JESUS WILL RETURN!

The end is coming. We don’t know when, and we don’t know how. But Jesus didn’t leave us in complete ignorance. What did He want us to know about the end times and His return? Join *Our Daily Bread* author and Bible teacher Bill Crowder as he explores Mark 13. Discover the signs Jesus identifies as markers to the end times and what they mean to us today.

**Bill Crowder** joined the Our Daily Bread Ministries staff after more than 20 years in the pastorate. Bill works closely with Mart DeHaan as vice president of teaching content. Bill is heard regularly on the *Discover the Word* radio program and spends much of his time in a Bible-teaching ministry for Christian leaders around the world.

To order more of *Timely Warnings: What Jesus Said About the End Times* or any of over 100 other titles, visit [odb.org/discoveryseries](http://odb.org/discoveryseries).
We all want to know when Jesus is returning. It would be great to know the when and the how of all the events surrounding the end times that Scripture describes.

Many theories have been put forth trying to explain the imagery, warnings, and sequence of events that point toward the end times. Jesus Himself spoke of return
and the coming of the fullness of the kingdom of God.

In the following pages, join author Bill Crowder as he explores Jesus’s famous Olivet Discourse in Mark 13. Discover the signs that Jesus identifies as markers to the end times, and see why it is important that we pay attention to what is happening around us and what Scripture says.

*Our Daily Bread Ministries*
contents

one
Road Markers ........................................... 5

two
Be On Guard Against Coming Persecution ................. 17

three
Be On Guard Against False Christs ...................... 21

four
Be On Guard Against Setting Times or Dates .............. 25

five
A Closing Story ........................................... 29
one
Road Markers

Say you’re on a driving trip across the United States on its vast interstate highway system. What signs or road markers are you likely to look for? What kind of information might they provide?

Certainly signs that update distances to destinations would be important. Signs that inform you of available restaurant or fuel options would catch your eye. You might find yourself looking for notification of an upcoming rest area and the necessary facilities it offers. Road markers are important. They provide
information. They move us forward and on our way.

The same is true when tackling challenging and lengthy portions of Scripture. We sometimes need “road markers” to navigate our way through the text. That is the case with Jesus’s message in Mark 13—a teaching block that carries the potential to generate the heat of conflict as well as the light of understanding. It’s packed with information that can be read any number of ways, depending upon your theological persuasion about the end times.

**Common Ground**

There are a variety of views on “last things,” also called *eschatology*. Those differing views are often held by solid, reputable scholars who love Christ and love the Scriptures. Perhaps the fact that these various positions exist may tell us that none of us has the end times perfectly figured out. That makes it even more critical to remember that these various views are not the gospel—the message of the life, death, ascension, and return of Jesus. Our salvation does not depend on our view of the end times. While our differing perspectives are not unimportant, they are not what is *most* important, nor are they justification for breaking fellowship with one another.

So where do we find common ground in the
midst of honest disagreement? What matters most in our consideration of “last things” is the confident assurance that Jesus will return as He promised. In John 14, we read:

“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” (vv. 1–3; emphasis added)

This promise was echoed six weeks later in Acts 1 by two figures (apparently angels) speaking to the disciples after Jesus’s ascension to the Father:

And as they [the eleven disciples] were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” (vv. 10–11; emphasis added)

We may disagree on the calendar of that return or the mechanics of it, but one thing is clear—Jesus will return. In Mark 13, Jesus speaks to His disciples of
events that, in one way or another, will characterize the time between His soon departure and His certain, promised return. How do we navigate our way through this strategic chapter? By paying attention to the road markers that Jesus Himself has provided in His teaching.

**Time and Place (VV. 1–4)**

Some scholars describe the gospel of Mark as a passion narrative with an extended introduction. This has value, for chapters 11–16—which comprise the passion narrative—focus on the final week of Jesus’s life on earth. Chapter 11 opens with the triumphal entry, then moves forward to the report of the resurrection in chapter 16.

According to some scholars, the “passion narrative” begins in the Garden of Gethsemane; others consider it as taking place throughout the week from the triumphal entry through Jesus’s burial in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb.

