

Be Alert

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[0 : 0 0] And turn in the Bibles to page 826 to the passage from Mark's Gospel. This week is the middle of three sermons on Mark chapter 13 in what's called the season of Advent leading up to Christmas when we anticipate Jesus coming at Christmas as well as his return at the end of history.

So on page 826 is the passage from Mark. And let me pray for us. God, our Father, speak to us from your words now we pray. That we'll not only understand it but also believe it and obey it.

Looking forward without fear to your return. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. They say that our society is becoming more and more a society of fear.

Fear. A former Prime Minister of our country has accused the current government from his own party of engendering fear in our society. Fear of terrorism.

Fear of bombs. Fear of bird flu. Somebody I know has decided that as the first outbreak of bird flu in Australia he'll stop using public transport. Fear of redundancy.

[1 : 1 9] Fear of loneliness. Fear of breakdowns in relationship. Fear of health breakdowns. Fear of fear. Significant fear in our lives. And we've often seen, not least in this year, pictures of extreme fear from other places in the world.

The fear of people fleeing Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans earlier in the year. The fear of people escaping the devastation of northern Pakistan after the earthquake.

Fear of people around the Indian Ocean last Boxing Day. There's that famous picture from years and years ago of that Vietnamese girl during the Vietnam War running naked, screaming down that dirt track, terribly afraid of the napalm strikes and other bombs and so on, and fighting around her.

It's not a new thing, fear. I remember it visiting Pompeii south of Rome years ago and seeing, in effect, the lava-coated skeleton, I guess now, of somebody who was trying to flee the lava flowing from Vesuvius in 79 AD when Pompeii was destroyed.

A body almost running but just covered in lava. No doubt a person terribly afraid at that time. Fear.

[2 : 3 8] Jesus is answering questions in this chapter about the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs of those events that he himself has predicted at the very beginning of this chapter, which we saw last week.

He's warned the disciples in the verses we saw last week that during the time described there will be deception, attempts to lead Christians astray, there will be persecution as Christians are brought to trial and perhaps put to death for their faith, there will be wars and earthquakes and famines.

Pictures of fear, which are heightened in this week's passage, as he now becomes more specific in answer to those questions from his original prediction.

Rather than more general things which we saw last week, we now see Jesus focusing in particular in these verses on the actual destruction of Jerusalem and its temple that he predicted.

And the scene is full of fear and the key verb, the key command or action that is wanted and demanded in this whole paragraph comes in the opening verse, verse 14.

[3 : 49] Flee. Flee. And yet, as we'll see, though this is a scene of fear and terror, and though the major command is flee, run for your lives, there is nonetheless underneath it a calm note of reassurance at the same time.

Fear and yet reassurance. Years ago when I was an actuary working for National Mutual in the city, I had the job for a time of being the fire warden on our floor, and I was issued with a plastic helmet and a bright armband.

And my job, not that we ever had a panic, but we did have a couple of rehearsals from time to time, my job was to tell people not to panic, but to flee and take off their high heel shoes.

I must say, I think I did my job very well. The trigger for fleeing here is the description in verse 14.

When you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be, let the reader understand, then those in Judea must flee.

[5 : 03] The language looks to us to be a little bit cryptic. But let the reader understand, is Jesus saying, think about this, you actually know what I'm talking about.

He's referring to the destruction of Jerusalem's temple in the heart of the city of his day. In particular, to the Holy of Holies within that temple, a place where no one could go apart from the high priest once a year with the blood of the atonement sacrifice on the day of atonement.

The desolating sacrilege is an odd expression, very distinctive, but it's an expression that comes in the Old Testament. That's let the reader understand, know your Bibles and know what I'm talking about.

And in the book of Daniel, where that expression occurs a few times, it's referring to the desolation or abomination of the temple by some act of pagan or idolatrous intrusion into the center of the Jerusalem temple.

