

WATCH !

by Ray C. Stedman

Now we come to the great prophecy of Jesus which deals with the last days of the planet Earth just before the return of its King in power and glory. It is found in the thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel. This passage is familiarly called the Olivet Discourse, because Jesus gave this great message as he was seated on the Mount of Olives, looking out over the city of Jerusalem, just a day or two before his crucifixion, and as he was contemplating the fate of the city in response to questions his disciples asked him. We have those questions in the opening verses of Chapter 13:

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what 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 this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" {Mark 13:1-4 RSV}

This account makes clear that the disciples must have been rather upset by the actions of Jesus during that last week. He had cleansed the temple, and had severely scolded and condemned the leaders of the temple. The disciples evidently feel that he has been too harsh, and they are trying to woo from him some positive statement about the temple. So they indicate to him the greatness of the temple buildings and of the stones of which they were made. Josephus tells us that some of these stones were forty feet long and eighteen feet high -- truly massive stones. But Jesus' answer again disturbs and perplexes them, because he said that these stones, as great as they were, would be cast down, and the temple would be destroyed. The disciples were troubled by this, and I think they selected a delegation to go and talk it over with Jesus. They chose the two pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John, who were in the inner circle. Finding Jesus seated on the mountainside, they asked him privately, "When will these things be, and what will be the sign when they are to be accomplished?"

This is the question almost everyone wants to ask when they read this prophetic section: "When is this going to happen?" We are familiar with these words in which Jesus foretells what will be happening on earth before his return. But the question which has seized the minds of men has always been, "When is it going to happen? Will it be in my lifetime? And what will be the signs, so we'll know when it will begin to happen?" For twenty centuries men have been asking this question. For twenty centuries men have been anticipating that the coming was to be in their own time. We must honestly face this. Every generation has thought Jesus was coming back within their own time, because of signs which they saw, or thought they saw, in the immediate events of their day.

But I think it clear, as you read this account through, that to ask the question, "When?" is to ask the wrong question. Jesus makes clear that if you focus on "When?" you are going to be misled and ultimately deceived. And this has been the record of what has happened to many people, many leaders and teachers, as they have tried to dig out the answer to the question, "When?" Jesus does not ignore this question, but he leaves it to the end.

I want to go through this whole chapter with you now, and survey what he actually does say, and how he handles this question when he comes to the end. There are four sections of Jesus' message which relate to the question of the disciples, "What will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" And there is one section at the end where he deals with the question "When will this be?" Let us take the sections as Jesus gives them, and remember that if we want the full account of what he said to the disciples, we must read Matthew 24 and 25, and Luke 21, which are the accounts parallel to Mark's account of what Jesus said here

to the disciples. It takes all those passages to give us the full picture. Each of the gospel writers selects certain things he wants to emphasize. Matthew makes a great deal over what happens to Israel. Luke is the only one who tells us of the fall of Jerusalem, and the subsequent captivity of the Jews and domination of the city by the Gentiles. But Mark is the one who emphasizes the danger to faith which is going to arise in the age which follows the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord.

Jesus sums it all up in one brief sentence right at the beginning,

And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray." {Mark 13:5 RSV}

This is the emphasis he makes, the keynote. You notice that his message begins and ends with that emphasis. He says here, "Take heed," a word which means "Keep awake." And the final word of the passage is, "Watch," which means, "Don't fall asleep." So at the beginning he says, "Keep awake," and at the end he says, "Don't fall asleep." And he refers to the whole age. During the whole course of the age, this is the emphasis he wants to leave.

In the first section which follows, from Verse 6 through Verse 13, Jesus gives us what I would like to call certain "non-signs," certain things which have deceived people throughout the ages about the coming of the Lord, things which they have taken to be signs, but which are not signs at all. I am sure you have read books or have heard sermons based upon these so-called "signs of the times." But they really are not signs, as Jesus makes clear.

