever known and Jesus returning on the clouds. And what's going on here?

And I'm going to cheat. I'm going to cheat here because I think there's a good reason why Jesus talks the way he does in this passage. But I've got to go somewhere else for the answer. You know, if you read the Gospels, if you ever read a Gospel story and it doesn't make sense to you, one thing you can do is go see if that same story is told in a different Gospel in a way that makes it more clear.

[12 : 21] And so in the book of Matthew, Matthew tells this whole passage just like we read it. But there's one crucial difference. Whenever the disciples ask Jesus that question, when will these things be, Matthew tells us that the disciples actually asked not one but two questions.

The first question was, when will these things be? When will the temple fall? But then the disciples asked another question, which was, what will be the sign of your coming at the end of the age?

Now, why would the disciples ask those two questions at the same time? The reason is because, I'm almost certain the reason is because disciples, from where they were standing, the fall of the temple was such a cataclysmic event that for them, they thought, when the temple falls, that's going to be the end of the world.

So when is the temple going to fall and when is Jesus going to come back? For them, it's the same question. But Jesus knows that it's two different events, but he's still answering both questions. And that explains why Jesus seems to shift back and forth between talking about the fall of the temple, but also talking about something that's going to happen much further in the future.

Here's what we can say with certainty, though. What do you do with all that confusion? We're not going to get lost this morning. Here's what we can say with certainty. Whether in any given point in this passage, Jesus is talking about the fall of Jerusalem, or whether he's talking about the return of the sun, what we can say is, in everything Jesus says in this passage, he is preparing his disciples for what life will be like in the time between his leaving and his returning.

[14 : 09] So maybe the abomination of desolation was talking about 70 AD, and maybe it's also previewing something that's going to happen at the end of time.

We can talk about that in a different time period, but right now I want to focus on what's most important. What is Jesus' message to his disciples in the in-between? What is his message to us in the in-between?

And his message is, be on guard. This is the command that he gives them until he returns. And because it's about the time period between his ascending into heaven and his returning, it's for us as well.

So what I want to do the next few minutes is to say, what does it mean to be on guard? What is Jesus telling us about being on guard? And the first thing he tells us to be on guard about is, he says, be on guard against false signs.

Be on guard against false signs. You know, when the disciples ask Jesus, when will these things be, do you notice they ask a more specific question?

[15 : 10] They say, what will be the sign when these things are accomplished? So the disciples are looking for a sign. How will we know that these things are about to happen? How will we know that the temple is going to fall?

What do we need to look for? And ironically, the first thing that Jesus does is he warns them against signs. He warns them against signs. And so he says, he says, you're going to have false prophets come.

And they're going to come in my name. They're going to lead people astray. Now, false prophets have always been a danger of the church. So his point here, though, is there's going to be false prophets who come, and they're going to take advantage of the fact that you're looking for Christ.

And they're going to say, here is the Christ. There he is. And Jesus says, beware. Be on guard against those. But what I want you to really notice is verse 7 and 8. Jesus says, when you hear of wars and when you hear of rumors of wars, do not be alarmed.

This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places. There will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

[16 : 18] Now, I don't know about you, but when I read that, that all sounds very apocalyptic. That sounds like end times talk to me. But when you really read what Jesus is saying here, he's actually saying the opposite.

He says, when you hear of rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Look, because the end is not yet. When you hear of wars and when you hear of rumors of wars, the end is not yet.

In other words, Jesus is saying there's going to be a tendency when things happen on the national stage. When you have wars and rumors of wars, you're going to think to yourself, maybe this is the sign.

And Jesus is warning against that. He's going to say, you're going to see wars and it's not yet. That's not the sign that the end is here. And then he says, at least, at the very most, these things are merely birth pains.

Now, when he calls them birth pains, he's not doing it to say, well, that lets you know that it's almost about to happen. He's actually downplaying it. He's saying these are just birth pains and nothing more.

[17 : 24] Paul uses the same imagery in Romans 8, where Paul says in about 50 AD, he says, the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers the pain of labor.

He's talking about waiting for God to make all things new. So Paul's saying from 32 AD, the earth has been experiencing birth pains, waiting for God to come and to make all things new.

And that's what Jesus is saying here. He's saying, beware of false signs. Beware of the temptation to see in every major event in the world a sign that the end is here.

Jesus, when he talks about the end times, almost always his emphasis is not on our ability to predict it, but it's on the unknowability of his return, of when it will happen.

Because Jesus says, we'll see this next week, he'll say, not even I know when the end is going to come. And, you know, there's a lot of people today, probably more than ever in the past few decades, a lot of people in the past few decades have tried to be prepared for Jesus' return by trying to predict when it will happen.

[18 : 44] And you've seen the charts. You've seen the big charts that the preacher will pull out, and he'll be so specific about when we'll know that the end is definitely here. And they seem so confident so often.

We know, we know when the end is going to come. Let me just say, when Jesus talks about being prepared here, he's not talking about figuring out the date on the calendar.

He's talking about our character. He's saying, will you be ready when it happens? Will your heart be on guard when it happens? You know, you could think about it like this.

