How do we wait for Jesus?

Text: Mark 13:1-13

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 9:6-7; Matthew 10:34-39; Mark 13:1-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 48, 231, 191:161-168, 411, 432, 274, 312, 411

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#45)

**Theme:** Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and also prophesies the damaging events leading up to His own second coming.

**Proposition:**  Expect and watch out for catastrophic events, deceptions and persecutions and endure to the end.

**Introduction**

Jesus is the promised ‘Prince of Peace’ (Isaiah 9:6) born as a child to the virgin Mary. At the time of His birth, a multitude of angels praised God saying: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!*” (Luke 2:14). So Christ, the Prince of Peace, has come, but where is the promised peace?

Is there not a war in Ukraine that has continued for over two years? Has there not horrific injury, loss of life and destruction in Israel and the Gaza strip since early October 2023? Are there not tensions between China and Taiwan and the threat of an invasion sometime soon? Are there not conflicts in marriages, families and churches? What is going on? Should we be alarmed, surprised, fearful and anxious at these things? Should we just give up on the peace once promised in Christ?

These are pressing questions that need answers – the answers that Jesus provides for us in our text today. Having left the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus and four of his disciples, Peter, James, John and Andrew went and sat on the Mount of Olives. From this high vantage point, looking out across the Kidron Valley the roof of the temple would have looked like a sea of golden glory, together with the beautiful terraced courts and cloisters of snowy marble. Here in Mark chapter 13 we have an extended section of the teaching of Jesus given on the Mount of Olives. This is often referred to as ‘The Olivet Discourse’ and is also recorded in Matthew 24:1-25:46 and Luke 21:3-36. We going to look closely at the first part of the Olivet Discourse in Mark’s gospel from verse 3 to 13 under three headings:

1. Don’t be deceived or alarmed
2. Be on your guard without worrying
3. Endure to the end and be saved
4. **Don’t be deceived or alarmed (v1-8)**

One of Jesus’ disciples, having been struck by the beauty, size and overall magnificence of the temple, had exclaimed as they were leaving the temple*“Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!*” (v1) *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.*” (v2). We don’t know exactly what the four disciples with Jesus on the Mount of Olives were thinking and feeling having heard this ominous prophecy of coming destruction. Imagine back before September 2010, someone saying to a member of our Christchurch congregation ‘*This large church building, which has stood for over 47 years will be completely gone so that no trace will remain’*. I think their response would likely be shock, surprise, perhaps doubt. The obvious question would then be ‘when?’ and ‘how can we tell beforehand that it is certainly going to happen?

The Jerusalem Temple was far more magnificent and significant than the old church building that used to stand on this site before the Christchurch Earthquakes. It is not at all surprising that the disciples on the Mount of Olives asked Jesus: “*Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?*” (v4) In other words, ‘when will the Temple be destroyed and what sign will occur just beforehand?’ It does sound like the disciples are just asking about the Temple, but the phrase ‘these things’ indicates that there is more to this question.

The parallel account of this conversation in Matthew’s gospel helps us to understand the bigger picture. Matthew records the question (Matt 24:3b) “*Tell us, when will these things be,* ***and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?***” It seems that the four disciples interpreted the destruction of the Temple as signalling the end of the world. They were not altogether wrong. The temple destruction was a type or foreshadowing of the end of this age. The temple was destroyed in AD 70, but this earth is yet to be destroyed (2 Peter 3:10).

What would be the signs leading up to the siege of Jerusalem and the breaking down of the Temple by the Roman commander Titus and his army? Wars, earthquakes and famines. At the time when Jesus spoke these words the Roman Empire was enjoying a long period of peace. Yet by AD 68, around the time that many Biblical scholars think Mark wrote his gospel, there was upheaval and political turmoil in the Empire with four successive emperors in one year (Galba, Otho, Vitellus and Vespasian). Between the time of Jesus’ death and AD 70, earthquakes were recorded in at least 11 places (Crete, Smyrna, Miletus, Chios, Samos, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colosse, Campania, Rome, and Judea). Luke records a great famine during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28) who was Emperor from 41-54 AD.

