

The Greatest Opportunity, Part 29

Mark 13

Title: Faithful and True

Subtitle: Jesus Prepares His Disciples for Danger

Fill-in: We are called to FAITHFUL ENDURANCE

It is good to see you, and we're going to jump right in. We are in part 29 of our series The Greatest Opportunity through the gospel of Mark line-by-line, and I've entitled this message Faithful and True. We will be in Mark 13 this morning, so if you have a Bible I invite you to go there. Page 849 of pew Bibles

Right now in our story we are nearing the end of Jesus' life. He has had some confrontations with religious leaders in the temple, and then we'll see in verse one of chapter 13 he leaves the temple, never to return.

And while we will look at the entirety of Mark 13 in a moment, I want to begin with what I believe is the centerpiece to the entire chapter, and it's Mark 13:13, which says,

SLIDE "But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

In Matthew's version of this story he, as he often does, adds some additional words. He writes,

SLIDE "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

There has always been an endurance aspect of our faith. If we look at the New Testament we see this theme pop up again and again using different language and describing different circumstances.

SLIDE Galatians 5:1 - "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

SLIDE 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 - "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love."

We express our endurance by our commitment to love. Too often when I hear people talk about the need to stand up for our faith or be bold for our faith what I hear sounds like, "we need to win an argument." And I just don't buy that. Certainly we need to be able to defend our faith, but if you want to be bold for Jesus, forgive somebody. If you want to stand up for your faith, show radical compassion and kindness for someone who isn't like you. If you want to live loud for Christ, have the strength and courage to consider the interests of others above your own. Show the world the hope that is in you and then testify to that hope with your words. That is what it means to live with Christ-centered endurance. For the young people listening, I know what the cheesy Christian movies say, but your faith is far less likely to be destroyed by an atheist college professor than it is by you wavering in your steadfast commitment to prioritize loving God and loving people.

SLIDE Or consider Romans 15:4 - **“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”**

If you and I are going to be people of hope and not give in to fear and cynicism, it’s going to take some endurance.

SLIDE And the last one I’ll show you, Colossians 1:11, Paul prays for the church, **“May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.”** Paul prays that the church would be strengthened with the Spirit’s power for endurance.

Endurance is an underrated Christian virtue. A couple of weeks ago I spoke to our staff about an article I’d read in *Christianity Today* where a pastor in Texas had written that, in light of the frequency of pastoral scandals and disqualification that had befallen his city that perhaps, whether we are pastors or laypeople, we would do well to recover the sense that a major goal of our lives, ministries, and marriages ought to be simply making it to the end.

Paul speaks to this in 2 Timothy where he celebrates that he is about to finish his race of life having kept the faith. Recently I re-read C.S. Lewis’s classic *The Screwtape Letters*, and I was reminded of the reality that as our life grows longer the opportunities for our spiritual fervor to diminish are all around us. And that leads me to the fill-in the blank that is on your handout or the app,

We are called to FAITHFUL ENDURANCE.

We are called to continue to love God and love others through the inevitable peaks and valleys of life. We are called to be anchored in God’s truth so that we are not led astray by worldly nonsense.

SLIDE I love what the late pastor Eugene Peterson says about endurance, **“Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it to glory.”**

When I say we are called to endurance I don’t mean to suggest that we serve God through the ministry of white-knuckling it through life. But rather as we hold on to Jesus in moments of trial we see him work and can praise him through it. As I look at the lives of Christians who have exemplified endurance, what I see from this is a commitment to leaning on Jesus, and a trust that he will be at work.

SLIDE I think of the words of the great Harriet Tubman, who helped free untold numbers of slaves in the era before the Civil War. She said, **“I always told God, I’m going to hold steady on you, and you’ve got to see me through.”**

I bring all of this up, because this passage is a favorite for speculating about the end times, but it’s actually about living faithfully in real-time.

In Mark 13 Jesus is training his disciples to persevere as they face hostility, and there is much for us to learn about living as disciples of Jesus Christ today.

So with that let’s begin in verse 1

“And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

The disciples are with Jesus, they look back and admire the temple, and rightfully so. The temple was a feat of construction that would draw attention in our day, let alone in theirs. **SLIDE We have a picture of it here.** It covered one-sixth of the city, encompassing some 1.5 million square feet. It's foundational walls were constructed using gigantic stones, the largest of which were 45 feet long, 11 feet tall, and 12 feet thick.

And Jesus' leaving of the temple, is not only literal but also symbolic. It harkens back to places in the Old Testament, including Ezekiel 11, where the glory of the Lord left the temple. And for Jesus to say that the temple will be torn down was not only a prophecy about what would happen just a few decades later, it was also a statement about the spiritual state of the temple. It had forsaken the way of the kingdom, and would be destroyed

It is impossible to overstate what an intense statement that is. It's borderline blasphemous and treasonous.. And yet this is what Jesus says, and this, understandably, provokes some questions for his disciples. Verse 3:

“And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately,"Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”

I love this. Jesus makes this big dramatic statement, and his disciples pull him aside and are like, “Hey Jesus, about this whole ‘total annihilation of the single greatest monument to our nation and religion’ thing. When will that happen, and will there be a warning?”

