

Beginning of Pains (Persecution & Preaching)

End Times (Part 4)

Mark 13:9-13 (Mt.24:9-14, Lk.21:12-18) 8/15/2021

Jesus shows us how every time you are mistreated, it is a golden opportunity ... if you read the situation through the lenses of spiritual insight.

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Mark 13:9 "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues.

On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. 10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.11 Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

12 "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. 13 All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Insight About Persecution

Last time we talked about using spiritual insight when we deal with false teachers and when we're surrounded by disasters. Those are two of the three monsters that hinder our mission of preaching the gospel to the nations. But there's a third monster threatening us, and Jesus calls us to use spiritual insight in dealing with that one as well.

9 You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues.

What does that mean—be on your guard? Is he saying, "Hide in the bushes so you don't get arrested"? No. Jesus doesn't say anything about avoiding it. He says you *will be* arrested, therefore be on your guard. So what does that mean? Get a really good lawyer? No. That whole phrase—you must be on your guard—is one word in the Greek. *Blepo*. When you're arrested and put on trial, *blepo*. Read the situation with spiritual insight. When they slap the cuffs on you, don't you dare just look at those cuffs with physical eyes. See them for what they are.

What are they? When you get arrested for preaching the gospel, and you look down at your handcuffs with spiritual eyes, what do you see? You see a golden opportunity to reach the power centers of this world with the gospel. It's your ticket to preach the gospel to the system from within the system.

You've heard of speaking truth to power? The problem with speaking truth to power is usually power isn't listening to you. I can go out in my front yard and say, "President Biden, you should take care of the border crisis and stop spending so much!" I might get a few things off my chest, but the President will never hear those words. The people in power don't care what you have to say, they don't know who you are, they aren't interested in listening to you ... until you appear before them in court. Then they ask you to speak.

When You Are Mistreated

I do believe that this portion of the sermon primarily has reference to the Apostles in the years leading up to 70 A.D.

9 You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues.

I've never been arrested or had a chance to present the gospel to governors and kings, and I've never been flogged in a synagogue. And only the tiniest percentage of Christians have. But the Apostles—that was their life. That's basically the whole story of the book of Acts. Remember, Acts is the Holy Spirit's history book on the period between Jesus and 70 A.D. So it tells us what's important about that period, and Mark 13:9 is basically a 2-sentence summary of the book of Acts. The disciples being handed over to the local councils? That happens to Peter and John in ch.4 ... and again in 5,6, 22,23, and 24. Flogged by the Jews? That happens in ch.5—and again in ch.16 and again in ch.22. Standing before the authorities and testifying to Christ—a constant theme in Acts. (More on that in a bit) Chapters 4,5,6,12,16,18,22,24, and 25 all show the Apostles being persecuted and preaching the gospel before governors and kings and bringing the gospel to the nations. What Jesus said would happen is exactly what happened. And the Apostles did exactly what Jesus taught them to do.

I think that's the main idea, but there's still application for us. You probably won't stand trial before a king, but you might get called into your boss's office. Or for that matter, you might just find yourself standing before a coworker, having to give an explanation for why you work so hard and make everyone else look bad, or why you never swear.

Preachers make a mistake when they say things like, "Living in America, none of us have any idea what persecution is about." Then they go on to tell the most gruesome stories of torture in other countries. That's not how Jesus talked about persecution—like only the most extreme forms really count. When Jesus talked about persecution, he said things like, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." In Jesus' mind, insults count as persecution. All true Christians will be persecuted, but most of us won't be tortured and killed for our faith. For most Christians, it's just insults and maybe some unfair treatment here and there. That counts as persecution, and everything the Bible says about persecution applies to those forms.

So when you suffer something because of your faith, whether it be some funny looks or some snickers behind your back or whatever, that's persecution—make sure you look at it through spiritual eyes. Use spiritual insight so you can see it for what it is. It's a golden opportunity to shine the light of the gospel shine before men. Even most unbelievers are nice people when they get treated fairly. But when you get treated unfairly because of your faith, and your joy remains just as strong as ever, that makes a powerful statement. When you apply spiritual insight, you see that persecution happens in God's plan in order to accelerate the propagation of the Gospel. So whenever you're mistreated, ask, "How can I use this to put gospel truths on display?"

