

Pastor Kyle Mercer
Jesus & the Future

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Series: Unexpected
Mark 13

BIG IDEA – WHAT YOU BELIEVE ABOUT TOMORROW AFFECTS HOW YOU LIVE TODAY

All right, Two Cities Church. It is Thanksgiving week. Thanksgiving is on Thursday. What do we do on Thanksgiving? We eat a lot of food with people who stress us out. Some of you go, "I do that every day." Okay.

Welcome, guys. What's up with America? We like to put all of our holidays together, don't we? There's Halloween (or Reformation Day; I get it). Then there's Thanksgiving, and then there's Christmas, and then there's New Year's, and then we're done for several months with all of our holidays.

What we like to do as a church, as the year ends and a new year begins, is we take up a special offering. It's called the *hold the rope offering*. I just want to take a moment to tell you about this. If you're new, this will be new to you. If you've been around for a while and you've asked me, "Are we going to do this again?" yes. We've been doing this since 2018. You go, "That's not that long." Well, we're not that old. We're only six years old, and this is going to be our fifth year doing this.

Let me tell you why we do this. When we came to Winston-Salem six years ago, we didn't know a lot (not that we know a lot now), but one of the things early on that we wrote down and put on all of our papers and told everybody when we came here... We said, "We're in Winston, but we're for the world." Maybe another way to say it is "We're rooted locally. We're reaching globally." Maybe put these words together. We wanted to be a "glocal" church. We care about the globe, but we're rooted locally.

That's one of the reasons, because of your generosity, we're able to build a facility in the heart of our city: because we love our city, but we also love our world. So, we

were asking, year one, year two, "What can we do, as a church, to help local, national, and global ministries go further faster?" Now, why are we able to do that? One reason is you guys are so consistently generous, just giving to our church of your time, talent, and treasure, that all of our needs are met. We have been self-sustaining since day one, and God continues to meet our needs.

A few weeks ago, a guy called me up. He was talking to his wife, and he said, "God has really, really blessed our business this year. We know the economy has changed. We gave a gift last year to the Forward initiative, but God has so blessed us that we want to give an additional gift to the Forward initiative this year of a quarter million dollars." Unbelievable. I am so humbled, because I'm thinking, "God, you continue to go ahead of us and meet all of our needs."

We believe in an abundance mindset. We believe that generosity begets generosity and stinginess is also very contagious. So, we wanted to say, "What does it look like for us to be generous as a church?" So we came up with something called *hold the rope*. Why do we call it *hold the rope*? Well, it's actually a very famous story that I want you to know.

There was a guy named William Carey, and he wanted to go to India. Have you ever been to India today? If you go to India today (I've been there one time), it's hard to get there. By "hard to get there" I mean it's a 15-hour flight. Back then, going to India, you packed your coffin with you. This is what all missionaries did. "I don't know that I'm coming back." There's no Facebook. There's no FaceTime. There's no international phone plan. You may get a letter. You may never come home.

So, he said, "I'm going to go to India," but then he said to his best friend Andrew Fuller, "I'm going to go to India, but it's going to be like going into a deep well." He said, "I'm willing to go if you promise to hold the rope." Andrew Fuller, his best friend, spent the rest of his ministry telling people about William Carey and raising money.

So often, here's what we tell missionaries: "Go buy your own rope." We're not going to do that. We said, "We want to hold the rope." So, here's what we're doing. We've chosen strategic local, national, and global partners. Over the next four to six weeks, we're going to tell you who they are. I just want to take a minute and tell you why local, why national, and why global.

Here's why local. We want to partner with all of the expressions of the body of Christ in our city to reach people. Here's the truth. A lot of these ministries in our city have been here long before us. They're doing really hard work. And you know this, but let me just say it out loud.

When you minister to the spiritually and financially poor, they can never repay you. Most of these ministries that minister to the least and last and leftovers of our city are never going to be self-sustaining. So, we're going to come alongside them and say, "Here's a big check. God loves you. We love you. Go further faster in ministry."

Secondly, we're going to partner nationally. Why? Because we love our nation. We don't think it's the job of Christians to save America. That may be the job of political parties. Fair enough. We think the job of Christians is to save Americans, and the way we do that is by planting more churches. We're going to tell you about some church plants we're really excited about and how we're partnering with them.

Then, finally, we want to increase our global footprint. We care about our neighborhoods; we care about our nation. We care about the carpool line; we care about the Congo. We care about all of it. So, we're going to be unleashing and unveiling and telling you all of our strategic partnerships, but let me just say this. Here's our goal. We don't have a financial goal.