The first so-called "sign" which many look to as marking the coming of the end, is the coming of various religious pretenders, false Christs. In Verse 6 Jesus says,

"Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." {Mark 13:6 RSV}

I was reading Dr. Charles Feinberg the other day, a noted Jewish Christian scholar who says that in the course of Israel's history since the time of our Lord, sixty-four different individuals appeared claiming to be the Messiah. So it is true, as Jesus said, many shall come saying, "I am the Messiah; I am he."

But I do not think we need to limit this to those who come to the Jews. It also refers to all in these twenty centuries who claim to speak in the name of Jesus, but who teach something that Jesus did not teach. This happens very frequently. As you drive around the Bay area, you notice automobile bumper stickers which say, "Bless man." This is a locally based movement which announces that it is following the teachings of Jesus and comes in the name of Jesus. But the "Jesus" it presents is not the biblical Jesus. The teachings of Jesus which they present are a selection culled from all the biblical sayings of Jesus but including only those doctrines which this movement accepts. Many things that Jesus said are not included at all. They have selected certain moral precepts and ethical teachings of Jesus, and they call them "the teachings of Jesus." Of course, this is a distortion of the biblical picture of Jesus. In every age there have been many who have been misled by this kind of presentation.

Most of the so-called "Christian" cults do this. They come in the name of Jesus, but what they teach is not what Jesus taught. They are coming and saying, in effect, "I am he." But what they teach is a far cry from the biblical presentation of the Lord Jesus. This, Jesus said, is a deceptive device, designed to lead many astray. And many will be led astray. His word of warning here is, "Take note of this. Take heed. Be careful that the Jesus you follow is the biblical Jesus, the apostolic Christ, the One of whom the apostles give witness, or else you will be led astray." This has been true through twenty centuries of history.

The second threat, and what many have taken to be a sign of the end, is given in the next two verses. Certain secular disasters are sometimes listed as "signs of the times." The Lord says,

"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; this is but the beginning of the sufferings." {Mark 13:7-8 RSV}

Those words make very clear that wars, famines, earthquakes, natural disasters, will occur throughout the whole sweep of the age. But they are not signs of the times. They are not signs that the Lord is about to come. Yet if you read the record of history you will find that over and over again people have misunderstood this, and have taken them to be signs. I read books, when I was a young Christian, which showed that World War I was the fulfillment of this word, "nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." The books said, "No other war in history has fulfilled that to this extent. Therefore this is the sign of the end." Then World War II came along, and they had to explain that. So they said, "World War I fulfilled the part about 'nation shall rise against nation,' and World War II fulfilled 'kingdom against kingdom.'" Unfortunately, this is the way expositors have dealt with this text. But Jesus says that none of those are signs. There have been wars and rumors of wars right from the very beginning. There are going to be famines and earthquakes in various places throughout history.

I remember as a lad reading a book about the San Francisco earthquake. I read it with great fascination, because it recounted the story of the 1906 earthquake in great detail. But its thesis was, "This is the sign of the end!" I expected the Lord to come the very next day after I finished reading the book! That must have been over forty years ago, and yet he has not returned. But I did not understand then, as I do now, that Jesus said these were not signs; these were but the beginning of the sufferings. We cannot say that the increase of natural disasters is a mark of the end times.

There is another "sign" that is often listed as indicating the end time -- the persecution of Christians. Jesus said,

"But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given to you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit." {Mark 13:9-11 RSV}

This is a persecuting age, and has been from the very beginning. Right from the very first century these words were fulfilled. The book of Acts tells us how the Apostle Paul, and other apostles, and the early Christians, were often beaten in the synagogues, dragged before governors and kings, and gave testimony before them.

Mark, you notice, links this somewhat with the preaching of the gospel. Someone says, "Surely this worldwide preaching of the gospel is a sign of the end. This is the first generation in which this has occurred." But notice how Mark links this. Right in the midst of this statement about being brought before governors and kings, he says the gospel is to be preached, indicating that there is some tie between these. This would suggest that when the gospel has penetrated a nation to the extent that it comes to the attention of the governing authorities, who then demand an accounting from those who preach the gospel, this indicates that the gospel has been given as a testimony to that nation. When Paul stood before Nero, emperor of Rome, about A.D. 67, this indicated that the gospel had penetrated much of the Roman empire and has served as a witness to the nations of the world of that day.

