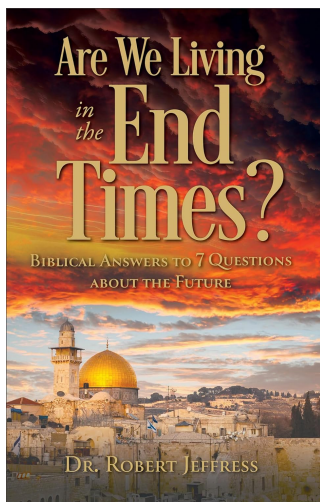


I think many of us would agree, we are living in some pretty interesting times in our nation and in our world. In the last six months I have been asked more than ever, "Do you think we're in the last days?"



One pastor in Texas must have gotten the same question from his church so many times he decided to write a book about it. He used the question as his title, "Are We Living in the End Times?"

[Transition] - Today, Jesus addresses that very question in our text in Mark 13. I want to look together with you at what he says. Before he gets to some specifics, he makes it clear, this life is not all there is. Let's look at Mark 13:1-2.

This life is not all there is (v. 1-2).

As Jesus and his Disciples are leaving church, one of the Disciples makes a casual comment admiring the grand design of the Temple. The comment seems innocent enough. But Jesus picks up on an underlying assumption in the comment. The impassioned adoration of the Temple exposes a subtle false sense of security the disciple was taking in the majesty and immensity of the temple.

The disciple's comment pointed to an over-confidence with the security they believed the temple provided for them. It was the place where God lived—surely, he'd never let anything happen to it. They mistakenly believed that its size, strength and beauty was indestructible, and impenetrable.

Josephus, Jewish historian of the time wrote this about the temple –
“Now the outward face of the temple in its front wanted nothing that was likely to surprise either men’s mind or their eyes; for it was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the suns’ own rays. But this Temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow; for, as to those parts of it that were not gilt, they were exceedingly white...Of its stones...some of these temple stones were 37 feet long, 12 feet high, 18 feet wide.”

Now, Jesus shocks his disciples with his response. The temple, as grand as it is, is not permanent. In one sense, Jesus was making the point that God was about to shift the focus of worship from the physical temple to a focus on Himself, as the Messiah, the savior of the World.

The spirit of the disciple’s comment is an expression of the confidence we can sometimes take in the seemingly strong and impervious structures and systems of this world. The security the disciples seem to be reveling in reminds me of the security we can revel in because of the strength of our nation, or our personal financial savings, or the security of our job, or our earthly accomplishments.

Sometimes we can find ourselves thinking how magnificent this life is, almost forgetting that it is temporary. The grandest aspects of it...even the most beautiful aspects of it...are all temporary. Jesus makes it clear even the grand structures of the strong religious system of the temple will be turned upside down one day. Life as we know it will one day have a definite end.

[Illustration] – Do you remember where you were when the World Trade Center was attacked? As an American being born in the early 60’s and raised in the 70’s and 80’s, I never felt vulnerability like I felt when I saw with my own two eyes, real time...the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers. I sat there thinking, I have to be watching one of those ridiculous futuristic movies...the kind where you watch it and think...that’s

nonsense, that could never happen. But what no one could have ever imagined happening, happened and those two magnificent structures were completely brought down. And it wasn't just the structures that were involved, it was the economic strength and everything else those two towers represented.

[Transition] - The prospect that the temple would one day be destroyed...stunned these disciples. Now, like any of us would do, they immediately interrogate Jesus for more information. When will this unimaginable thing would happen? What will be the signs it is coming. So, Jesus begins to let them know that life as we know it is headed for a dramatic conclusion. He shares in broad brush strokes the signs that will remind us that God's grand conclusion of things is unfolding. Read verses 3-13.

Life as we know it is headed for a dramatic conclusion.

Let's break this down a bit.

