

A priest and a rabbi from local parishes were standing by the side of the road holding up signs. The rabbi's sign read, "The End is Near!"

The priest, on the other side of the road, held up a sign which read, "Turn before it's too late!" They planned to hold up their signs to each passing car.

"Get a job," The first driver yelled at them when he saw the sign.

The second driver, immediately behind the first, yelled, "Leave us alone you religious freaks!"

Shortly, from around the curve, the two clergy heard screeching tires and a splash followed by more screeching tires and another splash. The rabbi looked over at the priest and said, "Do you think we should try a different sign?"

The priest responded thoughtfully, "Perhaps our signs ought to say simply 'Bridge Out.'"

Keep that little piece of humor in mind about that sign, "The End is Near!" as I deal with a rather somber topic: "When The Unthinkable Happens."

Just yesterday over 150 people were killed, more than 80 are in critical condition and another 100 injured physically and untold thousands injured mentally in Parish by the madness of around 8 terrorists. New York and Boston are on alert. The terrorists have support from people in Germany so the Germans are worried about another attack in their country. The French are calling it their 9/11.

Let's consider another unthinkable event. On the morning of August 28, 2005, the National Weather Service issued this ominous alert, "Devastating Damage Expected."

Hurricane Katrina had morphed from a relatively weak Category 1 hurricane to a Category 5 tropical monster--and was spiraling straight toward New Orleans. The city would be "uninhabitable for weeks . . . perhaps longer," the weather service warned. Half the houses would lose their roofs. Commercial buildings would be unusable, and apartment buildings would be destroyed. Residents should expect long-term power outages and water shortages that would "make human suffering incredible by modern standards." The prediction was right on target as was the hurricane.

Many of us have etched in our brains a picture of the Louisiana Superdome where 20,000 people sought refuge from Katrina. Conditions inside the dome were insufferable due to heat and humidity. There were reports of crimes within the dome as well. At the nearby New Orleans Convention Center, where another 30,000 people had fled, reporters interviewed people who had waded through "chin high" water, and who told of friends and families vanishing in the flood. Hurricane Katrina affected 90,000 square miles in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Well over 1300 people were killed across the region, and bodies were still turning up in condemned homes eight months later. (2) Again, such destruction was unthinkable . . . until it happened.

Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Nineteen members of the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda hijacked four passenger airliners so they could be flown into buildings in suicide attacks. Two of those planes were crashed into the North and South towers of the World Trade Center complex in New York

City. Within two hours, both 110-story towers collapsed. A third plane was crashed into the Pentagon, leading to a partial collapse in its western side. The fourth plane crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after its passengers tried to overcome the hijackers. In total, 2,996 people died in the attacks, including the 227 civilians and 19 hijackers aboard the four planes. It was the deadliest incident for firefighters and for law enforcement officers in the history of the United States, with 343 firefighters and 72 law enforcement officers killed while doing their duty. (3) Unthinkable, but it happened.

There are many unthinkable events recorded in history. There are some recorded in the Bible. One of them is recorded in today's lesson from Mark's Gospel.

The reading of the Gospel is the end of Mark's chapter 13, but we need to look at the beginning to see the full context. As Jesus was leaving the temple at Jerusalem, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

And they were magnificent buildings. The historian Josephus said that much of the exterior of the temple at Jerusalem, which was constructed under Herod the Great, was covered with gold that reflected the fiery rays of the sun. Moreover, he said that, from a distance, the temple appeared like a mountain covered with snow. This was probably because those parts that were not covered with gold were made of white stone.

And the temple was enormous. The outer court was nearly a quarter of a mile long and three football fields across. It was bordered by walls. On top of those walls were magnificent, covered cloisters or walkways, with richly carved wooden ceilings.

The temple was a huge undertaking which required an enormous amount of labor and money. It was said to be larger and more beautiful than the temple that Solomon built. It was quite a sight for all to behold--an architectural wonder of the ancient world.

As the disciples stared with wonder at this magnificent edifice, Jesus brought them back to earth as he said, "Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

What was he saying--that their precious temple would be destroyed? That was unthinkable to the disciples. The temple represented God. The temple represented their identity as God's people. Yet Jesus told them that one day it would lie in ruins. And what he predicted came true, within the lifetime of some of them. Herod's temple, a magnificent structure of awesome proportions, four years after its completion was totally destroyed and wiped from the face of the earth. (4) That was in 70 A.D., approximately 40 years after Christ's death.

In our lesson for today Jesus addresses the forthcoming destruction of the temple and then uses this opportunity to talk with his disciples about the end of time. This is the content of Mark 13, one of the so-called apocalyptic chapters in the Bible, a chapter that has been used to strike fear in many hearts. The end of time is still a subject of speculation in many Christian churches, and many pastors and teachers are still using it to keep their fearful congregations in line.

I don't mean to offend any of you by wading into this controversial topic, but I believe it is my responsibility to deal with some of the misinformation that has been spread about what is often referred to as "the end times." Jesus said three things about the end times that could be helpful to us.

The first concerns false teachers. Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many . . ."

I don't think we can properly deal with a writing like Mark 13 without dealing with the subject of false teachers. There is a popular misconception that has been spread in recent times about the end of life on earth known as "The Rapture."

