

Series: The End

Title: Persecution is Coming

Text: Mark 13:9-13

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Verse 9

In verse 9, Jesus warned His disciples to be vigilant concerning future events. He said, “But you, be on your guard! They will hand you over to local courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues. You will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a witness to them” (Mark 13:9). The admonition translated “be on your guard” is very emphatic in the original language.¹ Mark used a present active imperative verb to depict Jesus as calling for continual, ongoing vigilance. Truth related to the end of time calls believers to ongoing spiritual attentiveness.

The word translated “local courts” is the one from which we get our title for the “Sanhedrin.” In villages, cities, and towns outside of Jerusalem, there were usually makeshift forms of government that were modeled after the Sanhedrin.² Those who violated God’s Law or the tradition of the elders would often face punishment at the hands of such officials in the local synagogue. According to custom, violators would often be flogged with thirty-nine lashes (2 Corinthians 11:24). The practice was based on Deuteronomy 25:1-3, a passage that said punishment should not involve more than forty lashes.³ Scribes in Jesus’ day limited lashings to thirty-nine in order to provide protection against miscounting and an accidental violation of God’s Law.⁴ On top of Sanhedrin-like Jewish authorities, Jesus told His disciples that they would stand as “governors and kings” as well. The reference was to various Gentile-appointed rulers.⁵

Jesus warned His disciples that they would be “flogged” by such governing bodies. The word is a harsh one that refers to flogging or skinning.⁶ It picturesquely portrayed the brutal and barbaric nature of a customary first-century scourging. For first-century disciples, this meant they would face harsh persecution from governing authorities within Jerusalem, and from the Gentile world as well. Jesus’ words had a near fulfillment within the events recorded in the book of Acts. We read of disciples standing before local authorities in Acts 4:5-7; 5:17-18; and 12:1-3.⁷ Paul is seen standing before governmental leaders as well (Acts 23:1-11; 24:1-10; and 25:1-26:32).

¹ Robertson, 375.

² Robertson, 375.

³ Schnabel, 320-321.

⁴ Brooks, 209.

⁵ Robertson, 375.

⁶ Robertson, 374.

⁷ Schnabel, 321

The disciples needed to be open to the possibility of persecution. They were consumed by the prospects of Messianic glory (Mark 13:4). They had a Pollyanna perspective in which they assumed they would not face any trouble on behalf of Christ. Their eyes were focused on prominence, power, and prestige (Mark 9:33-37 and 10:35-45).

In time, they would face heated resistance. All of them, except one, would die for the faith. The lone survivor would experience exile at the hands of the Roman government. Those who followed the disciples' teaching would fare little better. History speaks of the persecution the early Church endured. Tacitus, the first-century Roman historian, has said that the earliest Christians were "hated for their abominations."⁸ Because their religion made them refuse to worship the emperor, the early Church was despised and incriminated on grounds of treason. Tacitus gave details of the persecution endured by first-century believers. He spoke of the way in which the emperor blamed the Church for fires that ravaged Rome:

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.⁹

While Jesus' words had a near fulfillment for the Twelve, a far fulfillment was also nested within His prophecy. For disciples of subsequent generations His words reveal there will be a governmental opposition of Christians during the last days. Such opposition was foretold by the prophet Daniel in Daniel 7:19-22. It is also spoken of in Revelation 6:9-10 and 13:5-8 and 14-17.

⁸ Brooks, 211.

⁹ Tacitus, Annals: Book XV, Chapter 44.

Bible-believing Christians should never put too much stock in government as being the cure-all for society's woes. At the end of time, Scripture teaches a one-world government will posture itself as the answer for the world's problems; however, in doing so it will set itself up in opposition against Christ. Those who are faithful to the Word of God will be counted an enemy of the state.

