

The Search For Security

by Steve Zeisler

Our most vivid memories are usually the crises, the points of tension and drama we have experienced. I remember very distinctly the moment I heard that President Kennedy had been shot. I was sitting on a bench in a high school locker room in Phoenix, Arizona, getting ready for a physical education class, when our teacher burst through the door and with great emotion in his voice, told us that the President had been shot and was likely to die. I can remember those events very clearly.

I think the same phenomenon of crisis times resulting in vivid memories happened when four men, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, determined to set down their version of the life of Christ, because about forty per cent of each writer's record concerns the last week of Jesus' life. Though they had all the rest of his life and teachings and ministry to speak about, their recollections (or those of the people they spoke to) were drawn to those tense, dramatic, final days leading up to his crucifixion.

This morning we will study a passage from Mark 13 which is set in those days. In recent weeks we have been looking at incidents in the life of Jesus where he ministered to individuals, where he reached out to them to teach them, to encourage them or challenge them. For the next few weeks, however, I want us to consider some of the discourses of Christ where he teaches at length on some subject that concerns him.

This morning's passage is known as the Olivet Discourse. It was delivered while Jesus was seated on the Mount of Olives, talking to four of his followers. We will look at the first thirteen verses today, and take the second part of the chapter next week. Mark 13:1-13:

And as He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another which will not be torn down. " And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, "Tell us when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?" And Jesus began to say to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and will mislead many. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened; those things must take place; but that is not yet the end. For nation will arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. But be on your guard; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nation. And when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for It is not you who speak, but It is the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved."

Jesus is raising some dramatic, portentous issues. He is speaking of the great scope of history, and the attitudes that men ought to have as they face difficult times, times of turmoil and change. It is possible to misunderstand this discourse because of Mark's seemingly unimportant opening words. We are told that Jesus was going out of the temple and one of his disciples said to him, "Teacher, aren't the stones beautiful?" It sounds just like the kind of comment anyone would make. To this day virtually every tourist who goes to Israel spends his time talking about stones. The place is covered with them—monuments, walls, all kinds of stones. But Mark is not reporting a casual conversation. In the simple statement, "Jesus left the temple," Mark is saying something very profound.

Jesus did not merely walk out of the temple, he abandoned it; he would never set foot in it again. After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the last week of his life, he went to the temple and looked at it. Then he came back the next day and cleared the temple of all its garbage, all the vile man-centered practices that had been allowed to go on there. He challenged the leadership of the temple. He warned and persuaded and finally pronounced judgment on this center of Jewish life, trying to bring about repentance before it was too late. Now, finally, he has left the temple for good.

I am sure there must have been a note of drama about Jesus here. There must have been a kind of tension apparent to those who were with him as they saw him depart from the precincts of God's place of worship. These disciples, I believe, began to cast around for a way of protecting, for a way of heading off the problem, just as we would when faced with turmoil and change. Their first effort is to call the Lord's attention to this impressive temple of God which had stood there for hundreds of years, with its massive stone, its beautiful architecture. They are asking, "Lord, in times of turmoil aren't there some things made by men which will stand the test? Isn't there some haven we can retreat to that will protect us? Isn't there some buttress that we can hide behind, some hedge that will survive the devastation, the upheaval? Aren't these stones beautiful, well-grounded, impressive?"

I did a wedding at Mount Hermon here in California recently, in the lovely old wedding chapel in the center of the grounds there. I was struck by the antiquity of the place. Many generations of people have gone there to be taught and encouraged. Uncounted numbers have received Christ while strolling the same paths, sitting in the same halls, singing some of the same songs. Mount Hermon is the kind of place many remember—or even visit—when life is difficult, when they are fearful about the future. Here is a place that won't change, here is a place that is solid and rooted, we think. But Jesus' answer to our imaginings would be the same as his answer to these men: no stone is going to be left standing. No human institution is ultimately a haven against hard times. Nothing that men have built or accomplished will last.

Now he is making a specific prediction about the fate of Jerusalem—a prediction which was fulfilled—but he is also attacking the thinking behind their question, which is their desire for something other than Christ himself to protect them. Their question is motivated by that desire. After Jesus announces the destruction of the temple, they ask, "Tell us when these things will be and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled." The thrust of the question seems to be, "If there is no safe place for us to retreat to, will you at least give us enough information so that we can take precautions and make adjustments, so that we can plan an escape, so that we can do whatever it takes to keep from being crushed by these future events? Give us a sign that will help us out."