In the midst of that passion narrative, Mark 11:27 through 12:44 describe an ongoing debate between Jesus and the religious leaders as it took place in the temple in Jerusalem. We enter the story as Jesus and His disciples are leaving the temple grounds following that debate.
The context of this discussion is important. It must be understood both in terms of time and place—the historical context—of these events. As we have seen, the time is the passion week as Jesus moves ever closer to the cross. This reality colors how we understand everything that is said.

The place where this conversation begins is the temple. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* says:

*The Jerusalem temple (not fully completed until ca. A.D. 64) was built by the Herodian dynasty to win Jewish favor and to create a lasting Herodian monument. It was considered an architectural wonder of the ancient world. It was built with large white stones, polished and generously decorated with gold (Josephus). It covered about 1/6 of the land area of old Jerusalem. To the Jews nothing was as magnificent and formidable as their temple.*

More than just a place of worship, this building was the center of Israel’s national life. It was also seen as the heartbeat and focal point of Judaism, explaining the religious leaders’ relentless attacks on Jesus, whom they saw as a threat to the temple.

A conversation in and about Israel’s temple grounds prompts the follow-on discussion between Jesus and His followers that will result in His Olivet Discourse.

As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, “Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” 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)

Jesus must have shocked His followers with His declaration that this very temple would be destroyed (v. 2). The temple was revered by the Jewish people, and the possibility that it could be utterly destroyed was unthinkable. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary agrees:

Jesus’ reply was startling. Great though the temple buildings were, they would be completely destroyed. Jesus’ actions in clearing the temple earlier in the week had represented a symbolic judgment against the temple (11:15–17), and his cursing of the fig tree functioned as an enacted parable of judgment against Israel and her religious institutions (11:12–14, 20–21). Now Jesus explicitly predicts the temple’s destruction. The prophecy was fulfilled in AD 70, when the Roman general Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.
It is this unprecedented prediction that prompts four of Jesus’s disciples to seek better understanding of the ins and outs of the Rabbi’s words. The ensuing teaching session begins with a question. It is likely the same question we would have asked: If all of this is going to happen, when will it happen?

As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?” (Mark 13:3–4)

This is a once-in-the-Gospels moment. We are accustomed to seeing Jesus’s inner circle witnessing things like the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:37), the transfiguration (Mark 9:2), or Jesus’s prayers in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). There, and in other cases, it’s always Peter, James, and John—the Big Three. Here, however, for the only recorded time in the Gospels, Peter’s brother Andrew is included.

I’ve often wondered how Andrew felt about that. He was one of the first two followers of Jesus (John 1:40), and he had personally brought Peter to meet Jesus (v. 41). Yet, he was left out of that group of three—and, with it, many significant events. How might that have felt?
But more importantly, Andrew is now included with the inner circle for the only time—and as a result he will be privy to Jesus’s longest block of teaching in the gospel of Mark. These disciples ask their Teacher when the monumental, unspeakable destruction of the temple might occur, and He will answer. What did Andrew and the others hear, and how are we to get our own minds around it?

**Necessary Warnings** *(MARK 13:5–8, 9–13, 21–23, 32–33)*

*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* pointed out a road marker that allows us to take a high level view of this important teaching discourse. It’s rooted in the first word in the message—the Greek term *blepete*, which translates “take heed,” “pay attention,” “be warned,” or “see to it.” While dealing with a variety of issues both current (for them) and future, Jesus organizes this teaching session around a series of warnings, all introduced by the word *blepete*—“pay attention.”

Jesus repeats this word throughout the Olivet Discourse. (We have highlighted it for you in each text). While we can have long and enjoyable theological debates about the prophetic elements of Mark 13, the repetition of this cautionary word gives us the big ideas Jesus is highlighting for His followers.
In this way, He warns us to “be on guard” about a number of things.

**Be On Guard Against Wrong Assumptions**  
(MARK 13:5–8)

The word *assumption* has been defined as “a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.” This matters to us because one of the most dangerous realities in life is that we tend to view the world through the grid of our assumptions. However, those assumptions can’t always be trusted because we have limited information, incomplete perspective, and/or biased attitudes.