Such is the teaching of Scripture. Do we not see the initial forays of such things in our day? Doesn't it seem that the world is ready for a one-world government? Are not many looking to elected leaders to provide answers and solutions that only the Lord can provide? The cult of government is growing and it will only be a matter of time before the end-time persecution of which Jesus spoke comes into full bloom.

Though they had an immediate application for His disciples, our Lord's words stand as a warning for all generations. We must be on guard, prepared to face the trials and tribulations associated with end-time events. Too many modern believers seem to be inoculated by the spirit of the age. They have little concern regarding the possibility of judgment. They glibly glide through life, obsessed with worldly priorities and pursuits, never believing that Christ might return in their lifetime. Realities concerning apostasy and persecution are given little attention. A concern for truth and sound Christian doctrine are overridden by a shallow religion centered on cute devotional thoughts and self-help imperatives. In the end, the judgment seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:12-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:10) will prove that such distracted living is foolish.

Verse 10

In verse 10, Jesus reminded His disciples of the importance of gospel proclamation. He said, "And it is necessary that the gospel be preached to all nations." The word translated "preached" is one that simply meant proclaim.¹⁰ It was used in the ancient world in reference to the actions of a town herald. It meant "to make an announcement." Earlier in Mark, we have seen that such proclamation was at the heart of John the Baptist's ministry (Mark 1:4 and 7). It was also at the center of Jesus' ministry (Mark 1:14). Consequently, the Lord called His disciples to proclaim good news (Mark 3:14 and 6:12). At the end of Mark's gospel, we will discover that such proclamation is to be the focus of the Church's ministry as well (Mark 16:15). All in all, the people of Christ are to be a people who continually make an announcement. They are called to herald the gospel.

Jesus' mention of the gospel being "preached to all nations" can be seen as a parallel to His commission in Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. For Mark's Gentile readership, the announcement revealed that they had a stake in the promises of God. The Hebrew Scriptures had foretold that non-Jewish nations would be folded into the Lord's plan of redemption (Genesis 12:3; Psalm 96:3; and Isaiah 42:6).¹¹

Our Lord's prophecy in Mark 13:10 seems to have had a partial fulfillment during the lifetime of the apostles. In Colossians 1:6 and 23, Paul appears to have indicated as

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 96.

¹¹ Brooks, 210.

much. The New Testament portrays the Church taking the the gospel to Africa (Acts 8:26-40), Western Europe (Romans 15:24 and 28), and obviously the East.¹²

Some mistakingly see our Lord's words as a prerequisite that must be fulfilled before the end can come. They take the promise in our passage, as well as its reiteration in Matthew 24:14, too literally. They almost seem to believe they can usher in God's end-time program through their evangelistic efforts. Jesus' words were not intended to spawn such a perspective. Instead, He simply meant to promote the propagation of the gospel to all peoples. The Church Age, that period of time that immediately precedes the end of all things, should be marked by gospel witnessing.

Such advancement of Christ's good news is to be a priority now, and it should be a priority at the end of times. Even in the midst of great persecution, it will be the Lord's will for the Church to make Him known. Persecution and apostasy aren't excuses for giving up on the Great Commission, as some would assume. Sadly, many in modern society believe that tough times present a justifiable reason to backdown.

Remember this — the darker the darkness, the brighter the light of Christ. Hard times make a great backdrop for gospel truth. Consider Paul's instruction to Timothy. When he wrote his second letter to his young preacher protégé, Paul spent time describing the horrific nature of the last days (2 Timothy 3:1-9). Immediately after giving his description, he issued a challenge for Timothy to exhibit faithfulness to proclaiming God's Word (2 Timothy 3:10-4:2). Hear and take heed to the teaching of both Jesus and Paul — persecution, apostasy, tough times, and tribulation demand that the Church stay faithful to gospel ministry!

