



Watch and Be Alert

Mark 13

Joe Jones March 8, 2020

Please turn in your Bibles to Mark 13, then pray with me.

Father, we pray for Your powerful blessing on Your Word this morning as we look at this chapter in the Gospel of Mark. Thank You for it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

My kids like to play the game “Hide and seek.” In that game, the seeker counts to ten or 20 or 30, then says, “Ready or not, here I come.” Jesus of Nazareth was a Man Who lived on earth about 2,000 years ago. He lived an exceptional life, without sin, and He died for the sins of others on a cross. He then rose from the dead, ascended into heaven with a body and soul that cannot die, and from heaven He will return to earth one day. On that day, the reality will be: “Ready or not, here I come.”

At that time He will judge the whole world, rewarding and punishing. He will end this age of human history and start the next unending age of human history in which He will rule and reign over a Kingdom of justice and joy forever and ever. Do you believe all that? It's true. It's real.

We're in the final section of the Gospel of Mark before the Passion narratives. In these final days of Jesus' life, He's been going in and out of Jerusalem with His disciples. He's been teaching primarily in the temple and having clashes with the Jewish religious leaders. Looking at Mark 13:1, we see that Jesus now leaves the temple one last time and as He does, one of His disciples points out the grandeur of the temple. It's hard for us to imagine how grand and beautiful and massive the temple and its surroundings were.

As they're leaving, they say, “Jesus, look at how great the temple is.” Jesus responds with a real downer, because He prophesies that this very temple—which is the center of the Jewish people's life and worship at that time—will be completely destroyed. His prophecy was fulfilled in the year 70 A.D., when every massive and beautiful building block in that temple was torn down.

When Jesus prophesies this, it prompts a response from four of His disciples—the same four Jesus started with. If you look all the way back at Mark 1:16-20, it's Andrew, Peter, James and John. Here He is with these same four disciples at the very end and they have a couple questions for Him when He tells them the temple is going to be destroyed. Let's look at those two questions in Mark 13:4. *“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”*

Underneath the questions they're asking is an important—and somewhat misguided—assumption. They're assuming the destruction of the temple will coincide with the end times when Christ comes in power to set up His Kingdom. They think these two things go together, in terms of their timeframe. When the temple is destroyed, what would be left but for the Messiah's Kingdom to come immediately?

This assumption is only partially true, so Jesus is going to say, "Yes, but no." He's going to correct them a little bit. He's going to reset their expectations, focusing them on the main thing, on what really matters. You see, this passage isn't primarily here for us to argue about the details of the end times—exactly when Jesus will return, whether there will be a rapture before He returns, whether we should be amillennial, premillennial or post millennial.

Those are all important things to study, but that's not the primary purpose of Jesus' saying these words. It's not here so we can chart out a timeline, plot dates on a calendar or try to match every news story to particular things Jesus mentions. Jesus' primary reason for saying these words is to encourage and challenge us with a very simple exhortation. Let's look at it. There are a few words He uses that all get to the same idea of what Jesus is driving at over and over again here for us.

- Mark 13:9 He says, "*Be on your guard.*"
- Verse 23 He says, "*[You] be on guard.*"
- Verse 33 He says, "*Be on guard.*" Get the point?
- Verse 33 again He says, "*Keep awake.*"
- Verse 35, "*Stay awake,*" or "*Keep alert.*"
- Verse 37, "*Stay awake.*"

Jesus is drilling this message into the minds and hearts of these four disciples. In fact, Jesus very specifically means for this message to these four disciples should go to all disciples of all times. He says in verse 37, "*What I say to you I say to all: stay awake.*" This is a unique statement where Jesus is specifically emphasizing, "I'm saying this to everyone. All disciples throughout all times—stay awake! Be on your guard. You, Christian in the 21st century, keep alert! Be watchful! Be ready for My return."

To put it negatively, don't let your guard down. Don't fall into spiritual slumber. Don't let your love for Christ grow cold. Don't get so wrapped up in this world that you forget that Jesus is coming back quickly. Don't be caught lazy. Don't be concerned about a million other things. Don't be so attached to the stuff of this world that when Jesus comes back, you're tempted to look back. Remember Lot's wife?

