

The Long Watch

by Steve Zeisler

We are creatures destined for eternity, who first must live in time. And the fact that we are called to live in time presents us with many difficulties. Time never seems to work for us. It either goes too fast or too slow-- so fast that the demands and the pressures of the moment come upon us with such rapidity that we cannot possibly keep up; or so slow that we find ourselves drifting to sleep; we become lethargic; we assume that nothing ever changes.

At the close of his ministry, Jesus was asked some questions by his disciples about the future. (We began to look at his answers to their questions in the 13th chapter of Mark last week.) His first response, as we saw, was, in a sense, unfocused. He spoke about a period of time which would extend between his first and second coming, but he said of that period, "that is not yet the end" (verse 7). He said that that period would be characterized by various kinds of physical upheavals, such as earthquakes and famines. Then he said that kingdoms and nations would rise against one another, and there would be wars and rumors of wars. Now Jesus said that those physical and political upheavals would occur throughout the world, so we ought to expect them to take place all during this period between his first and second coming. And last, these events would not be predictable; they would not follow any particular sequence.

In verse 14 of this same chapter, however, Jesus adopts a very different tone in his discourse. Suddenly, everything is very focused indeed. Now he has a particular geographic location in mind, and the events that will occur there will do so over a short period of time. Also, these events will be very closely tied together. Mark 13:14-27:

But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where it should not be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. And let him who is on the housetop not go down, or enter in, to get anything out of his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! But pray that it may not happen in the winter. For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never shall. And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect whom He chose, He shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ'; or, 'Behold, He is there'; do not believe him; for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order, if possible, to lead the elect astray. But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance. But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. And then they shall see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth, to the farthest end of heaven."

Jesus is directly answering the question his disciples had asked, "What will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?" His answer is that the sign will be an awful act of arrogance, a monstrous act of human pride that will take place on the site of the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus quotes the book of Daniel in referring to the "abomination of desolation." Daniel describes that event as taking place in the Jerusalem temple. Jesus says that his directive then to those who are in Judea, in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem, is that they should "flee to the mountains." Then following "the abomination of desolation" there will come a period of tribulation, and following that, the Lord will come visibly in the clouds; he will call the elect to himself and the new age will begin.

Now I believe there are persuasive arguments in scripture which say that before this period of tribulation, the church will be "raptured," that is, all born again believers will be taken out of the world so they will not have to go through any of these things. And even if you are not convinced that the rapture will take place prior to the tribulation, it is still very unlikely that the specific statements Jesus makes here will apply to you, because you are unlikely to be in Judea at the time the desolating sacrifice is set up. In his account, Matthew says that people ought to be concerned that the Sabbath laws do not impede them in their flight, and we, of course are not likely to be subject to the Sabbath laws at any point in our lives. So the question arises, of what use is this information to us? Can we derive something helpful from this?

I want to suggest some implications to you. Now I am not saying that this passage teaches these things precisely, or that they are even the main reason the Lord said them. (I think Jesus said these things for the sake of the people who will have to live through them.) But there are some reasonable inferences we can draw for ourselves and for our time. First, we can learn something about the nature of man's pride.

Let me read two further descriptions of the "man of sin" who will accomplish this defiance which, Jesus says, will be the sure sign that the end is here.

Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (2 Thess. 2:3-4)

The prophet Daniel, in a passage where he talks about this sacrilege being set up, describes the "man of sin" this way:

Then the king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god, and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods. (Dan. 11 : 36a)

When this individual goes into the temple site, the place where God is being worshiped, and sets himself up as God, man's pride will be seen in its most intense and terrible form. But that pride is not qualitatively different than human pride as it exists in our age. That kind of pride is not ultimately, absolutely, qualitatively different than pride as you and I experience it. When we flatter the important people of the world, when we long to be part of the inner circle that excludes others, those desires stem from the same source as this man's. Every time we put down the "small" people, every time we exalt ourselves because of our achievements, we are operating on the same basis; we are serving the same lord, because that is what this "man of sin" will do. Finally, this man will say, "I am the apex of humanity; I am man as he ought to be; I am God." Our man-worship, our unrighteous longing for human approval is in the same league.

