

When the world is at war

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[0 : 0 0] I remember when I was a teenager in the 90s, my dad and I used to watch a documentary called The World at War.

I don't know if any of you are familiar with that documentary. It was a well-known documentary and it was about World War II and how World War II started and the progress of World War II. It was fascinating to just watch how that conflict unfolded and how Hitler and Germany started by invading Poland and then all hell broke loose.

Then it caused a whole other nations to come in, including England and eventually America with Pearl Harbor and the Pacific. There was a conflict all over the world. I was watching that documentary and I remember thinking as a teenager in the 90s, I'm so glad that we're past all that.

I'm so glad that we live in a world where tyrannical dictators don't just decide to invade countries on a whim. And then we look at the news in the last week and we realize I was wrong.

I was wrong because nothing much has changed. The war that is currently raging in Europe between Russia and Ukraine, which I think most of you know about unless you've been hiding in a cave for the last couple of weeks, has come as a shock to the world.

[1 : 2 5] And there's been a global response, as you have probably seen on the news. Many countries have in many ways come to the support of Ukraine and done everything they can short of actually going there and fighting because the invader, Russia, under President Putin, has essentially threatened nuclear war if anyone gets involved.

Remember, I don't know if you saw, but when the war first broke out a week ago, President Putin went on TV and he threatened the world. He said, if anyone interferes, the response, and I quote his words, will be immediate and will lead to such consequences that the world has never before seen.

That is what is going on in our world. And we're closer to nuclear war than we've been since the Cuban Missile Crisis. And I think all of us are a little bit concerned.

And we're going, we're saying to ourselves, you know, what is going on in our world? What is going on in our world? Where is our world going to go? Where is this all going to end up? And what are the signs pointing to?

That is one of the questions Christians are asking. You know, what are these signs pointing to? Are they actually pointing to the end of the age, to Armageddon? Is it around the corner? And that's what I want to speak about this morning.

[2 : 4 7] I want to spend this time talking about how are we to think about war as Christians? What the Bible says about it? And you think I might have to take a break from Mark while I address this special topic.

But in the providence of God, that's exactly what the next passage in our Mark series talks about. Mark 13 is all about how Christians are to handle war.

Because these are the questions that the disciples are asking Jesus now. What are the signs pointing to? What is going to happen? How do we prepare for it? And so let's have a look at Mark 13 and see what he says.

And see what we can learn, what wisdom there is to glean about how we think about the conflicts that go on on our global stage. And how we are to react to them and think about them.

So here in Mark 13, Jesus is about to go to the cross. The next chapter is preparations for Passover, the Lord's Supper.

[3 : 49] But before he goes and fulfills his mission that the whole of Mark has been building up to, he wants his disciples to understand what's about to happen. Not just what's about to happen in his death and resurrection and ascension, but beyond that.

What's about to happen in the world, politically, on the world stage, after his ascension. And Mark 13 is all about a particular event that the disciples are going to live through.

There's a lot of sort of language that sounds like, you know, it's the end of the age. But Jesus deliberately says this generation won't pass away until these things happen.

So we know that's later in Mark 13. So we know that this is the stuff that's in their history that's happening. And he starts by talking about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

So have a look, Mark 13 from verse 1. As he was going out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, Teacher, look what massive stones, what impressive buildings. And they were impressive buildings.

[4 : 54] They're talking about the temple complex in Jerusalem in the day of Jesus. It was massive. It was glorious. It would have been one of the wonders of the world in ancient times, that temple in Jerusalem.

Then Jesus replied to him, verse 2. Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another. All will be thrown down. What Jesus is predicting, prophesying, warning his disciples of, is a critical point in the story of Israel and the whole biblical story and God's plans for the whole world, which up until now the temple in Jerusalem has been central to.

Now Jesus says things are going to change massively, both politically and theologically. Things are going to change when the temple will be destroyed. Not one stone will be left on another.

Now the disciples would have been thinking, no, surely not. And definitely the people around Jesus overhearing his teaching were thinking, surely not. This temple will never fall.

But it did. Forty years after Jesus said these words, it happened exactly like he said. In AD 70, the Romans, coming to suppress a rebellion, laid siege to the city of Jerusalem.

[6 : 11] It was a terrifying siege if you read the history. We're going to actually look a little bit more about it next week. We're going to continue Mark 13 next week. But that ended in the final destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

And that was going to change everything. So Jesus warns his disciples about this particular event. And his disciples want to know how they can prepare for it.

So they know war is going to break out. So they want to know what are the signs that they must look out for. So they ask. Verse 4. Tell us, when will these things happen?

And what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished? So the disciples, like us today, want to know how to read the signs of the times.

Don't we want to know how to read the signs of the times? Don't we want to be able to look at the newspaper and go, okay, I know where this is going. I can see the signs. And Christians pour over their Bible looking for obscure Old Testament prophecies that they can make modern events fit into to give us the signs so that we can be ready.