And what follows is the longest teaching from Jesus in the entire gospel of Mark. And there are many smart and godly people who say that most of what Jesus says in the verses we're going to read today refers to the end times. However, there are also a lot of smart and godly people who say, wait a second, it would be really weird for Jesus to respond to a question about the destruction of the temple with a speech about the end times. They argue that Jesus is talking about events leading up to Jerusalem's destruction in 70 AD.

That's the view that seems most sensible to me based on my study, so I will teach the passage from that perspective today. You can disagree with me, that's fine. But what's most important is that either view reinforces the necessity of faithful endurance as we navigate our lives and await Jesus' return.

In this passage, Jesus isn't encouraging end-times speculation. Quite the opposite. What he's doing is reminding his disciples then as he would remind us today, that we can called to live with faithful endurance as we follow Jesus in an uncertain world.

If we look back to the disciples' questions, we see there are two of them. The first one is, “when is this all going to happen?” And Jesus answers that, but he answers it all the way down in verse 30, which will look at more closely soon. But if you have your Bible open, glance down at verse 30. He says, **“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place”**

From a biblical standpoint does anyone know how long a generation is? Think about numbers that get a lot of attention in the Bible. 40 years.

So in the next 40 years these things will take place, and in fact that is what happened, because in the late 60s Rome invaded, the temple was destroyed by 70, and there was cataclysmic suffering and destruction throughout Jerusalem. And in these verses that follow, Jesus has some words for his disciples and how to approach the difficulty that is to come, and there is wisdom in these words for how you and I might navigate times of intense stress or chaos that either impact us personally or impact our world.

He's not giving his disciples cryptic hints about the end. He's giving them practical instructions about remaining faithful when the world becomes chaotic. I know our world doesn't ever become chaotic anymore, but just try to imagine that as we walk through the passage.

Verse 5:

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. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. 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."

We know from history that in the years following Jesus' death and resurrection that a number of figures came on the scene who gathered followers and claimed to be Messianic. In Acts 5, for example, the Pharisee Gamaliel describes a man named Theudas who rallied 400 men to follow him who were eventually dispersed and killed.

Please do not miss this point: Isn't it interesting that in talking about the upcoming destruction of the temple and the danger that would follow, Jesus' first warning to the disciples isn't about the powerful Roman army, but about the internal threat of deceivers and false teachers?

In times of uncertainty and calamity, we are vulnerable. Confusion gives us a heightened desire for comfort and easy answers, and thus we are vulnerable to be led astray by those who speak false words of so-called comfort.

And I share Jesus' concern. When I look at our world today, I see exponentially more damage is being done to the Church of Jesus Christ in America from within than from outside persecution. We are continually led astray by so-called leaders who mix Christianity with politics, or make 'prophetic' declarations that have no basis in reality or spread rumors and conspiracy theories. This distracts us from the core tenets of discipleship, undermines the legitimate use of spiritual gifts and destroys our credibility.

We're seeing this play out right now in real-time in our country as we grapple with the aftermath of two devastating hurricanes, but this sort of thing is all too common across the world. Something happens that creates chaos and uncertainty; some use the chaos as an opportunity to spread disinformation. Those on the ground actually trying to help people beg them to stop, but the disinformation continues to spread, and it hinders efforts to save lives and get people critical resources.

And what breaks my heart about this, first and foremost, is that it compounds human suffering. But what also breaks my heart, and I've seen it far too often in my lifetime, is many of those spreading this disinformation self-identify as Christians, and it just doesn't make sense to me that someone who is truly following the one who is full of grace and truth can also spread outrageous, harmful, often self-serving misinformation. That is evil. And while peddlers of nonsense will always be with us until Jesus returns, it is up to us not to fall for it. You cannot love your neighbor and spread dangerous lies. Jesus underscores the importance of this by warning his disciples about internal disinformation before he warns them about Roman artillery.

Next, Jesus says you'll hear about wars and rumors of wars, but these are not a sign of the end. Nations will continue to rage, and earth will be afflicted with earthquakes and famines. These events are part of life in a broken world. Jesus describes them as birth pangs, a metaphor used throughout Scripture to describe times of intense suffering.

These types of events are not meant to increase our speculation about the end times. I've seen people start studying earthquakes and other geological activity and then rejoice over an increase in these things because, they say, this is an indication that Jesus is coming back soon. When it comes to theology, there is a lot I don't know, but I'm pretty confident in this. If your study of theology is causing you to rejoice in human suffering, you're doing it wrong. Wars and earthquakes are not meant to awaken end-time fervor, they are meant to awaken Christlike compassion.

