

The Last Days (Part 2) -- Mark 13:14-23

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

Lord, we need to experience You in a real, personal, and meaningful way today. As we read, study and meditate on this story from the book of Mark, kindle a fire in our hearts. May the fire of the Holy Spirit cleanse us from sin and make us bold for You. May it start a revival in each one of us that sweeps across our congregation, through the town of Lancaster, across the state of Ohio and around the world. We ask these things in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

The Seventh-day Adventist church exists today because of what the Bible has to say about the last days. Do you agree with this statement? Back in the 1800's some people began studying the prophecies of the Bible. They studied what the Bible has to say about the last days before Christ returns the second time. And based on what they learned, they started the Seventh-day Adventist church. How many of you realize that?

I grew up in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This chart showing a timeline of last day events (posted on Wikipedia in the article, "Seventh-day Adventist eschatology") is very familiar to me. In fact, I remember one that was much more detailed than this. As a church we have been careful to pinpoint where we are exactly in this timeline from Christ's first coming to His second coming and beyond.

My purpose this morning is not to explain this chart to you. It is only an illustration. To some of you this may not make any sense. Here's what I want you to notice: where we are on this chart today. We would all agree that we are living after the year 1844. And those of us who have been raised in the Adventist church can tell you with certainty that the "close of probation" is still in the future. So, where does that leave us today? Somewhere in between, right?

We are going to talk about these events today. But there's a question I want you to keep in mind as we do so, and it is this: "What has to happen before we move forward on this chart to the close of probation?" In other words, "What is God waiting on?" Or perhaps, "What are we waiting on?" That's a very important question, because we don't want to get stuck here, right?

Let's now consider a summary of our story today:

Jesus warned His disciples of the arrival of a corrupt and destroying power in Judea. He counseled them to be alert and swift to escape to the mountains. Jesus then predicted an awful time of distress to follow that would be unlike any other in earth's history. Yet Jesus promised that through God's intervention His chosen people would be saved in spite of it.

This story has been written primarily so that we might know Jesus. So, that's how we are going to look at this story. What did Jesus experience in these verses? First of all, He experienced predicting widespread evil and deception. Jesus begins verse 14 of Mark 13 by referring to the "abomination of desolation". I'm curious, so I just have to ask: "How many of you are 100% certain about what this is?" Well, for those of you who are not 100% sure, relax, ok? Identifying the "abomination of desolation" is not as important as knowing Jesus Christ. There are three references in the book of Daniel that mention the "abomination of desolation" or a similar rendering. The one that Jesus was most likely referring to is Daniel 9:27. It is the last verse in a prophecy that pinpoints the time when the Messiah would appear and be put to death. It's a prophecy that spans 490 years. So, after the coming of the Messiah, the "abomination" and "desolation" would occur. The Hebrew word translated, "abomination" means "to be filthy, polluted, disgusting, or idolatrous". It's something that is appalling to God, such as idolatry or unfaithfulness to Him. The Hebrew word translated, "desolation" means

“to be astonished, stunned, or devastated”. It describes the effect of this disgusting idolatry and unfaithfulness. It astonishes and devastates God, His people, and even the land, leaving it desolate.

I invite you to turn with me to Luke 21:20. This is Luke’s account of the same story in Mark 13. But notice an important added description of the “abomination of desolation”. (Read) Luke makes it pretty clear that Jesus is here referring to the armies of Rome that would come and surround Jerusalem.

One more thing to notice in Jesus’ prediction in Mark 13:14 is that those affected by this “abomination of desolation” are where? In Judea. So, this is not a worldwide event. It’s something that affects those living in and around Jerusalem.

Jesus makes another prediction in Mark 13:19. This one affects the whole world. Looking forward into the future to “those days”, Jesus predicted “tribulation”. This word means, “distress” or “oppression”. Again, it is a prediction of trouble. God’s people will be in distress. They will be oppressed. That is not good, right? Notice the widespread nature of this tribulation. In verse 19 Jesus says that from the time of creation to the time of “those days” nothing would compare to it. The length of time as well as the severity would be unequalled in earth’s history. Notice also in verse 20 that if the Lord were not to intervene, “no flesh would be saved”. The entire world is affected by this tribulation.

Again, much has been written about this time of tribulation. Most scholars see parallels between this tribulation in Mark 13:19 and the oppression of God’s people in Daniel 7:23-27, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, and Revelation 12:13-13:10. The one causing this oppression is often referred to as the Antichrist. Now, since this is not a study on Daniel or Revelation, we will not do an in-depth study on these passages. In Mark 13 Jesus mentioned this great time of trouble very briefly. He covers it in only two verses. There is one point to consider, though, in His prediction in Mark 13:20. In verse 19, Jesus says this tribulation will be in “those days”. However, in verse 20 He refers to this time of oppression with the words, “the days”. He repeats this description twice. Understanding the Greek grammar here reveals that Jesus is referring to a specific time period, which is mentioned in the book of Daniel as well as in Revelation. In Daniel 7:25 and in Revelation 12:14 the time period is described as “a time and times, and half a time”. In Revelation 11:2 and 13:5 it is referred to as 42 months. In Revelation 11:3 it is referred to as 1260 days. If you do the math, all three of these equal out to the same time period. Most scholars believe that these prophesied 1260 days are fulfilled in 1260 years, which is a long time! No wonder Jesus says in Mark 13:20 that if the Lord had not shortened those days, no one would survive.