- *The beginning signs that God's dramatic conclusion is on course are visible today (Verses 3-13).*

Verse 1-13 identify the events which are reminders that God's final plan for humankind is on course. When we hear of these things, which we hear about routinely in our lives, we are to watch out and know that these are the signs that things are progressing just as God said they would, and they are to serve as affirmations and confirmations that things are progressing just as God promised they would.

Listed are:

- People coming on the scene claiming to be God, gods or somehow saviors of the world.
- Wars and rumors of wars
- Nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom
- Earthquake in various places
- Famines

- Persecution of all kinds and opportunities to stand as a witness for God
- Convictions regarding Jesus will become a greater and greater point of contention slashing friendship ties and even decimating family bonds.

These events are all just the *early signs* that serve to remind us that God's plan is on course. They are not the end of the course of human history, though they may seem like it for those who endure them. Jesus gives these rather vague descriptions of the kinds of things that will happen so that those who follow God are not disheartened by persecution when they encounter it, panicked by wars when they hear of them, fooled by appearances when they see them or led astray by false teachers and preachers during uncertain and trying days.

Instead, when we see and hear and experience these types of things, we are not to be discouraged or paralyzed by false fears, we are to realize that things are unfolding just as God said they would, but we are not yet at the finale.

Jesus tells us in this text that when these things happen, we are to "watch out." The word there means, "*To discern realities which lie beyond the observations of the physical senses.*"¹ In other words, we are to see through these events and understand that these are signs that God's dramatic conclusion is on track and unfolding just as he has planned. Remember, despite appearances God is always in control.

Several times in these verses Jesus encourages us: Watch out, don't be alarmed, be on your guard, don't worry, understand what's happening, pray, and again be on your guard. And in verse 11, Jesus assures us God will be present through his Spirit, poised to provide what each of us needs in order to stay strong, respond appropriately, and uphold the truth of the God.

¹ Garland, David. *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1996. 492.

[Transition] - So, when we see and hear of these kinds of things happening, we don't need to freak out. We are to take a breath, understand, and be aware and be ready. Now, I want you to notice, Jesus makes it clear that as life unfolds, things are going to get noticeable worse for those who follow God. Look at verses 14-23.

- *There will be a defining moment where things will get noticeably worse (Verses 14- 23).*

It is best to understand these comments to have a dual reference. In one sense, they seem to be referring specifically to one of the wars just mentioned as part of God's unfolding plan: It is a siege that will come on Jerusalem. In other words, Jesus has said, there will be wars...and in fact, one of them will involve Jerusalem.

The trigger that will unleash this locally intense persecution is *"The abomination that causes desolation standing where "it" does not belong.* (which is a reference to an Old Testament prophecy of Daniel...we talked that through in our Daniel series a few years ago. If you missed that series or want to review it, it's on our website)

What's important to note about verse 14 however is that even though the translations make the grammar align in English...in the original language it actually reads this way, *"The abomination that causes desolation standing where "HE" does not belong."* This reading reveals that the abomination refers to a person, not a thing.

Many theories have been floated to explain who or what this refers to.

- Some believe it refers to the profaning of the altar of burnt offering in the temple by a representative of Antiochus IV, Epiphanes, in 167 B.C.
- Others believe it was the order given by Gaius Caligula to have his statue set up in the Temple in A.D. 40.

- The comments Jesus makes in verses 14-20 seem to apply most naturally to the war in Judea at the hands of the Romans. under General Titus in A.D. 70. In that time when Titus' army marched on Jerusalem, there was terrible blood shed and the temple was destroyed, many Jews fled as Jesus instructed them to, but many ignored Jesus' words and tried to protect the Temple at all costs and lost their lives in torturous ways. At that time the temple was destroyed.

But do these events of war on Jerusalem match the description Jesus gives in verse 19 when he says, "those will be days of distress unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again?"

It's a good question. Not likely. If they don't, then it's likely that Jesus also has a future event in mind as well. An event that remains in our future when there will be a defining moment when things will get noticeably worse. A time when we all will need to understand that things will become more intense: A person, an abomination...who will usher in some sort of cataclysmic event that has no equal prior to it or after it.