Historical records, and recent events, confirm that throughout the past two thousand years there have been many wars, earthquakes and famines in this world, as there are today. These are signs, ‘*the beginning of birth pangs*’ (v8) as Jesus describes them, that point to His return at some unknown time in the future. Jesus also explains that “*Many will come in my name, saying,* ‘*I am he!’ and they will lead many astray*” (v9). This prophecy too has been, and continues to be, fulfilled. There have indeed been many ‘would be messiahs’ over the past two thousand years – for example, more recently: Sun Myung Moon (founder of the South Korean Unification Church), David Koresh (leader of the Branch Davidians), and Chinese woman Yang Xiangbin (founder of Eastern Lightning). In light of these signs leading up to the end of this world, Jesus gives two instructions: “*See that no one leads you astray*” (v5), and “*Do not be alarmed*” (v7).

Do not be deceived into following false Christ figures, whether they be leaders of new movements or by extension church leaders who seek to elevate themselves to be higher than humble faithful servants in submission to Jesus their Lord and Saviour. Do not be alarmed or troubled. The underlying Greek word here means to be ‘inwardly aroused’, ‘disturbed’, ‘frightened’, ‘startled’. It can be very disturbing to see the images of war from Gaza, Ukraine and other parts of the world. It is wise to consider limiting our exposure to news media.

However, we should not be alarmed and surprised at wars, earthquakes, famines and the appearance of false messiahs. Jesus has warned us that these things ‘*must take place, but the end is not yet*’ (v7). So, brothers and sisters, do not be deceived and do not be alarmed, but do be on your guard – which brings us to our second point.

1. **Be on your guard without worrying (v9-12)**

Crossing the road on foot can be dangerous because if you get hit by a moving vehicle that could end in serious injury or even death. As children we learn road safety rules like: stop, look, listen before attempting to cross over to the other side of the road. The more potentially dangerous a situation is the more alert and self-aware we need to be.

Beginning in verse 9, Jesus warns the four disciples on the Mount of Olives to ‘be on your guard’; literally ‘watch yourselves’. The danger is not from road traffic, but from different human authorities: ‘councils’, ‘governors’, ‘kings’ and even from their own family members. This is a hazard that comes specifically to disciples of Jesus who are persecuted ‘for my sake’.

Notice that the word ‘deliver’ appears three times in verses 9-12. It describes the act where something or someone is transferred into the possession of another. Like when Joseph’s brothers sold him to the Ishmaelites (Gen 37:28) or when Judas kissed Jesus, thereby identifying Him to the Jewish authorities so that they could arrest Him (Mark 14:46). For some disciples their suffering would mirror that of Christ before Calvary. Regarded as heretics they would stand trial before both Jewish religious courts and Gentile rulers.

We know from early New Testament church history that this is indeed what happened to many Christians. Stephen was stoned to death by order of the Jewish council (Acts 6:12). Under the Roman Emperor Nero, Christians suffered great persecution. Roman historian Tacitus records that “*before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illuminate it*”.

What were the disciples of Jesus to say when they were delivered over to Jewish or Gentile authorities to be tried for the crime of confessing Christ as their Lord and Saviour? Jesus provides the answer in verse 11: “*And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit*”. In the Book of Acts we read of how the Apostle Paul was brought before the Jewish Council and we learn of the plot to kill him (Acts 23). Paul was rescued by Roman soldiers and brought before Felix the governor where he cheerfully made his defence (Acts 24:10). He later appeared before Herod Agrippa; to whom he proclaimed the gospel (Acts 26).

Over the past two thousand years, many, many disciples of Jesus have been delivered over to religious and secular authorities to be tried, tortured, and killed for the sake of Christ. For us today, in New Zealand, the threat of trial, imprisonment, torture or death for owning the name of Christ is hardly a present danger, but should we worry about the possibility in the future? Jesus says ‘No’ – ‘*do not be anxious beforehand*’. Instead entrust yourself to the Lord both now and into your uncertain future.

