

DEALING WITH OVERWHELMING CONDITIONS

Mark 13:1-37

Most of us are familiar with the motto of the Boy Scouts: Be prepared. The problem is that by the time we are in the midst of an overwhelming situation it is too late to get ready for it if you haven't made preparation in advance. It is what you do when you don't have to that makes all the difference when it is too late. So, how do you get ready if you don't know what is coming? There is another saying that tells us that being forewarned is being forearmed. That's all well and good, but how can we figure out what it is that we are prepare for?

In a real sense we already know some things that are going to happen. We may not know when or the exact details of the events, but we can predict that certain things will occur. Instead of wringing our hands about what we don't know, we can certainly prepare for the future using what we do know.

The winter season provides us with a good example of what we can do to prepare for what we know will happen. If it is winter, then we know that it is going to snow. How much snow will we have and when really doesn't matter when it comes to advance preparation. If it snows, then what might happen? The power may be off for an extended time. We may not be able to drive our car because of the slick roads. We can prepare by having an alternative heating source, and we may need a snow blower, or a snow shovel or salt for the driveway. We may buy extra food and have it available. We can make sure we have good tread on our tires.

Another thing we know is going to occur is that we are going to age. How do you prepare for that? Eat healthy foods, find a house all on one level, buy good health insurance, make a will, exercise, etc.

Most of us take care of such things because we know how important being prepared is for those situations that can be overwhelming especially when we can't predict the time the situations will happen. Some people neglect such things and they may find themselves overwhelmed by the difficulties of life and everything seems to be falling apart all around them.

In the final week of the earthly ministry of Jesus, He gave His disciples a forewarning of hard times that would be coming in the next few decades. Perhaps we can find some general principles of how to prepare for times when the problems of life are overwhelming.

Terrible Things Can and Will Happen (13:1-2)

¹ As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" ² And Jesus said to him, "**Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down.**" Mark 13:1-2 (NASB95)

We don't normally think in terms of "what is the worst possible thing that might happen?" Sometimes it is useful to ask such questions in an effort to think about how we would respond in case something like a nuclear explosion were to occur in one of our large cities. The temple in Jerusalem was a massive structure and the idea of it being leveled to the point of not one stone being left on another would be like considering the World Trade Center coming down. It is helpful to give some consideration as to what we would do if a tragedy were to happen to us. You may think that is morbid, but how many of you have long-term care insurance? How many of you have a life insurance policy? Do you own a burial plot in a cemetery? You get the idea. Thinking about what could happen will help us to be better prepared for what will happen.

Admittedly, Jesus was not talking about something hypothetical occurrence, but it was a forewarning of what was to come. Something this drastic happening would likely be accompanied by other things that should be considered. For example, what might precede such

an event or what might happen following such an event? Jesus certainly had the attention of Peter, James, John and Andrew. Their curiosity led to questions. The answer Jesus gave reveals another caution that we should heed.

Don't Be Fooled by What You Hear (13:3-8)

³ As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, ⁴ "Tell us, when will these things be, and what *will be* the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?" ⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. ⁶ "Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am *He!*' and will mislead many. ⁷ "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened; *those things* must take place; but *that is* not yet the end. ⁸ "For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will *also* be famines. These things are *merely* the beginning of birth pangs. Mark 13:3-8 (NASB95)

It will help to put this exchange in the context of the situation in which the question was posed and the answer given. If we read this account in Matthew's gospel, we find that the question asked also included something about the "sign of your coming and the end of the world." Many, today, have taken these words and built a whole set of teaching around this as being applicable to the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. A literal translation of Matthew's version of the question would be "Tell us, when shall these be? and what is the sign of thy presence, and of the full end of the age?" This literal rendering makes sense when we consider the context of what the disciples thought was going to happen.

Keeping it simple: What event (that was going to be fulfilled) was on the mind of the disciples? The destruction of the temple is the only thing that had been mentioned up to this point. They were just asking a simple question that we might phrase this way: "What will we see going on that will let us know this destruction is about to happen?" Even if we put in Matthew's version of the question, the disciples were simply asking about when Jesus would reveal Himself to be the Messiah and would usher in the Kingdom of God which would be the end of the then present age of Roman rule and the status quo. The disciples were **not** thinking about the Second Coming. They were in the midst of the First Advent and were expecting Jesus to do something in the near future that would declare to the world Who He was.

The answer Jesus gave was related to events that would happen before the destruction of Jerusalem which we know, historically, occurred in AD 70. Speaking historically, we find evidence that after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, all these things did actually happen. "Messiah mania" was a problem after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The rise of the church bought out many charlatans who hoped to deliver the Jews from the oppression of the Romans. Many were convinced that the Messiah would lead a revolt that would cast off Roman domination.