Most understand this future person—this abomination—to be what Revelation calls the *anti-Christ*...an evil personality that is vehemently opposed to God and his people. While there are references in both the Old and New Testaments to evil leaders, opposed to God, the anti-Christ will be a uniquely gifted and attractive leader who will orchestrate an all-out effort to deceive as many as possible and bring destruction to God's people. But, again, details are sketchy and timing unknowable.

What we have to keep in mind is this: throughout these periods of distress, which Jesus is describing...in generation after generation there will be Christians who will undergo severe trials and tribulations.

Jesus declares that the advancement of God's rule and reign and the suffering of God's people are bound together in some mysterious way.

And, as he has done numerous times before, God, in a show of mercy to his followers will not allow them to endure more than they can handle. Verse 20 assures us God will cut these days short.

Throughout these times, there will be those who claim to be the Christ and they will perform signs and miracles in profound ways in an effort to try to see if they can possibly discourage and deceive God's followers.

They will present themselves as servants of God, but their words will contradict the teaching of Scripture and they will try to lead Christians who are not well grounded in their knowledge and understanding of God astray.

When we see these types of things happening, make no mistake, God's plan is on track, God's plan is unfolding, and God's people must be on their guard. They must keep in mind that all these things are happening just as Jesus predicted and thereby understand and be ready.

[Transition] - Now, at this point, Jesus announces that following these days of distress he's been describing, the glorious return of Jesus will occur. Look at verses 24-27.

- *Those days of distress will give way to the glorious return of Jesus to gather to himself all his followers (Verses 24-27).*

Following those days of distress, some type of cosmic event—involving the Sun, the moon, and the stars—will signal the grand finale of Christ's glorious return. (Revelation 6 places these events at 6th seal)

Jesus will gather all his followers from all corners of heaven and earth to himself. This will be an event that will be visible by the entire world. It will occur with such power and glory and majesty that there will be no mistaking it.

Those who are ready will see this glorious event and gasp a gasp of excited anticipation. Those who are not ready are going to gasp a gasp of fear and dread.

How long after those days of distress, described in our text today, will this happen? It's impossible to tell. Jesus' ambiguity seems deliberate. It seems obvious from this text that he wants us to be ready for anything at any time.

Becoming too preoccupied with calculations about dates and sequences can threaten to distract us from the mission God has called his church to do—to make disciples by connecting them to Jesus and helping them grow to love and serve him. It seems God values spiritual vigilance over creative predictions. Are we to completely ignore and be ignorant? No, we are to be alert, and we are to be prepared.²

[**Transition**] - Matthew 24, Luke 21, and the latter part of the book of Revelation give us more detail than Mark does here, however even there the details are sketchy. In all of these accounts we are not told with precise detail when this dramatic conclusion to life as we know it will occur. What Jesus does stress is the admonition to be ready. Be ready, know it is coming, watch out, understand, be on guard; be ready. Read verses 28-37

We are not told when, only to be ready (Verses 28-37).

Nine times in chapter 13 Jesus exhorts us to be ready, to be alert, to be on guard and to watch out. The signs Jesus gives are not for the purpose of designing detailed prediction timelines, but for the purpose of promoting the importance of being ready and well grounded so as to not be deceived by the trouble and the charlatans that will emerge on the scene near the end.

² Geddert, Timothy J. *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology*. JSNTSup 26. Sheffield: JSOT, 1989. p. 234-235).

Incidentally, Jesus' comment in verse 30 about this generation not passing away until all these things have happened is best understood to refer to the near term portions of his prophecy that referred to destruction of the temple, and the suffering associated with that Roman attack...not the future second coming of Jesus.

The central issue is not how Christians can predict the timing of the end, but what they will do when they encounter those events. Will you stand for God? Will you declare your conviction! Or will you compromise to avoid persecution and pain?

