

Hope for His Return

In my tradition, Advent was simply a four-Sunday expanded celebration of Christmas, with Scripture and carols about the birth of Jesus. But I've learned that it's a time of preparation for Christ's Second Coming, in judgment as well as final salvation.

Our Scripture is Mark 13:1-23. On the way out of the temple, just a few days before his crucifixion, one of the disciples commented to Jesus about the magnificence of the temple, one of the marvels of the ancient world. Its grounds covered a third of the city, and was built of magnificent stones, some weighing over a hundred tons. The Western Wall of that temple still remains. It was a normal response to comment with awe and admiration for the temple.

Jesus' reply to this disciple would have been surprising, if not shocking. He prophesied the complete destruction of the temple, which was the focal point of Jewish worship and religious devotion. In so doing, Jesus pronounced God's judgment upon the old order of Israel, which had rejected the offer of God's redemption and perverted the true purpose of God for Israel and the temple.

Jesus and his disciples walked across the Kidron Brook to the Mount of Olives where they could see the temple in full view. Peter, James, John, and Andrew, having taken note of Jesus' prophecy of judgment, asked when these things will take place. The intent of Jesus' answer is pastoral. Jesus is not simply describing judgment. The burden of his instruction is to prepare his disciples to face difficult days ahead. Mark likewise is seeking to encourage his congregation in Rome, a people also facing persecution under Emperor Nero. These are important words for us also.

Biblical prophecy, including this discourse of Jesus, has often an immediate application and a future dimension. In AD 70 there was an immediate day of the Lord when the armies of Rome descended on and sacked the city of Jerusalem, totally destroying the temple, as Jesus prophesied in our text. But Jesus' words look beyond the immediate to the final last days before Christ's triumphant return.

Follow as I read **Mark 13:1-23**:

13 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5 Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in

my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.

8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

9 "As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. 10 And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. 11 When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. 12 Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; 13 and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

14 "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; 15 the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; 16 the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. 17 Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! 18 Pray that it may not be in winter. 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. 20 And 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. 21 And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it. 22 False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. 23 But be alert; I have already told you everything.

Lloyd John Ogilvie tells an experience from his high school years of a religious sect that predicted a date for Jesus' return to earth. They gathered at a summit, singing hymns as they prepared to be caught up into glory. The news media so covered this event that they had young Ogilvie caught up in the likelihood of Jesus' imminent return. Even though his family tried to allay his concerns on the predicted day, as the Ogilvie family sat at the breakfast table, young Lloyd John wondered, "but what if the prophet of doom was right? The predicted happening was clearly set to the right moment," he says. "I had calculated ahead that it was going to be during my math class. Since that was my most difficult and least enjoyable subject," Ogilvie relates, "I gained some comfort in the fact that I might not have to worry about the results of the exam to be taken on that day."

"Even now," Pastor Ogilvie says, "over thirty years later, I can recapture the feeling I had as I watched the classroom clock tick away to the fateful moment. Then it came. Nothing happened. The world did not end, but the time before the exam did. The excuse of my distraction over the demise of the world didn't

impress my teacher,” says Ogilvie. “Life went on; the exam had to be taken; the end of the world had been miscalculated.”

Ever since the ascension of the Lord 2000 years ago, and the beginning of the church age, we’ve been living in what the New Testament refers to as “the last days.” It is the intention of God’s Word to call us to live in readiness for Christ’s return. In the mind of eternal God, this church age, whether it will be two or three or however many thousands of years, will be a brief, parenthetical time span in the eternal plan of God. And, personally and existentially, every life is lived as a brief time of preparation for meeting the Lord. For those who have gone on to be with the Lord, their day of the Lord has come, and they have reached their glorious destiny. Whether for our personal day of the Lord, or for that great and final day, Jesus gives us directions for our preparation.

Jesus says that as we approach the last days and the return of the Lord, we’re to, first of all, **take heed**. When asked by his disciples for a sign of the coming destruction of the temple Jesus says, “Beware!” (5). We must take heed against those who would lead us astray. Those who are living in God’s will, being led by the Spirit, and gaining understanding from the Word, will not be deceived in the last days. But those who are living superficial and nominally Christian lives will fall under deception and will follow false teachers who will have the outward appearance of being credible, religious, and respectable.

It seems that spiritual deception is more in the arena of the heart than the intellect. Those who have a personal relationship with Jesus, and seek to live a faithful and disciplined life in obedience to the Word of God, will not be deceived. The deceivers will be religious performers of “counterfeit signs and wonders” (see 2 Thes.. 2:9-12, above), about whom Jesus also warns us (Matt. 7:15-23).