The Bible urges us to this readiness over and over. As I was studying this, I found verse after verse, passage after passage, that do the same thing Jesus is doing here. They say, “Be ready!” I want to give you one passage in particular, 1 Thessalonians 5:2-6, where the Apostle Paul writes:

² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

It’s as though Paul has heard from the lips of Jesus, “Keep awake!” He’s using that instruction to tell the church in Thessalonica, “Stay awake. Be ready for the return of Christ.” Do you get the point? I’ve said it about a hundred times now already. Let’s be ready for the return of Jesus.

This doesn’t mean we’re living in constant fear that we’re not doing enough for God. That’s not what Jesus is instructing us toward here. It also doesn’t mean we should move to the mountains of Wyoming or Montana—although that sounds kind of good—and just sit on top of a mountain, detached from the world and looking into the skies, just awaiting the return of Christ. No. What Jesus is simply saying is live your ordinary lives in this world for Christ, loving God sincerely and using your gifts to love others. If you live that way, you’re living in readiness for the return of Christ.

Now take a moment to consider your life. Are you ready for Christ to come back? It’s like the classic story of the high school or college student whose parents go away on a week-long trip. The student is so good all week—until his parents call and say, “We’re going to stay a few extra days.” So that weekend he calls his friends and has this huge party at his house. Then what happens? His parents come back a day early and he’s caught unprepared for their return.

So consider your life. Are you ready today for Christ to come back? Are you ready even to suffer for and with Jesus as you wait for His coming? He’s worthy of that.

Now, one thing we should appreciate about the Bible is that it doesn’t just command us: “Just get after it.” Command, command, command. Rather, it gives us motivation and reasons for obedience. In Mark 13, Jesus gives us a truckload of motivation to be ready. We’ll look at that, but before we do, I want to look at how I see the structure of this passage, which is important to see. There are three major groupings of verses in Mark 13.

- First, in verses 5-13 and then in verses 28-31, there's a primary focus on these four disciples, their generation and what they will experience in their lifetime. The terminology of "this generation" and "these things" marks this part of Mark 13.
- The second section is in verses 14-27, where the frame of reference shifts from "this generation" and "these things" to "them," "that tribulation" and "those days." So here Jesus seems to be looking ahead to a more distant future. He's prophesying what will happen immediately before His return and then at His return.
- In the third section, verses 32-37, Jesus is speaking both to the disciples who are with Him and then to all disciples throughout all ages, stressing that no one knows the day or hour of His return.

Let's keep this structure in mind as we read this passage. I hope the reading of God's Word will land on us with a weight and that it will encourage and motivate us to obedience. I'll say a few things about each section, looking at seven motivations that should stir us to be ready for Christ's return.

Motivation #1 – False teachers who seek to lead us astray are in the world, therefore be on guard.

Look at Mark 13:5-6: *"And Jesus began to say to them, 'See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!'" and they will lead many astray."* We know there were false prophets among the early Christians who were seeking to deceive them. In fact, the Apostle Paul needed to warn one church about the false teaching that Jesus had already returned. Here Jesus is lovingly preparing the disciples to watch out and be on the alert for false teachers.

We don't often realize it, but much of the New Testament is actually warning us about false teachers and false teachings. Think about the books of Jude, 2 Peter, 1 and 2 Thessalonians or 1 and 2 Corinthians. Think about the place in Acts 20 where Paul met with the Ephesian elders, warning them about false teachers coming up even within the church. This was a real danger then and is a real danger today, isn't it?

I was recently reading an article about the Shincheonji Church of Jesus founded in 1984 by charismatic pastor Lee Man-hee whose followers are estimated to be up to 240,000 worldwide. They believe he is the messiah. Now, if you do the math, that's .003% of the world's population, but I believe those types of percentages will increase exponentially in the days, months and years that immediately precede the coming of Christ.

In fact, I believe the Bible teaches there's going to be a massive deception, even within the church, that will come right before Christ returns. So please, let's not assume we're immune to being led astray by false teaching. I could give multiple examples of people who have seemed strong in their faith, but now where are they because of false teaching. False teaching often

contains a kernel of truth plus a subtle destructive lie that's very powerful and very seductive. Today, we must be aware of and watching out for these false teachers who are in the world. Be on guard.

Motivation #2 – Christians aren't immune from the wars and natural disasters that plague our world, therefore be spiritually alert.

Look at Mark 13:7-8:

⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

Notice that these are signs, but they shouldn't necessarily be taken as signs that Christ is going to return right away. When the first century Christians heard about wars and natural disasters—and there were significant earthquakes and other natural disasters that happened during those days—they should not have thought, “Oh, Christ is going to return tomorrow.” Part of what Christ is doing here is preparing His disciples for an entire lifetime of following Him, even as they see some of these signs happening.