Regarding wars and rumors of wars: There were many internal insurrections against Rome during this time and these may have been the catalysts that prompted the action by Rome to attack Jerusalem and destroy it and the temple. Additionally, there was much infighting among the leadership of the Roman government. Historically, famines and earthquakes were recorded during the forty-year period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Trust the Leading of the Holy Spirit (13:9-13)

⁹ "But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to *the* courts, and you will be flogged in *the* synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. ¹⁰ "The gospel must first be preached to all the nations. ¹¹ "When they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but *it is* the Holy Spirit. ¹² "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father *his* child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. ¹³ "You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. Mark 13:9-13

The rise of Christianity was the object of blame for much of the problems of the Roman Empire and the persecution of the Jews against the Christians is well documented. Most of the Apostles were killed during this time; however, it was not before the gospel message had been preached in Judea, Samaria, Asia Minor, and Europe (the Roman world). All these things literally did happen in that generation. Many of the Christians in Jerusalem had to leave because of the persecution of the Jews and they took the Gospel message with them. If it had not been for this persecution, the message would not have gotten out as rapidly and many of the Christians would have died when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.

Seek Shelter from the Storm (13:14-20)

¹⁴ “But when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION standing where it should not be (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. ¹⁵ “The one who is on the housetop must not go down, or go in to get anything out of his house; ¹⁶ and the one who is in the field must not turn back to get his coat. ¹⁷ “But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! ¹⁸ “But pray that it may not happen in the winter. 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 will. ²⁰ “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. Mark 13:14-20 (NASB95)

If you were to see a tornado on the western horizon, what would be your first response? The obvious answer is to go to the basement and find a safe place. In the Midwest plain states, it was common place to have a storm cellar on your property because of the frequency of tornadoes. A key preparation for any overwhelming event is to have an escape plan or a place of shelter.

Notice that Jesus said, “When **you** shall see . . .” though some of the Apostles would be dead at this time or would be in other areas, this wording would indicate that to which He referred would happen in their generation. The armies of Rome would be the instruments by which the desolation (complete destruction) of the temple would take place. When they arrived, then people could know that the time had come. There is a time to take a stand and a time to leave. The destruction that would come upon the city was ordained by God and those who were wise were to leave and leave as soon as the trouble started. No earthly possession would be worth the risk to go and try to retrieve it.

If we just take what Jesus said and use the most obvious interpretation, then the trouble that was to come upon Jerusalem was the worst tribulation that had ever happen up to that time and worse than anything that would occur later. However, some teach that there is a greater tribulation that is to come sometime in the future during the time of the Anti-Christ rising to power. In order to come to this conclusion, then you must make some “not-so-obvious” assumptions.

Of course, such times would be difficult for women with small children and the difficulty would be multiplied if it happened during cold weather. If the city had not capitulated then everyone there and most in the surrounding areas would have died.

Hold to the Truth (13:21-23)

²¹ “And then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ’; or, ‘Behold, *He is there*’; do not believe *him*; ²² for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³ “But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance. Mark 13:21-23 (NASB95)

Remember that (according to Matthew) the disciples had ask for a sign that would confirm that the Messiah had come. The first and greatest sign would be the death, burial and resurrection and the confirmation (the second witness) would be the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In the days leading up to His arrest Jesus had made a proclamation of the coming

desolation for the city. According to both Matthew and Luke, as He was coming into the city, He stopped and looked out over it and said

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. Matt 23:37-38 (NIV)

This prediction was part of the "everything" He told them in advance of it happening. Matthew's account of this warning about false Messiahs said there would be rumors that the Messiah would be in some secret place or in the desert. The destruction of Jerusalem that would be part of the "revealing" that would confirm Jesus was the Messiah and this was not something that would be hidden. It would be like the lightning that occurs in the sky – it would be seen by all. According to Gill, in writing about the destruction of Jerusalem: "which must be understood **not** of his last coming to judgment, **nor** of his spiritual coming in the more sudden, and clear, and powerful preaching of the Gospel all over the Gentile world but of his coming in his wrath and vengeance to destroy that people, their nation, city, and temple: so that after this to look for the Messiah in a desert, or secret chamber, must argue great stupidity and blindness; when his coming was as sudden, visible, powerful, and general, to the destruction of that nation, as the lightning that comes from the east, and, in a moment, shines to the west."

When we are facing overwhelming conditions in life, it is most important that we know the facts of what can and will happen and not be relying on hearsay and urban legends.

