

Series: The End

Title: The Great Tribulation

Text: Mark 13:14-23

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Verse 14

In verse 14, Jesus continued His teaching on end time events by speaking of an event called “the abomination of desolation.” He said, “‘When you see the abomination of desolation, standing where it should not be’ (let the reader understand), ‘then those in Judea must flee to the mountains’” (Mark 13:14). Notice the mention to something referred to as “the abomination of desolation.” What is the event of which Jesus spoke? The language is peculiar. The first word in the title is one that referred to something that was detestable.¹ The second (“desolation”) spoke of the act of something being made into a desert.² In a religious sense, it implied “that which is repulsive to God and His people.”³ Coupled together, the two words referred to a cataclysmic event through which a despicable and sinful happening would make the Jewish temple useless.

The event in view was first spoken of by the prophet Daniel. In Daniel 9:27, we read, “He will make a firm covenant with many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and offering. And the abomination of desolation will be on a wing of the temple, until the decreed destruction is poured out on the desolator.” Daniel’s pronouncement was in regard to an individual known as “the coming ruler.” Though the exact identity of the individual is unknown, he was depicted as existing during the end of time (Daniel 9:26). Apparently, this apocalyptic character will make some sort of covenant with the people of God in the last days. He will abruptly break that covenant by committing what is called “the abomination of desolation.” On two additional occasions in his prophecy, Daniel spoke of this event (Daniel 11:31 and 12:11).

While Daniel’s prophecy will ultimately be fulfilled in the last days, it appears there were additional fulfillments of the prophecy at different times in history.⁴ The first occurred in 168 B.C. when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Temple. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the man built an altar for Zeus on top of the altar used for burnt offerings. He then sacrificed a pig on top of it.⁵ This is what is meant by Mark’s words in verse 14 that said “standing where it should not be.” The apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees gives an account:

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 96.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 96.

³ Brooks, 212.

⁴ Robertson, 376.

⁵ Ferguson, 217.

Now the fifteenth day of the month Casleu, in the hundred forty and fifth year, they set up the abomination of desolation upon the altar, and builded idol altars throughout the cities of Juda on every side; And burnt incense at the doors of their houses, and in the streets. And when they had rent in pieces the books of the law which they found, they burnt them with fire. And whosoever was found with any the book of the testament, or if any committed to the law, the king's commandment was, that they should put him to death. Thus did they by their authority unto the Israelites every month, to as many as were found in the cities. Now the five and twentieth day of the month they did sacrifice upon the idol altar, which was upon the altar of God. 60 At which time according to the commandment they put to death certain women, that had caused their children to be circumcised. And they hanged the infants about their necks, and rifled their houses, and slew them that had circumcised them. Howbeit many in Israel were fully resolved and confirmed in themselves not to eat any unclean thing. Wherefore they chose rather to die, that they might not be defiled with meats, and that they might not profane the holy covenant: so then they died. And there was very great wrath upon Israel (1 Maccabees 1:54-64).

Though the apocryphal books should not be regarded as having equal weight as Spirit-inspired Scripture, they do contain historical information that can be helpful to us. We have such information in the aforementioned account of Antiochus' heinous acts.

A second fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy took place in the first century. We know this is true through a subtle reference Mark provided to his readers. Notice the words "let the reader understand." They were probably a way of Mark telling his audience to put two and two together. By the time they read his gospel account, Titus had already sieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple complex. Mark wanted the church to know that the current events of their day were a fulfillment of both Daniel and Jesus' prophecies.

It seems the "abomination of desolation" had a fulfillment in the first century because of how personal Jesus' words were to His disciples. He seemed to think that people in their lifetime would experience the things of which He spoke. The Lord instructed them to be ready to "flee to the mountains." The region surrounding Jerusalem was mountainous. The city itself rested in the mountains. Jesus wanted His disciples to get out of the city and hide in the surrounding hills. The church historian Eusebius, who lived during the third and fourth centuries, tells of how the early church actually followed Jesus' instructions. Many fled to a city called Pella and sought refuge:

Furthermore, the members of the Jerusalem church, by means of an oracle given by revelation to acceptable persons there, were ordered to leave the City before the war began and settle in a town in Paraea called Pella. To Pella those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem; and as if holy men had utterly abandoned the royal metropolis of the Jews and the entire Jewish land, the judgment of God at last overtook them for their abominable crimes against Christ

and His apostles, completely blotting out that wicked generation from among men.⁶

Jesus' personal instruction to the Twelve in our text is evidence that His prophecy had some bearing on people living in the first century. It seems Titus' siege of Jerusalem in AD 70 was in view. The Jewish historian Josephus has described the horrors of that event in the sixth book of *The Wars of the Jews*. He tells of how there were over one million Jews were killed through the event. Jerusalem fell into severe famine.⁷