And it is true that when Christians have been brought before these governors and kings, God the Holy Spirit has given them special words to speak of witness and testimony. Remember how Paul seemed to speak with such wisdom before King Agrippa, and Felix and Festus, the Roman governors, when he stood before them. And Martin Luther, standing before the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, in the city of Worms, was given words to speak which have come ringing down the centuries since: "Here I stand. God help me; I can do no other." And other martyrs and witnesses have been given special wisdom to speak in their hour, as a testimony to the nations. But this is not a sign of the end, because it has been going on through the whole course of the age, and will characterize the age until its end. This is the point Jesus makes.

But then he points out that this persecution is of such an intense nature that it constitutes a real threat to faith.

And the anguish of such persecution is that it involves the betrayal of family members one by another. He says,

"And brother will deliver up brother 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 he who endures to the end will be saved." {Mark 13:12-13 RSV}

Now, "the end" he is talking about there is not the end of the tribulation; it is the end of an individual's life. All Christians are called on to be faithful unto death. Did you realize that? In the book of Revelation, Jesus calls upon the churches to whom he is writing to "be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." That is not a word for martyrs only, but for all Christians. "Be faithful till your dying day." Why? "Because he who endures to the end will be saved" -- not because he has earned his salvation by enduring to the end, but because he has proved that he has real life by enduring to the end. Only genuine Christians will survive the test of the age.

Remember that John says of certain individuals in First John 2:19, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us." Every age witnesses those seeming Christians who begin well, seem to be bright and happy and committed, but who begin to fade away under the pressures and tensions of the times. As those tensions and pressures increase, sometimes to the severing of the dearest family ties, there are many who turn back and thus reveal that they never really had life from Christ. This is why we have those passages such as that in Hebrews 6 warning us that we are to be sure that the life we have is real, genuine, founded in Jesus Christ. For he who endures to the end will be saved.

In the second section we come to the Lord's answer to the question of the disciples regarding signs. They asked, "What will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" Every age longs to know this. Our Lord puts it in one brief phrase:

"When you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be [and I think it was Jesus who added] (let the reader understand)," [but it may have been Mark]. {Mark 13:14a RSV}

This parenthetic statement is a reference to the fact that we need to think about this. Matthew tells us that Jesus is referring to the book of Daniel. That is, "Let the reader understand the book of Daniel." For Daniel talks about a desolating sacrilege, an "abomination of desolation," which is to be set up in the temple and will defile and profane the temple. In Second Thessalonians the Apostle Paul evidently is referring to that very sacrilege when he speaks of the "man of sin" who is to appear, who will take his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming that he himself is God. This is the world-wide religion of the last days -- the claim that man is God, that we do not need any other God, that man himself is sufficient to his own ends. "We can solve our own problems. Man is God!" This religion will be personified in a person who sits in the temple of God.

This is why Bible students have always watched with great interest the possibility of the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. In A.D. 70, the Roman armies of Titus fulfilled the prophecies of Jesus as to the destruction of the temple by destroying it completely. There has never been a temple in Jerusalem since that day. But Jesus speaks of a desolating sacrilege which will be set up in the temple, which means there must again be a temple in Jerusalem. And as we approach the time when a temple can be constructed, we are seeing the possibility of the fulfillment of this event in our day and age. Now, we are not the first. There have been other times when a temple could have been constructed in Jerusalem -- during the Crusades, perhaps. But again in our age there is a very real possibility of its coming to pass. So this may be the beginning of the true sign of the times.

Jesus says that when this appears, there will be three immediate, tremendous, terrible results:

First, there will be an immediate and sudden peril to those believers who are in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. You tourists to the Holy Land, take note!

