

First Sunday of Advent
The Need for a Savior

Isn't there a saying about how men get lost because they never ask for directions? How many home repair projects take longer than necessary because someone didn't bother to read the directions? **One of the most difficult things for most humans to do is to ask for help.** We can do very well for ourselves in many areas of life, yet, sometimes we keep our troubles to ourselves because we're afraid to let anyone know or can't admit it is beyond us. At other times it seems that the world is so broken that it's beyond anyone's control and we don't know whom to ask.

Wow! It's been twenty years since September 11, 2001, when our nation was attacked by terrorists in a well-planned act of war. Those of you who were around and remember, do you recall how more people seemed to be open to God right after that attack? It was as though God had opened a door into the heart of our nation. People filled the pews of our churches as never before. I've heard stories of prayer groups popping up in NY fire stations. Pastors and laypersons from churches across the country went to NYC to offer help and prayer. It is easier to talk about God at such times because people want to find God. They know they need His help.

Tragedies, disasters, and challenges put our lives into perspective – we see what's really important in life, we see who we really are, *and* that we all need help.

Since that seemingly long-ago attack on 9/11/01 we've had more terrorist attacks on our homeland, including shootings, bombings, and gruesome beheadings. The savagery of ISIS rampaged through the Middle East, and now we wonder if it will revive and come to our shores? We're still dealing with a worldwide pandemic that has impacted the lives of all of us. (Some are wondering if it was unleashed on purpose.) It seems as if racial tensions are greater now than a couple of decades ago. We're facing inflation and businesses are struggling to find workers. Division in our nation is reflected in many churches. The future seems more uncertain than perhaps it did before. When tragedies, dangers, and challenges beset us it always feels like it's harder than ever. **Difficult times are most difficult when it's your turn.** In the midst of this uncertainty, it is fair to ask if we are living in the last days before the return of Christ. Is this the end of the world? What does the Bible say about times like these?ⁱ

A Glimpse Into The Future

In Mark 13 and Matthew 23 Jesus speaks to his disciples **about evil in the world, the future, and the end times** (it's sometimes called the Olivet Discourse because he was teaching from the Mt. of Olives, just outside Jerusalem). This is the second-longest sermon by Jesus – the longest being the Sermon on the Mount. It is also the longest prophetic section in the New Testament outside the book of Revelation. For those reasons alone, it deserves our careful attention.

Consider the setting of this message: it is Wednesday of Christ's final week on earth (what we call Holy Week, before Easter). He had just been teaching at the Temple in Jerusalem and he warned people about being complacent in their religion. He made a point that the works of man do not last. When his disciples commented about the beauty of Herod's Temple, Jesus replied that a day is coming when the temple will be destroyed and *not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down*, Mark 13:2. This prediction was literally fulfilled in A.D. 70 when Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

The disciples were keenly aware of the dark clouds of opposition swirling around Jesus, but they still had no idea that their Master is about to be crucified two days later. Even though Christ had predicted his resurrection, that too was a mystery to them. And of his ascension to heaven and his long absence from the earth, they simply had no conception about that whatsoever.

In this context Jesus' message is a warning of a long delay before he returns and of difficult times ahead. He gives an exhortation to his followers to remain faithful in light of the hard times to come and his delayed return. But make no mistake: **Jesus clearly predicts his eventual return to the earth: *At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory*, Mark 13:26.**

When the disciples heard this prediction, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ... *when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?* Mark 13:4. To the first question Jesus answers, ***No one knows about that day or hour, not even angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*, Mark 13:32.** But he does give some idea of what to look for prior to his return.

Signs of the Times

1. Spiritual Deception: Jesus said, ***Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many*, Mark 13:5-6.** The first "sign" is a reminder that **religious charlatans** may be found in every age. Maybe you've heard of David Koresh and Jim Jones. Then there are those semi-religious charlatans of various political ideologies with promises of utopia. Near the end of the age, **spiritual deception will increase because spiritual gullibility will increase.** We should not be surprised. I Timothy 4:1 warns us: ***The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.*** We must stay close to Scripture and the faith handed down by the apostles lest we be led astray by ***false Christs and false prophets ...who... will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect...*** Mark 13:22.