Handed Over

That's one way to apply spiritual insight to persecution. Another way is to remember you're following in the footsteps of Christ. Those words, "**handed over**" in v.9 are important. Jesus uses that same

Greek word three times in one paragraph. You don't notice it because the same word is translated three different ways. But if we kept it consistent it would sound like this:

9 ... You will be handed over to the local councils

11 Whenever you are handed over and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say.

12 Brother will hand over brother to death, and a father his child.

The word means to be handed over to hostile authorities to be arrested. The reason that's significant because that's the word, more than any other word, that dominates the account of what happens to Jesus in the next two chapters in his trials. No less than 10 times in ch.14-15 we'll read about Jesus being handed over. Mark is saying to his readers, "The things you're about to see Jesus go through—brace yourself, because it's all going to happen to you too."

The point is, we are bound to Christ. His fate is our fate. He is betrayed, handed over to the authorities and unjustly punished and killed, and that's the same path his followers will take. Look at the persecution you suffer through that spiritual lens and it will keep you from being discouraged or cowardly.

Don't Be Discouraged

If you look at it through merely human eyes, you'll get discouraged, you'll become afraid, you'll be confused, and your faith will falter like John the Baptist. He was thrown in prison and ended up doubting whether the Jesus had had spent his career proclaiming to be the Messiah was really the Messiah. Persecution can do that if you're not ready for it.

Especially when you get a certain timeline in your head about the end times. John the Baptist preached about how the wrath of God was coming on unbelievers. And that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He said the axe was at the root—it was about to happen. And he was right about all that, but maybe he slid into thinking it would all happen in his lifetime (which God never said). Then he ends up in a dungeon, the evil people who were supposed to be judged were winning, he was losing, and he ends up getting his head chopped off on the whim of some dancing girl. I'm sure that's not how he saw his life going in his mid-30's. The right-hand man of the King of kings, the greatest man ever to live up to his time—life snuffed out because of a rash, drunken vow at a party. When you get treated unfairly, if you fail to apply spiritual insight to the situation, you can do a lot of damage to your faith.

And persecution can also make you more susceptible to false teachers. If you're facing prison time because you won't endorse transgenderism or homosexuality, and someone comes along with some really clever interpretations of the Bible that enable you to say those things are okay, you'll be tempted to listen to that false teacher. When it's a choice between torture and accepting this clever interpretation of the Bible, you'll be tempted. Or, you might be tempted to change course just because of how difficult things become. Very often Christians will face all kinds of horrible circumstances and think, "This must be God telling me I'm going the wrong way." Persecution can do all kinds of damage to your faith if you don't apply spiritual insight. So Jesus says, "You're going to be mistreated, so *blepo*."

Seeing it with spiritual insight will give you courage. Have you ever thought about how important courage is? Courage is the one virtue that protects all your other virtues.¹ Lose your courage, and every other virtue is at risk because you'll always compromise as soon as things get scary enough. No matter how honest you are, if you lack courage, if the consequences of telling the truth are scary enough, you'll lie. If you really, truly love people, but you lack courage, and you get into a situation where helping someone in need is going to be really scary, you won't show them love. If you're the greatest Bible teacher there is, but you lack courage, you'll bit your tongue when teaching the Bible means going to jail.

¹ I'm indebted to C.S. Lewis for this insight. He said, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality. A chastity or honesty or mercy which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on conditions. Pilate was merciful till it became risky." - C.S. Lewis in *Screwtape Letters*

All the virtues you have in your life will go only as far as your courage will go and no farther. And if you lack courage, Satan can pretty much steer your life wherever he wants.

Courage in the face of persecution is essential. And how do you get it? *Blepo*. By looking at the situation through the lens of spiritual insight. See it as a means of creating a platform for the propagation of the gospel.

Preaching

And let me say a few things about preaching the gospel.

10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.

Preaching the gospel is the whole point of this beginning of pains time period.² It's our mission. It's why we're here.

70 A.D.?

And when Jesus says that must happen first, that means the end can't happen until the task of preaching the gospel to all nations is completed. Many argue that it was completed prior to 70 A.D. You could make a strong argument for that. The word "nations" can also be translated "Gentiles." Did the Apostles take the gospel message to the Gentiles in those years leading up to 70 A.D.? Yes.

Colossians 1:6 ... All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing.

Colossians 1:23 This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.³

What do we see in the book of Acts? Again, that's the Holy Spirit's historical account of the period between Jesus and 70 A.D. Does Acts say anything about this? Absolutely. Taking the gospel to the Gentiles in response to persecution is the whole story of the book of Acts.