"...then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything away; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter." {Mark 13:14b-18 RSV}

It will be a terrible time of danger so imminent that people will have no time even to go home and pack, but must leave the city promptly or be trapped. The second result is the outbreak of a world-wide time of tribulation:

"For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days." {Mark 13:19-20 RSV}

This will be a terrible time of unprecedented trouble. If you want the vivid details of this, read the passages in Revelation which deal with the pouring out of the vials of the wrath of God, and the opening of the seven seals, and the sounding of the seven trumpets. It will be a time of economic crunch, when all commerce is controlled by a central authority, and everyone will be issued a number by which to do business.

Perhaps you have read accounts of the computer system already set up in Belgium and designed to issue a number to everyone in the world in order to facilitate the transaction of various forms of business. I do not say that this is necessarily the fulfillment of this prophecy, because every age seems to bring us close to it and then to back away. Perhaps we will back away again, who knows? But it could be fulfilled in this day, and this is why we need to take note of these developments.

The third result will be:

"And then if any one says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand." {Mark 13:21-23 RSV}

This will be a time of world-wide religious deceit. I think we must see these false Christs and false prophets who are mentioned here as the agents of the single supreme anti-Christ who rules and reigns in that day. These are people all over the world who are delegated to bring men and women into submission and subjection to the world-wide religion whose creed is "Man is God." What a threat to faith that is! We can see the beginnings of it in our own time in the constant increase in secularism. There have been such trends in the past -- let us remember that. But this may be the one which leads to this final world-wide deceit by the agents of anti-Christ.

Then, Jesus says, comes the climax:

"But in those days, after the tribulation [after and not before], 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 they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." {Mark 13:24-27 RSV}

There is the climax of history -- the appearing of Jesus Christ as Lord, with great power and great glory. (This is not at all touching the question of the "rapture," the departure of the church. That is dealt with in other passages.) Here we have the appearance again of Jesus Christ in great power and glory, preceded, as all the prophets have predicted, by terrible signs in the heavens. Evidently some tremendous cataclysm upsets the whole solar system, of which we are a part, or perhaps even the entire galaxy. It has been interesting to me that astronomers today are commenting upon newly-discovered forces at work in the heavens, and strange, inexplicable heavenly bodies which no one seems to know much about -- mysterious "black holes" in space, and "quasars" which emit tremendous amounts of energy and yet seem to be so far removed from the earth that

nobody can be quite sure what they are. From other passages we know that this disruption of heavenly bodies will have an effect upon the earth, as volcanoes erupt and tidal waves arise. Then the Son of man appears, and all his mighty angels with him. He sends those angels out to gather Israel back into the land. This gathering of the elect, I am sure, is the fulfillment of the predictions of the prophets that there will come a time when Israel will be gathered from the four corners of the earth -- not by natural but by supernatural means -- to establish the kingdom of God there in the Land.

Then our Lord gives us a section which draws an analogy from nature:

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." {Mark 13:28-31 RSV}

This is easy to follow. When you see the trees in the spring putting forth leaves, you know two things for sure. One, summer is very near. It will not be long until the days are warm, and the cold weather is over. Second, it is certain nothing is going to stop it. When the leaves appear on the trees, summer is certain to come. Jesus says we can draw the same conclusions from seeing the events he outlines here coming to pass, for he says, "So also, when you see these things taking place, know that he is near." What does he mean, "these things"? I do not think he means the signs in the heavens, for they are not the beginning of the events. Rather, he is talking about the sign on earth, i.e., the appearance of the desolating sacrilege in the temple in Jerusalem. When you see things beginning to move in this direction, things which begin to make possible this event, then you know that the Lord is drawing near -- so near, in fact, that Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place." That is, once it starts, it will all be over before a generation has run its course. A generation is about twenty-seven years.

And, it is also certain. How certain? "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Those words are given to us to undergird our faith in a time of testing, a time when it might appear that the Bible will be wrong and events appear to be going a different route. When it seems that perhaps the biblical record is just a dream and cannot be trusted, remember these words of Jesus: "Heaven and earth will pass away -- as solid and real as they appear -- but these words will not pass away. This is absolutely certain to happen. History is going to end this way." Remember this, regardless of what secular voices all around you have to say.