The first year we did this we raised \$50,000. Last year we raised \$400,000. I don't know what we're going to raise this year. That will depend on the generosity of all of us. We don't have a financial goal; we have a participation goal. We want to see 100 percent of the people who call Two Cities Church home to give a one-time gift above and beyond general tithes and offerings to hold the rope. One hundred percent of it is going to go right through us to these partners.

Here's what we want to do. Ministry can be discouraging for many people. We want the first phone call of 2023 to be... Imagine this phone call: "We love you. Here's 20 grand." "We love you. Here's 50 grand. It has been a hard year. The last few years have been hard. We want to help you go further faster. We want this to be the firstfruits." So, let's pray about that together right now, and then let's dive into Mark 13.

Lord, we thank you for... I think it's 2 John or 3 John that says people go out for the sake of his name. The Bible says, "Honor such people," and we want to honor them, Lord. We want to encourage them. We want to fuel and fund what they're doing. We pray for them, the local partners in our city, the national church planters, and the global missionaries, Lord.

I pray that every person in here would have a conversation with themselves, have a conversation with you (not just think about it but pray about it), and have a conversation with their spouse or their kids. May this be such a joyful time, Lord, of an ability to give what you have already given us to help others go further faster. We pray this in your name, amen.

All right. Find your way to Mark 13. I'm going to meet you there in seven or eight minutes, because I have to do a big intro on Mark 13. You go, "Why?" Well, we're in the fourth quarter, we might say, in the book of Mark. If you love baseball, we are rounding third base. We only have a few weeks left in the gospel of Mark.

Today (you'll see in a minute), this is going to be kind of a different sermon. It's more technical. It's a little more tedious. It's because if you look at Mark 13, it's almost all red letters. Do you see that? If you have a red-letter Bible, it's all red letters, for the most part. In fact, here's what's interesting: in the gospel of Mark, this is the longest and largest teaching Jesus does.

Now, he does a longer teaching in Matthew (the Sermon on the Mount). He does some longer teachings in Luke, but if you're coming to Mark, this is his longest teaching, and if you're talking about Matthew and Luke, it's his last teaching. So, what is Jesus going to talk about when he's about to head to the garden of Gethsemane and to the cross?

Is he going to talk about faith? Well, by implication, yes. Is he going to talk about marriage and money? Those are some of his favorite topics. No, he's not going to talk about that. Is he going to talk about the cross and the resurrection? Those are huge topics. He's not going to talk about that. Here's what Jesus is going to talk about and *we're* going to talk about for the next 40 or so minutes: the future. That's what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus is going to spend 37 verses, and he's going to talk about... Here's the word. You're committed. You showed up at the 9:15 service, so I'm going to give you a big word. He's going to talk about eschatology. *Eschatology* is the study of last things. It's the study of the end of the world.

It's interesting. Whenever you talk about last things... We're going to talk today about the return of Christ. My guess is most of you have never really heard a sermon on the return of Christ. Why? Because we don't talk about it anymore. There are two extremes when it comes to the return of Christ and the end times and eschatology. It's the same extremes people take when you're talking about demons or something.

It's either to obsess over them (that's not healthy), to obsess about signs and wonders and charts and end times and dates and current events and Bible codes, or to completely ignore them. Have you ever met somebody who's kind of obsessed with the end times? I've known some people like this. They're drawing charts with crayon on the back of a cereal box. Have you seen these people?

Their favorite Old Testament book is Daniel, just the last six chapters. Their favorite New Testament book is Revelation. Their favorite fiction book is *Left Behind*, all 14 of

them. I'm not as worried for us, as a church, about being too obsessed. I'm worried that we're ignoring it. I'm worried that you never, ever think about Jesus Christ returning. You don't ever pray about it. We'll see this at the end. You're supposed to fast for it. Part of your sabbath is supposed to be thinking about it.

Now, when we talk about these things, here's what people say. Whenever I'm preparing my sermon, I'm thinking of the most modern person. I'm having a conversation with a very modern person. Here's what I think a person will say today: "I can't believe you Christians and the end of the world. I can't believe you think about the end times and about how everything is going to end."

So does every American. Right? I mean, how many zombie shows do we need? I think, in America at least, and probably anywhere, there are four major ways people think the world is going to end, if you're not a Christian. First, something with the environment. The radical environmentalists. We're not saying climate change isn't real or global warming isn't real, but there's this whole thing with the environment.

In the 70s it was "We're going to have way too many people. We're not going to be able to feed everybody. Don't have any kids." China did a one-person policy. So, that's one thing. First is something with the environment. Second is going to be something with war. Now we have nuclear weapons, so is it going to be Kim Jong-un? North Korea has nuclear weapons. Russia has them. Iran has them. What's going to happen with war?

If it's not one of *those* things, how about pandemic or plague? That's another way people think the world is going to end. We kind of had an experience with that with COVID. "Come, Lord Jesus, and please bring toilet paper and hand sanitizer if you're coming." We had that experience.