Secondly, we can infer from this passage something about the ordinary, everyday issues of life which take up so much of our time and energy. When I read this passage, it struck me that Jesus directed those people who live in this time, in this place, not to make a bad decision about very ordinary things. He is saying, in effect, that if you are more concerned than you should be about the treasures in your home-- if you go back into your house to try and carry away some of your belongings at this last moment- you might have made a very dangerous choice. Jesus says to pray that these events not occur in winter, and that does not seem to be very different than the prayer he directed us to pray, when he told us that we should pray for our daily bread, for shelter against the elements, etc. These are all the kinds of things that are part of our lives all the time now.

Given the perspective of verse 19,

For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never shall be,

we might expect him to tell us to pray about some kind of violent attack by "Star Wars" type armies and demonic wizards because there has never been a time like this in history. But what he does is say, "Look, pay attention to the mundane things, the little things- shelter against the elements, too much concern for your property; recognize the plight of mothers with children and pregnant women."

Again, this is an inference, but I was reminded when I read this to pay attention to the day-to-day, ordinary decisions I make. I was reminded that I might be doing things and making choices that have greater consequences than I am aware of. It scares me to know that I have a special responsibility to spend time with my children as they are growing up, to help them understand my love for them, their security in Christ, and to see that they have a healthy family life. Yet, time after time I get caught up with the ministry, the work of God, preaching, dashing about the place, going to meetings. I do not spend as much time as I should with my children. If I come home at night thinking, "Tonight I'll read the paper instead of wrestling with my son," that kind of decision can be much weightier than I recognize. Now that is the inference I am suggesting. It should not be a big deal whether or not someone goes home to get his cloak, but it might be. All that had the effect of reminding me to not take for granted the ordinary things of life, to realize that important things can happen in the day-to-day conversations I have, and the decisions I make about ordinary things.

Thirdly, we can learn from Jesus' description of the end times the important and exalted place of scripture. He says, "But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance" (verse 23). At this time in history, facing these dangers, under these kinds of awful conditions, Jesus reminds them, "You have an anchor. You have a place you can turn to for answers. You are not going to have to go through anything I haven't told you enough about for you to find hope and security and encouragement in my word. Things are not going to get out of control." There will be tremendous hope and help available when people review the words of Christ in that day. That is true today as well. What a gift the Scriptures are to us! It has the answers, the hope, the encouragement. Nothing we are called to go through is unanticipated in scripture. I think we can infer from this that an important place ought to be given to the word of God in our day as well. It is an anchor; it is a source of hope for us.

Fourthly, consider how Jesus uses the word "elect" or "chosen" in this section. In this passage we have some very encouraging words about the elect, the chosen ones. He mentions them three times. First, in verse 20:

And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect whom He chose, He shortened the days.

You and I are Christians because God chose us. We cannot lose what he has determined we should have. We cannot come short, fall away, or fail to make it. Jesus first highlights that in the context of despair. When you first read this, you tend to think Jesus is saying that if he had not shortened the days that God's children would be put to death. But that does not seem to be a reasonable interpretation, because we know that Christians die, Christians are martyred, believers throughout the ages have died for their faith. We are told in Revelation 6 about the prayers of martyrs who gave up their lives in the cause of Christ. If you are a Christian, being put to death is not the worst thing that can happen to you. So I do not think Jesus is saying that God shortened the days so that Christians would not die during the tribulation. I think a lot of Christians (those converted after the rapture, perhaps) will die during those days.

What Jesus is saying, it seems to me, is that the times will be so horrible that even the elect will be tempted to despair of life itself. It will seem that death is the conqueror; it will seem that the forces of evil are greater than the power of God. Believers will be tempted to despair and give up their faith at that time. There is a story about a Jewish rabbi in a concentration camp during the war, who prayed fervently that God would intervene to deliver his people. Hour after hour he begged God to do something to save them. As he stepped over the threshold of the gas chamber he said, "There is no God." Jesus is saying that the chosen ones will be protected from believing that God has abandoned them, and if he has to shorten the days to do it, then that is what he will do. That is the encouragement of these words. If you are chosen of the Lord, then you will not despair of your faith. He will see to it that whatever he has to do-- including shortening the days-- will protect you from that.

Jesus mentions the elect a second time in verse 22:

for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order, if possible, to lead the elect astray.

He is saying that at times of greatest upset there will come false prophets who have great ability to deceive.