This is why Jesus repeats the challenge...We've got to be ready, alert, filled with wisdom and understanding about the path things are going to take in general so that we are not deceived...and we are to be watching out because we don't want to be caught unprepared.

[Transition] - So, what's involved in being ready or prepared?

What is involved in being ready?

[Illustration] - The unfolding of God's dramatic plan is compared to the birth of a child and the times of distress that we need to be ready for are called birth pains. When a woman is in her ninth month of pregnancy and ready to deliver. One of the ways she gets ready is to have her hospital delivery bag packed and ready by the door. She's probably got a name picked out, nursery ready, and that Momma is probably declaring with animated tones to all who will listen that she is ready for this baby to come out.

When labor pains begin and grow more and more intense, she's going to have some extremely difficult work to go through in labor, but underneath all the struggles will be the thrilling anticipation of holding this new little life. Jesus wants us to embrace that same spirit of readiness.

[Illustration]- It seems like people are sensing things getting noticeably more crazy in our nation and world. You guys know what preppers are? *“A person who believes a catastrophic disaster or emergency is likely to occur in the future and makes active preparations for it, typically by stockpiling food, ammunition, and other supplies.”*

Forbes magazine reports roughly one third of the US adult population now identifies as preppers—spending some \$11 billion annually to hedge against a breakdown of society. That figure is up from just six percent 15 years ago. ³

[Transition] - You may not be into being a “prepper” in that way, but Jesus is calling us to be “Spiritual Preppers.” That’s the common idea in our text today. Be ready. Be prepared. So, let me conclude by suggesting three things that make us ready. To be a “Spiritual Prepper”

1. Believe Jesus died for your sin.

The first step in being spiritually ready is getting right with God. Open your heart to a personal relationship with Jesus. If you want to be one that gasps a gasp of excitement when you see God’s glorious return, then open your heart to Jesus and call out to him today and invite him to be the leader and forgiver in your life. Let us know your desire to do that on that “connect card” in the chair pocket in front of you or just come talk to one of us.

- **Deepen your faith in Him**

Jesus says that those who understand and hold fast to their convictions and maintain their trust in Jesus will endure this well and be saved. However, we have to understand the trials will work to erode our faith. The pain we’ll experience from relational trauma and persecution for our

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chrisdorsey/2024/01/04/when-it-comes-to-end-times-survival-viewers-cant-get-enough/?sh=55ab8b343b7d>.

beliefs will tear at our grasp of God and work to loosen our firm hold of faith.

This is why during our lives we must give ourselves in a dedicated effort to deepen our roots of trust and faith in God and do all we can to allow our beliefs and convictions to be anchored deep in the rock of God's love and faithfulness.

Practically, I'd encourage you to read your Bible regularly, study together with others in a small group.

- Take part in Celebrate Recovery in order to heal from your hurts, habits, and hang-ups. This will help you be prepared to be strong.
- Join one of our Sermon Based Small Groups.
- There are Women's and Men's groups.
- There are small groups for students and young professionals.

Don't sit these out. Get going, get healthy, and get growing. Being ready...being a "Spiritual prepper" depends on it.

[Transition] - Finally, being ready doesn't mean that you walk around constantly looking up at the sky. The pregnant momma is not sitting by the front door the whole time waiting to go into labor. She is busy making preparations and getting more and more things ready. Being ready involves putting your energy towards the things God has called you to do.

- **Be active completing your calling.**

Did you notice the parable Jesus closes this section with? It says that a man went away and put his servants in charge, each with an assigned task.

In other words, Jesus wants to return to catch us as his church doing what he has called us to do. He wants to return to catch us investing ourselves to complete his great commission by connecting people to him and helping them grow to love and serve him. He wants to catch us loving

people well and standing against the evil in our society...taking a stand for the unborn, serving on school boards, and upholding his truth.

Make no mistake, Jesus is coming again...and as we await his return, let's be "Spiritual preppers." Let's be about getting ready and doing what he's called us to do.