The danger of assumptions has been addressed wisely by many, including:

- “Remember, we see the world not as it is but as we are. Most of us see through the eyes of our fears and our limiting beliefs and our false assumptions.” *(Robin S. Sharma; lawyer; writer)*

- “Begin challenging your assumptions. Your assumptions are the windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while or the light won’t come in.” *(Alan Alda; actor)*

- “Don’t make assumptions. Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you...
can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness and drama. With just this one agreement, you can completely transform your life.” (Don Miguel Ruiz; author)

Agreement on all points of life with the individuals quoted here isn’t necessary to appreciate the keen insight they offer on the danger of assumptions. And, not surprisingly, the danger of assumption is at the heart of Jesus’s first warning to His four followers, beginning with the word blepēte:

And Jesus began to say to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. Many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He!’ and will mislead many. 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. 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 13:5–8, emphasis added)

The indicators Jesus lists have been used by people for years as the basis for assuming that we are on the very brink of His return. In the midst of what appears to be plenty of signs, it’s easy to be deceived. Jesus even warns that such an assumption
could cause the wrong person to be acclaimed as the returning Christ—and that would indeed be a dangerous assumption.

How many of us have assumed that our day must be the day? When I was a new follower of Christ, it seemed that studying Bible prophecy was a massive priority. The attempts to unravel prophetic mysteries ranged from wise and insightful to outlandish and absurd. But, the more absurd some of the applications were, the more they were bound up with the dogmatic assertion (assumption) that now was when those things would happen.

Assumptions can be dangerous because even though our day might be the day, there is nothing that says that it must be the day. Jesus warns against being deceived, and at its core, that warning is rooted in a simple fact—these kinds of events are an ever-present part of the brokenness of the world. They didn’t suddenly begin to occur in our generation, and they won’t suddenly go away until Jesus actually does come.

The last sentence is the key to how we respond to these words.

“These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.” (v. 8)

The beginning. The first part. Not the culmination
or the conclusion. The beginning. It reminds me of the words of Winston Churchill following a rare early victory for the Allies during the Second World War. He said, “This is not the end, this is not even the beginning of the end, this is just perhaps the end of the beginning.” There is wisdom there. Checking off the boxes of Jesus’s descriptors should not deceive us into thinking it is the end—but we can take hope. It may mark the beginning of the end. Time will tell.

**Thoughts for Reflection:**

Why can assumptions be dangerous? How can they lead to false hope or even disappointment?

How might that apply to the kinds of false assumptions Jesus warns about in Mark 13?

James 1:5 reminds us that if we lack wisdom we can ask of God and He will grant it to us generously. So, ask God for the wisdom to carefully work through challenging texts (LIKE MARK 13), so that you can gain all of the benefit intended from those Scriptures, without burdening them with unnecessary assumptions.
two

Be On Guard Against Coming Persecution (MARK 13:9–13)

In the recent film *Paul: Apostle of Christ*, 21st-century followers of Jesus are confronted with a 1st-century reality—what it looked like to be persecuted for the name of Christ. To be sure, millions of Christians around the world today are enduring persecution at this very moment—an issue that should regularly populate our prayers. Nevertheless, for many of us, especially in the West, persecution for Christ is a theoretical, abstract concept that’s fuzzy at best. The film brought that fuzziness into distinct clarity. Hiding, fearing arrest, experiencing imprisonment, facing the brutality of the Roman “games,” and suffering painful
and tortured deaths, people who named the name of Christ paid a massive price for identifying with Him. This painful experience is a significant and leading part of Jesus’s next warning about coming things. Again, it is led by blepete, here translated “be on your guard.” Notice:

“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. The gospel must first be preached to all the nations. 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. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. 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, emphasis added)

Regardless of when the Christ returns, the time between Jesus’s day and the day of His return will be marked by His people suffering persecutions. This is not only a feature of Jesus’s longest message in Mark, it is also presented as part of the opening Beatitudes of His first message in Matthew:
“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10–12)

Without being the least bit trite or flippant, we may say that persecution of Christ-followers was never going to be the exception to the rule; it is the normal response of a dark world to the light of Christ. While there is a danger in assuming that everything negative in life is just such a persecution event, that doesn’t alter the fact that real persecution exists in our world today.

Statistics are often difficult to track accurately, but according to reputable sources, more than 300 Christians are currently being martyred in a typical month and multiple thousands are displaced.

