

## The Darkness before the Dawn

### Mark 13.14-23

I read a story this week about a Russian writer who was once imprisoned because of his religious convictions. The conditions in the labour camp he was in were so intolerable that he eventually began to contemplate suicide. But his faith in God would not allow it, so he began formulating a plan of escape that would cause him to be shot by the prison guards. Without being told about the writer's intentions, a fellow inmate approached him and drew a cross on the ground. Seeing it as a message from God, the writer abandoned his plan of escape and entrusted himself to the Lord. What he didn't know was that people all over the world were praying for his freedom, and just three days later, he was released from prison.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe you've heard the saying--"It's always darkest before the dawn." In theological terms, this saying could not be more correct. Not just in relation to trials of faith such as that of the Russian writer, but especially in relation to the end times and the Second Coming of Christ.

That's why the Bible urges all Christians to persevere through the days of darkness and watch for the dawn:

Hebrews 10:35-37 (NKJV)

<sup>35</sup>Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. <sup>36</sup>For you have need of **endurance**, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: <sup>37</sup>*"For yet a little while, And **He who is coming will come and will not tarry.**"*

Has your life been stressful – even intolerable lately? Look up to the coming of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ and endure.

Sermon in a Sentence: **Embrace the Light of Christ before the darkness comes.**

This is the second message in a short series on the Second Coming of Christ. Our text is Mark 13 – a passage that is often called the Olivet Discourse, and is found repeated in Matthew and in Luke. Next to the Sermon on the Mount, this is the most important sermon Jesus preached.

Last week, we heard the disciples ask what the signs would be for the dawning of Christ's kingdom. Jesus began His answer to their question with six non-specific signs (wars, famine, earthquakes, persecutions, martyrdom, apostasy). I used the term 'non-specific' because these six signs have always been present in the history of humanity after the Fall. In that sense, they are not signs for when the end times will occur, but rather why the end times will occur.

I want to caution you about misusing these non-specific signs. Some Christians treat these as if they are specific – that is, indicating the when of Christ's return. And so we hear misguided things like this: "Look at all the earthquakes we're getting – Christchurch, Japan, even Victoria. It is clear proof that the rapture will happen in our lifetime."

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jesusfreakhideout.com/devotionals/darkest.asp> accessed on 29 June 2012

There are two fallacies to that statement. Firstly, there are no signs in Scripture for the rapture – only for the return of Christ to the earth. Secondly, earthquakes, according to Jesus are not specific signs for the end. They are merely “the beginning of sorrows” (Mark 13.8).

I don’t believe earthquakes or famines or persecutions are any more intense now than they’ve ever been. But these are devastating enough to make us all yearn for a better world – a world that will be ushered in with the coming of Christ.

So those signs are non-specific. Now we come to three specific signs – signs that are unmistakable warnings that the coming of Christ is at hand. These three signs are about the when of His coming.

### **Embrace the light of Christ before the darkness comes.**

Notice three specific warning signs at the end of the world.

## **1. The Abomination of Desolation (Mark 13.14-18)**

Mark 13:14-18 (NKJV)

<sup>14</sup> “So when you see the ‘*abomination of desolation*,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not” (let the reader understand), “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. <sup>15</sup> Let him who is on the housetop not go down into the house, nor enter to take anything out of his house. <sup>16</sup> And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. <sup>17</sup> But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! <sup>18</sup> And pray that your flight may not be in winter.

Do you see that little phrase in brackets (v 14) ‘let the reader understand’? Can there be any doubt that we all need to pay attention to what Jesus is saying here? And that we need to compare it carefully with other Scripture to get the full meaning?

Here’s what we are going to do with this sermon in order to ensure we are both alert and understanding. We will work all the way through the immediate text in Mark and then go back to bring in a few relevant cross references at the end.

This first specific sign is the ‘abomination of desolation’. Let’s consider what it is and what it causes.

### **a. What it is (v 14)**

Jesus gives three clues to alert us to what this abomination is. We can see this most clearly in the parallel text in Matthew.

Matthew 24:15 (NKJV)

<sup>15</sup> “Therefore when you see the ‘*abomination of desolation*,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, **standing in the holy place**” (whoever reads, let him understand),

The first clue is that it will be found in the holy place, which is the Jewish Temple (see Acts 21.8) – that is where this abomination will be set up.

There is actually a historical precedent for this. On 15 December of 167 BC, Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria massacred Jewish men, women and children and desecrated the Jewish Temple. He put an image of Zeus in the Holy Place and sacrificed a sow on the altar. He outlawed Jewish Temple service and even circumcision, and it remained that way until the Maccabean revolt restored Jerusalem to Jewish control in 164 BC. The Temple was cleansed of the abomination of desolation at that time – an event celebrated every year in the Jewish Festival of Lights, also known as Hanukkah.