Jesus made one more prediction in Mark 13:21-22. He said there would be “false christs and false prophets”. People would come pretending to be Jesus or one of His prophets. In verse 22 Jesus says they would even use “signs and wonders” in an attempt to prove that they were authentic. Jesus says their goal is to deceive, if possible, even the “elect” or “chosen ones”.

Jesus not only experienced predicting widespread evil and deception, but also giving counsel. In Mark 13:14-18 Jesus gave very specific instruction to those Christians who would be living in and around Jerusalem at the time when the Roman armies surrounded the city. He ordered a quick and immediate evacuation to the mountains. This would not be a unique experience for God’s people. The Israelites had fled to the caves and mountains under the rule and tyranny of the Midianites in the book of Judges and again under the oppression of the Philistines in the book of 1 Samuel. In Mark 13:15 Jesus gave specific instructions to those who would be living in the city of Jerusalem in His reference to “him who is on the housetop”. In verse 16 Jesus gave specific instructions to those living in the rural areas around Jerusalem in His reference to “him who is in the field”. In verse 17 Jesus mentioned those women who would be pregnant or nursing. It seems that Jesus had a special place in His heart for them and the trials they would have to endure. A fourth instruction to these Christians in Judea is found in verse 18: “Pray that your flight may not be in winter.” In Palestine “winter” was a word synonymous with “stormy weather” and was often translated as such.

Before we move on, I would like to read a quote from the book Great Controversy by Ellen White. She describes how things actually transpired 40 years later in 70 AD. Notice how Jesus' prediction was fulfilled and how His counsel proved to be so appropriate:

Not one Christian perished in the destruction of Jerusalem. Christ had given his disciples warning, and all who believed his words watched for the promised sign. "When ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies," said Jesus, "then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out." [Luke 21:20, 21.] After the Romans under Cestius had surrounded the city, they unexpectedly abandoned the siege when everything seemed favorable for an immediate attack. The besieged, despairing of successful resistance, were on the point of surrender, when the Roman general withdrew his forces, without the least apparent reason. But God's merciful providence was directing events for the good of his own people. The promised sign had been given to the waiting Christians, and now an opportunity was afforded for all who would to obey the Saviour's warning. Events were so overruled that neither Jews nor Romans should hinder the flight of the Christians. Upon the retreat of Cestius, the Jews, sallying from Jerusalem, pursued after his retiring army, and while both forces were thus fully engaged, the Christians had an opportunity to leave the city. At this time the country also had been cleared of enemies who might have endeavored to intercept them. At the time of the siege, the Jews were assembled at Jerusalem to keep the Feast of Tabernacles, and thus the Christians throughout the land were able to make their escape unmolested. Without delay they fled to a place of safety,—the city of Pella, in the land of Perea, beyond Jordan. (pages 30, 31)

Jesus gave additional counsel in Mark 13:21-23 in response to the false christs and false prophets. When people should announce their arrival and call for Jesus' followers to come look, Jesus' counsel was very simple: "Don't believe." In other words, "Don't even go look." Jesus makes it clear in Mark 13:22 that any interest at all could prove fatal. These "false christs and false prophets" were determined to deceive them. Jesus' last instructions in Mark 13:23 are a repeated theme throughout the chapter of Mark 13. We heard a great sermon by Pastor Rick Remmers on how to follow Jesus' counsel here to "take heed" or "watch". Jesus repeated this command four times in this chapter. And in essence this is what Jesus was saying, "You know now, before it happens. So, be prepared."

Now that we've looked at what Jesus experienced in this story, let's consider our own experience. What happened in this story must somehow impact what happens in our story. The ultimate goal in studying the life of Christ is to become like Him. What does that look like? We will consider two ways in which Jesus' words and life in this story reveal how we should live as healthy Christians.

First of all, He is revealed as our Example in that He mixed mercy with the enemy's wrath. Jesus made it clear what the enemy was planning to do. Disaster, destruction, and death were sure to come. But in the midst of all this, He showed how God's mercy would also be revealed. In Mark 13:14 His message was, "Yes, the Roman armies will come and completely level the temple to the ground. But, I'll give you an open window, an opportunity to escape." In verse 18 Jesus told His disciples to pray for mercy. "Pray that you won't have to flee in stormy weather!" And in Mark 13:20, Jesus revealed God's mercy that would shorten the time of tribulation for the sake of His chosen ones. God's mercy would intervene.