- [7 : 25] And so Jesus tells his disciples the signs that they must look out for. But not yet. What's interesting when you read what Jesus says to his disciples here in Mark 13 is that he actually only answers their question from verse 14 onwards.
- He starts giving them the signs they must look out for before the destruction of the temple. But first, and this is very vital for us. First, he tells them what are not the signs.
- Things that are not the signs. Read from verse 5 with me. Jesus told them, watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name saying, I am he.
- And they will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, don't be alarmed. These things must take place. But it is not yet the end.
- For nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginning of the birth pains. Now let's look at these verses.
- [8 : 33] Let's understand what Jesus is actually saying. Because it pertains to our world today, obviously, very much. And what fascinates me is how Christians often take these particular verses I've just read and read them as signs of the end.
- Have you come across that? Many Christians say, oh, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes. Okay, when we see these things happening, it means Jesus is coming back soon. It means the end is coming.
- I've actually seen a website. I don't think it's available anymore. I saw it a few years ago called the Apocalypse Clock, which mapped out from the news all the earthquakes, all the famines that were happening in the world, all the rumors of wars, the reports in the press about wars, the wars that were taking place.
- And it had this little graph that showed you the increase of these things and predicted the time of Jesus' imminent arrival. But when we read this passage in context, if we read it, we can't just read these verses and take them out of context.
- We've got to read what Jesus is trying to say to his disciples here. And his whole point to his disciples is actually the opposite of that. That these are not the signs of the end.
- [9 : 43] He literally says in verse 7, it is not yet the end when you see these things. So of all the signs, these are not the things that are going to specifically point to the coming of the end.
- That is what Jesus is actually saying here. And before he does tell his disciples the signs of their times to interpret from verse 14 onwards, he starts here specifically because he doesn't want his disciples and Christians to get caught up trying to calculate God's timeline.
- That is for God to know, not for us. You know, later on, in fact, in verse 32, he says, concerning the day or the hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, only the Father.
- He doesn't want us to get caught up and distracted trying to work out the particular timings and trying to interpret the signs. And so he deliberately says when you see wars, when you see false messiahs, when you see increases in earthquakes and famines, don't stress.
- Don't worry because those are not necessarily signs of the imminent end. And yet many Christians, of course, are trying to do just that.
- [10 : 55] They're trying to take these verses out of context and then trying to look at the war in Ukraine and Russia. Look at, oh, you know, Gog and Magog. Oh, Revelation. Oh, the helicopters. It's all been prophesied.
- It's, you know, Jerusalem isn't going to get involved. And then Israel is going to go to war with Iraq. And they get so absorbed and they're reading all of the events more than they're reading their Bibles.

They get so absorbed in world events. And Jesus is actually wanting his disciples not to get distracted by these events. And he's saying these things, wars, rumors of wars, natural disasters, COVID, earthquakes, famines, they don't point to anything specific.

Look, Jesus' point here is that they will always happen throughout this age. They will always happen. He actually calls them necessary. Did you notice that?

These things must happen, he says. Must take place. They are necessary. Verse 7. There are necessary pains that the world needs to endure before the end comes.

[12 : 03] Jesus calls them birth pains. It's a good illustration for any woman who's given birth, isn't it? You know you have to go through intense pain before the good thing, right?

Before the baby comes. And in the same way, Jesus says this world is going to go through a time of pain and hostility and warfare and death and suffering before the end.

Before things are going to get better. And it's going to happen throughout this age. Between the resurrection of Christ and his return. Between the first and the second coming of Christ.

That is what he's saying here. So the war currently in Europe between Russia and Ukraine is saddening. It's so sad to see people suffering like that.

But Jesus calls that a necessary birth pain. That is necessary. Wars like that are necessary to happen is what Jesus is saying. And he's saying they will continue in every generation until Jesus comes back.

[13 : 05] So I shouldn't have been. If I knew my Bible as a teenager, as well as I do now, I shouldn't have been shocked. And I shouldn't have expected when I watched that documentary of the World War II that things are better now.

According to Jesus, they will not get better. They will continue like this. Sad as that is. Until his return in every generation. Every generation will see natural disasters.

Every generation will see political disasters. I mean, look at us now. COVID. War between Ukraine and Russia. Things that a few years ago we would have never dreamed of happening.

They happen in every generation. The question that we should be asking is, why are they necessary? Why does Jesus say that they must happen? That's what he says in verse 7.

These things must take place. And the question, and it's a good question to ask, is, well, if Jesus is alive and he's ruling as the Bible says, and he's powerful, why doesn't he stop it?

[14 : 12] Haven't you asked that question? When you look at crime in South Africa, when you look at war overseas? You can't ask that question. Jesus, why don't you stop it?

Why don't you come down and put an end to it? Why do we still see these things happening? If Jesus is in control. And that is what he goes on to tell his disciples.

He tells them about a necessary delay in him coming to put a stop to all of this suffering. And it's in verse 10. Verse 10 is the center of it.

Look what he says. This is a vital verse to understand this whole passage. It is necessary that the gospel be preached to all nations.

