

Misleading Signs: Understanding the Deception

Mark 13:5–13
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When Jesus' disciples expressed their amazement at the beauty of the temple, he said that it would soon be demolished. The disciples thought he was predicting the end of the world, so they asked him in verse 4 not just about the destruction of the temple but also about everything else that would happen.

Jesus knew that they, being sinners, would want signs to tell them when these things would happen. Today, people still want signs. They want signs that will tell them when Jesus will come back and assume that the things Jesus mentioned in our text are those signs. So, they expect an increase in false christs, wars all over the world, earthquakes and famines and troubles, and hatred against those who believe in Jesus.

But our text says something entirely different. Jesus began in verse 5 by warning his disciples not to let any man deceive them. Why was he concerned about deception? Because he didn't want them to think that the kinds of signs people usually look for predicted either the destruction of Jerusalem or his return in glory. There's nothing particularly remarkable about anything mentioned in today's text, except that verse 10 says that *the gospel must first be published among all nations*. We have to understand what this means and we'll get to it in a few minutes. But everything else happens all the time. This is why I've titled this morning's message, "Misleading Signs."

So, let's look at these so-called signs. There are three of them: (1) false messiahs; (2) wars, earthquakes and famines; and (3) the persecution of believers.

False Messiahs: A Warning

The arrival of false messiah figures is the first misleading sign Jesus mentioned. Verse 6 says, *For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many*. And verse 22, which we'll say more about next week, also warned against the appearance of false prophets and their miracles.

If this was supposed to be a sign of the Second Coming, Jesus should have returned a long time ago. Why? Because there were already countless false prophets and false christs in the first century. First John 4:1 says, *Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world*. In fact, John wrote his letter partly to

help us tell the difference between true preachers of the gospel and false prophets. He said that the test of orthodoxy is confessing that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. Likewise, Peter warned his readers with these words: *But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction* (2 Pet. 2:1).

However, prophets weren't even new in the first century. The wizards of Egypt copied Moses' early miracles fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born. They showed up at different times in Israel's history. Jeremiah had to deal with them in the sixth century BC. He wrote, *Then the LORD said unto me, The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy you a false vision and divination, the thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart* (Jer. 14:14; cf. 23:21–25).

But what about false christs? Did anyone pretend to be the Messiah? The answer is yes. Listen again to what John wrote: *Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time* (1 John 2:18). Who were they? The Jews thought the Messiah would be a political figure like David. Acts 5 mentions two of them: Theudas and Judas of Galilee (vv. 36–39). And even if we limit ourselves to religious messiah figures, there were plenty of them, too. Simon Magus in Acts 8 was one. He practiced sorcery, and many praised him as *the great power of God* (vv. 9–11). Two early church fathers confirm this: Justin Martyr says that Simon was worshiped in Rome. And according to Irenaeus, he claimed to be the Son of God.

The Beginning of Sorrows

Versus 7 and 8 give us the next group of misleading signs. Jesus said, *And when ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows.*

Wars have been around since man first sinned. They were common in the first century. In school, we all learned about the Pax Romana (or peace of the Roman Empire), and it's true that Rome's military secured an amazing level of stability. But Rome didn't stop wars completely. The Jews, especially, were in constant danger. In Jerusalem, they refused to put a statue of the emperor in the temple and thereafter they lived in constant fear of attack. They didn't fare any better in other countries, where at times thousands of them died at a time with little provocation.

Earthquakes are and always have been common in the Middle East, especially Asia Minor. The country known today as Turkey was hit with unusually devastating earthquakes earlier this year. It killed almost 60,000 people on February 6, making it one of the worst natural disasters ever. There were also several deadly earthquakes preceding Jerusalem's destruction in such places as Crete, Smyrna, Laodicea, Colosse, Rome and Judea.

As for famines, the Bible itself tells about a famine that was so bad in Judea that Christians from all over the known world sent help (Acts 11:27–30). But it wasn't limited to Judea. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, this famine, which occurred in the fourth year of Claudius and continued for several years afterward, resulted in the starvation and death of many people throughout the empire.

So, what does all of this mean? Look at what Jesus said. First, he said that wars and rumors of wars were not signs of either the end of Jerusalem or the end of the world. Verse 7 says, *But the end shall not be yet*. He warned us not to use international conflict and natural disasters to guess when God's judgments will happen. And second, Jesus said in verse 8, *These are the beginnings of sorrows*. Although wars and earthquakes and famines occur all the time and so have little predictive value, they're just the start of all the awful things that would come upon Jerusalem when the Lord descends in wrath and fury.