With that said, these are signs of the end. I believe that soon before Christ returns, there will be a noticeable increase in two things.

- First will be an increase in international tumult. Kingdoms and nations will be warring against one another.
- Second, there will be an increase in natural disasters. Many of us have been paying attention to the news headlines about the coronavirus; those headlines have been everywhere, haven't they? We've heard about the tornadoes in Nashville this past week.

We know of wars and skirmishes going on all across the globe. It's these types of things that will increase significantly in the days before the return of Christ. This should motivate us to be on guard. The Bible never says Christians are exempt from facing these things. We must suffer as we follow Christ, so let's be on guard. Let's be ready.

Motivation #3 – We must endure the hatred of the world as followers of Christ, therefore prepare to endure.

There's a lot of intensity here. Let's look at Mark 13:9-13:

⁹ But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. ¹⁰ And the gospel

must first be proclaimed to all nations. 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. ¹² And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. ¹³ And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

So in addition to the wars and natural disasters that plague all humanity, we Christians must also face the added pressure of persecution. Jesus teaches that there will be a range of persecution that disciples must face in following Him. It ranges from government authorities cracking down on Christians and the Christian faith, to those within the walls of our own homes—brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers and children, betraying one another—and everyone in between.

Jesus sums it up by saying, “You will be hated by all for my name's sake.” So the early Christians boldly took the gospel to the ends of the known world and they suffered for it, didn't they? They were not ashamed of the gospel; they spoke for Jesus, then they suffered for it. There's a real pattern in that for all Christians throughout history. In fact, every one of the 13 apostles of Jesus—Paul being the 13th—except for John were martyred for their faith in Jesus.

We learn from Acts 12:2 that James, the brother of John—who was sitting with Jesus, hearing these very words—was killed by Herod with the sword. We learn from church history that the Apostle Paul was beheaded by the emperor Nero. Matthias, who replaced Judas, was burned to death. Can you imagine that—burned to death? James the son of Alpheus was stoned and then clubbed to death. And Peter was crucified upside down.

Throughout church history, the blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the church and many, many thousands of Christians have died, been imprisoned, tortured, beaten and betrayed for the sake of Jesus. Today, persecution against Christians is worse than it's ever been before. In fact, it's estimated that over 260 million Christians are living in places today where they experience high levels of persecution. These are our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering right now for the sake of Jesus. Their reward will be great.

But right before the end, there's going to be an increase in false teaching, wars and natural disasters, but there's also going to be an increase in two more things.

- First, bold witness for Christ, notably to the unreached nations and peoples. I believe at the very end there's going to be a surge in evangelism and mission to the ends of the earth.
- Second, the unrestrained persecution of Christians at the very end. This is coming, folks.

This is coming for the church and Jesus here in Mark 13 is lovingly preparing us to be ready—so let's be ready.

Motivation #4 – Tribulation is going to become incredibly intense at the very end, therefore be on guard.

Look at Mark 13:14-23:

¹⁴ But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁵ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, ¹⁶ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁷ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ¹⁸ Pray that it may not happen in winter. ¹⁹ For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. ²⁰ And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. ²¹ And then if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Christ!" or "Look, there he is!" do not believe it. ²² For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³ But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

Look back at verse 14, because I want to dig in a little bit to this “abomination of desolation.” What is this? We know from history that at a few points the temple in Jerusalem wasn't just destroyed, it was desecrated by foreign rulers. This happened in a climactic way in the year 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. They didn't just destroy it, they desecrated it, offering sacrifices to their gods in the midst of the temple.

Now track with me here. This desecration that happened in 70 A.D. points forward to another person at a future time who will perform an even greater desecration. The Apostle Paul picks up on this reality in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4. This is an important passage and I want you to see it. The Apostle Paul says this, talking about the second coming of Christ:

³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

It seems that Paul is saying there's a man coming in the future who will perform the greatest desecration by arising from the midst of the church, proclaiming himself to be God and leading many professing believers astray. The general sense we get from Jesus' teaching is that when this man comes on the scene and this desecration happens at the very end, things are going to get really, really bad. It's going to get particularly hard for Christians during an unprecedented period of tribulation and persecution.

Christian, you can prepare today for that day by abiding in Christ day by day. So let's be ready.