I spent a number of years traveling to Russia to teach pastors and encountered many who had suffered the most intense of persecutions under atheistic communism. In one of my classes, I had a student several decades my senior who always—and I mean always—was smiling. The surprise came when I learned that he had spent twenty-five years in a labor camp for courageously declaring his faith in Jesus.
I met another man who had been repeatedly beaten, and finally was shot in the head for preaching the gospel, and miraculously survived that shooting.

For them and millions like them, suffering was not a random circumstance for “those people over there.” It was their story and experience—and they had found Christ’s strength and love to be more than sufficient for those years in which they suffered for Christ.

Jesus’s warning rings true. As we move inexorably into the future and God’s promises along the way, we must be aware of the realities of the present. For many people, that may include persecution and suffering for the name and message of Christ. The question we must ask ourselves is whether or not we too will be ready for persecution if it comes our way.

**Thoughts for Reflection:**

Does persecution seem like a distant problem to you?

Go online and discover what persecution of Christians really looks like in today’s world, and how different it is from the relatively minor criticisms we may experience for following Jesus (one resource is The Voice of the Martyrs at [https://www.persecution.com](https://www.persecution.com)).

Pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. And, ask God to strengthen your own faith and relationship with Him so that, should dark times of persecution arrive, you will be able to stand firm in Christ.
As a boy, I loved reading comic books. My favorite was Batman (old school *Detective Comics*) largely because he was not a superhuman with superpowers. Bruce Wayne (Batman) was just a guy trying to help. That resonated with me. It still does, and, given the overwhelming popularity of the super-hero genre today, it must resonate with countless others as well.

Even more to the point, when the film *Man of Steel* was released, it reimagined the Superman origin
story. Filled with breathtaking special effects and non-stop action, the movie drew box-office-busting crowds to theaters around the world. Some said that the film’s appeal was rooted in the technology required to produce such a project. Others attributed it to the enduring appeal of the “Superman mythology.” Amy Adams, who played Lois Lane in the movie, had a different view of Superman’s appeal. She said that it was about a basic human longing, asking, “Who doesn’t want to believe that there’s one person who could come and save us from ourselves?” That is the right question.

This genuine human longing, however, can cause us to look for rescue in the wrong places. Jesus’s next blepete warning targets that danger, stressing something hinted at earlier (v. 6):

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

As it was in Jesus’s day, we are constantly looking for someone to rescue us from the darkness of this world.
But following a false messiah has devastating results, as was discovered by over 900 people (more than 300 of them children) who committed themselves to Jim Jones, the charismatic leader of The People’s Temple. Leaving homes, families, and careers, these folks migrated to the jungles of Guyana in South America to establish a community in honor of their deeply flawed, deeply disturbed leader. Jonestown was the result. On November 18, 1978, it became the site of a mass suicide demanded by Jones and carried out at gunpoint. One of the great tragedies of the late 20th century was the byproduct of embracing a false Christ. And Jonestown was not an isolated incident. The Heaven’s Gate cult leader, Marshall Applewhite, claimed to be Jesus. In 1997, thirty-eight of his followers committed suicide with him. Many others currently claim to be Jesus—often proclaiming messages that at first glance sound deceptively similar to things Jesus might say. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals them to be frauds or deluded.

The danger of false messiahs, however, is not only in the potential for a Jonestown-like disaster. Those false Christs cannot meet the needs of the hearts that follow them. These leaders are inadequate to provide what their followers are longing for, so that their ultimate thirst is never truly met. Such false
Christ diverts those hungry hearts away from the living Christ who alone can meet those deep heart needs. Although on a much more personal and much more intimate scale, this still results in tragedy. Be on your guard, indeed.

**Thoughts for Reflection:**

Jesus’s warning about false messiahs has great value today. Why do you think people are drawn to false teachers, leaders, and/or Christs? What are they looking for? How are they deceived?

It has been said that the best way to recognize counterfeit money is by constantly handling genuine money. Applying that idea here, consider immersing yourself in the Gospels, so that you can grow even more attuned to the heart of the true Christ. If you read three chapters a day, you can read all four gospel accounts in a single month. After several months spent in the Gospels, your awareness of the spirit and person of Jesus will be greatly strengthened.
After I had moved to Michigan in the early 1990s, I was cleaning out some old files when I stumbled across a gospel tract that caused me to grin and groan simultaneously. The cover of the tract was emblazoned with the declaration, “Why the Lord Must Return in 1984.”

