

As a brief example, I have found it deeply disturbing that in many churches, people have for a variety of reasons found themselves unsatisfied with the medical services available to them, and have turned to a variety of alternative therapies, such as Reflexology, Shiatsu, Homeopathy and a wide variety of others. Many of these present themselves either as thoroughly scientific, which they are not, or as belief systems which come from various Eastern religions. All of this should ring bells for Christians, saying 'warning'. For our health we place ourselves in the hands of our Saviour, not anything else, and the remarkable and godly benefits of proven clinical medicine and advice are sometimes ignored by Christians who prefer the exotic temptations of alternative therapies.

### Application

If we are to keep ourselves pure as God's people today, then this passage of Scripture reminds us of several things which we should keep in mind. We may well be close to the End Times today, not simply because scientists indicate that humanity is progressively destroying the planet on which it lives, but because it is hard to turn to anywhere in Scripture which speaks about God's coming again and not to feel that what is described is close to what we see around us today. Nevertheless, we do not know when God will bring His world to an end and it will not be scientists who decide this by measuring the pollutants in the atmosphere, but God Himself, who will decide when He believes it is time.

Remembering that we do in fact live in what the Bible calls the End Times, even though they have lasted two thousand years so far, the Church of God should be ever vigilant against false prophets, false teaching and false Messiahs. In Old Testament times, there was hardly a prophet of God who did not have to fight against another prophet in order to speak the Lord's Word (see, for example, Jeremiah's struggle with Hananiah – Jer. 28) and the same will be true today. The Church of God is not a religious shopping-centre of belief systems, but one centrally controlled entity with one known printed authority; the Bible; but too many people have the impression you can believe what you want and still be a Christian. It has grieved many godly people to see churches wane and dwindle not because Christian faith is either practiced badly or is somehow wrong for the society in which it is set; but because its leaders and participants, having set themselves loose from a historical and Biblical understanding of their faith, have elected to teach, preach and practice a faith that is barely Christian. There are even mainstream Christian denominations (in England) which are asking the question at the highest level 'what are we about?' because they do not know any more.

Vigilance is necessary, and for the Christian who wishes to stay close to the Lord, it is a constant calling. Satan has managed to persuade many Christian people today that there are other ways of maintaining their faith than knowing the Lord God and being obedient to Him and Him alone. As God's elect; that is where we stand, under the Lord's care and protection in these uncertain times.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss what you believe may be described as an 'abomination of desolation' today.
2. Discuss what you feel about the prospect of being a victim of war in the times before the coming of Christ. Do you think Jesus meant this physically, or spiritually?
3. What false teachings do you believe are prevalent in the church today. Do not point the finger at others, but look to your own church fellowship.

### Discipleship

How hard was it for Jesus to speak in this way about what was to come? Each of us finds it hard to give other people bad news, and the news that people will have to endure really hard suffering is both hard to give and hard to receive. Jesus never shirked from the truth of what He knew however; He was heading towards His own suffering at the Cross, and in the light of that, our own fears for the future seem less troublesome. As part of your on-going assessment of Lent, make notes about what Jesus may have felt about His prophetic words in today's text.

### Final Prayer

We bless You, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Come into our lives again and make all things new; root out evil, cure our sicknesses and heal our strife. Unite Your people so that we might be effective witnesses to Your love, and bring us eventually to Your glory in peace. Thank You, Lord Jesus Christ, for Your great work among us: AMEN

### Prayer

There are days, Heavenly Father, when we do not know what is right for us to do. We are weak and need Your assistance, we are tempted and need Your strength, we are in denial of the truth and need Your revelation, or we are unwilling to act and need the drive of Your Holy Spirit to empower us. At such times, may we not be content to hear the advice of others, but seek to discover Your divine guidance which is available to us through Your Son Jesus Christ: AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Forgiveness

Pray that the Holy Spirit will bring the power of loving forgiveness to places in the world where there is historic strife between people, whether this is because of economics, ancient animosities, religious persuasion, or other form of animosity. Pray that God will show His power within our hurting world by demonstrating that forgiveness works because it is practical love.

### Meditation

The Lord, in creation, Has given us much;  
Yet in death He will take us back.

This is not something people really want to hear,  
It is hard to accept, but it's true.

So instead of perceiving this truth as a threat,  
Try receiving it as a blessing.  
We have all been given life by a generous God,  
And through Him, we may have it forever.

Whatever we possess now, for good or for ill,  
Seems to us that it will always be ours.  
But we know it will not, and what better hope do we have  
Than the promise of Christ's salvation.