Daniel was the prophet of 550 or so BC, in the time of the exile when the temple had been destroyed, acknowledging that it would, as it did, be rebuilt.

[6 : 14] But at some later time, it would be abominated by something where it ought not to be in its heart. And most people recognize that in Daniel's prophecy, we find some fulfillment in the years well before Jesus, 168 BC.

When a man ruling the area by the name of Antiochus IV, brought into the temple and set up an altar, not to the God of the Old Testament, but to Zeus, Greco-Roman chief God.

And not only built an altar to Zeus in the heart of the Jerusalem temple, but there sacrificed pigs, unclean animals in Jewish eyes. The most offensive thing that you could imagine, a pagan altar sacrificing this unclean animal.

And at the same time, he outlawed Jewish worship entirely and made it a capital offense. Now, at that time, there was partly an act of God's judgment against God's people, but it brought about an uprising that cleansed the temple.

The temple itself still stood. It was cleansed by, in the period of the Maccabean uprising, and restored, in a sense, spiritually, to be a place of Jewish worship as it was up until the time of Jesus, although he's made condemnatory statements about the practices that go on in and around the temple, leading up to this passage in Mark 13.

[7 : 39] Jesus, then, when he uses this expression, desolating sacrilege, and let the reader understand, is saying that, to an extent, history will repeat itself. Just as God had brought about an act of judgment, 168 BC, that brought about a sort of, a bit of a spiritual uprising in response to that, now God will act in judgment again against his people and against the temple.

But this time, the temple will be destroyed. And not one stone, big though they were, will be kept upon another. In the verses at the beginning of this chapter we saw last week, this time, Jesus is saying, God's judgment will be more fierce than it was 160 or 70 years before.

Now Jesus is speaking these words just before his death, the week before Good Friday, before his execution. It's about 30 or perhaps 33 AD. In 66 AD, within the lifetime of his disciples, for most of them anyway, the Jews began to revolt against Rome, which was the power occupying Israel-Palestine of the day.

The Romans had taken over from the Greeks in 63 BC and had exercised a much stronger rule over the area. And that's why Pontius Pilate is around when Jesus is crucified.

He's the Roman governor or prefect or procurator at the time. But in the end, the tensions between the Jews and the Romans grew more and more in the years following Jesus to the extent that in 66 AD, the Jews began to get a little bit more antsy and began to sort of fight back more against the Romans.

[9 : 24] And they began to sort of besiege Jerusalem, the Romans that is, and the Jews within began to fight back. And it culminated with, in the end, a siege that led to over a million deaths and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 AD, when the Roman general Titus, to be the emperor, came in to the city then in ruins.

The desolating sacrilege, where it ought not to be, clearly referring to something in the centre of the temple, could refer to a couple of things in that period.

In the time of the siege, many of the Jews within Jerusalem were what are called zealots. That is, they were prepared to fight by the sword in order to conquer Rome and bring about the restoration of God's kingdom.

And many of those zealot groups had leaders who claimed or sort of claimed to be Messiah-type figures. Stay with us, fight. We will win. And this is the Messiah, in effect, to conquer Rome and their forces.

But in the course of the zealots occupying Jerusalem in this siege, lots of compromises were made. There were murders conducted actually in the temple precincts.

[10 : 41] There were criminals who actually lived and dwelt in the temple itself. Indeed, they anointed a man as high priest who was a complete idiot and ought not to have been able to make sacrifices in that area.

So any of those sorts of things could well be described as a desolating sacrilege that it's not actually preserving the purity of the Jerusalem temple and its sacrificial system.

It also could refer to the end of this time when Jerusalem's destroyed in 70 AD and the Roman general Titus marches into its ruins smouldering with the Roman standard into the very centre of the temple.

All of that is in effect a desolating sacrilege of the Jerusalem temple. Jesus is warning his followers precisely of those events.