As Marcus Borg points out in his book *Speaking Christian*, most Christians throughout history never heard of the rapture . . . and with good reason. The word and the notion it embodies are a modern innovation, going back less than two centuries. Nobody even thought of the rapture until the 1800s. "Because millions of Christians think that the rapture is 'biblical teaching' and thus has the authority of the Bible behind it, it is important to know that it is neither biblical nor ancient," says Borg, "but was first proclaimed by a British evangelist named John Nelson Darby" in the first half of the 19th century.

Darby concocted his vision of the rapture by his interpretation of a few passages in the Bible that speak about the second coming of Jesus and the end of the world. According to Darby's imaginative scenario, the rapture begins a series of events that will unfold seven years before the second coming of Jesus and the final judgment. More specifically, it refers to an event when true Christians, as he would term them, will be raptured, that is, taken up to heaven, before Jesus' coming. Those who are raptured will be spared the "tribulation"--the horrific suffering, wars, and devastation that face those who are "left behind."

As you have probably guessed the rapture is the premise of a series of novels appropriately titled "Left Behind" by authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. These novels have sold more than sixty million copies since they began to be published in the mid-1990s. Obviously these books have made their authors quite wealthy. All twelve in the original series have been on the New York *Times* bestselling fiction list.

Before the "Left Behind" series, there was *The Late Great Planet Earth*, a best-selling book by Hal Lindsey describing the same scenario. (5)

These books and the movies that have been based on them have had a disturbing influence on many Christians. For one thing, they have convinced as many as 40 percent of American Christians that the second coming will happen quite soon. And they have stirred up much fear among many impressionable readers. Those who espouse such concerns seem to confuse fear with faith. Arousing fear in people can be both quite easy and quite profitable--as many cable news channels have learned.

That's quite different than the faith that Jesus instills in his followers. In fact, the constant admonition of Jesus is, "Don't be afraid." But that's the first thing Jesus warns us about in Mark 13--being led astray by false teachers.

The second thing Jesus warned his disciples against was misinterpreting contemporary events such as wars and natural disasters as indicators that the end is at hand.

He says, “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come . . .”

There have always been natural disasters and there will always be such disasters. Fortunately, particularly in this country, we are better protected against such disasters than any generation that’s ever lived. We have never experienced disasters in the scope of those experienced by other nations and other generations.

For example, on July 5, 1201 in Egypt and Syria, the deadliest earthquake in recorded history struck. This disaster rocked the eastern Mediterranean and killed over 1.1 million people. Nearly every city in the near east felt the effects of this quake.

Then there was the bubonic plague or “Black Death.” It killed almost 33 percent of the entire population of Europe when it struck between 1347 and 1350. It also affected millions in Asia and North Africa. (6)

There have even been flu epidemics through the centuries that have killed millions of persons. Each time a great tragedy has occurred, people have thrown up their hands and said, “This is it! This is the end of the world.” But each time they’ve been wrong. Jesus warned his disciples against misinterpreting contemporary events such as wars and natural disasters as indicators that the end is at hand. Don’t panic, friends. This world may be around for many more centuries or even millennia.

But here’s the most important thing you need to know. Jesus made it very clear that nobody knows when the end of time will be. Jesus said even he didn’t know. We read in verse 32 of Mark, “But about that day or hour **no one knows**, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” It might be tomorrow. It might be 10,000 years from now. Nobody knows! Foolish people keep setting dates, but so far they’ve been totally wrong. If you run into somebody determined to announce how soon the end will come, ask him if he thinks he is smarter than Jesus, for Jesus said **even he** didn’t know when it would be. How much more definitive can you be than that?

In a classic *Peanuts* cartoon Linus and Lucy are standing at a window watching it rain. Lucy says to Linus, “Look at it rain! What if the whole earth floods?”

Linus answers: “It won’t! God promised Noah in Genesis Chapter 9 He would never flood the world again; the sign of this promise is the rainbow.”

Lucy smiles and replies, “Linus, you’ve taken a great load off my mind.”

To which Linus responds, “Sound theology has a way of doing that.” (7)

Jesus makes it very clear: regardless of what certain popular books and movies infer, it might be thousands or even millions of years before the end comes. Nobody knows--neither scientists, theologians nor quack preachers on radio or television.

Here's what I want you to remember: Life is unpredictable. Terrible things will always happen in this world. I don't say that to you so that you will be afraid. Exactly the opposite is true. I want you to know that regardless of what comes, God will never leave you nor forsake you. Even if the entire world should pass away, God will still be with you.

It is said that during the making of the classic film *Ben Hur*, actor Charlton Heston had to learn how to drive a chariot. It was part of a race scene that was probably the most exciting one that had ever been filmed up to that time.

After many weeks of chariot lessons Heston told the director, "I think I can drive the chariot all right but I'm not at all sure I can actually win the race."

The director, responded, "You just stay in the race and I'll make sure you win."

That's Christ message to us in every troubled time: "You just stay in the race and I'll make sure you win." Don't let false teachers fill your mind with needless anxiety. No one knows what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future. God holds the future and we are God's own children. Do not be afraid.

1. <http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/environment/natural-disasters/4219883>.
2. <http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/environment/natural-disasters/4219861>.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks.
4. <http://www.bibleresearch.org/articles/a11pws.htm>.
5. Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power--And How They Can Be Restored* (Kindle Edition).
6. <http://www.disasterium.com/10-worst-natural-disasters-of-all-time/>.
7. Copyright by Charles M. Schulz.