Preaching in Acts

Acts 8:1 ... On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ... 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

30% of the book of Acts is either sermons or about the Apostles' sermons. Standing before governors and kings as witnesses to them? That was God's whole reason for recruiting Paul in ch.9.

Acts 9:15 ... This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

Paul stands before Governor Felix in ch.23, then before Governor Festus and King Agrippa and a bunch of other high officials in ch.25,26. Then Paul appeals to Caesar.

Acts 25:12 After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

² In Matthew's account, Jesus says, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." The word translated "end" (*telos*) often means "purpose" or "goal" or "objective." Perhaps when Jesus says, "Then the end will come" his meaning is not so much "then the date on the calendar will arrive," but rather, "then the goal will be accomplished."

³ See also Romans 16:26, 1:5, 8-15; 11:11-36; 15:14-21; Ephesians 2:11-3:21; Colossians 1:27; 1 Timothy 3:16).

Matthew's account says the gospel will be preached "to the whole world" (Mt.24:14). The word translated "world" is *oikoumene*, which is used in Lk.2:1 where Caesar ordered a census of the whole *oikoumene*. It refers to the Roman Empire, not the whole globe.

So Paul gets shipped off to Rome where, according to church tradition, he was beheaded.

Acts 26:32 Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

When I was a kid that was my least favorite verse in the Bible. It drove me crazy. "Paul! You blew it! What a terrible decision." A lot of scholars scratch their heads about the book of Acts. Why does it end so abruptly? What happened to Paul? What happened to the Church? There's no ending—the book just stops. But if we understand the Olivet Discourse—that the whole point of book of Acts is to tell the story of how God managed to get his people to stand before governors and kings as witnesses to preach the gospel to them, what greater climax could there be to the book than Paul being granted an audience before Caesar? If Luke went on to the story of how Paul died, he would be taking us down an irrelevant, misleading rabbit trail that would do nothing but divert us from the point he's making. But instead, he ends right on the climax.

Confronting Kingdoms

And there's more to this than just evangelism. It did include evangelism. When Paul was on trial before King Agrippa, Agrippa said, "Are you trying to persuade me to become a Christian?" And Paul said, "Yep."

So there was that, but there was also a larger purpose. Jesus sending his emissaries to proclaim his message before the authorities in Israel and the governors and kings of Rome was a confrontation of the kingdoms of this world with the authority of Christ. These trials were confrontations about the nature of authority in the world. It was a collision of kingdoms—the kingdom of God vs the kingdoms of this world, calling everyone from the Sanhedrin to Festus, Agrippa ... all the way up to Caesar himself—calling all the powers of this world to bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the book of Acts ends in the perfect spot. Jesus said the whole point of all that's happening is to bring the gospel to the nations and present it even to governors and kings. So Luke writes a book chronicling how that came to pass, and at the very end he says, "And Paul got an audience before Caesar himself!" Then Luke just drops the mic and walks off stage.

Application for Us

So is this part mostly for the Apostles? I think so. But is there an application for us? Absolutely. Jesus spent most of his time preaching the gospel, that's what he trained his Apostles to do, and what was entrusted to them, they passed on to reliable men who would be faithful to pass it on to others. Generation after generation, our task is the proliferation of gospel preaching around the world. In Paul's final words to Timothy he said:

2 Timothy 4:1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word.

Necessary Before Christ's Return?

So yes, our mission is still the preaching of the gospel. But what about the idea of the gospel having to be propagated a certain amount before Jesus' return? When Paul said the gospel had already gone out to the whole world back in his day, does that mean this requirement was fulfilled? Or was there still more to be done before Jesus will return?

I think point relates more to the Second Coming than to 70 A.D. I think that for a couple reasons. First, it's hard for me to see this part as being mainly about 70 A.D. because there's no meaningful connection between the gospel being disseminated a certain amount before God could bring judgment on

Jerusalem. It's hard to see why God would say, Jerusalem can't be judged, and the Temple can't be sacked until the gospel is preached throughout the Roman world.

On the other hand, it does make sense that God would hold off on the Second Coming until the gospel reached a certain number of Gentiles. You can see why God would say that, because after the Second Coming, there's no more opportunity for anyone to be saved. After 70 A.D., nothing changed with regard to the preaching of the gospel. Gentiles who weren't reached prior to that date still had a chance to hear the gospel after that date. But once the Second Coming happens, the whole operation of reaching the lost with the gospel is over. And so Peter says, the reason it's taking so long is that God is being patient, not wanting anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). And a few verses later he said that by living godly lives we can speed up the timeline for the day of the Lord.