And I know that while some of us are not very excited about history really and events that are sort of only alluded to or referred to here say in the New Testament, that's what Jesus has in mind when he's talking about the destruction of the temple.

[11 : 41] It's worth our while knowing of some of the events that actually did happen 30, 35 years after his prediction. When this happens, Jesus says, flee.

Not just those in Jerusalem but all of those in the whole of Judea in the area around about the province of which Jerusalem was the capital. Flee. It's a bigger event than just Jerusalem.

And the tradition has it that many Christians actually did flee across the Jordan River to modern day Jordan to a city called Pella. Those who stayed behind were almost all killed in the siege or in the final fall of Jerusalem in 70.

Indeed, as things got tighter, the zealots occupying Jerusalem for bad people to flee from about the spring of 68 AD for the last nearly two years of the fall of the siege and fall of Jerusalem.

No longer, you see, is Jerusalem a refuge for God's people like the Psalms often say. Now it's abandoned by God's people and it's abandoned by God himself. There is an urgency to the fleeing in these verses.

[12 : 51] Verses 15 and 16 make that clear. The one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away. Houses, of course, had flat roofs. On top of the roof, people would do work.

They'd dry clothes or wash clothes. They'd sleep at night if it was a hot night. They'd pray there and so on. The outside, the steps to the roof were outside the house, not inside.

And here we're being told that if you're on the roof, don't go down the steps back inside to collect all your possessions. Run for your life. It's the sort of thing we see when someone's house is on fire or bushfires coming.

Don't go and get stuff. Get out. That's the urgency captured in verse 15. Verse 16, the same. The one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. You'd be out working in your shirt sleeves or whatever and time of fleeing.

Don't go and get your cloak, your sort of blanket that you'd wrap around as a coat in the early morning or late evening, the blanket that you'd sleep under. Don't go and get it. There's no time. Run for your life is what Jesus is saying in verses 15 and 16.

[13 : 55] And that sense of urgency is compounded in verses 17 and 18 when we realize how difficult it will be for some people, some hindrances to fleeing quickly.

For example, if you're pregnant or nursing a child, verse 17 says, woe to such people, not because they're bad things to be pregnant or have a child, but it will make fleeing so slow and so hard.

And pray that it won't be in winter, verse 18 says, because in winter travel is harder. There may well be frosts and ice, even snow up in the hills around Jerusalem.

And indeed, the little streams and rivers will be much more, much fuller with water, harder to cross as you flee. That's how desperate and fearful this scene and description is.

Now, in case there's any doubt in his disciples' mind about the seriousness with which Jesus is addressing this situation, he adds verse 19. This makes it an even more frightful, fearful event.

[14 : 58] Jesus says in verse 19, for in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be.

Literally, Jesus is saying this will be the worst human suffering in world history. Well, may we ask, is this worse than the Great War? Is this worse than the Holocaust of the Second War?

Certainly, in percentage of population killed, it is extremely high, well over a million people for just this area and this relatively small city of the day. But Jesus' language is the language of Old Testament prophecy and he's saying in effect that it's not just a human tragedy that is being described here.

This is the hand of God in judgment at work and that's why it's most fearful. That's why the suffering is worse because God is judging his people and punishing them for their sins and as we're told several times in the scriptures, it is a fearful or a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And yet, though the scene described to this point is full of fear and panic, fleeing with urgency without turning back, there is, however, a note of reassurance and restraint in the verses that follow.

[16 : 32] In verse 20, if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved. But for the sake of the elect whom he chose, he has cut short those days.

That is, there's a note of restraint because God's in charge. It is not just pandemonium because Jews are fighting Romans and people are dying. The hand of God is sovereign and in control.

And the destruction, the death, the suffering, though great, is restrained. The days are shortened by God's care for his chosen ones, the elect, as they're called, at the end of verse 20.

That is, God, in the midst of all of this fierce judgment, is protecting his own faithful people, cutting short the days. He's in charge.