And interestingly, the word translated sorrows literally means birth pains. Birth pains indicate that a baby will soon be born. This is something we look forward to. In the first century, the earth was about to bring forth something new, which the fall of Jerusalem would make possible. What was this? It's the fact that the gospel would be freed from the limitations placed on it under the old covenant, where salvation belonged mostly to the Jews. Revelation 20 says that during this time Satan will be bound and thrown into the bottomless pit so *that he should deceive the nations no more* (v. 3). This is the period we're now living in.

The Persecution of Believers

Jesus also gave his disciples a third misleading sign, viz., the persecution of believers. Because this sign affected his followers directly, Jesus had more to say about it in verses 9 through 13 than about false christs, wars, earthquakes and famines combined.

Jesus carefully explained what Christians should expect. According to verse 9, Christians would be delivered to authorities. This is an obvious reference to the first century. Why? Because Jesus identified the authorities that would judge Christians specifically as Jewish authorities — *councils* and *synagogues*. Of course, the highest Jewish council, which the other councils operated under, was the

Sanhedrin, which remained in power only until the destruction of Jerusalem. After that, it lost most of its clout and moved to Galilee, where it eventually faded away and disbanded in the fifth century. These Jewish authorities aren't a threat anymore. But they weren't the only authorities that would judge Christians. Jesus also predicted that his disciples would be *brought before rulers and kings*. This is still a problem today.

Once again, we don't have to go beyond the New Testament to see Jesus' words fulfilled. Just read the book of Acts. The first New Testament martyr was Stephen. Acts 6:9 says that certain men of the synagogue argued with him and lied about what he said to stir up the people, the elders and scribes. The last verse of this chapter affirms that all of this took place during an official gathering of the Sanhedrin. It says, *And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel*. And further, the first verse of chapter 7 explicitly implicates the high priest. And what happened? After Stephen testified to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, the Jews stoned him to death. This resulted in even greater persecution. The first verse of chapter 8 says, *And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem*. Acts also records the first New Testament believer executed by the government. In chapter 12, we read that Herod *killed James the brother of John with the sword*.

Does the New Testament say anything about the hatred of men toward believers that Jesus foretold in verse 13? Yes, it does. The apostle Paul told the elders of Ephesus, *For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them* (Acts 20:29–30). And in Paul's last letter — 2 Timothy — he gave numerous examples of this. He wrote, *This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes* (1:15); and, *For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica.... Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works.... At my first answer [defense of the gospel] no one stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge* (4:10, 14, 16).

Now, having said all of this, there's one statement in these verses that needs a little more explanation. It's verse 10. Jesus said, *And the gospel must first be published among all nations*. Can anyone justifiably claim that the Word of God reached the entire world in the first century? It doesn't seem likely. But what does the Bible say? In Romans 1:8, Paul said that the faith of Roman believers is *spoken of throughout the whole world*. A few chapters later, he wrote: *So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world* (Rom. 10:17–18; cf. 16:26). He also told the Colossians that the gospel had been preached to them *as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth*

fruit (Col. 1:6), and that it was preached to every creature which is under heaven (Col. 1:23). He wrote the same thing to the church at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 1:8–9).

But had the gospel made its way to South America, Alaska and Greenland by the end of the first century? Not that we know of, but that's not what these verses mean. They mean that the gospel had spread throughout the Roman Empire, filling the known world with the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Word of God says clearly that this happened.

And why wouldn't the gospel have had such success? Jesus promised in verse 11 that he would give his followers the right words to say while testifying about him. This was especially true for his first-century disciples, to whom the Holy Spirit brought to remembrance the various things Jesus said and did. But it also applies to us differently: God's Spirit helps us remember what the Bible says when we have to explain our faith.

If today's text identifies things that happen all the time or were fulfilled in the first century, what does it say to us today? The answer is a lot.

To begin with, it means that we should always be on guard. We don't know when Jesus will come back, and we shouldn't look for misleading signs to clue us in. Wars, famines, earthquakes, betrayal and persecution happen all the time. Let's not trust circumstances. Instead, let's put our hope and confidence in the one who took away our sins on the cross and rose again to give us everlasting life. His word never fails.

This passage also teaches us to be discerning, especially regarding false teachers. The world is full of people claiming to have found the truth. But the only question that should interest us is, What does the Bible say? Our creeds and confessions are important because they summarize the Bible's teachings. They're a faithful guide. Likewise, church history testifies to the work of God in the lives of his people over the centuries. But watch out for new ideas! Stay away from anything that goes against the sacred text of Scripture!

And finally, the persecution of the church is guaranteed. We don't know when or where it will happen, but it will happen. Prepare for it by digging into the Word of God, giving yourselves to prayer, and pursuing God's grace in your lives. Never suppose you can handle this by your own strength and wisdom! You can't. You need Jesus to help you through it. He's the author and finisher of your faith. Amen.