Jesus' answer is complex. In Mark 13:14 he talks about a sign of the end; and in verse 24 and following he talks about when these events will happen, but he does not tell them what they want to know; he does not give them the answer they are looking for. The sign he gives them is the worst possible kind of sign: a sign that announces the end only moments before it occurs. He does not give them a safety net, which is what they were hoping for. What he does—and this precedes his direct answer to their question—is warn them about the problem with asking that kind of question. The very fact that they long for something other than him to help them indicates that they have some examination to do, some attitudes to change.

Jesus gives them two commands, two directives, to help them with the hopes and fears which stand behind their question. The first command is in Mark 13:5; the second in verse 9. He uses the same word in both commands, which is translated in the Greek, "to see," or "to notice." First, he tells them, "See to it no one misleads you." Second, he says, "See yourself" (literally, "see yourselves; take heed to yourselves"). Some translations may not say that, but that would be the best translation. After saying, "See to it that no one misleads you," Jesus then goes on to list the kind of things that we might be vulnerable to as we seek to escape the fearsome future. We might be vulnerable to an impressive, striking, powerful, aggressive, self-confident Messianic leader, someone who promises to take care of us, who can command money and people and response, someone who claims to be Christ himself. Or we might be vulnerable to the more subtle approach of, say, scientists who promise that genetic manipulation or new energy discoveries, or whatever will guarantee a safe future for this nation. All of those are kinds of Messianic claims, and when we are under pressure, when we are afraid, we are most vulnerable to that

kind of appeal.

The second category Jesus raises concerns the dramatic events in history, such as war, rumors about war, national intrigue, nation raised against nation, etc. As a student I remember seeing the effect the Vietnam War had on Christian student friends of mine, who increasingly set aside the things of Christ in order to be involved either for or against the war. The events of this day are so important that nothing else can supersede them; nothing is more important than throwing ourselves into these events, they would say.

The third category of misleading events that can take place concerns natural disasters of various kinds—earthquakes, famines, etc. When the physical world itself shakes, when crops stop growing, it is very difficult to believe that the heavens have not also shaken. If the ground itself gives way, how do we know that the promises of God have not also given way? Does he still love me? When the ground under my feet shakes and the roof over my head collapses will he remember me? We are vulnerable to being misled in such times of stress. The more we long for someone other than Jesus to take care of us, the more vulnerable we are in these times. "See to it that you are not misled," Jesus says.

His second command is, "Look to yourself. Take heed to yourself." Look not only at the forces arrayed outside you, but at what is inside you too. What do you see when you look to yourself, when you take heed to yourself? What kind of heart do you have? Is your commitment to Christ conditional? Are there limits to what you will go through for his sake? Is there some assignment he could give you that you will not accept? Are you going to finish the course? That really is the question, because his final conclusion in Mark 13:13 is, "It is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved." And this does not have anything particularly to do with the end time; it has to do with the end of his calling in your life, the end of his assignment for you. What do you see when you look at yourself? Do you see that God by his grace has given himself to you in such a way that you will finish the course, that you have been given a love for him that will not ultimately fail under pressure?

Consider the possible arenas for this kind of pressure. Jesus says that some will be taken before the civil authorities and will be judged guilty because they are Christians. That is happening in many places around the world today. Christianity is illegal in many places. Being a Christian can get you beaten or jailed; your property can be confiscated. In China it is illegal to import Bibles. Many of us have a naive confidence in the constitution of this country. (Our constitution is being eroded at a fairly rapid rate in our day, in my opinion.) There is no guarantee that it will last. There is no guarantee that we will not, in our lifetime, go before the courts charged with the horrible crime of being a Christian.

The second arena will be the synagogues, Jesus says. For these four Jewish men who sat before him on the Mount of Olives, the synagogue was most like a home church for us. These were synagogues in the villages, in the local towns; they were all over the place. The synagogue was where they went for their Saturday school training, where they first heard about God, just like the kind of churches that many of us grew up in. The home church, the church in our town may very well be an arena where Christ himself is judged evil, where those who name his name may be flogged, rejected, pronounced anathema—right in the religious community. It says we may be taken before kings and governors. We could include under that heading, bosses at work, political figures, school boards, newspaper editors, prominent media figures, men and women who make things happen in the world. We may have to answer for our faith in Christ before such a very unsympathetic audience.