So, we've had many different ways that people think about the end times. Another very common one is aliens or artificial intelligence. We see this in movies. You see this with movies back in the day like *The Terminator*. Nowadays, people are less worried about aliens. They're more worried about artificial intelligence. Elon Musk is going to create something that's going to kill all of us. This is kind of the fear.

What I want us to see here is Jesus is going to talk about the future today. This is going to be a technical sermon. I'm going to try to keep it simple and straightforward, and hopefully we're not going to get lost in the trees, but we're going to look at the whole forest. Let me give you the big idea of what I think Jesus is saying here and what Christians have believed, and then we're going to look at the passage for the rest of the time.

Here's the big idea: *what you believe about tomorrow affects how you live today.* Obviously. What you believe is next affects how you live right now. Obviously. Whatever people believe about the future of the stock market at any given time affects what they do with their money right now.

So, what Jesus is going to do... He's not going to talk so much... He's going to give us some details and some events, but he's going to talk a lot less about what we need to be looking for and a lot more about how we need to be living in light of the future. So, let's look at all that together.

Turn with me to Mark, chapter 13. We're going to start in verse 1. Here's what it says. ***"And as he came out of the temple..."*** By the way, this is going to be the end of Jesus' interaction with the temple. So many of the last chapters he was in the temple, cleansing the temple, debating in the temple. He's done with the temple now.

"...one of his disciples said to him..." We don't know which one. ***"... 'Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!' And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.' And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple..."*** We're going to get into this.

So, here's what happened. Pastor Dave and I were taken by somebody in partner with another church, and the last 12 days I spent in Israel. Here's what's really neat. Jesus sits here and gives this sermon to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. I had the opportunity four days ago to stand on the Mount of Olives.

When you're standing on the Mount of Olives... I stood roughly where Jesus sat and taught this. You can look over the old city of Jerusalem, and you can perfectly see where the temple was (it's not there anymore). So, Jesus is looking out on this temple, and he tells them it's going to be destroyed.

You have to understand how big of a deal this was for the Jewish people. In America today, even in Christianity, we don't really have an idea of sacred space. For them, the temple was where heaven and earth came together. The temple was where the felt and manifest presence of God dwelt. The temple was the place of worship. The temple was the place of sacrifice.

Jesus is looking out and going, "All of your religion is going to be..." Because that's what it represented: the religion and the external. He said, "It's all going to be torn down." But also (this is something I learned this week), the temple meant a ton to Herod. Herod was not a Christian, but he expanded and enhanced this temple, and it was a place of pride for him. It was a place of strength. He would invite his friends to see the buildings he had built.

So, both to the religious person and to the secular person Jesus says, "I'm going to tear down something. Something is going to be torn down that you really value." The principle is often Jesus has to tear down things in our lives that we love to put himself at the center. Every person I've ever met who has come to Christ, for the most part, it was because God tore something down in their life that they were hoping in.

You don't normally meet the guy who's like, "I have the great job, and I have the BMW. I have the great spouse, and my kids are great. My health is awesome. Because of all that, I came to Christ." You normally meet somebody, and they say, "Well, I actually put a lot of my hope in my health," or maybe, for a woman, it will be "...in my beauty."

"Those things are beginning to fade, and they're not there anymore. I need to find a place to put my hope. It can't be in that." Or you meet somebody who put all their hope in their career or all their hope in their money, or you meet somebody who put all of their hope in getting married, and then they get married and it's hard. God works in all of these things.

So, the first thing he tells us... He says, "The temple is going to be destroyed." This is actually a really important thing, because until the temple was destroyed, Christianity was seen as a small sect of Judaism. I'm speaking historically here. When the temple was destroyed, Christianity, for the first time, in the eyes of people has its own sphere and is seen as its own religion.

But they have more questions. Let's look here. Verse 3, continuing: **"...Peter and James and John and Andrew..."** It's the core three we always talk about and Andrew. **"...asked him privately..."** They ask him a question privately. **"Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?"**

So, the first thing they ask is, "Give us a timeline." It's interesting. Time is very important. I mean, if you ask the question, "What time is it...?" We ask that all the time, right? Your kids will ask you that. We all have watches on. We're looking at our phones all the time. We're always asking what time it is. At the deepest level, "What time is it?" is a theological question.

God created time. In fact (this is kind of a deep thought), we live in four dimensions: height, width, depth, and time. Time is the sphere in which God works. Basically, according to the Bible, God starts time at creation. The very center of time... I don't mean it's the exact middle of all time, but the center of time is Christ coming at the cross, and the end of time is Jesus Christ returning visibly, bodily, from the sky.