What Jesus is speaking of in Mark 13 is an abomination of desolation worse than what Antiochus did – and even worse than what Titus did in AD 70 when he destroyed the Jewish Temple. In the end times, the rebuilt Jewish Temple will be so utterly defiled by an abomination – a blasphemous image – that God and His people will be far from it – thus making it desolate.

The second clue is the word ‘standing’. You are familiar with a ‘standing order’. It is a ruling that keeps going into the future. In the same way, a ‘standing abomination’ is a defilement that keeps going until it is forcibly ended. This tells us this abomination will remain for an extended period of time.

How long? For the answer to that question, we look to the third clue. Jesus refers us to the Old Testament prophet Daniel, who had something specific to say about this abomination of desolation. In Daniel we learn that the abomination occurs at the midpoint of the earth’s final seven years. Its appearance is in violation of a covenant guaranteeing peace for Israel. The abomination remains in place – defiling the Temple – for exactly three and a half years.

When we add these three clues together, we see that the abomination of desolation is a blasphemous image put in the Temple of God for three and a half years – right up until the time Christ returns.

That is what it is. Now we see from verses 14b- 18 what it causes.

#### **b. What it causes (vv 14b-18)**

The Jewish people have prior experience with holocausts (Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Adolph Hitler, etc.). The abomination of desolation signals the start of the most horrific holocaust in human history. Jesus urges His people to run.

Mark 13:14-16 (NKJV)

<sup>14</sup> “. . . then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. <sup>15</sup> Let him who is on the housetop not go down into the house, nor enter to take anything out of his house. <sup>16</sup> And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes.

As the abomination goes up in the Temple, evil is unleashed and God’s people are suddenly hunted prey. Jesus says there will not be time to grab precious belongings from the house, nor even to pick up a coat. Survival will only be possible as fugitives hidden in the wilderness.

In verses 17-18, we hear compassion in Jesus' voice:

Mark 13:17-18 (NKJV)

<sup>17</sup> But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! <sup>18</sup> And pray that your flight may not be in winter.

Jesus is especially concerned for pregnant and nursing mothers because it will be difficult to flee to safety and keep hidden in their condition. He probably is also hinting at a horrible foresight into the murderous rampage of evil – pregnant women ripped open and babies slaughtered – as when Moses was born, and when Jesus was born.

If their flight is in winter, their escape routes will be limited by flooding streams, and food will be scarce – the grain having already been harvested, the fields left bare.

This is a scary thought, isn't it? Abomination. Desolation. Treachery. Holocaust. Death.

Jesus warns us this is the first sign. If you see this – run! And look up! Because Christ's coming is very near.

Are you ready for the end? **Embrace the light of Christ before the darkness comes.**

The abomination of desolation is the first sign. The second sign follows immediately afterward.

## 2. The Great Tribulation (Mark 13.19-20)

The world will end in a blaze of devastation and destruction. The Bible calls this the Great Tribulation. It goes for three and a half years.

### a. What it is (v 19)

Not coincidentally, the abomination of desolation coincides with a heavenly event – Satan is expelled from heaven. Falling to the earth, he is filled with rage and immediately vents his wrath on God's people. In other words, this holocaust is Satanically-driven.

With this being the case, we might conclude that the horrors of the Great Tribulation are all because Satan is running amok.

But this is not the real story.

Mark 13:19 (NKJV)

<sup>19</sup> For *in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be.*

In reality, the Sovereign God is in full control – that is why Jesus intentionally specifies that God created the world. Satan may try to exterminate God's people (the Jews plus Gentile converts), but he will not succeed. The real terror that is unleashed during the

earth's final three and half years is from God: His wrath on sinful, blasphemous humanity.

With just the breaking of a seal, Christ puts to death a quarter of all life on earth. With just the blast of a trumpet, He wipes out a third of all life (making a cumulative total of one half). And with just a simple turning out of a bowl, He destroys everything and comes again.

The tribulation is great, then, not because of the Devil's war, but because of God's purifying wrath.

It is important that we understand this. Some people take the position that there has always been tribulation – Christians have always been hunted and murdered – so these predictions in Mark 13 are not to be taken literally. But these people miss two key points. Firstly, Jesus explicitly says here that the abomination and the tribulation are specific signs for when the end of the world occurs. Secondly, the tribulation is unique because it is not about persecution and martyrdom; it is about God pouring out His wrath on the entire universe.

There are only three precedents for the wrath of God being poured out: globally through Noah's flood, locally on Sodom and Gomorrah, and personally on Jesus Christ during the crucifixion. The fourth and final time will be universal – involving the heavens and the earth – and it will be by fire. This is the great tribulation.

Verse 20 tells us what this great tribulation causes.

#### **b. What it causes (v 20)**

Mark 13:20 (NKJV)

<sup>20</sup> **And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, whom He chose, He shortened the days.**

This is total destruction . . . or it would be except God calls a halt to it. The word 'shorten' means 'amputate'. God cuts off His wrath so that some of His chosen people survive.