It's character before calendar for Jesus. Will you be on guard? Will your heart be ready when Jesus returns? Be on guard against false signs. And then there's one more thing that Jesus warns us to be on guard against in this passage.

He says, be on guard against losing hope. Be on guard against losing hope. You know, one thing that Jesus makes absolutely clear in this passage, especially in the first few verses, is that before Jesus returns, his church is going to suffer.

[19 : 57] They're going to suffer. In fact, my understanding of verses 5 to 13, that first section, is that Jesus is talking about the whole time period between his leaving and his coming back to earth.

And he's telling his disciples, suffering in the church is not just going to happen. It's going to be the status quo. This church will be deeply acquainted with grief until Jesus returns.

And if you think about it, you know that came to pass. That was certainly true of the disciples. You know this fact that as far as we know from history, every single disciple that remained with Jesus was executed at some point in his life.

The only exception, besides Judas, was John who was exiled to an island of Patmos. These men suffered as a result of Christ.

And what Jesus is doing in this passage is he's telling them ahead of time, this is going to happen. Don't be surprised when it happens. Don't lose hope because I've told you ahead of time. You know, a lot of times when we walk through suffering, when you go through deep suffering, isn't it the case that so often you lose sight of everything else?

[21 : 08] And your suffering is what you feel the most acutely. And it's easy to forget what is true sometimes when you're in deep suffering. It's easy to forget that suffering can have a meaning.

It's easy to forget that something good can come on the other side of suffering when you're in the midst of it. And what Jesus is telling his disciples here is for the church, suffering always goes hand in hand with hope.

Suffering is never without hope. And one of the reasons that's true, he gets really specific here, one of the reasons that that's true is because he says the church's suffering is actually the way that God is going to spread the gospel.

Paradoxical as that is, the church's suffering is going to be the way that God spreads the gospel. And you see that in verses 9 and 10. He says, 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, and bear witness before them.

And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And God says here, My will is for the gospel to go out to all nations. And he tells the disciples, The way that that's going to happen sometimes is through your suffering.

[22 : 22] You're going to be beaten. But in the midst of that, you're going to be dragged in front of people where you will be able to give your testimony in a way that you were never able to otherwise, aside from that.

The best illustration of this is the book of Acts. You know, some people, when they talk about Mark 13, they say that Acts, the book of Acts is a commentary on Mark 13.

Because everything that Jesus says here, especially in verses 5 to 13, you see in the book of Acts. So, for example, you remember Stephen? Stephen was, he wasn't even an elder at his church.

He was a deacon. He was a deacon, and Stephen was up there preaching the gospel. And I didn't mean to insult you there, Aaron. I know you're a deacon. He was a deacon.

Stephen was a deacon. And Stephen is preaching the gospel, and Stephen gets executed while he's preaching the gospel. And, you know, you look at that, and you say, he was our great hope for our church, and the authorities have killed him.

[23 : 19] Saul approved of his death. But through Stephen's execution, something really strange happened. All the Christians fled Jerusalem, and that meant that the gospel went out all over the world in a way that it would not have had Stephen not been executed.

And it doesn't justify Stephen's execution, but it does say Jesus was able to do something amazing through that. He was able to bring the gospel out of a situation of deep suffering from his church.

When you see suffering in the church, you also have to say, what is God doing here? Because God works in the suffering of his church. And then another reason to be on guard against losing hope is, Jesus says, is that when the church suffers, you don't lose hope because God is with you.

So you see in verse 11, 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 to you in that hour, for it's not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

The disciples had confidence. They should have had confidence. They had confidence that in those moments where every word was a matter of life and death and every word counted, they knew that they didn't have to depend solely on themselves, but that God was actually with them.

[24 : 44] And in a way that they may not have understood, he was speaking through them. And that's one of the promises that Jesus gives his church. Remember before he ascends into heaven, it says, lo, I am with you always to the ends of the age.

That's a promise that he makes to his church that whatever kind of suffering our church goes through, whatever kind of persecution the church at large goes through, God does not leave his people. In fact, he gives them exactly what they need when they're going through their suffering.

Let me close with this. A last reason not to lose hope is because suffering is not the end. Jesus told his disciples in this passage, and we'll look at this more next week.

He told his people that he's coming back. So the cry of the church for 20 centuries has always been, come Lord Jesus.

In the midst of suffering, come Lord Jesus. And that is our hope. It's not just that God is with us in the suffering, but it's that in Jesus' resurrection, we see the promise that death is not final.

[25 : 57] In fact, Paul calls all the suffering he went through a light momentary trial compared to the kind of life that God is going to bring out of his church in the future, when he returns.

And so our great prayer this morning, our great confession this morning is that Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. And our prayer this morning is come Lord Jesus.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you for your goodness to us. We ask that when we face suffering, when we face trials, that you would help us to see that our suffering is not final, that you can do marvelous things, even in the midst of pain, even in the midst of trials.

We pray for your church across the world. that wherever your people suffer, we pray that the gospel would go out, just as you've promised. We ask all this in your son's name. Amen.