He's sovereign. This note of restraint in verse 20 shows also then a note of mercy. God's judgment is fierce.

[17 : 38] It is fearful. But it's not total. It's restrained by his mercy for his people. Unlike, for example, the Singaporean justice system, which has no room for mercy or clemency.

If there's no mercy, then no one will be saved, is what verse 20 is saying. But as fearful as God's judgment is, and it is, a rich vein of mercy runs through it.

There's assurance here for the disciples. Dare to flee and flee with urgency. No turning back. This is a desperate situation. Yet God is sovereign and in control.

and he protects his people for eternity. And it remains true today, though our circumstances are different. Whatever we're afraid of, we ought not to be.

For God remains sovereign and our destiny is in his hands. Even in the turmoil of our world, God's in control.

[18 : 50] Hard though sometimes it is to see how that is. And just as last week with the threat of leading Christians astray to give up their faith, so too here that threat of deception looms large.

Verse 21. If anyone says to you at that time, look, here is the Messiah or look, there he is, do not believe it. False Messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens to lead astray, if possible, the elect.

Remember, this is a particular circumstance. That is, the end days of Jerusalem's temple leading up to 70 AD.

In those four years of the Jewish revolt, the Zealots tried to convince the Jews that they would win against Rome. Indeed, they had initial victories that may have given them some hope.

and they claim that in defeating Rome, which we will do, the Messiah is amongst us. And there were many competitions or competing voices, rather, for who this Messiah may be.

[19 : 55] Jesus is saying, don't be misled. Don't be misled into staying and fighting, thinking that you'll overthrow Rome with the help of some Messiah who's there. You won't. Flee. Don't be misled.

Don't be deceived by false claims, false prophets and false messiahs. Even though, as some of them will do in verse 22, they'll perform signs and wonders or omens.

That is, it won't just be people mouthing words. Some of them will actually produce a miracle. They may heal someone or produce some sign that will draw attraction to them as though somehow they've got divine power on their fingertips.

Jesus says, don't be misled. That's a word for us to pause about. Because even today there are people who perform some form of miracle or healing or whatever it is, some sign, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they're backed by God.

Test the spirits, we're told. Be aware of such false claims. Deuteronomy 13, 100,000 and 500 years before all Jesus' words makes us aware of such things.

[21 : 04] So too in Jesus' day, so too in our own. Don't be misled. Don't be deceived. And Jesus finishes this little section of this address in verse, chapter 13 by saying, but be alert.

As we saw last week a couple of times, be alert but not alarmed. For I've already told you everything, he says at the end of verse 23. Not that he's told them everything about everything, that they know all there is to know about anything.

Jesus is saying, I've told you all you need to know. I've given you sufficient for the days ahead so that you'll endure them with faith and trust in God.

He's told them all they need to know about the events of the future. Not everything about the future but sufficient about the future. And when he says, don't be misled if someone says, here is the Messiah or look, there he is, you can rest assured that God will protect you.

They're trying to mislead the elect but we've already just been told in verse 20 God's protecting the elect. You can be trusting in God's providence even in the midst of the turmoil of the fall of Jerusalem.

[22 : 17] And indeed when the Messiah does come as we'll see next week in verse 26 everyone will know. They will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. We won't need someone to tell us there's Jesus coming.

We will know. Everyone will know. We won't be misled on that final day. Now remember these verses are particularly focused on the events leading up to 70 AD.

Long time ago. The warnings are for those who would endure those events. But that doesn't mean we just say well this is an irrelevant part of scripture because it's all been and gone.

There are still lessons for us to learn here. Not in the sense of applying when something bad happens flee but rather in the bigger picture of what's being said here about God about our eternal destiny the end of the world and so on.

As we'll see next week the passage moves more into the end of history type stuff. But there are certainly some key things about God that are worth reminding ourselves from here today.

[23 : 21] God is sovereign. God orders this world. He restrains events in history. He allows things to happen but he never ever is compromised in his sovereignty his rule of this universe.