Luke provides a parallel to our current passage in Luke 21:20-24. From his words, it is clear that Jesus' words in our text had application for the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. See Luke 21:20 and notice the reference to "Jerusalem surrounded by armies." Though it involved many inhumane acts against the residents of Judea, Titus' siege was ultimately an "abomination of desolation" because of the way in which it profaned the holy place. History tells that the man entered the holy of holies and removed the items used in sacred worship. The pots, pans, altars, utensils, and other consecrated items were then paraded through the streets of Rome in a victory parade.⁸

The event was significant in God's revelatory and redemptive purposes. In verse 14, Jesus spoke of the Abomination of Desolation in order to answer His disciples' questions concerning the "signs" that would accompany the last days. The destruction of the temple in AD 70, like other end time events, was a sign (Hebrews 2:4) designed to reveal revelatory truth. It demonstrated how the Temple was no longer significant in God's dealing with humanity.⁹ Through the coming of Christ a better means of mediation had been established (Hebrews 9:11-15). Instead of staying in the capital city and clinging to the temple complex, God's people were to disperse into the world with the good news of Jesus (Acts 1:8).

According to New Testament prophecy, there is still another fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy that is yet to be fulfilled. Remember how Jesus used the words "not yet" back in verse 7. When first century Jews saw the destruction of Herod's Temple, they undoubtedly thought the end had come. Jesus wanted them to know it was "not yet." The church age was just beginning and the people of God had a special mission to fulfill (Mark 16:15).

Also recall the "birth pains" metaphor from verse 8. The image of a woman in labor teaches us that the prophetic events of the first century were to be seen as precursors of something greater that would happen at the end of time. The destruction of the temple was a cataclysmic event that signified the dawn of the church age, but it

⁶ Eusebius. *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. (Barnes & Noble Books, 1965), 111.

⁷ Josephus. *Josephus: The Complete Works: Translated by William Whiston*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 872-899.

⁸ Brooks, 212.

⁹ Ferguson, 217.

was just an initial sign of God's eschatological plan. As the church age continued, Jesus promised that signs would increase in occurrence and intensity. Such is the picture provided by the "birth pains" metaphor.

Based on this understanding of prophecy, the Olivet Discourse was intended to have both near and far fulfillments. Jesus clearly meant to teach about things that would occur in both the first century and at the end of time. We know this is true because of His reference to the end-time appearing of the Son of Man in verse 26. Thus, we can perceive that a final "abomination of desolation" will occur at the end of time. John spoke of this reality in the book of Revelation. He told the early church that a blasphemous one-world government and religion would dominate humankind in the last days. This autocratic state religion, John told, would be run by an individual we now know as Antichrist. Scripture tells us:

The beast was given a mouth to utter boasts and blasphemies. It was allowed to exercise authority, for forty-two months. It began to speak blasphemies against God: to blaspheme his name and his dwelling—those who dwell in heaven. And it was permitted to wage war against the saints and to conquer them. It was also given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation. All those who live on the earth will worship it, everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered (Revelation 13:5-8).

Verses 15

In verse 15, Jesus encouraged His disciples to run for their lives when they saw His prophecy concerning the abomination of desolation fulfilled. He said, "A man on the housetop must not come down or go in to get anything out of his house" (Mark 13:15). To stress the horrific nature of coming trials, Jesus encouraged His disciples to be prepared to flee. In doing so, He spoke of one running from his or her "housetop." In the ancient Near East, homes customarily had flat roofs. An outside staircase usually provide access to that area.

Ancient folks used the tops of their houses in a way similar to the way we use a back porch. Daniel 6:10 conveys the prophet Daniel utilizing such a space for prayer. In speaking about the tribulation of the first century and the last days, Jesus warned that disciples should escape from their roof tops when they see disaster coming. He advised that they shouldn't even go back into their house to retrieve important items. The calamity would be so great, they wouldn't have time to grab clothes, food, or other bare necessities.

Jesus' instruction underscored the severity of upcoming tribulation. History gives witness to the cataclysmic nature of Titus' siege on Jerusalem. Historians tell us that 1.1 million Jews were killed as a result of the event. In addition, 97,000 were enslaved. One has described horrific things that accompanied the grave famine that accompanied Titus' invasion: "When a woman in the city had her food stolen, she was so desperate that she

killed and cooked her own infant, offering half of it to defenders who had smelled cooking and demanded food.”¹⁰

Verse 16

On top of running from their rooftops, Jesus also advised His disciples that “a man in the field must not go back to get his coat” (Mark 13:16). Since the first century world was mostly an agrarian society, Jesus’ instruction made sense to early readers of Mark’s gospel. Many were accustomed to working in fields. Usually, a worker would take off his or her outer robe (“coat”) to perform tough farming work. The same garment was referenced earlier in Mark 10:50. Typically, the item of clothing was normally left on the edges of the field when a worker labored in the fields. Jesus warned that one should not return to fetch his or outer garment when the signs of the times began to be fulfilled. His warning, as with his warning in verse 16, highlighted the intensity of hardship to come.