Finally (this is probably the most devastating thing) your own family may turn against you because of Christ. A brother stood up in the first service this morning and talked about the decision that he and his wife made that they ought to adopt a severely handicapped child. After a long time of trying to decide, the Lord had led them to believe that it was right for them to do this, but the young man's parents are threatening to split the family over this, threatening to have nothing more to do with him because they do not want that kind of child in their family. Now these may be merely the heated responses of the moment, but at least potentially this man is suffering at the hands of his family for what God has called him to do.

All of us hate out-of-control situations. We fear and fight against circumstances where our resources are

inadequate, where our control is overthrown. As a result of that, when facing those kinds of times, we want a safe haven, instituted by men, protected from the ravages before us; we want to find a place we can go to for safety. But Jesus' word to us is, "There is no such place; nothing men have made can ultimately protect you." Then we retreat slightly, still loathing the out-of-control circumstances, and ask the Lord for foreknowledge that will allow us to make adjustments, that will allow us to plan the plans and take precautions. His answer to us is equally hard; we won't be given that kind of information. In fact, we need to examine ourselves at that point and realize how easily we could be misled. We need to examine the nature of our Christianity. Is it the kind that is going to survive a test?

In Scripture we have the promise of Jesus Christ himself to stand with us; the promise of the never-ending intimacy of his Holy Spirit on our behalf; the promise that the very hairs of our heads are numbered. Nothing will happen to us apart from God's will, apart from his sustenance, his closeness and his support, apart from our certainty of getting through it by his hand. We have those promises, but we do not have a safety net. We have nothing else. We cannot walk by sight and by faith. We can walk by faith, but there is nothing physically in view that we can count on. That is why Mark 13:11 is such dramatic good news:

When they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit.

Do you see the point Jesus is making? The disciples' desire to be able to prepare ahead of time is contradicted here. You cannot know for sure what the questions will be. You cannot have studied ahead of time and written down all the possible answers to every question. There is no way we can guarantee that we will have the questions and answers before the test. What we will have is the Spirit of God to give us what is required.

Many people (including me) believe that the future is going to be tumultuous. I have reflected back on times in my own life when I have gone through a period of testing, when the props were knocked away, the safety net taken away and I was left only with Christ. When I was a young Christian, a man I counted on, a leader I had looked up to and learned from, abandoned his wife and children and ran away with another woman. That was a very shaking experience for me. I thought of him as someone I could trust. I thought of this man, his family and his ministry as a secure haven. This won't be shaken I thought.

I recall when I was involved in campus ministry that I was forced into public discipline of students I had worked with, prayed with, studied with and cared about. They had decided, at least for a time, to live in open rebellion against God, and extensive personal ministry to them made no difference. It was a very wrenching thing to see friendships have to go through that. A friend and I just this last week were talking about a church split that includes unfortunately again, people who are friends of mine, people I have ministered with. Much of the reason for the split has to do with self-aggrandizement, money, power, and debates about who should have it. To see people whom I had trusted and counted on giving themselves to all of this is very saddening.

But potentially most difficult of all is the fact that without question, PBC is going through changes. This is the church I was raised in, the only real church home that I have ever had, the place that has taught me everything I know. There is no doubt in my mind that PBC is not going to stay the same. God is moving out some of the most experienced and solid leadership we have had around here. I have been asked so many times in the last year, "What has happened to Body Life? Why isn't it like it used to be?" What does it mean? Why the changes? Why isn't PBC secure? Why isn't it the same?" These are hard questions to face.

We do not like to have the human foundations change and be uncertain, yet the Lord views it as necessary for every Christian to have the props taken away, to finally reject the notion that anything besides Jesus and his promises will get us through life.

And when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious before hand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak but it is

the Holy Spirit.

This is a reminder that the support, the encouragement, the wisdom, the power of God cannot be taken away. It will be available exactly when you need it. We will not be called on to go through anything more than that sustenance can get us through.

Thank you, Lord, for your teaching ministry to us, for your examination of life and history. Thank you for displaying our inadequacy to us, for reminding us of how utterly capable and dependable and certain you are. Help us to believe it with all our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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