They will be powerful, they will do dramatic signs and wonders. Under those most difficult conditions you will face the temptation to follow someone else, so much so that if it were possible the chosen ones of God would be led astray. But it is not possible. That is the point. If Jesus has chosen us for his own, we cannot fail. Satan can deliver his most punishing blow and God will see to it that his chosen ones will not fall short. That really ought to encourage us. Maybe you know people who right now are being deceived by a false prophet. You are convinced they know the Lord but are now in a period of time where they are blinded. If it were possible to lead the elect astray, these ones who live during the last days would be so led, but it is not possible. Those whom you love, if they are God's chosen, will not ultimately fall to the deceiver.

The third time the elect are mentioned in in verse 27. Following the darkening of the sun and the moon and the falling of the stars, God still has a plan for his chosen ones. We will outlive the usefulness of the whole universe. Our future is more certain and more secure than anything our senses tell us. Jesus will never forget his chosen ones; he will send out his angels to gather us. The powers of evil in the heavenly places will be shaken, yet the elect will continue in a love relationship with Christ even after that.

Now again, if that is all true of the end, it is true today as well. If the Lord by his power and his choice will not allow those whom he knows to fall, then that is true in the here and now. We cannot fail. He will do whatever it takes to make us like his Son. He will do whatever it takes to bring us back from our folly, if need be; to protect us from the temptation to think that our destiny is uncertain.

Let me review this again with you. In this passage, Jesus is speaking primarily to people who will be living in a particular point in history, when a man will enter the temple in Jerusalem and proclaim himself to be God. Now it is most unlikely that any of us present today will be there. But that does not mean that what Jesus is saying here does not have implications for us. I would like to suggest that there are at least four. One, that the quality of evil that we see at the end is continuous with the quality of evil in our day. Human pride will always be the same. Secondly, that the ordinary choices we make about our homes, what we wear, about protection from the weather and everything else at the end of time may be life or death choices, and are probably much more important now than we give them credit for. We ought to be awakened to that. Third, Jesus said, "I am not going to ask you to go through anything that I have not told you about ahead of time." You will have the resources to deal with these things at that time. Scripture, his Word, is a source of hope and security for us. And four, it is impossible for his chosen ones to fall, now or then or ever. He will not allow it to happen. You could not possibly be more secure about your future and about your victory over whatever it is that seems to be dominating you right now.

Jesus has told his disciples what it will be like in the final months of history. But those days are not here yet. In fact, almost two thousand years have passed since he uttered these words, and the time that intervenes is going to sometimes come too fast for us to handle and sometimes too slow. In verse 28 he talks about the fast-- paced events at the end, the seemingly out-of-control demands, the crushing pressures.

"Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that the summer is near. Even so you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. But of that day or hour no one knows not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."

Once the final process begins, once these events are set in motion, they cannot be prevented from running their course. His word here to people who have to live through this time is that there will be a certain and sure end of all these things. You are going to have to endure some tremendous difficulties, but you can be confident that the end is in sight. Jesus is right at the door. Once they begin, these things will not even last a generation.

The last thing Jesus says concerns time that goes too slow, when lethargy, sleepiness and boredom take over because nothing seems to be happening. Verse 33:

"Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is. It is like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge,

assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert-- for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or at cock crowing, or in the morning-- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!' "

Sleepiness, failure to watch and be alert means losing interest in the things of Christ, of forgetting our first love. We are all tempted to let other things encroach upon the first place that Christ ought to have in our lives. We are not looking for his return; we are not looking for his presence in the world around us; we are not thinking about his priorities. We are asleep, spiritually. But at the end of time there will be no danger of falling asleep. Christians then might be fearful, tempted, facing despair, might be under pressure, might be threatened, but they will not be asleep; they will certainly not be bored. Yet there is a very real danger that we in our day might fall asleep, that we will stop being concerned. But the evil one we face, the forces at work, the stakes in terms of our personal lives are no different now than they will be at the end. What the evil one is hoping to accomplish in this age by making us drowse off to sleep is just as dangerous as what he hopes to accomplish in the final age by despair and temptation and pressure and sword.

So we have learned some implications from the events of the future that have a bearing on the present age. The direct word from Jesus to the present age is, "What I say to you I say to all: stay alert." As awful as these things will be in the future, the same kind of issues are at stake right now. That fact ought to motivate us to not become spiritually unconcerned and sleepy, to watch until the Master returns.

Father, help us to stay awake and to be moved by what we see your children will have to face in the end, to critically examine ourselves and to realize that we may have to battle with lack of concern for these things, even while the same enemy and the same issues are before us. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Mark 13:14-37
Steve Zeisler
Seventh Message

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