Motivation #5 – Jesus is going to gather to Himself His chosen ones who are eagerly waiting for Him when He returns, therefore be ready.

This is the most powerful motivation for us, bright, beautiful and stunning. Oh, there is hope for us here! Even though we've got to go through difficulty and tribulation and hardship for following Jesus, what a hope we have!

Look at Mark 13:24-26:

²⁴ But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

This, friends, is our great hope! Jesus is coming back and we can count on it. Look at verse 27: *“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.”* Is Jesus the humble and servant-hearted Son of Man Who came to die for sinners? Yes. Is He also the ruling, powerful and glorious Son of Man Who is coming again? Yes, He is! He will come again in power and glory, not to die for sins but to save His chosen ones and judge those who have closed their hearts to Him.

I love that word “gather” in verse 27, don't you? He's going to gather us to Himself. Finally safety! In a world of threats and total lack of safety, finally when Jesus comes and gathers us, there's safety and the joy we'll experience on that day will be incomparable. Hard as it is to believe, His coming will make all our sufferings and tribulations seem small in comparison to the joy that will begin on that day and then increase forever as we live with Him in the new creation.

This great day is the day of relief we're looking forward to, when there will be no more sin and no more evil. Imagine it. No more temptation. No more suffering. No more pain. No more tears. No more persecution. No more wars. No more terrorism. No more racism. No more tornadoes. No more tsunamis. No more earthquakes. No more hospitals. No more viruses. No

more cancer. No more strokes. No more transplants. No more miscarriages. No more abortions. No more abuse. No more unfaithfulness. No more divorce. No more guilt. No more shame. No more anxiety. No more depression. No more mental illness. No more curse on the earth.

Instead, there will be the blessings of the Son of God extending “far as the curse is found.” Isn’t that good news? We have a great hope. So we need to be on guard and we need to be ready. Don’t miss out on this. We have a wonderful hope, so let’s endure to the very end.

Motivation #6 – Every generation must be prepared to go through tribulation, therefore be watchful.

Look at Mark 13:28-31:

⁸ From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

What Jesus is doing here is turning from the global, cosmic, final event surrounding the return of Christ and looking now back to His four disciples who are sitting in front of Him, whom He’s loving so well. He’s essentially saying, “Don’t think that all this is way out there in the future. No, you four are going to have to go through some of these things.”

And He says to us this morning—the living Christ Who is with us today—urging you and me, “Be ready.” Whether we’re going to be around when Jesus returns or not, He’s saying, “Be ready.” Don’t put off this living in readiness for a later time.

Motivation #7 – Jesus could come at any time, so we must be ready all the time, therefore be prepared.

Mark 13:32-37 says:

³² But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.

Jesus concludes here by bringing our attention back to that day and those things, as opposed to this day and these things for this generation. This conclusion is so appropriate, because Jesus makes “that day” —the final day of His return— a possibility of happening at any time. For the disciples, it could have happened in their generation. Or it could have happened for the early church. Or it could happen 2,000 years later—which it hasn’t happened yet, but it could happen in our generation or lifetime. Or it could happen in 200,000 years. We just don’t know.

I’m happy to leave that day and time to the Lord. Because He could come at any time, we must be ready all the time. As Christians, we struggle and sin; we’re not perfect. If you don’t know Christ, the stakes could not be higher, so I’m pleading with you today. If you’re here today and you’re not a believer, you might think you need to get your life together before you come to Jesus, but that is just simply false. You come to Him as you are, bringing your sins to Him and He will forgive every last one of them because He died for you. Then your future couldn’t possibly be any brighter. So entrust your life to Him.

For those of us who have already trusted in Him, my encouragement is basically the same. Keep trusting in Him. Keep following Him. Keep plodding on, day by day, trusting in Him. Be reminded today, as the book of Acts says, that it’s through many tribulations that we must enter the Kingdom of God. Be reminded today that He’s coming back—that’s real and that’s true. And be reminded of your bright future, Christian.

Let’s pray.

Father, I pray that each one of us would be like the Bereans in the book of Acts who were noble and went back to Your Word to study it and look into the things Paul was teaching them. I pray that we would go back to Mark 13 to study and dig into it, so that ultimately we would be encouraged, convicted, challenged and given hope again and again through this chapter of Your Word. We thank You that Jesus is coming back. We look forward to the hope we have in Him, praying in the power of His name. Amen.

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