Jesus teaches us plainly that we are not to interpret contemporary events, no matter how big they seem, with the end of history, because doing so only distracts us from the work he has called us to today.

He goes on to say, verse 9

"But be on your guard."

The constant refrain of this teaching is be on your guard, pay attention, look out. And the idea here isn't that we should be paranoid, but rather, it's a warning to ensure our hope is anchored entirely in Christ. It's a warning to make sure we are committed to loving God and loving others, so we are prepared to do so in times of chaos. It's Jesus saying don't let your heart grow cold because of the hardship around you.

"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."

This is the book of Acts. Throughout the book, Jesus followers, mostly Paul, are beaten, arrested, put on trial, and even put to death for their faith.

Verse 10:

"And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. 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. 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. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

What are we to make of verse 10? In Matthew's account, he adds the phrase, "and then the end will come," to that statement. It all hinges on how we interpret the word "first." Does he mean first in chronology, as in "You must first turn on the stove in order for the water to boil."? Or, does he mean first in priority, as in, "The first thing you must do at your job is provide great customer service"?

Do you see the difference? The second statement doesn't mean that first thing in the morning you need to provide great customer service before you do anything else. It means that the most important thing is that you provide great service.

Those who say it's chronological say either that Jesus meant that everyone must hear the gospel before he returns, or it's a reference to the entire known world hearing the gospel before the destruction of the temple.

Those who say he's talking about priority argue that Jesus is reinforcing the importance of staying true to him and maintaining a commitment to share his good news even when chaos hits. I always assumed the word was meant chronologically, but the more I've studied it the more I think the priority view fits the context. But again, you are welcome to disagree with me.

But Jesus warns, as you represent me before the world, you will face serious hardship. You'll face persecution, it could divide your family, it could cost you your very life. And there's the verse we started with.

The one who endures to the end will be saved. To what will we turn when there is chaos around us? What will we look to for ultimate hope and comfort? What will our priorities be when we are tested? We are called to be intentional, faithful followers of Jesus. Men and women who continue to love God and love others even when it appears the bottom is falling out. We're called neither to conspiratorial thinking nor apathetic disengagement. We are called to live by the hope we have in Christ.

And by the way, there is a strong undertone to Jesus words that he's encouraging them to set their values now so they're prepared when chaos comes. There is wisdom in that for us.

Verse 14, now things start to get weird:

"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. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter."

The abomination of desolation, what is that? It sounds bad. It's a reference to the book of Daniel which prophesied the day when Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes invaded the temple and desecrated it by sacrificing a pig. This act was so heinous and offensive that it led to the Maccabean Revolt, where the Jews successfully drove the Seleucids out of Jerusalem.

And there there is this little "let the reader understand" that Mark drops in there for us. Thanks, Mark, but we don't understand. What's he doing here? He's making it extra clear to his readers that he is

referencing the prophecies of the book of Daniel. It's like he's saying, if you don't understand, you won't understand what Jesus is saying here.

So what is Jesus talking about? There are some who suggest the abomination is some sort of end times figure, but that doesn't make sense because Jesus isn't talking about the end times. He's talking about the end of an age, the age when the temple stood tall and the Jerusalem religious leaders were in authority.

What's more likely is Jesus is predicting any number of events that the historian Josephus took place in the run-up to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. To give one example, we know that the Roman emperor at this time was named Titus, and he led the siege of Jerusalem that in 66-70 AD. And if you visit Rome today you can stop by a monument called the Arch of Titus, and inside the arch you'll see a depiction of Roman soldiers plundering the Jewish temple and offering sacrifices to their gods, claiming that their gods are greater than the God of Israel because they have won.

The point is, Jesus says when you see these things start happening, get out of town. Don't worry about your carry-on luggage, just find the nearest exit and get out. The Romans are taking over, and if you want to survive you need to run. Verse 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. 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. And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.”

And some would say, wait a second, Jesus is using some pretty stark language here. He's talking about the worst tribulation in the history of the world, Surely, some might argue, that now he has shifted and is talking about the end times. And there are a lot of smart people who hold that view. And perhaps they are right. I don't think they are, though, and I will briefly explain why.

The language that Jesus is using here is very similar to that found in Old Testament books like Jeremiah, Joel, and Daniel. And in all of those instances, the prophets were describing events of local significance, not global significance. In other words, in their prophecies, particularly their prophecies surrounding the destruction of the first temple in 587 BC, they described a tragic event, not the end of history.