2. International Conflict: ***When You hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom*, Mark 13:7-8.** The Greek text reads, "You will be hearing," – that is, there will be ongoing, continual conflicts. Do these names sound familiar: Korea, Viet Nam, the Persian Gulf, Russia, China, Lebanon, Iraq, Kashmir, Somalia, Haiti, Kuwait, Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, Kuwait, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan? And who knows how many other places.

We cannot reason directly from one particular war to the Second Coming. Our perspective is too short. Once upon a time Italian dictator Mussolini was hailed a savior. Not long afterward he was called the Antichrist. And so it goes. This world is marked by warfare, and we will not see the end of it until the Prince of Peace returns and men beat their swords into plowshares.

3. Disasters: ***There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains*, Mark 13:8b.** Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis all happen and we may not know when they are coming. Famines kill and the biggest tragedy is that too often they are man-made. Famines and earthquakes have been with us since the beginning of time and will be with us tomorrow. In themselves they do not point to the Last Days. But they are opportunities for us to respond with the compassion of Christ.

4. Fierce Persecution: ***You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged... in the synagogues*** [Jesus speaking to his Jewish followers]. ***On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them*, Mark 13:9.**

Has anyone had this as a memory verse? Probably not. It's too negative to be very popular. Yet there it is, clear and easy to understand, right from the lips of our Lord. Jesus told his disciples to expect the worst: **followers of Christ will be hated because of their relationship to him.** Maybe we're dismayed when schools cut out Christmas carols in favor of "holiday" concerts, or some TV personalities slander Christians. It could become more intense. More Christians were killed for their faith in the 20th century than in all the previous 200 centuries combined. Today there are places where one can be thrown in jail, a labor camp, or killed for converting to Christianity or even proclaiming him. In many places persecution and hatred of Christians is on the rise. That trend will come to a fearful climax in the final days preceding the return of our Lord.

5. Worldwide Evangelism: *And the gospel must first be preached to all nations, Mark 13:10. In troubled times people are hungry for a word from God.* If time is short there is a sense of urgency in the missionary enterprise.

Last Thoughts

A. In every generation there will be false messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, persecution of believers, and the preaching of the gospel. It would be a mistake to read about one incident and jump to the conclusion that Jesus must be right around the corner. God has an eternal perspective. That's vastly different than the latest news flash. God's timing is perfect.

B. Since history is truly His story, let's keep our eyes focused on Jesus because he may come sooner than we think. We ought to rejoice that He clearly is the Lord of history – that the power behind the universe is One who is willing to suffer on our behalf. Throughout this sermon he gave on the Mt. of Olives he says, *Watch out... You must be on your guard... he who stands firm to the end will be saved... Therefore keep watch...*

This is no time to procrastinate. It's time to get serious with the Lord. Do you know Jesus? Don't say, "Tomorrow I'll come to Christ." How do you know what tomorrow will bring? How can you be sure you'll be alive tomorrow? If these are the last days, you don't want to be caught by surprise. Whether He comes tomorrow or in 100 years, you will have no regrets if you come to Him today. *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away, He said, Mark 13:31.*

Are times bad enough that we need a savior? *Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down...* Isaiah 64:9. What's that old joke about American politics – people believe the messiah will come every four years? *History is littered with the broken hopes of people who trusted in a savior made by human hands.* Saving humanity means transforming human hearts, and only God can do that. That's our need for a divine Savior. The world still needs Jesus. And the world still needs you and me to commit our lives to Him and bring others to Him. He is the only true Savior of the world. The only hope for peace in the Middle East was born there 2,000 years ago.

Like the Twin Towers of NYC that crumbled, so goes many things we have long trusted. Where will we go to find safety? The answer is 3,000 years old: *The name of the Lord is a strong tower; The righteous run to it and are safe, Proverbs 18:10.* Don't keep the Good News of a true Savior – Jesus Christ – all to yourself. People still need the Lord.

Final Word

For in him you have been enriched in every way ... Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly await for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful, 1 Cor. 1:5-9.

¹A majority of Americans believe (62 percent) that climate change is causing natural disasters, but a substantial proportion of the nation also thinks that these calamities are also the result of the "end times" (49 percent) as recounted in the Bible, according to the [Public Religion Research Institute](#).

The research firm — which published the findings in its new report — "Believers, Sympathizers & Skeptics," noted in its analysis that this end times proportion is up five percentage points from 2011, when just 44 percent agreed that natural disasters are evidence of the apocalypse.