So, they're asking, "What time is it?" Here's what I want you to see. Jesus is not going to respond with a bunch of dates and a bunch of Bible codes and a bunch of "Watch these cultural events." Watch what he says. I want you to see this. Here's the advice. These are the practical things we need to start looking at.

Verse 5: ***"And Jesus began to say to them, 'See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.'"*** So, the first thing he says is "When you think about the future, when you think about end times, when you think about the return of Christ, the first thing I want you to know is: don't be led astray." It's the call to spiritual discernment.

I think there's a principle here. The more you're looking for signs, the more likely you are to be deceived. I remember I was in Myrtle Beach, and I was with a bunch of Christians. This was when I was in college. We met this guy there. He was a genuine Christian, but he was a little bit of a wacko and a weirdo when it came to the end times stuff. Maybe you've met these kinds of people.

He came over to us one time and said, "Man, did you know the mark of the Beast is on every Coca-Cola can?" We were kind of playing around with him. I said, "Really. Tell us." I'm thinking, "Is he going to go with the barcode?" He said, "It's the numbers on the bottom of the Coke can." He goes, "I'll show you," and he grabs a Coke can.

He says, "All right. Look at this: '666' is on every bottle. Look at this: three, one, two. See? Three plus one plus two equals six." Then he looks at it again and goes, "I'll show you again. It's 666. Okay, seven, four... Okay. This one is tricky." The more you're looking for signs, the more you're going to try to see things that are not really there.

Have you ever heard of David Koresh, the Waco, Texas, cult leader? I heard a story recently about one of the Special Forces who had to go in there. He was a Christian. Special Forces had to go in afterward. Something like 20 people had been killed in this cult following. As the guy tells the story, this Christian guy...

He said, "I had to go in there." He said, "I still to this day..." This was years ago. This happened in 1993. He still has nightmares about it. He said he went in there, and when he was there, and when they were cleaning out the bodies and cleaning up all the mess, he said, "I committed... I made a vow to God that I was going to know my Bible well so no one could deceive me."

By the way, this is why we do everything we do here. Why do we do Bible preaching? Why am I trying to always point it back to the text? It's not my idea. I want you to see this truth in the text. So, the first thing he says is, "Do not be deceived." He says there are going to be many false teachers. In fact, he'll say this a little bit later.

Here's my question: Who are you listening to? Are you reading the Bible more or listening to Joe Rogan more? We have the prophets of our day. I'm not saying everything they say is false teaching, but how many people are obsessed with Ben Shapiro? They're obsessed with Bill Maher. They're obsessed with Jon Stewart. We spend so much time listening to different leaders.

For a long time, for decades, do you know who the high priestess of our nation was? Oprah Winfrey. Do you guys remember that? Remember when Lance Armstrong had to come on to be forgiven of his sins? Who did he meet with? The high priestess of our nation, Oprah, and she forgave him on public TV.

So, he says you have to be careful who you're listening to. What podcasts are you listening to? What YouTube videos? The loudest and most consistent voice in your life needs to be the Scriptures. The first thing he says is "Do not be led astray." The second thing he says is "Do not be alarmed." Look at verse 7.

"And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines." This is important. We're going to return to this. ***"These are but the beginning of the birth pains."***

Jesus is trying to give us the right perspective and expectations for our lives. Every parent knows this. The best thing you can do for your kids is to try to give them, in every stage of their life as they enter it, the right expectations and the right perspective for that. I mean, how many of us entered marriage with completely wrong expectations, and that's why we're so discouraged in our marriages?

How many of us entered our careers with completely wrong expectations? "I have to work 40 hours a week? I only get two weeks of vacation?" We have these completely wrong expectations for our lives. Jesus is telling us the right perspective and the right expectations, because then you won't be surprised or *as* surprised and *as* alarmed when it happens.

They've done studies to show you that, basically, if you're taking your kids (I'm not saying you should do this, but if you want to do it) to a haunted house during Halloween, they will be less scared if you tell them what's going to happen beforehand. "Hey, people are going to jump out. They're not real. It's all fake. They're not going to touch you."

Whenever we go to an amusement park, we want our kids to ride all of the rides. We don't want to ride rides without them. So what we do is we go on YouTube beforehand and show them all of the rides. "This one goes upside down. This one has

a big drop. This one does *this*." All of a sudden, they're not as afraid because they know what to expect.

The Christian in suffering should be the calmest person in the room. We should be a non-anxious presence. The sad thing is many Christians... We didn't do very well during COVID. We freaked out, and we flipped out, and we acted like God was not in control of those who are in control. Some of us lost our witness for a season by how we acted in suffering.

Now, he tells us... There are two big categories of things that are going to happen. I want to name them. There are a lot of things. He said famines and wars and nations and earthquakes. Here's what theologians break that into. There's natural evil that's going to increase in our lives, and there's moral evil that's going to increase in our lives. Now, what is the difference between that?