Notice that our Lord did not expect His disciples to submissively submit to death and martyrdom. He instructed them to take reasonable caution in preserving their lives. They needed to flee and protect themselves so that they could faithfully engage in the Gentile mission of the church (Mark 16:15).

Throughout church history, some have foolishly supposed that surrender to martyrdom without a search for escape is the most spiritual response to persecution. The words of Jesus teach us otherwise. He actually encouraged His followers to run from the threats of oppressors. It is holy and wise for Christians to guard themselves from those who would aim to do them harm. Didn’t Jesus protect Himself at times (John 2:24-25)?

It is well documented that the early church indeed had a problem with some who seemed to seek after martyrdom. Paul makes a reference to this reality in 1 Corinthians 13:3. The teaching of Jesus was therefore important for the earliest disciples. Some grasped it. Eusebius told of the way in which Polycarp took holy aims to avoid martyrdom before being burned at the stake.¹¹

In every age, believers must be willing to suffer for the cause of Christ, but they must exercise vigilance in avoiding unnecessary persecution. There is nothing beneficial about needlessly being a glutton for spiritual punishment. Jesus’ words in our text reveal this to be true. One has commented, “A believer is not to suppose that God will take care of him, and provide for his needs, if he does not make use of means and the common sense which God has given him, as well as other people. Beyond doubt he may expect special help of his father in heaven, in every time of need. But he must expect it in the diligent use of lawful means. To profess to trust God, while we idly sit still and do nothing, is nothing better than fanaticism, and brings religion into contempt.”¹²

¹⁰ Schnabel, 327.

¹¹ Eusebius, 167-174.

¹² Ryle,

Verse 17

Verse 17 says, “Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days!” (Mark 13:17). Jesus’ pronouncement of woe is understood. When the calamity of the last days unfolds, mothers will be in a predicament. Because running will be difficult, and because there will not be time to stop and feed infants, both expecting and nursing mothers will face grave hardship.¹³

Verse 18

In verse 18, Jesus advised His disciples to pray concerning the timing of the suffering that would soon take place, saying, “Pray it won’t happen in winter” (Mark 13:18). During the colder seasons of the year, the hills throughout Judea would often be covered in snow.¹⁴ In addition, wadis would be swollen with water, making crossing a difficult task.¹⁵ If people fled to the hills during hardship, as Jesus advised in verse 14, they would inevitably face less than favorable conditions. First-century people would have a difficult time surviving in frigid conditions.

Verse 19

In verse 19, Jesus described the intensity of the horrors associated with Titus’ invasion. He said, “For those will be days of tribulation, the kind that hasn’t been from the beginning of creation until now and never will be again” (Mark 13:18-19). Our Lord’s words contained a quotation of Daniel 12:1, a passage that said, “At that time Michael, the great prince who stands watch over your people, will rise up. There will be a time of distress such as never has occurred since nations came into being until that time. But at that time all your people who are found written in the book will escape.” Daniel’s words obviously referred to the end of the world. As a result, it is appropriate to conclude that Jesus jumps to the far off future in our current verse. While He had previously been speaking about the first century, He moved to talk about the end of the world.

Verse 19 and following can be seen as talking about the period of tribulation that will mark the last days. In describing that time, Jesus said they will involve great “tribulation, the kind that hasn’t been from the beginning of creation until now and never will be again.” Some misunderstand our Lord’s words, taking them too literally. They rightly think Jesus meant to say that the Tribulation will be the most horrific time period ever. However, they fail to see that Daniel and many of the prophets used the same language when speaking of other time periods. Their misunderstanding of Jesus’ figure of speech often leads to needless debates concerning end-time theology.

How could both Jesus and the prophets speak of several different eras as each being “a time of distress such as never has occurred since. nations came into being”? Can

¹³ Schnabel, 326.

¹⁴ Schnabel, 327.

¹⁵ Brooks, 213.

the qualitative descriptor be true of several different generations? It is important to note that the language is figurative. It involved a prophetic way of describing the severe difficulty of an event. We find the same language used of various different events throughout the New Testament (Exodus 10:14 and 11:6; Joshua 10:14; Judges 19:30; 2 Samuel 19:7; and 2 Kings 18:5 and 23:5). Jesus' intent was to simply emphasize the severity of the tribulation associated with the last days.