The great tribulation is a frightful thought. One thing is for sure – no-one – not even the Devil – will stand when Christ appears.

Malachi 3:2 (NKJV)

<sup>2</sup> "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire And like launderers' soap.

**Embrace the light of Christ before the darkness comes.** If you wait until you see these signs, you may not survive.

Jesus gives three specific signs for the Second Coming. The first is the abomination of desolation. The second is the great tribulation. And the third is . . .

### 3. The Antichrist (Mark 13.21-23)

Satan is a counterfeiter. What does he do upon being expelled from heaven? He counterfeits a Messiah. He takes the reigning world leader and creates the illusion that the man dies and is resurrected. This man is the antichrist. It is his image that is set up in the Jewish Temple for people to worship – this is the abomination of desolation (see Revelation 13).

The great tribulation will be desperate times like the world has never known. Who will save the world? Satan puts forward his counterfeit Messiah.

#### a. What it is (v 21-22a)

Mark 13:21-22 (NKJV)

<sup>21</sup> “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or, ‘Look, He is there!’ do not believe it. <sup>22</sup> For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive . . .

For nearly all people, the deception works. They put their faith and trust in the antichrist.

#### b. What it causes (vv 22b-23)

Mark 13:22 (NKJV)

<sup>22</sup> . . . to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

So strong is the appeal of the antichrist that even believers would apostatise . . . except that God never loses one who is His own.

The point in this third and final sign is that there will be no ambiguity between believers and unbelievers in the end. It will be black and white. The great majority of people will declare their allegiance to the Devil, worship the Antichrist and openly and bitterly defy God. At the same time, a small minority of people – elect of God – will refuse the mark of the Beast, choosing God even over their own survival.

It is a horrific choice to make. But even more horrific not to make it. As the writer of Hebrews so bluntly says:

Hebrews 10:31 (NKJV)

<sup>31</sup> It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The good news today is that you can escape this awful eventuality. **Embrace the light of Christ before the darkness comes.**

Just as God delivered Noah and his family before He poured out His wrath in the flood; just as God delivered Lot and his family before He poured out His wrath on Sodom and Gomorrah; so, too, God promises deliverance for believers before He pours out His wrath in the end times.

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 (NKJV)

<sup>9</sup> . . . [Turn] to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *even* Jesus who **delivers us from the wrath** to come.

So I leave you with this challenge. These three signs are not yet here – there is no abomination of desolation, no great tribulation and no antichrist. But Jesus is here. Therefore, look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, and run with perseverance the race that is set out for us.

In other words, don't watch for the signs; watch for the Saviour.

**Embrace the light of Christ before the darkness comes.**

Now let's go back to what was in brackets in verse 14. Let the reader understand. We've heard the alert – we take the signs seriously. We also understand in the broader context of Scripture. Here are a few cross references, which I read without comment. You will notice the parallels to what Jesus says in Mark 13.

Daniel 9:27 (NKJV)

<sup>27</sup> Then he [the Antichrist] shall confirm a covenant with many for one week [seven years]; But in the middle of the week [3 ½ years] He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of **abominations** shall be one who makes **desolate**, Even until the consummation [Second Coming of Christ], which is determined, Is poured out on the desolate."

Daniel 11:31 (NKJV)

<sup>31</sup> And forces shall be mustered by him, and they shall **defile the sanctuary** fortress; then they shall take away the daily *sacrifices*, and place *there* the **abomination of desolation**.

Daniel 12:11 (NKJV)

<sup>11</sup> "And from the time *that* the daily *sacrifice* is taken away, and the abomination of desolation is set up, *there shall be* **one thousand two hundred and ninety days**. [1290 days divided by 365 days in a year = 3 ½ years]

Daniel 12:1 (NKJV)

<sup>1</sup> "At that time Michael shall stand up, The great prince who stands *watch* over the sons of your people; And there shall be a **time of trouble**, Such as never was since there was a nation, *Even* to that time. And at that time **your people shall be delivered**, Every one who is found written in the book.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 (NKJV)

<sup>1</sup> Now, brethren, concerning the **coming of our Lord Jesus Christ** and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, <sup>2</sup> not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. <sup>3</sup> Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the **falling away** comes first, and the **man of sin** is revealed, the **son of perdition**, <sup>4</sup> who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that **he sits as God in the temple of God**, showing himself that he is God.

Revelation 7:13-17 (NKJV)

<sup>13</sup>Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" <sup>14</sup>And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the **great tribulation**, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup>Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. <sup>16</sup>They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; <sup>17</sup>for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. **And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.**"

Three dreadful and concurrent signs: abomination of desolation, great tribulation, antichrist.

**Embrace the light of Christ before the darkness comes.**