Natural evil is suffering that comes into your life but is not from a person. So, earthquakes, tornadoes, volcanoes, hurricanes, storms, illness and injury, sickness, and cancer. They come to you, and you don't look at one person and say, "You did this to me. This came from the evil heart of a person." It's just like, "No, this is what it means to live in a broken, sinful world." That's called *natural evil*.

The second big category is *moral evil*. So, he gives the earthquakes. Then he says there are going to be wars. There's going to be nation after nation fighting. There's going to be kingdom against kingdom. He says *famine*. Here's what's interesting about famine. Sometimes famine is a natural evil. Sometimes famine is a moral evil. Historically, it has been more of a natural evil. "It didn't rain, and we don't have enough crops, and there's famine."

Most places today where there's famine it's because there's a dictator in government who's not feeding his people and distributing food. So then it becomes moral evil. He basically says there's going to be natural evil, and there's going to be moral evil. Then he gives us... Here's the perspective I want you to have. This is so helpful. Do you see at the end of what I just read you? He said it's birth pains.

Now, if it were only Jesus who said this, it would be enough, but Jesus isn't the only one who talks about birth pains. The apostle Paul in Romans 8, when Paul talks about all the suffering we're going to go through... He, as well, uses the image and the illustration of birth pains. I know, as a guy, I can't talk about giving birth. I'm not allowed to. It's for women. It's unbelievably painful.

But here's the image. If you go to the hospital, and you go on a floor and hear a woman screaming, is that a good thing or a bad thing? The answer is it depends on what floor you showed up on. Did you show up in the oncology unit? Did you show up

in the ED? Or did you show up in the labor and delivery unit? His whole point is as the frequency and intensity of natural evil and moral evil increase, life is on the other end of all this. That's his point.

He's trying to give us hope so that we would be a hopeful, non-anxious, calm presence in the midst of suffering. I've seen this. There was a lady in our church recently. She just got diagnosed with cancer, and there is just a calmness about her. There is a trusting of Christ. There is a hopefulness of the future that is so evident, and it became more evident as suffering came into her life.

So, the first thing Jesus says is "Don't be led astray." You have to be discerning. The second thing he says is "Don't be alarmed." Then look at what he says in verse 9. **"But be on your guard."** If we want to keep with the A's, it might be "Don't be led astray, don't be alarmed, and be aware."

"But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them." Jesus' longest teaching on the end times has to do with persecution of Christians.

This isn't a prophetic word because I don't know, but I don't know if we're ever going to get a first-century church until we get a first-century environment. People go, "I want a first-century church. I want the power. I want the witness. I want the conversions." I don't know that we're ever going to get a first-century church power without a first-century church environment.

Here's what he tells us: we're going to experience persecution. What is persecution? I'm going to give you a couple of categories. Persecution happens when there's a collision of values. That would be the simplest way to talk about persecution. That's what happens. That's why there hasn't been a ton of persecution over the last couple hundred years in America. Though not everybody was a Christian, there were similar values.

By the way, that's what peace is. If you ever want to know what peace is... People act like peace is so easy. Peace is not easy at all. Peace isn't easy in your home. Peace isn't easy in your marriage. Peace isn't easy with your kids. Peace isn't easy in your business, and believe me, peace is not easy in a nation.

How does peace happen? We have the same values, and they're roughly in the same order. What's happening is Christians are becoming more and more a minority. The nation is becoming post-Christian. In some places it's really still pre-Christian. The gospel never fully got there...parts of the Northwest. So, you have a massive difference in values.

Now let me tell you about persecution. I want us to know this. Again, not because I'm a doomsday person but because I want us to have the language and categories so when this happens (and I think it *is* happening) we see how it happens. Persecution goes in four places, and it goes in an order. There's *social persecution*, then there's *economic persecution*, then there's *political persecution*, and then there's *physical persecution*. That's the order.

I told you I was in Israel the last 12 days. When I was there, one of the things the tour guides do is they take you to the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. I had been three or four times to the Holocaust museum in DC. I recommend going and seeing that. It's a whole different experience doing it in Jerusalem when your tour guide is Jewish and there are Orthodox Jews everywhere walking around.

Here's what you see in there. You see that the Nazis persecuted the Jews in exactly that order. It's a little bit of an amplified version of how persecution happens. Here's what they did. The first thing they did with the Jews... The first thing Hitler said was, "No more dating Jews. Don't kiss a Jew. Don't marry a Jew. Don't sleep with a Jew." What is that? It's a version of social persecution.