Verse 20

In verse 20, Jesus further describes the difficulty of the last days by saying, "If the Lord had not cut those days short, no one would be saved. But he cut those days short for the sake of the elect, whom he chose" (Mark 13:20). Mention of the term "elect" often sparks controversy. It is important to note that the word is a thoroughly biblical one. It is often used as a designation for God's people. See Matthew 22:14, 22, 24, and 31; Mark 13:22 and 27; Colossians 3:12; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 2:9; and Revelation 17:14. In the original language of our current passage, the verb translated "chose" appears in the aorist tense and middle voice. It depicts an act in the past that God performed for Himself. AT Robertson has said the verbiage "explains the sovereign choice of God in the end by and for himself."¹⁶

In studying Scripture, we learn that our all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving Lord knows who all will be saved (Romans 8:28-30) and that He has guaranteed their salvation. It is also clear that a set number of people will be saved (Exodus 32:32 and Revelation 13:8). This truth is comforting to believers as it gives assurance of salvation. One's eternal fate rests in the hands of God, not man. Grace, not one's goodness, guarantees eternal rescue. This truth is also pertinent when it comes to end-times truth. Though the heaven and the earth will be thrown out of kilter (Mark 13:24), and though the depravity of man will reach a fever pitch, nothing will prevail to wrest God's people from His sovereign hand. He has guaranteed that all His people will remain secure (Romans 11:26), even in the face of the Great Tribulation (Revelation 14:1-5).

Verse 21

In verse 21, Jesus warned, "Then if anyone tells you, 'See, here is the Messiah! See, there!' do not believe it" (Mark 13:21). According to our Lord, the end of time will be marked by many false claims of Messiahship. He emphasized the same truth back in Mark 13:6. John similarly spoke of the same reality in 1 John 2:18. Paul remarked on it in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4. In our current text, Jesus speaks of the response believers ought to have toward false christs by saying, "do not believe it." The language uses a present imperative verb that commands a continual rejection of claims from false teachers.¹⁷ No matter what happens, believers are to never quit standing on guard against erroneous spiritual teaching.

¹⁶ Robertson, 377.

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 97.

Verse 22

Verse 22 continues Jesus' description of the deceptive leaders who would mark the times of tribulation. It says, "For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and will perform signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, the elect" (Mark 13:22). Jesus' word found fulfillment in the first century. History attests to the plethora of false messiahs who made spurious claims during the times surrounding the earthly ministry of our Lord.¹⁸ The apostle John even made reference to the prevalence of antichrists during the early church. He seems to indicate that the appearance of such individuals was a fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy in our text (1 John 2:18). As a result, our Lord's words can be seen as having a near (first century) meaning.

They can also be seen as having a far meaning. According to the book of Revelation, the last days will be dominated by two individuals – the Antichrist and the False Prophet (Revelation 13:1 and 11). It seems that Jesus' made reference to both individuals in our current passage. In Revelation, John spoke of these individuals as having power to "perform signs and wonders" (Revelation 13:3 and 12-15), just as Jesus said in our text. Through such miracles, the Antichrist and False Prophet will deceive many. A great majority of humanity will submit to their one-world government and religion (Revelation 13:16-17), seeking security from the danger associated with apocalyptic events (Revelation 6:1-17).

Verse 23

In light of all of the details concerning the end of time found in verses 14-22, Jesus encouraged His disciples toward spiritual vigilance in verse 23. He said, "And you must watch! I have told you everything in advance" (Mark 13:23). The word translated "everything" is the same one used back in Mark 13:4. Its appearance in our current verse indicates that all of Jesus' teaching since verse 5 has been designed to answer the disciples' question in verse 4 concerning when apocalyptic "things" will take place.

Because of all the "things" He shared, Jesus commanded His disciples to be on guard. He gave similar warnings back in verses 5 and 9. The word translated "watch" is one that meant "be on the look out," "be careful," or "beware."¹⁹ In the original language of the text, it appears as a present imperative verb; thus, it commands ongoing vigilance concerning matter. Jesus wanted His disciples to exercise a habit-of-life caution concerning end-time truth. In fact, Mark places the word translated "you" in a position of emphasis in the verse.²⁰ Believers must take responsibility to be vigilant concerning matters related to the end of time. They should examine popular teaching to see if it is in alignment with the plumb line of Scripture. Caution should be taken so that they are not easily led astray by seducing spirits. One has rightly said, "Gullibility is no mark of a saint

¹⁸ Schnabel, 328.

¹⁹ Zodhiates, 342-343.

²⁰ Robertson, 377.

or of piety...God gave us our wits for self-protection.”²¹ May we be on guard against hollow teachings and beliefs that lead us away from the firm foundation of Christ.

The fact that Jesus answered question concerning the last days is instructive for us. It reveals that the Lord wants us to be informed, to a degree, concerning how the world will end. What believers know they must obey. They must comfortable with the fact that there are secret things they will never understand (Deuteronomy 29:29. Christ has not told us all things (Acts 1:7), but He has told us some things. We must aim to observe and obey all that He has shared.

²¹ Robertson, 377.