The pressure the world will put on us is strong  
To trust its pleasures and deny Christ:  
But it doesn't take much to see through its lies,  
And place our hope for a future in God.

### Bible Study - Mark 13:14-23

<sup>14</sup> 'So when you see "the abomination of desolation" set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea should flee to the hills. <sup>15</sup> Those on the house-tops should not go down or re-enter the house to retrieve anything; <sup>16</sup> those who are in the field should not turn around or go back to get a coat. <sup>17</sup> How awful for those who are pregnant or nursing infants in those days! <sup>18</sup> Pray that it will not happen in winter, <sup>19</sup> for in those days there will be great suffering, of a kind that has not been since the beginning of God's creation until now, and will never be again. <sup>20</sup> And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no-one would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, the ones He chose, He has shortened them.'

<sup>21</sup> 'If anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Messiah!" or "Look, there he is!" then do not believe it. <sup>22</sup> False Messiahs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders in order to deceive the elect, if that were possible. Be on your guard; I have told you all these things beforehand.'

### Review

This is Scripture to put the fear of God into you, literally! Jesus spoke these words to the disciples as He reflected on the Temple and the manner in which those who ran it had rejected him. Consequently, He foresaw a terrible judgement coming on both Jerusalem and the Temple which would lead to chaos in the lives of ordinary people (13:14-20) accompanied by a rise in false religion (13:21-22). As we say yesterday in our analysis of chapter 13, this

passage is both a prophecy of what would happen in the siege of Jerusalem in AD66-70, and secondly, a prophecy of the events that will continue to happen and will one day signal the final return of Christ in glory.

It is too easy to allow oneself to be frightened by the terrible images presented in this passage, and fail to recognise that the things described in verses 14 to 20 are the human consequences of war. Jesus had just prophesied 'there will be wars and rumours of wars' (13:7), and so we can expect that the 'End Times' will be characterised by war. However, war has characterised all human experience, and it has terrible consequences for those who are caught up in it, whether in the past or now. Nowadays, we read about wars in history books written either by those who have won those wars or by those who have benefitted from the victory: a British history book, for example, generally reflects a society that has defended its island for a thousand years, fought many other wars and successfully invaded other countries over the same time. Histories such as this frequently display the glorious consequences of victory, but God's Word is different from nearly all other descriptions of war because its focus is on what happens to ordinary people who pay the price of defeat. You can read about this throughout the Old Testament; see the ruin of Israel in 721BC (2 Kings 17), and the Babylonian defeat of Jerusalem in 587BC (Jeremiah 29f.). All who have experienced flight before a rampant army recognise the descriptions of terror Jesus prophesies (13:15-20).

Wars may come on earth for many reasons, but God's judgement comes on the earth at the End Times for a specific reason, and is described in our passage as due to the setting up of the 'abomination of desolation' (13:14). We will study this in more depth in the full Bible study, but put simply, it means the replacing of the proper worship of God by false religion. You may say that there has always been some of this going on in the church throughout the ages, but Jesus' prophecy tells us that a time will come when this is so endemic within the heart of God's Church that it will indeed indicate the End Times!

Everything would seem doom and gloom in this passage of Scripture without the words of verse 20. They assure us that despite everything, the Lord is in control of everything, and He sees the suffering of those who endure the End Times. Certainly, those who remain faithful can expect to know that the Lord's hand is on them as His 'elect', that is, His chosen people. Furthermore, the Lord will reduce the time of war on earth for the sake of those who suffer; in other words, the Lord protects those He has chosen to save. Finally, the theme of false religion is emphasised again at the end of the passage (13:21,22), and those who face the End Times are warned to be on the lookout specifically for false 'Messiahs', that is, those who claim to be God's unique anointed servant, and also 'false prophets' who try to add to what God has revealed.

The danger is that we distance ourselves from these words through believing that they are to be reserved only for people at some point in the future. All scripture points to the fact that we are indeed living in the 'End Times' now, even though they have been with us now for two thousand years. Many people want to find some other explanation, but the only conclusion we can draw from it is that the Lord will indeed be coming soon, and despite the years that have passed, this does mean really soon!

### Going Deeper

If we are to understand these prophecies we must look further at what the 'abomination of desolation' means, because this is the trigger to the cataclysmic events described. We must remember, however, that Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled in AD70 and continues to be fulfilled in the wars which still take place. Jesus' words still point towards God's judgement which will finally come, one day.