How does this happen with us? Well, it's hard because a lot of us... We just want to be liked. Right? Let me just take the pressure off all of us. It's okay if not everybody likes you. We all have that feeling. We just want to fit in. I mean, I know I'm not cool, but I'd like to at least fit in. I'd like to maybe be respected. I don't want to be seen as too different. I don't want to be uninvited or not invited to things.

So, the first thing the Nazis did with the Jews was social persecution. "Just don't hang out with them." The second thing they did was economic persecution. I think it happened on April 7. It happened so quickly. Right after they made some things about the social, they said, "No more buying or selling to Jews."

Here's what this is going to look like in America, and it's already happening in some places. There will be certain careers that will be almost impossible to be a Christian in. There was a... I forget where he was. The head of plastic surgery... He had been in it since the 80s. The head of plastic surgery at some big medical center... I saw an interview with him. He just had to quit his job. He was like a 30-year tenured attending doctor there.

He said, basically, the environment with this plastic surgery stuff now is so... They're pushing the agenda that, if you're a plastic surgeon, you have to help women look like men, and you have to help men look like women. He tried every right way and every humble way and every "Well, you can do that, but I'm not going to do that." They finally said, "You're done," and he was the head of it.

I mean, can you be an evangelical Christian and a tenured professor in the humanities at an Ivy League school? It's like a joke. Probably not. The statements you'd have to sign even to get in would be so anti-Christian you probably couldn't be a part of it. I don't know all that's happening, but there's economic persecution.

The third thing is political persecution. Here's what they did with the Jewish people. The Nazis basically started to create these ghettos, and they used political power to take people out of their homes and put them in these ghettos. What does political persecution look like today? It's hard to exactly say, but I'm pretty certain I know the center of it.

What's happening right now is there's a conversation in our nation about what the highest value is. Is it religious liberty (which is what it has been since day one) or is it erotic and sexual liberty? That's the conversation our nation is having. Historically, it has been religious liberty, no matter what you want to believe, is the highest value. That's what allows pluralism to flourish in a nation.

By the way, Christians don't believe in relativism (all values are equal). We believe in pluralism, because the truth is going to win. Let there be a marketplace of ideas, but religious liberty has to be the highest value. Today, what is becoming the highest value is erotic and sexual liberty. It's not that I want to talk about this stuff all the time. I don't get excited about talking about transgender stuff and the sexual *this*. I'd rather not talk about it, but it's just showing up everywhere.

Finally, there's physical persecution. We're not there yet. There are many places in the world where this *is* the reality. But that's how you get there. You get there from social to economic to political to, finally, physical persecution. Well, Jesus says, "Here's what I want you to do."

Verse 10: ***"And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over..."*** Here's another "Do not be alarmed." ***"...do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit."***

He basically says, "Persecution is going to increase, but the mission must continue to go forward." In fact, if you ever meet missionaries who learn a language and cross an ocean and say goodbye to family, a large part of what they do is they realize Jesus said he's not coming back until every nation has heard of him.

"I long for Christ to come back so much, so I want to hasten the day by sharing the gospel with those who have never heard." That's the foundation. There's a connection between the return of Christ and "hold the rope." There's a connection between the return of Christ and missions.

Look at what he says next. This is intense. Verse 12: ***"And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death."*** When I was on this trip in Israel, I was with a bunch of pastors from California.

One of the things they told me, which I found interesting... Is the future of our nation going to look more like Florida or California? We don't know. But he said in California what's happening now is there are a lot of these high-level lawyers who are Christians who are, for free, representing parents, because in California...

I'm not saying everywhere. I don't know all of the details. But parents are losing their rights with their kids. If a kid says he wants to do something, if a kid feels like he's a certain gender... Mom and Dad no longer have any authority. An evil nation is that which tries to divide parents from their children and children from their parents. Jesus warned us of this.

In verses 14-23 (it's too much to read), basically Jesus talks about the destruction of the temple. Here's what I want you to see. You can read it later. One of the interesting things he says... And he gets very specific, even, in geography. He says in verse 14, basically, "When the temple is destroyed, I want you to flee to Judea."

This is interesting because, historically, one of the questions people ask is "If Rome was sacked in AD 70 and there were so few Christians, how did Christianity survive when Rome sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple?" What we understand is the Christians remembered what Jesus taught and fled when this happened.

Now here's the question every Christian has to answer...*When do you flee and when do you stay when there's persecution?* Like, when do you go, "I have to get out of this job"? When do you go, "I have to get out of this state"? When do you go, "I have to get out of this school"? I think you need to be led by the Spirit, wise counsel, the Word of God, and all that.

Don Carson (he's a theologian and a New Testament scholar) studied the life of the apostle Paul. It's interesting. If you read Paul's letters, and then you read Acts, sometimes Paul leaves. There's this time where he's getting persecuted and he goes down through a basket. What's *that* about? Then you read later in Acts, and he gets stoned. Not *that* type of stoned. They threw stones at him.