Verse 11

In light of the coming persecution, and in view of the necessity of gospel proclamation, Jesus gave His disciples advice for ministering the word in the midst of a hostile environment. He said, "So when they arrest you and hand you over, don't worry beforehand what you will say, but say whatever is given to you at that time, for it isn't you speaking, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11). The word translated "worry beforehand" was a compound word in Koine Greek. It was comprised of two words. One meant "before" and the other meant "to be anxious." It depicted the act of one fretting about something before an event took place. It meant "to worry ahead of time."¹³ There is certainly a type of anxiety that takes place during a crisis. There is also a type of that occurs before a potential crisis. Jesus spoke of the latter form of worry in our text. In doing so, He commanded His disciples to avoid worrying about the future.

In the original language of the text, Mark used a present imperative to forbid the action. While worry may seem justified in many circumstances, Jesus forbade it. Even the Great Tribulation will not be a sufficient excuse for anxiety and inordinate fear. Believers must learn to trust in the Lord. Fretting about the future will do little to fix it.

¹² Schnabel, 322.

¹³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 10.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Therefore I tell you: Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear...Can any of you add one moment to his lifespan by worrying?” (Matthew 6:25 and 27). Paul instructed the Philippians — “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). May we learn to develop the confidence of David who sang, “When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?” (Psalm 56:3-4).

Instead of fretting, Jesus wanted His disciples to trust in Him. His indwelling presence would give them assistance when they needed it. Jesus said, “Say whatever is given to you at that time, for it isn’t you speaking, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11). It is important to note that Jesus’ words should not be used to encourage a free-wheeling, emotionally-driven approach to self-expression in corporate worship. Nor should His instruction be used as an excuse for preaching and teaching that is devoid of study or thoughtful prayer and preparation. The Bible encourages the local church to have scripturally-grounded and logical teaching, preaching, and worship that is based on diligent study and solid Christian doctrine (Colossians 3:16 and 2 Timothy 2:14-15 and 4:1-5). A.T. Robertson has rightly said, “There is no excuse here for the lazy preacher who fails to prepare his sermon out of the mistaken reliance upon the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

Jesus never meant His injunction to be taken as an instruction concerning how the Church was to conduct public worship gatherings. His words had a fulfillment in the ministry of the apostles. Acts 4:5-12 describes how the Holy Spirit aided Peter and others in answering the local magistrate of their day. Furthermore, one can see a fulfillment through the way in which the Spirit of God inspired the apostles to pen Holy Writ (2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21).

Though the promise of verse 11 was intended for the apostles, there is a hint of application for us. Christ has promised that the Holy Spirit will aid us in our witnessing endeavors (Acts 1:8). Though we may not have to stand before governmental representatives and give an answer for our faith, and though we may not be used to deliver special revelation from God, we can be confident that the third Person of the Trinity will assist us in sharing the gospel. Every time we open our mouth to share our testimony, He works to “convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:8). Like the earliest disciples, we can be bold and confident in our evangelism, knowing we have help from the Lord.

Verse 12

In Mark 13:12, Jesus elaborated on the nature of the difficulties Christians will face during the end times, saying, “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rise up against parents and have them put to death.” When the Great Tribulation reaches its fever pitch, even family bonds will be incapable of preventing the persecution that will come upon God’s people. Parents, siblings, and children will all sell

¹⁴ Robertson, 376.

each other out in order to cover their own hides, since the Antichrist will persecute anyone who will not support his world system (Revelation 13:14-18). The prophet Micah foretold of the breakdown of family bonds during the apocalypse in Micah 7:6.¹⁵ Paul did too in 2 Timothy 3:3.

Such familial conflict because of Christ should come as no surprise to those who know God's Word. The Bible consistently teaches that the bond of Christian experience is stronger than that of family (Proverbs 18:24 and 27:10; John 19:25-29; Matthew 23:8 and 25:40; and Acts 1:15-16). In Mark's gospel, Jesus previously talked about how the way of discipleship would cause many of His followers to value the demands of His kingdom over the demands of their kin (Mark 10:29-30).