And even though we might be in the midst of a world of fear and turmoil and panic and confusion God is sovereign. He's bringing about his purposes.

We can trust him. Nothing can separate us from him or from his love in Christ. We're to trust him and not fear our world for we know God is responsible and sovereign over all things.

Secondly God is judge. He remains a holy God who judges sin and he will not condone forever the sin of this world or his people.

And so the events of 70 AD like so many events of the Old Testament leading up to this time are events of real judgment by God but warnings of the final judgment day when Jesus will return.

[24 : 30] God will act and God will judge. And our response is to be repentant of our sins. The opening words of Jesus remember in this very gospel the kingdom of God is at hand repent and believe the good news.

Where to turn from our sins so that we can face the future without fear confident in God's mercy to us. And that's the next point that God is merciful.

Yes he is a judge he judges sin but he never compromises that judgment and holiness by letting people off and yet he remains a merciful God at the same time.

You see at every point in history leading up to here God's judgment has been real sometimes ferocious fearful but always tempered by mercy for if God had never brought mercy into the equation then there would have been no history after Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden.

The flood would never have kept alive Noah and his wife and family or would have drowned. And at various points of God's judgment through history none would be saved none would live.

[25 : 47] Judgment would have been absolute and deserved by all of humanity in this world. But at every time when God judges there is mercy undeserved mercy as some are left some are kept alive by the mercy of God.

And the time in history where we see the full force of God's judgment unleashed is on the day a few days after these words were spoken when the Son of God hung on a cross and died my God my God why have you forsaken me?

Undeserved punishment then by the only sinless one but all the judgment of God against sin taken by him so that you and I through faith in him may escape such judgment and receive God's mercy.

None of us deserves God's mercy if we did it would not be mercy but mercy is to be sought with empty hands and humble hearts from a God who is judge but from a God who is merciful and we thank God that he's merciful for otherwise we have no future at all but also in this passage we see that God prepares his people for the future see Jesus care for his disciples is not to abandon them when he dies in a few days after this but to give them sufficient to understand the circumstances that will confront them in the years to come so they live by faith trusting in God's mercy see God doesn't want us to be uninformed the scriptures are there to show us the way to point us the way they're sufficient for us day by day to live by faith with trust in God and added to that is the final point that God is reliable and trustworthy as we'll see next week

Jesus final words in this chapter that relate back to the question about the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs associated with that event leads on to talking about his return at the end of history the two events are related the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and Jesus return at the end of history the two events are connected together theologically because they're acts of God's judgment God judged people his people in 70 AD and it's a warning of what will happen when Jesus returns as the final act of judgment at the end of history 70 AD is connected to the end by way of prefiguring it and being a warning of it but more than that Jesus' prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem has been fulfilled 35 or so years after he uttered these words his prediction came true if that prediction is fulfilled then the bigger prediction of his return as judge at the end of history we can have confidence will also be fulfilled that is the events of 70 AD the destruction of Jerusalem the desolating sacrilege where it ought not to be is if you like evidence of the reliability of Jesus' words that he is coming back again you see it's not an empty prediction that Jesus is returning and even 2000 years after the event it's no less certain he is coming he's coming to be the judge and he's coming to bring God's judgment and justice against the living and the dead all people who've ever lived in any place in any age we can be sure of that and part of the evidence of our surety is that

[29 : 52] Jesus' words about the destruction of Jerusalem came true the two events are related and so we can be sure that the ultimate event itself will also come true on the final day when Jesus returns so one of the functions for us the reader 2000 years later in this passage is not about how do we deal with the destruction of Jerusalem that's been and gone but is to give evidence or weight or solidity to our faith that Jesus is certainly coming again as the judge but we can look forward to that day alert but not alarmed look forward to it without fear for as Jesus says in verse 23 I've told you everything be alert Amen Beep beep intub■■■■ beep in