Furthermore, what made the destruction of the temple in 587 BC so unspeakably and uniquely awful was not the physical suffering. There was, indeed, intense physical suffering, but it wasn't suffering unlike anything the world had ever seen. What made that awful event unprecedented was the spiritual component. Along with the death, enslavement, and horrific hardship came the reality that the nation God had created as His special possession was destroyed. The temple, meant to house his presence, was a pile of rubble. The people had turned their backs on God, and God subsequently turned his backs on them and used the wicked nation of Babylon as instruments of his judgment.

So how are we to understand Jesus' words here? Throughout Mark 11-12 he has shown how the very ones who were supposed to represent God to the world had turned their backs on him. They were ripping off the poor, they were full of themselves, they had killed John the Baptist and were plotting to

do the same to Jesus. History was about to repeat itself, and a pagan force was about to come in and destroy the temple again. And Jesus says, I'm telling you all of this beforehand so that you don't get led astray by charlatans who want to leverage chaos to gain power, and so that you don't lose faith as you face this period of extraordinary upheaval.

But Jesus isn't done referencing the prophets in his warning. Verse 24,

"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 in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 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."

What's going on here? It's possible that Jesus has, for some reason, shifted from talking about the destruction of the temple to the end of history. Lots of smart, godly people hold that view. But I'm with folks like N.T. Wright, Tim Mackie, and others who say that's not what's happening here. What's going on is Jesus is using prophetic imagery to underscore the calamity that is about to take place and say something about the spiritual state of the Jewish temple system that is about to be destroyed.

I want to show you a prophecy from the book of Isaiah, chapter 13. If you look in your Bibles in Mark 13, you should have a little note indicating that Jesus is quoting this exact passage. Listen to what Isaiah says, **SLIDE "For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless."**

What is Isaiah talking about? There are six more verses of predictions of doom and then it says in verse 17, **"Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold. Their bows will slaughter the young men...verse 19, And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations."**

This is Isaiah's prophecy about the destruction of godless Babylon. Babylon was the most powerful and brutal empire in the known world at that time, and Isaiah said God was going to destroy it. Now, when Babylon was, in fact, destroyed in 539 BC, did the sun literally go dark, and did stars stop giving light? I'll give you a hint: the sun is still shining right now, or at least it was an hour ago.

It prophetic, poetic imagery. It's the only language Isaiah can find that is strong enough to depict the collapse of the world's largest empire. And now here's Jesus, using that very same language to describe the destruction of Jerusalem. **SLIDE** Bible scholar Tim Mackie puts it this way,

"In Jesus' eyes, Jerusalem has become Babylon. Jerusalem has become indistinguishable from the great, violent, arrogant nations of the world. And so he predicts its downfall the same way Isaiah did."

And we don't have time to dig into the details of the rest of that section, but the Son of Man language is harkening back to imagery from the book of Daniel, that refers to the Son of Man being persecuted, overcoming, and rising into glory, foreshadowing what would take place with Jesus not in a

generation's time, but by the end of the week. There are many good reasons to believe this is not about Jesus' return to earth, but about his glorification following his resurrection. And Jesus, who is glorified, will then send out his messengers, which is the very same word for angels, by the way, to preach the good news and make disciples of all nations.

Evangelical New Testament scholar Michael Bird describes this passage this way... **SLIDE**

"The accompanying language about the sun and moon being darkened, stars falling, and heavenly bodies shaken is not literal, as it invests a sociopolitical disaster with cosmic imagery in order to underscore its catastrophic significance."

He goes on, **SLIDE**

"It is not the end of the world but the end of a world, the symbolic universe of first-century Judaism connected with the temple. All that the temple stood for is out, and the Son of Man is in."

And through all of this, Jesus says, look out. Stand firm. Live with endurance. Continue to love God and love people. Continue in the work of ministry. Serve the poor, tell the truth, look out for the marginalized, welcome the outsider. This is what it means to live the way of Jesus in times of societal upheaval.

Verse 28, Jesus starts talking about fig trees again, something he did in Mark 11

"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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 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."

Jesus says look for the signs of the coming destruction. You'll see them just as I have told you.

"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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-- lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

One commentary I read this week summarized this parable this way, "The implication of this parable is that if the disciples are not ready for their hour of testing, they certainly will not be ready for the day of his return."

The watchfulness Jesus urges is not speculation about the end, but rather, it is faithful endurance in the present. To stay awake is to embody the cross-shaped life of Jesus in the way we live as individuals and as communities. To drift off the sleep is to be formed by the habits and values of our surrounding culture, a culture that is constantly trying to infiltrate the church with the fear and divisiveness it sells.

And so may we be men and women of faithful endurance. May we so anchor ourselves in the love of God that no chaos in the world, in our communities, or in our personal lives can distract us from our primary tasks of loving God and loving others. And may we remember, no matter what comes our way, we serve a God who became a man and faithfully endured the cross, so we can trust him as with live with that endurance today.

Let's pray.