We must also in these last days take heed, says Jesus, about convulsions in nature. There have always been famines, pandemics and earthquakes, but Jesus is saying that their occurrence is not to cause us to panic. These phenomena will not destroy the earth. Nor will wars, devastating as they may be. Perhaps Jesus is saying these occurrences will increase in frequency and perhaps in intensity, but we’re not to panic in the face of them. We should rather see them as the normal course of nature in travail and as assurances of our coming deliverance (Rom. 8:22).

Take heed about wars. Treaties and a strategic shield against nuclear attacks are certainly important, yet our confidence as believers is not in them. Wars, not even a nuclear attack, will end history, as we know it. Our future is not in the hands of Russia, Iran, North Korea, terrorists or even the United States of America. Storms and earthquakes, like the recent ones we’ve read about, are destructive, and seem to be intensifying and occurring with greater frequency.

But Jesus himself will come before these, or humankind's abuse of the earth and its environment, destroy God's creation, which is destined for its final redemption.

Jesus says, "*Do not be alarmed.*" We can **take heart** as we live in these last days, regardless how distressing become our circumstances. As Jesus prophesied to his disciples about the soon-to-be destruction of the temple, and about the upheavals of the last days, he was giving evidence that he is sovereign. Jesus says that his return will take many by surprise, but Sovereign God will not be surprised. In acknowledging his self-imposed limitations on his incarnation knowledge, Jesus said, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert!" (vv.32-33). But Jesus is saying the Father knows exactly the day and the hour of the Second Coming.

And, we who believe in the verity of passages like Romans 8:28-29, know that God is sovereign over all our circumstances, even the ones described as dreadful in the last days. We believe God will continue to reign as sovereign, and all that happens will be only by his permission and for his purposes for us as well as all his kingdom subjects. As Jesus promised, God will be in charge of all things, for our good and for his glory (Rom. 8:28). He'll be at work to give us the grace we need to live in these last days (2 Cor. 12:9).

The Scriptures are filled with models of those who were strengthened by the grace of God while under fire. Think of the Israelites in Egypt, after the era of Joseph, when the Egyptians persecuted them. The more they were persecuted, the more they multiplied and prospered (Ex. 1:12). And, this has been true of the church through the centuries. The persecuted church has been the most powerful and fruitful in the work of the kingdom. So, we do not fear the last days, and the prospect of mounting tribulation. The Book of Revelation pictures a victorious church that bears witness through tribulation (Rev. 11).

Let us, in these last days, take heed, and take heart. But also, let's **take hold**. Let's take hold of our assignment. Our interest is not in self-preservation, but in gospel proclamation and kingdom advancement. Jesus says, "*And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations*" (v. 10)

When Peter responded to the scoffers of his day, who mocked the church over the fact that Christ had not returned as he had promised, he said eternal God doesn't measure time the way we mortals do. "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness," says Peter. "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8-9). God will in his time bring all his chosen ones to repentance and faith

in Christ. Our thrilling privilege is to join him in his work of gathering in his harvest before the coming of Christ.

Lloyd John Ogilvie, the one who as a teenager failed to prepare for his math final because of a false hope, says, "*The best way to prepare for the last things is to concentrate on the first things.*" Let's concentrate on the first things of kingdom living, praying, serving, loving and giving.

We at Dale Heights have the privilege and responsibility to engage in kingdom work through the faithful witness of our lives and the power and reach of our prayers. We also take hold of our assignment through our giving to the cause of Christ through our giving, both to the budget and also through special giving opportunities, such as the Christmas Joy Offering, which supports those on mission around the world. As we share the gospel and support worldwide evangelism, we're preparing for the return of Christ, who'll be worshiped by people from every nation, tribe, language and people group (v.10; Rev. 14:6). Although evidence abounds that we seem to be losing the war against climate change and environmental destruction, as God's being-redeemed people, we should join forces to reclaim our stewardship of the earth and our seeking peace and plenty on earth in place of wars and famine. We must work and to pray, saying, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven and as it will be when Jesus comes in glory."

We're to look to the coming of the Lord, but also we are to prepare for the strong possibility that soon the Lord may come to get us before his Second Coming. Your and my final "going" may precede his Second Coming! What an irony, that many who are assuaging their curiosity about the particulars of the last days are so ill prepared to meet the Lord because they are not concerned about the first things, such as strengthening their love relationship with Jesus, obedience in all their relationships, witness, and loving kingdom service. Join me in living in the last days as we take heed, take heart, and take hold, getting ready to meet the Lord. We must have a strong hope for his glorious coming!