It may even be that the greatest trial for you comes from within your own family, from an unbelieving blood brother or sister, a parent, or your own children. Betrayal from within a family could come through hatred for the gospel or the desire for a relative to save their own life by handing over the Christian in their midst. These things too have occurred over the past two thousand years and continue in many parts of the world today. Jesus warns his disciples that, from the time of his first coming to that of his return ‘*you will be hated by all for my name’s sake*’. Here ‘all’ does not mean every single person, but ‘all kinds of people’, including religious and civil leaders and members of your own family. Persecution for the followers of Christ, like wars, earthquakes and famines are signs of ‘*the beginning of birth pangs*’ but ‘*the end is not yet*’.

Brothers and sisters, do not be surprised if these things come your way, expect the possibility that they may. Remain vigilant, be on your guard and do not worry about the present or future. Prepare yourself by listening to the words of Jesus as He guides you and equips you for the pathway ahead so that you can endure to the end – which brings us to our final point.

1. **Endure to the end and be saved (v13)**

Scripture describes the Christian life like an athletic race (1 Cor 9:24; 2 Tim 4:7; Heb 12:1). Not really like a short sprint, but much more like an ultra-marathon, requiring long-term focus, commitment and effort. We see this clearly in the final verse of our text today, as Jesus says: “*But the one who endures to the end will be saved*”. Now this does not mean that we obtain salvation from death to life through our own efforts at endurance. We know most certainly, brothers and sisters in the Lord, that by grace we have been saved through faith. And this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph 2:8).

Our endurance to the end, even though it is imperfect, evidences that we are truly saved (cf. 1 John 2:19). It is one of the works that accompanies true faith (James 2:17). The Greek word translated ‘endure’ in verse 13 does not so much mean to ‘grin and bear’ difficulties, sufferings, persecutions and betrayals, but to remain steadfastly under trial, trusting in the Lord and seeking to learn the lessons. God teaches us through the turmoil that often attends this life.

This ‘endurance’ word was used in the ancient world as a military term to describe an army holding a vital strategic position at all costs. So we might say ‘*the one who stands his ground to the end will be saved*’. What is that ground? It is Christ, the Rock. He is the One who did all the work to endure to the end and to save His people. When He said on the cross ‘*It is finished*’, He had accomplished all that was necessary to save people like us from sin and death. Completing this work killed Him, but He rose from the dead, and He is surely coming back in glory at the end of this age.

However, our endurance is not the same as that of Christ. When we endure, we do so only because the Holy Spirit enables us to. How does this work practically? The Spirit guides in the truth of God’s Word. Specifically from our text today, confirming that there will be ongoing signs before Christ returns that point to the reality that He is coming again to this earth. As we have seen, these signs include:

* False would-be messiah figures who will lead people astray
* Wars and rumours of wars
* Earthquakes in various places
* Famines
* Persecution of Christians by religious and secular authorities
* Betrayal and hatred of Christians by members of their own families

Also, before Christ returns “*the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations*” (v10). There is work to be done, an ongoing task to be performed, by Christ’s disciples – to proclaim the gospel far and wide. Each one of us, brothers and sisters in the Lord, are called to be actively involved in this work, using the various gifts the Holy Spirit has given to each one of us to further the proclamation of the gospel. You may know that by AD 60 the gospel had reached all the ‘nations’ represented in the Roman Empire (e.g. Rom 1:5, 8; 10:18; 15:18-24; Col 1:6:23). Today the gospel has reached the ‘ends of the earth’, the return of Christ is imminent, however, no one, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son of God, but only the Father knows when (Mark 13:32). So, whilst we continue to wait for Jesus to come, this is how we are to live:

* Don’t be deceived or alarmed
* Be on your guard without worrying
* Endure to the end and be saved
* Be actively engaged in the proclamation of the gospel to all the nations

Where is the promised peace of Christ now? It is found in the hearts of those who have saving faith in Him and who experience the spiritual blessing of divine peace, which surpasses all understanding, and which guards the heart and mind in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7). It is found in restored and sanctified relationships in marriages, families and local churches. Not perfectly, but genuinely. The promised peace of Christ is already, in part in the lives of His disciples, but it is not-yet fully experienced. When Jesus, the Prince of Peace, comes back at the end of this age then all His disciples will know complete, everlasting, perfect peace. So, Come Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20b).

AMEN.