2 Peter 3:11 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 12 as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

We can hasten that day through godly living, which also comes through the preaching of the gospel. It doesn't seem likely that Peter was saying they could speed the coming of the destruction of Jerusalem by living holy lives.

Also, when Paul talked about this in Romans 11:25, he said Israel has received a hardening until the full number of Gentiles has come in. If the full number of the Gentiles had come in by 70 A.D., we would expect the hardening of Israel to end and all Israel to be saved. That didn't happen in 70 A.D. Israel is still hard toward God even to this day.

So is there a sense in which the gospel was preached to the whole world prior to 70 A.D.? Yes. But does that satisfy all that Jesus is saying here? I don't think so. I'm convinced this part speaks mainly to Jesus' Second Coming. There is a certain level of proliferation the gospel must reach, a certain number of Gentiles that must come into the fold before Jesus will come back.

What is that number? Some people have tried to come up with a precise definition of "nation" and a precise definition of what it means for them to be "reached," and they've done the math and figured out we have X number more people groups we need to reach before Jesus returns. I think that kind of calculus is misguided. When Jesus said the gospel must first be preached to the nations—that statement is very, very vague. It's basically the same as saying, "First the gospel must be preached all over the place." I suppose if Jesus had said that, there would be whole books written on the exact definition of a "place," and what percentage constitutes "all over." But I think that would be misguided.

In one sense this was fulfilled in the first century, and in another sense it hasn't been fulfilled yet even after the incredible explosion of world missions in the 1800's and to this day. I don't think we can calculate this any more than we can figure out what the "full number" of Gentiles is. God left those statements vague on purpose because what we need to know is simply that there is a number. But it's not our place to know what that number might be.

Holy Spirit Help

Our job is to simply reach as many as we can and teach them as much as we can. That task is so important, Jesus makes an amazing promise.

11 Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will give them the words to say. That's not a promise for lazy preachers who don't want to do the hard work of studying to prepare their sermons. It's a promise of the supernatural help needed to handle the persecution when it comes. The Apostles were not public speakers. They were fishermen and regular, common men. You get someone who is untrained in speaking and throw him into an ultra-tense, intimidating context where he's on trial for his life before some power-mad magistrate, most people's mind would just go blank. I went to court for a speeding ticket once and I was so nervous I could

barely make my argument. And I *was* a professional public speaker at the time! Evidently the promise is only for presenting the gospel in court while you're being persecuted, not when you just got an unfair traffic ticket.

God fulfilled this promise. Look at what the Apostles said to the authorities when they were on trial in Acts. They were not only courageous, but also incredibly eloquent for being regular, common men.

God will provide the grace we need to endure persecution. Christians always worry, "I don't think I'll be able to handle it when persecution comes." One person who thought that was Corry Ten Boom, who is famous for how she endured a Nazi concentration camp. But when she was a little girl, she didn't think she'd be able to handle it. She asked her dad about that, and he said, "When we go on a trip, when do I hand you your ticket to get on the train? Years ahead?" "No, you give it to me right before I need it to get on." "God is the same way—he gives you the grace you need when you need it, not before." That's the promise Jesus is making here.

Conclusion: Stand Firm

Jesus wraps up the section on the beginning of pains with another reference to the persecution. It's going to get so bad, it come even from your own family members.

12 "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. 13 All men will hate you because of me.

There will be people who are ready to stand up against the government when persecution comes. But when their own children are the ones to turn them in, or their parents or spouse—they won't see that coming. But it will happen, and it will happen because of hatred. And that hatred will be hatred for Christ, taken out on those who stand for Christ and resemble Christ.

Steve Lawson has said, "The problem with preachers today is no one wants to kill us." Jesus said it this way:

Luke 6:26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

It's possible to go along to get along and bypass persecution. No one notices if you just skip over those passages about homosexuality or hell or male and female roles or whatever passages the culture currently finds especially distasteful. You can get the world to like you, or at least tolerate you by doing that, but Jesus says, "Woe to you" in that case. It won't go well for compromisers, because they won't be saved.

13 All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Those are the only ones who will be saved. So Jesus' final word for the period of the beginning of pains is this: persevere.