Rejoice in Hope (13:24-27)

²⁴ "But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, ²⁵ AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ "Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. ²⁷ "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. Mark 13:24-27 (NASB95)

What role does **hope** play when people are in dire situations? Much has been written about those who are battling such conditions as cancer and the influence of having a positive attitude or having hope. Let's consider how the prophecy that Jesus gave about what would happen after the destruction of Jerusalem would give the disciples or us hope.

The comment regarding the sun, moon and stars are thought by some to be a reference to a physical occurrence that would take place before the Second Coming of Christ. The explanation of what He meant is likely found in the words immediately following the comment. Specifically: "*the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken.*" What does that mean? If we put this in context of the comments that Paul made ("we battle not against flesh and blood, but against power and principalities in the heavens") then we see that Jesus is talking about spiritual things rather physical things. If we, then, factor in that Matthew said, "**Immediately** after the tribulation of those days . . .", then we get the idea that Jesus was talking about something that would happen soon after the destruction of Jerusalem and is NOT a reference to something that is yet to come. (Actually, the account of both Matthew and Mark can be translated simply as "And with the tribulation of those days, the sun, etc.")

The entire set of events described can be related to the time immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans. Some commentators have noted that the "sun" refers to the Shekinah, or the divine presence in the temple. For the Jews, it was gone. The "moon" refers to the light of God reflected in the ceremonial law and commandments the Jews followed in their observance of "new moons" and other times. The "stars" were the doctors of the law and Rabbis who departed from the purity of God's commandments. The legal dispensation was shaken and would be replaced by the church age.

With regard to people being able to see the Son of Man coming in the clouds, most writers link this to the Second Coming of Christ. We could argue that the word “then” that starts verses 26 and 27 would support an interpretation of a long time delay; however, the word translated *then* can also mean “at that time.” If these are related only to the events of the desolation by the Romans (immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem) then the appearing would be symbolic or as John Gill writes “and he shall appear, not in person, but in the power of his wrath and vengeance, on the Jewish nation which will be a full sign and proof of his being come.”

Surely, the verse related to sending the angels to gather the elect from the four winds must refer to the return of the Jews to their homeland. This is the popular interpretation in most of the writings today. Those who apply this passage to the end time (end of the world rather than end of the age) believe that the “elect” are the Jews rather and those who accept Christ as Lord and Savior. However, if we read this simply as it is stated and accept the chronology as being immediately after the desolation of the temple by the Romans, then this verse refers to the messengers (translation of the word angels) who proclaimed the gospel (the loud trumpet call) to bring those who responded to God’s invitation to salvation.

Read the Signs of the Time (13:28-31)

²⁸ “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ “Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, *right* at the door. ³⁰ “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. Mark 13:28-31 (NASB95)

If we will just notice what is happening around us, we can discern when problem might be developing. If the concern is about health or aging, then we should not ignore the obvious signs that we are heading for problems. If the concern is with regard to economic problems, either personally or in our nation, then there are a number of things we can watch for that will let us know that conditions might become overwhelming if we are not prepared. In the same way, the Christians of that day could see the building unrest of the Jews that would prompt the Romans to take drastic action against Jerusalem.

In the NAS and the RSV translations, verse 29 says “recognize that He is near.” Most other translations render this as “recognize that it is near.” A word-for-word translation from the Greek would come closer to saying “recognize that is near.”

Both Mark and Matthew wrote about the immediacy of the events as seen in the statement “this generation shall not pass away before all these things happen.” However, Mark does not include the information found in Matthew’s account that two shall be in the field and one shall be taken the other left behind. This is widely quoted as what will happen in the rapture of the church. However, a more traditional interpretation of this statement was related to the conscription of workers by the Romans to work on the attack on Jerusalem. So, in this context, being taken was definitely a negative thing.

Keep the Faith (13:32-37)

³² “But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father *alone*. ³³ “Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the *appointed* time will come. ³⁴ “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. ³⁵ “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 when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ “What I say to you I say to all, ‘Be on the alert!’ ” Mark 13:32-37 (NASB95)

The warning to watch was clearly given to the followers of Christ so that they would not get caught up in the destruction that would come upon Jerusalem but would be ready to flee into the mountains and to get away from what would follow.

It has certainly been the case that many have applied this passage to our present day situation in which being ready would involve having the right spiritual condition in our lives. We can certainly apply the message of staying faithful to what we know to be the truth when we find ourselves in overwhelming situations. When times are rough and things are not going well, we may be tempted to “try anything” that we think might help. We can get ourselves in a lot of extra problems if we do not remain true to the truth.

There may be many other things we can do to prepare ourselves for overwhelming situations, but we should certainly apply these truths that are implied in the advice Jesus gave us. We start with a realization that horrible things can happen, we need to be on guard to not believe everything we hear, we should trust God to provide for our needs, have a plan based on truth, keep a positive outlook and remain faithful to the truth.