He gets stoned, and he gets back up and goes into the same city. There's another time where he's about to go somewhere, and this prophet comes and wraps him up with a belt and says, "If you go here, they're going to imprison you, and you're going to suffer," and he says, "Why are you breaking my heart? I have to go. I have to preach the gospel."

So, as he looked at Paul's life and asked, "When did Paul flee, and when did Paul stay?" he said the best thing he could tell is he fled when, if he would have stayed, it would have caused harm to other people, and he fled if he was with other people so that they could be safe, but when Paul was alone, he was willing to stay, and he was willing to suffer.

This is often, by the way, why it's usually single people, as a general rule, who go to the hardest places in the world. I mean, sometimes missionaries will get a phone call. "We need somebody for the 'stans...Afghanistan, Kazakhstan...all the 'stans. They need to be single, because there's going to be a type of suffering and a type of intensity that was probably not designed for the family."

So, these are all questions. Jesus is telling us, "Sometimes you have to flee. Sometimes you have to stay. Persecution is coming. Be faithful to bring the gospel." Then look at what he says. Verse 24. Here's where he gets to the return.

"But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light..." This is apocalyptic language. ***"...and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds..."*** This is talking about the return of Christ. ***"...with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."***

I just want to talk to us for a few minutes about the return of Christ. When I talk about the return of Christ, I feel crazy. I feel like I'm talking about something that makes me feel like a weirdo, even when I'm talking about it in church. I think we forget that we are a part of a supernatural story. I mean, you already believe in a virgin birth, right? You believe a teenager got pregnant without ever having sexual relations and had the Son of God.

You already believe Jesus Christ lived a completely sinless life, though no one else has ever done that. You already believe Jesus Christ hung on a cross and all of the sins of the world, at one time, were paid for in his death. You already believe a dead guy rose again. What's so hard about believing he's going to come from the sky, riding on a white horse?

This is not a secondary doctrine. Every once in a while I'll tell you, "Hey, Christians disagree. Some think *this*." This is not one of those. Every Christian believes Jesus Christ is going to come back suddenly, visibly, bodily, from the sky, at the end of time. Let me say that one more time. Every Christian has always believed Jesus Christ is going to come back suddenly. It's unexpectedly. He's going to come back suddenly, visibly, bodily, from the sky, at the end of time.

This should have an unbelievable effect on us. I was teaching on this last night. My wife was here. She was at the Saturday night service. We talked about this. We sang a song at the end. We were talking about all this. Afterward... We always order pizza on Saturday nights, and I just go pick it up on the way home.

She said, "Do you think...? We just talked about the return of Christ. Should we eat pizza and watch TV?" I was like, "I was planning on it." It was interesting. So, we went home, and before we watched TV we had a conversation with our kids about the return of Christ. One of our kids started crying. We're still trying to figure out exactly why, what's going on there, but it should have an effect on you.

Are you ready? What death is to an individual the return of Christ is to everybody. That's what it is. What death is to the individual the return of Christ is to all humanity. So, the question is, when you hear about the return of Christ... There's nothing that tells you more about your current spiritual condition than how you feel about Jesus Christ.

I think a lot of us don't want him to return anytime soon. I remember when I was a brand-new Christian, I found out Jesus was going to return, and I thought, "Can I please get married first?" There used to be a joke. "You don't want to be a bachelor until the rapture." We think, "No, I want to have kids first. I need to make a lot of money first. I need to travel the world first."

Here's what the return of Christ reminds us: you don't have as much time as you think. There should be a healthy "He could return..." This is our hope. Here's what he's telling us. This is so helpful. We need *that* day (the return of Christ) to help us get through *this* day. That has been the Christian's hope. We know this because all of us have little "*that* days" when we just need a big "*that* day."

We all have little "*that* days" that help us get through. So, you're struggling in school, and *that* day is graduation. *That* day is the beginning of summer break. You can remember that. It's like, "We have finals, and what helps me get through *this* day is knowing *that* day is coming."

For some people it's retirement. "My career, my job...four more years. We'll have enough. *That* day is coming, so I can get through *this* day." The last diaper that someone has in their home. Right? The final kid off the payroll. Some of you go, "Say it again, Kyle. Let me just close my eyes as you say that." We need *that* day to get through *this* day.

He tells us one other thing. He tells us in light of this to stay awake. Let's look at verse 32. "***But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in***

heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." If someone tells you, "I know when Christ is going to return. I know the exact day," that is, for sure, the day he's *not* returning.

There was a book written in the 80s called *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. It didn't happen. Some of you go, "Phew!" That book obviously is not a best seller anymore. Look at verse 33. **"Be on guard, keep awake."** Here it is, guys. Four times he's going to say it: "Keep awake."

"Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you [the opposite of awake] asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

Keith Green (he was a famous songwriter who died in the 80s) wrote a song about the church, a critique of the church, and he said, "The church is asleep in the light." He said we have all this knowledge, and we have all this truth, and we are just asleep. What do you need to be spiritually awake?

Usually, you know what you need to be physically awake. Some of you are like, "5-hour Energy drink. My mocha choca Frappuccino in the morning, double shot." You know what you need to be physically awake. Some of you go, "I need enough sleep." Some of you go, "I need my routine."

The Bible says we are to be spiritually awake and spiritually alert, and I think some of us are spiritually drowsy or spiritually asleep. Let me just ask you. If Jesus Christ were to come back tomorrow, how does that make you feel? Let me ask you this: What do you need to do? If you knew Jesus Christ was coming back some time before Christmas (that's in just a little bit over a month)...

The Bible says there should be a sense in which you're anticipating and expecting it. I've heard the best illustration is a couple that's about eight and a half to nine months pregnant. They know the baby comes 36 to 40 weeks, but the baby could come early. The baby could come on the due date. The baby could come a week or two late.

What do you do when you're getting about the eighth or ninth month? You don't stop everything you're doing. You're still working. You're still having friendships. You're still going out. You're still going to the grocery store, but in the back of your mind is always this feeling he could return. The Bible tells us three things we should be doing in light of the return of Christ.

The first thing is we should be dealing with sin in our lives. You don't have as much time as you think. What is it that you would need to get rid of in your life, that you need to get serious about, that there's an urgency about? "If Jesus Christ came back tomorrow, I wouldn't want to have to still be talking to him about this. I'd want to say this is done in my life."

Secondly, if Jesus Christ came back tomorrow, who do you need to talk to today? That's what my wife was saying. It was like, "Where are our kids at?" We had that conversation last night. We have a 10-year-old, an 8-year-old, and a 6-year-old. We were like, "Are they ready?" You think you have more time. We often think we have more time than we do. When Jesus Christ comes back, it's done. It's over. It's the same thing death is to you. It's done. There's no more time.

So, there are three motivations to the return of Christ. First, take sin seriously. Keep your life pure. He could come back, and he wants to find you ready. Secondly, it's keep the mission clear. Some of you go, "Man, I have to talk to my dad." We said to our kids last night, "We would like us all to go to heaven as a family, and we don't know when Christ is returning. We want everyone to be ready."

Then, thirdly, it's to be a comfort. It's to be a comfort in our lives through all of the suffering. How many of us...? The suffering is... You don't want to stay awake, so you drink too much. It's the opposite of staying awake. You don't want to stay awake, so you just binge Netflix. You don't want to stay awake, so you're just looking forward to your next vacation.

Martin Luther, the famous monk turned Reformation leader, said about the return of Christ, "I feel as though Jesus Christ died yesterday, rose today, and is coming back tomorrow." What an amazing thought. What if we lived that way? "The cross is so real it's like he died yesterday. The resurrection is so invigorating I feel like it happened today. The return of Christ is so preeminent in my thinking I feel like it might happen tomorrow."

Guys, part of the way we stay awake is by staying together. This is part of a reminder each week for us to stay awake. So, we're going to sing a song at the end. It's a song called "Maranatha." You go, "What does *maranatha* mean?" It's one of the only Aramaic words in your New Testament.

The apostle Paul wrote in Greek except, in 1 Corinthians 16:22, he switches from writing in Greek, and he writes one word in Aramaic: *maranatha*, which means "O Lord, come." The end of the entire Bible... Jesus says to John at the very end, "I'm coming quickly." By the way, he says, "My reward is with me."

The apostle John just can't handle it. He writes down as the final words, "O Lord, come. Amen." What I want to do is I want to pray for us to make those three commitments to be pure in our lives, to be clear in our mission, and to endure in suffering, and then I want us to stand and sing this song together. Let's do that.

Lord, those are the three commitments we want to make in light of the return of Christ. They're the three commitments that Christians should be doing anyway, Lord. We want our mission to be clear. We have kids to talk with. Some of us need to look at our marriage and go, "If Christ is returning tomorrow, we need to get some things straight in our marriage. If Christ were returning tomorrow, we need to get some things straight in our finances."

For others, we just have some conversations to have with people. Some of us want to be reconciled. We don't want Christ returning when we're still unreconciled with our brother. Lord, give us *that* day to look to as we... We don't know all the suffering that's happening, all the natural and moral evil that's going to come to us, the future persecutions, all of that, Lord. We need to be looking to *that* day to help us get through *this* day. Would you give us grace to do it? We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.