In the last section Jesus answers the question of when this shall happen:

"But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." {Mark 13:32 RSV}

This means that anybody who claims to have a revelation as to when this event is going to take place has been deluded. Even the angels do not know. The fallen angels do not know, and even the true, the holy angels do not know.

And then, perhaps the most startling thing Jesus ever said: "Nor does the Son. I don't know." This marks the humanity of our Lord. He laid aside the exercise of his Deity when he came to earth, and never exercised it while he was here. He was a man like us, limited to the knowledge that God made known to him. God had not told him this, so he did not know. He said, "I don't know the answer; only the Father knows." Remember that even after his resurrection he said to his disciples, "The times and the seasons are not for you to know. (Quit trying to find out!) But the Father has put them in his own power." So the question of *when* is not important, because it cannot be determined. There is no way that you can tell the day or the hour. And, as we read on, we will see that our Lord did not even know how long it was going to be before he came back. All these disciples thought it would take place within their lifetime, and Jesus seems to speak as though that were the case: "When you see the desolating sacrilege, etc." But it did not happen then. I do not think Jesus himself could have told us how long he would be gone. It has been almost two thousand years, and in all that time no one has known when he would come. He says,

"Take heed, watch; [That is the important thing.] for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his own work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Watch therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning -- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: "Watch." {Mark 13:33-36 RSV}

Here he gathers up all the intervening time between his first and second comings and divides it into four watches -- one long night of the world's sin -- and he says, "You don't know, (And I think he implies, "I don't know.") whether the coming is to be early in that time, or in the middle of it, or three-quarters of the way through, or clear at the end." No one knows. I don't know; you don't know. But it is like a man going on a journey (Here he likens it to his own going away.) who gives his servants work to do, and he expects them to do it. And he sets a doorkeeper to watch.

Now, what is he to watch for? Is he to watch for the master's return? That is the way this is usually interpreted. But that is not it, for he is to start watching as soon as the master leaves. They know he will not be back right away. What then is he to watch for? He is to watch lest somebody deceive them and gain entrance into the house, and wreck and ruin and rob all they have. So Jesus' word is, "Be alert; don't go to sleep; watch! There are temptations and pressures which will assault you, to make you think that it is all a lie, to make you give up and stop living like a Christian, stop walking in faith, stop believing the truth of God. Watch out for that. And, in the meantime, do your work. Don't let anything turn you aside. Don't let anything derail you from being what God wants you to be in this day and age." This is the way you watch. We are not to be looking up into the sky all the time, waiting for his coming. That will happen when he is ready. We are to watch that we are not deceived.

I have been disturbed, as many of you have been, at how many Christians of late seem to have fallen away. I look back across thirty years of ministry and I see men whom I would have sworn were solid, tremendously committed, faithful, Bible-teaching Christians, but who are now denying their faith and have turned aside. And on every side, seemingly, this increases -- people falling off into immorality and iniquity, turning away from their faith, saying, in effect, they no longer believe the Lord or the Bible. It is this our Lord is warning against.

Therefore he says we are to keep awake. Do not believe all the secular voices that tell us the world will go on forever as it is now. Don't believe the other voices which tell us there is no God, so we can live as we please, or that if God exists, he will never judge us. Don't believe the voices which whisper to us constantly and try to turn us away from our faith. With one sharp, arresting, ringing word of command, Jesus ends his message: "Watch!"

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for this word of warning to us. We sense the perils of the age in which we live. We know we are under pressure, and that this pressure can increase at times and capture us even when we least expect it. Thank you for the faithful word which tells us there will come tests and trials even within our own family, and times when we must make choices which are painful and difficult to make, when it will cost us something to stand for the truth. Lord, we pray that you will steady us and strengthen us and help our confidence and trust to be in you, that we may endure to the end, that we may be faithful unto death, that we too may join in that great day with those who are given the crown of life, because the life of the Lord Jesus has held us steady through all the trials and tests thrown against us. Thank you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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