The truth of Jesus' words reminds us that our Christianity will invite scorn, laughter, and contempt from an unregenerate world. Because our profession of faith and distinct lifestyles will bring a degree of shame and conviction to sinners, they will often resist us strongly. Jesus told of this truth in John 15:18-20. Such reviling against God's people is actually a sign of God's blessing on our lives (Matthew 5:11-12). The fact that others despise us because of our witness is an evidence that we are born again. These realities should lead us to embrace the shame of the cross for the glory of Jesus (Mark 8:34 and Romans 1:16).

Verse 13

In verse 13, Jesus continued to describe the persecution His disciples would endure, but He also gave a wonderful promise for those who would prove faithful. He said, "You will be hated by everyone because of my name, but the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13). The pronouncement that believers would "be hated by everyone" was obviously hyperbolic to a degree.¹⁶ Every single person didn't despise the disciples. Jesus only meant to highlight the severity of the resistance they would face.

The words "the end" are futuristic. They refer to an event still yet to occur, even from our perspective. Though some of the events foretold of in Mark 13 have been fulfilled, there are also some prophecies still unfulfilled. We will later see that Jesus' teaching in chapter thirteen envisioned much more than the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. Jesus spoke in a way to show that His prophecies involved things that would happen at the end of the world (Mark 13:14, 19, 24, 25, 26, and 32-36).

According to the Lord, "the one who endures to the end will be saved." His words form the basis for a doctrine we know of as "the perseverance of the saints." McKim has defined it the doctrine by saying, "The belief that God's elect who believe in Jesus Christ are held secure by God's power, despite temptation and sin."¹⁷ Scripture speaks of such truth repeatedly. In Romans 8:30, we read, "And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified." According

¹⁵ Schnabel, 322.

¹⁶ Schnabel, 322.

¹⁷ McKim, 207.

to God's Word, those who are truly justified will certainly be glorified. Those who are predestined will persevere until the end.

The word translated "endures" in our passage is one that literally meant "to remain under." It figuratively portrayed the action of one patiently facing a trial or bearing up under a heavy difficulty.¹⁸ Jesus used the term to teach that true disciples will faithfully press on despite the threats of persecution. Such endurance is not a requirement for earning salvation; instead, it is a result of true salvation.

Those who are truly saved will give witness of their salvation through their perseverance. The Bible teaches that such endurance is a mark of Christian love (1 Corinthians 13:7). Those who embody it will enjoy a share in the New Heaven and New Earth. Paul said, "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:12). It is for this reason that the New Testament exhorts believers to press on in the face of persecution. Peter counseled believers, saying, "For what credit is there if when you do wrong and are beaten, you endure it? But when you do what is good and suffer, if you endure it, this brings favor with God" (1 Peter 2:20).

According to Jesus, those who exhibit such endurance "will be saved." The word translated "saved" is one that was used of any sort of rescue or deliverance.¹⁹ Earlier in Mark's gospel, it was used to describe physical healing (Mark 5:28-34 and 6:56). As used by Jesus in our current passage, the word speaks of salvation from spiritual damnation. Jesus could not have meant that His disciples would experience physical deliverance from persecution, since many of them ended up facing martyrdom.²⁰ He meant to say that those who persevere in the face of persecution will escape the horrors of the second death (Revelation 20:11-15). Sin and separation from God will have no power over them.

We have no need of being hopelessly overwhelmed by the troubles of our age. We should not fret about the future. Evil may abound and the nations may rage, but Jesus is still on the throne. The Heavenly Father's plans cannot be undone and He cannot be supplanted. Our salvation is secure and we have hope of ruling and reigning with Jesus forever. Because of God's grace, we will endure. No power of man can snatch us out of Jesus' hands (John 10:29). We may face ridicule, persecution, and even death for the sake of Christ, but we will win in the end. May these truths guard our hearts and minds. May they make us joyful, hopeful, and faithful, even as we face attacks from a world that despises our faith.

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 96.

¹⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 96.

²⁰ Schnabel, 323.