In the mid-1800s, a Baptist pastor named William Miller determined that according to his understanding of Daniel 8:14 Jesus would return to
the earth in October of 1844. Many of his followers sold all of their possessions and joined together to welcome the King of kings. When Jesus did not return, Miller rejected his own problematic teachings, and the nonevent became known as “The Great Disappointment of 1844.” More recently, one preacher warned that May 21, 2011, was “Judgment Day,” on which the Lord would return. He even put it on billboards across the country. Nothing unusual happened that day, of course.

From televangelists to pastors to authors, little has changed. We are continually being told that the unknowable is now known—declaring with absolute confidence that they know the time in which Jesus will return.

In spite of those professing such certainty, Jesus makes it clear that such knowledge is beyond our reach. In fact, this is the point of His next warning, with blepete encased within it:

*But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come.* (Mark 13:32–33, emphasis added)

While the promise of Jesus’s return is one we
can hold with absolute confidence, Jesus builds on His previous warning to reemphasize the danger of misreading the events of the times between His departure and that promised return. We cannot know the times of His return, because, in His humanity, even Jesus Himself was restricted from that knowledge! (v. 32).

As a result, the Teacher challenges His followers to live always in the expectation of that return. It calls us to a mindset in which the value of each moment, event, or opportunity is heightened by the possibility of His coming.

This helps us to form the opposite of an escapist mentality. Rather than looking for Jesus to come so that we can escape from this world to the next, we are called to maximize this life. To live fully this day and every day in His name. This value system was at the very heart of one of Paul’s most dramatic statements. Writing to his friends at Philippi, the apostle affirmed:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.
(Philippians 1:21)

Those words form a statement of remarkable balance. There will be a time for the next life—a time for which we don’t know the day or the hour—but in the meantime, every day is to be lived as an
expression of our desire to follow Christ by His Spirit, power, and grace. Because our entrance into eternity, whether by Christ’s return or our passing, will come at an unpredictable moment, our challenge is to make every moment count.

**Thoughts for Reflection:**
We live in the in-between, our days bracketed by the reality of Jesus’s first coming and the expectation of His promised return. Yet, while we can rightly long for His coming, we must live in the here and now.

Using a concordance or Bible study website, see what wisdom the Scriptures offer us about the value of each and every today (FOR INSTANCE, PSALM 90:12). Allow the value of the day to anchor you in the present moment in which God has placed you. Seek to honor Him in that moment.

Ask God to help you live today balanced between looking forward to the day Jesus returns while making every day count for Him now.
Jesus gives a final parable on being prepared for His return, then gives one final charge to pay attention. Interestingly, this time He doesn’t use *blepete* but rather a different word to convey the same idea.

“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. 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—in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. What I say to you I say to all, ‘Be on the alert!’” (Mark 13:34–37; emphasis added)

Twice Jesus warns, “Be on the alert!” Both times it is the word agrypneite, challenging the hearer to be constantly awake. As the servant carries on his or her duties with the anticipation of the Master’s return, we too embrace the opportunities presented to us with a sense of awareness—not a sense of dread. No wonder Paul could tell his young protégé, Timothy:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6–8)

Having lived each day in faithful response to the love of Christ, Paul had no need to fear death and every reason to celebrate Christ’s return. It is in that
spirit that Jesus challenged His four good friends to live in the face of an uncertain future.

Lots To Consider

If you’re a fan of John Grisham novels, then it’s likely that you also enjoy the movies made from those novels. That enjoyment, however, is often frustrated because so much of the story has to be condensed or altered in order to compress it into the two-hour movie window. Sometimes it works well, other times not so much. For perspective, James Michener’s epic story of the American west, *Centennial*, was made into a 27-hour TV mini-series—and it still didn’t cover all the story!

The point? Some things are just too big for the space allowed for it, and that is certainly the case with the text of Mark 13. It’s an awful lot to process in a short study, but the big idea is clear—we need to pay attention. We need to be on guard (*blepete*), so that we live our days to reflect His life and heart. So that we can help others learn to pay attention as well.

As such, we need to pay attention to:

- The times in which we live
- The challenges and warnings of Scripture
- The possibility of suffering for His name
- The reality of His promised return
We need to pay attention so that, in these troubled and troubling times, we can point people to Him for hope and help.

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