#### ***The 'abomination of desolation'***

The translation above uses the well known expression 'abomination of desolation', which translates an almost impossibly difficult Greek expression. The Greek word for 'abomination' means something which is detestable or sacrilegious and the word for 'desolation' also means destruction. Put together, the phrase refers to a blasphemous object which causes destruction. What could this mean, or what could this be?

We know what this was in Old Testament times, because the expression comes from Daniel (9:27, 11:31, 12:11). This refers to a prophecy which was fulfilled in 167BC, when the ruler of Israel Antiochus Epiphanes IV placed an image of the Olympian god Zeus in the Temple at Jerusalem in order to symbolise the acceptance of Greek culture. This single event sparked the Maccabean uprising which led to fierce fighting and thousands of deaths amongst Jewish

people, but ultimately paved the way for a settlement between the Jews and their Greek overlords which allowed the Jews a degree of religious freedom.

However, this was not the first time that something like this had happened. The Jewish people looked back with horror on the fact that some of their own Kings had placed foreign gods in the 'holy of holies' within the Temple as a way of securing 'foreign policy goals' (see King Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33:15). By doing this they were making the statement 'I will honour your gods and you will honour mine'; something like an ancient 'peace treaty'. Such practices, particularly during the time of Manasseh, were regarded as the reason why the Kingdom of Judah had failed and was finally overrun by the Babylonians in 586BC.

After the time of Christ, Caligula wanted to set up his image in the temple in AD40, but the Sanhedrin refused and incurred the wrath of the Emperor, and then in AD66 Nero tries the same, and Jerusalem came under siege, eventually being destroyed in AD70. It is easy to see how this setting up of images in the Temple was a catalyst for catastrophic events both before the time of Christ and after, and there should be no surprise that Jesus prophesied it would be a trigger for the End Times. The main question we face is what kind of 'abomination of desolation' should we expect to see today, and what might usher in the End Times. Clearly, it is some kind of false religion or false god, and we will pick up this theme again shortly when we look at the 'false Messiah' and 'false prophets'.

#### ***Terrible things, happening to God's elect***

Verses 14 to 20 are difficult to read because they all describe the terror of cataclysmic events. Hollywood movies or TV dramas about disasters are no substitute for the evidence of what really happens to people who flee in terror for their lives (13:14,15), unable to return to collect valuables or what might otherwise be thought of as essentials. Such things are even worse for those who are pregnant or care for little children and babies (13:17), and also worse in winter when the cold makes emergency flight all the more hazardous.

All of these things are known to us because they are indeed the reality of war; even now, there are parts of Africa, for example, where people experience such things almost daily. What Jesus says, however, is that there will come a time when these things will affect His people, and they will be of such a magnitude as will make all previous wars and horrors seem relatively insignificant (13:19). In other words, the wrath of evil will be at its greatest when Christ is about to come again. This is not something we can confidently predict in terms of 'when', but Jesus tells us that this will certainly be true, and we can certainly be vigilant.

The words of re-assurance which Jesus gives in verse 20 are described as happening to God's 'elect'. Although they have had to flee from their familiar homes and places of security (see verses 15-18), the elect will be secure in Him; this is what it means to be God's 'elect'. The 'elect' is not a term which means a group of people who are mysteriously plucked from amongst all humanity by the random judgements of God in heaven. The word means 'choice', and God's elect have indeed been chosen by God, but are the ones who have also decided to choose God. 'Election' starts with God, but it is a two-way relationship, and always has been ever since Abraham 'believed God, and He counted it to him as righteousness' (Gen 15:6).

#### ***False Messiahs and false prophets***

In the previous passage (Mark 13:5,6), Jesus warned that at the End Times' people would be led astray. In our reading, Jesus explained this further by talking about false 'Christ's' as well as 'false prophets'. Although one aspect of such false religious representation, prophecy or teaching is that people may be led astray, the problem at the End Times is far greater. This is because with the climax of the End Times being the return of Jesus, 'false Messiahs' would therefore make false claims about what God was doing at this critical time.

Nevertheless, however much we study this passage and see how it relates to this time or that in the past or potentially in the future, the problems of false religion, false prophets and false Messiahs, as Jesus clearly prophesied, are with us today. It is deeply grieving that many good Christian people today do not read God's Word regularly and have difficulty with prayer. Now it may seem churlish to suggest that there is something wrong when many such Christians live apparently good and godly lives; but deeper dangers lie beneath the surface of the life of the church today. With a lack of Biblical teaching and exposition in many pulpits, ordinary Christians are having to try to live Christian lives without the guidance of Scripture and God's Word which binds them together with the historic Christ, and so it becomes easy to be fooled by some 'false Messiah'.