Do you realize that God is all about mercy to those who deserve it the least? In Exodus 34 God reveals Himself to Moses. And the first word He uses in verse 6 in this self-revelation is "merciful". When Jesus was on this earth He spoke words of blessing to the people known as the Beatitudes. In the heart of this list are the words in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy." Don't you love it when God shows you mercy? Aren't you relieved when the policeman extends mercy when you've broken the speed limit? Being like Jesus is being merciful. It is primarily God's job to take care of meting out justice. I invite you to turn with me to Romans 12:18-21. (Read) If someone is causing you and the church trouble, God will repay them what is just and right. Our role is to extend mercy and, if possible, to live peaceably with all men.

I am often encouraged as God allows me to see His mercy mixed in with hardships. It was May 2012 and our family was on our way back home from a trip to Tennessee. Just outside of Cincinnati our car suddenly lost power and we coasted onto an exit ramp. Not only were we broken down 100 miles from home, but we soon

found out that the car was irreparable. This was the only car we had. Yet in this hardship we saw God's mercy. We were able to get the car off the interstate and safely onto an exit ramp. An auto repair shop was maybe an 100 yards away. They not only towed the car and diagnosed the problem, but also gave us a ride to the Cincinnati airport to rent a car. God's mercy continued after we got home. The Lord provided a temporary vehicle for us while we shopped around for a car replacement, and even provided a monetary gift towards the purchase of a "new" one.

I also think of last summer when many of us lost our power as a result of some storms and high winds. The weather was hot and the power didn't come on for days, even weeks. But our family saw God's mercy mixed in. We were out of town when the storms came through. And even when we did come home, and the power was still out, God provided a refuge for us at night in our cool basement. Over and over God's mercy has been mixed in with hardship, whether in sickness or in some financial time of need. Doesn't it feel good when God is so merciful to us? So, let's determine to extend that same mercy to those who offend us, make mistakes, or have other faults.

Second and finally, Jesus is revealed as our Example in that He had a world vision. In Mark 13 Jesus was answering a question that applied to His disciples and the temple. And that was about it. And yet we find in Mark 13:19 that Jesus has expanded the view to include "the [entire] creation which God created"! And in verse 20 His vision takes in all of humanity. The New King James Version reads, "No flesh would be saved." But a better translation would be, "All flesh would not be saved." Or, "Not any flesh would be saved." Jesus is referring to the human race! He was able to see beyond those few followers addressing Him on the Mount of Olives. We see Jesus revealing this same vision in His prayer in John 17. In verse 20 He tells the Father, "I not only want to pray for these disciples, but also everyone who will come to believe in Me as a result of their witness."

As fallen humans we naturally have tunnel vision. Do you know what I mean? We often can't see the forest, but only the tree right in front of us. A major cause of this tunnel vision is a self-centered perspective. I can't see your needs or your perspective because I'm consumed with my own. I spent many, too many, years of my life self-absorbed, focused on my own needs and problems. This way of living got to be so miserable that I finally was able to see the joy in focusing on the needs of others.

Jesus shows us that a healthy Christian is someone who is free to live their life blessing those around them. They stop complaining and finding fault. They stop wallowing in their own issues and needs. Instead of asking, "How is this going to affect me for good or bad?" they ask, "What can I do to minister to the needs and to lighten the suffering of others?"

So where are you today? Are you afraid of the future? Are you trying to find out the latest end-time events? Are you filled with a critical spirit, finding fault with others? Or are you focused, intentional, and passionate about spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to as many as possible?

I would like to come back to the question I posed at the beginning: "What has to happen before we move forward on this chart to the close of probation and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ?" Is God waiting on us? Are we waiting on God? Where's the hold up? There is a quote that always comes to mind when these types of questions are raised. It's found in the book *Testimonies for the Church* Vol. 6 by Ellen White and it's on page 450. Notice what she says:

A flood of light is shining from the word of God, and there must be an awakening to neglected opportunities. When all are faithful in giving back to God His own in tithes and offerings, the way will be opened for the world to hear the message for this time. If the hearts of God's people were filled with love for Christ; if every church member were thoroughly imbued with the Spirit of self-sacrifice; if all manifested thorough earnestness, there would be no lack of funds for home or foreign missions. Our resources would be multiplied; a thousand doors of usefulness would be opened, and we should be invited to enter. Had the purpose of God been carried out by His people in giving to the world the message of mercy, Christ would, ere this, have come to the earth, and the saints would have received their welcome into the city of God.

Incidentally, this was written over 100 years ago. So, on one hand, God is sovereign. He has a plan that no one can thwart. He will not allow time to go on indefinitely, waiting for us. And yet the message here is very clear. We have a responsibility. How we, as God's people, live affects the fulfillment of events leading up to Christ's return. We could have been home by now. It is my prayer that you will catch the strains of heavenly music drifting from around the throne of God and become so homesick that you will determine to do whatever you can to precipitate the events that must take place before Christ can return.