In the NIV, I think it says that the gospel is first preached to all nations before anything else happens. It is necessary that the gospel is first preached to all nations.

[15 : 11] If history convinces us of anything, it's that we cannot fix this world. Am I right? And the reason we cannot fix this world, no matter how much we try, no matter how much we advance our societies, no matter how much we think we are over war, no matter how much we think we've got technology now, we've got trade relations with Russia, we'd never see a war again.

History convinces us that that is not true. We cannot fix this world. We cannot make it better. And the Bible tells us why.

The Bible says the reason for that is that we are not meant to be in charge. We cannot be in charge. We're not made to be in charge of our world. We're not made to call the shots in our world and in our lives.

But we are made to live under the good authority of God. Living under His word, in obedience to His word. That is the only way our lives will work and that is the only way our world will work.

It is the only way anything will work. Well, you know what the gospel is? The center of the gospel message, the gospel that we are called to believe, is that Jesus is the Messiah.

[16 : 31] In other words, the gospel is that God has sent Jesus to reestablish His good rule over creation and over our lives and over our world and over our countries. And that is the gospel Jesus says must be preached first to all nations before anything can be fixed.

That He is the one who is going to fix it. Act 17 verse 31. God has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed.

And He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead. There is a day set in God's calendar when all this will be put to an end. Where God will do the thing we're praying for and come and stop the wars.

And stop the suffering and establish His perfect, good, fatherly rule over creation. And establish perfect justice where no evil will get away.

That is good news. You know, we often read about judgment and we think, oh, that's scary, that's bad. But it is the best news that God is going to come establish His just rule over this world.

[17 : 42] That's what we all deep down want. But the question is, well, why the wait? You know? That was written 2,000 years ago.

Why the wait? Well, partly because we are the ones that will be under that judgment. We forget that. When we pray for God to bring justice to the world speedily, we forget that we are the ones who will need to stand before Him.

With everyone else. Not just Putin and Hitler. We are the ones, all of us, that are under judgment for living in rebellion to God's rule. Whether it's in our own little lives or whether it's presidents doing their own thing for their own megalomania.

We all, in different ways, live with us in charge and not with God in charge. Living in rebellion to God's rule. We are the problem in our world.

It's not some problem out there. We are the problem in our world, the Bible says. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And so, the only way anyone can escape that judgment of God is to hear the gospel and submit to Christ.

[18 : 50] Because He is the only one who can take away sins. Because He is the only one who has died an atoning death on the cross for the sins of other people. No other religion has that. You can explore any other religion.

But no other religion presents to you a Savior who has effectively died a death to take away the sins of others. An atoning death for your sins. He is the only one in history who has done that.

And therefore, the only way to escape judgment is to submit to Him. And He is the only one who can give us resurrection life. Because He rose from the dead. And so, that is the only source of new life after we die.

And that is why Jesus says this delay is necessary. Do you see now? Why? Do you understand? If someone were to ask you, you know, why hasn't Jesus come back? Would you be able to answer them? He says the delay in Him coming to fix this world is necessary so that more people can hear the gospel.

And submit to Him and be saved from judgment before it comes. And that is why suffering and wars and brokenness is allowed to continue by God for a time.

[19 : 59] It's not that He's out of control. He is in total control. And He has chosen to let this age continue for a time temporarily so that He can give life eternally.

And it's worth it. It's worth the wait. You know, we might think, oh, well, I'm saved now. You can come back, Jesus. But imagine the people of the last generation had said that before you were saved, before you came under the submission of Christ.

Then you wouldn't have been saved. And God knows exactly who He's elect. Exactly how many people are going to be saved before He comes back. And it's exactly in His timing. He is in total control. And the delay is necessary so that He can give people eternal life.

And we might go, oh, but, you know, there's so many people suffering in the meantime. Yes, and it's horrible and we should help them. But it's to give eternal life, which is worth it by far.

We might have eternal life in a new creation without death and suffering. You see, God wouldn't allow His children to go through this broken age. He wouldn't allow the world to still carry on in this brokenness unless it was necessary.

[21 : 12] He wouldn't allow us to stay here and have to endure the brokenness of this world in sicknesses and in being victims of crime and war.

If it wasn't totally necessary. We encounter these things and we go through the brokenness of this world, not because God doesn't care about us.

But because He does. Because He cares more than we know. And through the church right now, He is here with us in the brokenness, mounting a rescue mission through His church.

You know, rescuers, I always think rescuers are heroes. People who rescue people drowning in the sea or stuck in a cave or in a forest in the middle of a fire.

And the reason I think rescuers are heroes is they go into the difficult situation to be with that person, to take them out. They don't stand and instruct the person what to do. They go into that situation.

[22 : 13] And God is mounting a rescue mission. In Jesus, He came into our situation. And through His church, He hasn't taken us to be with Him yet because we are to be the ones proclaiming the gospel.

We are to be the ones that are in that dangerous situation so that other people can come out of it. God is at the moment mounting an epic rescue mission throughout the world.

And that is why we're still in the situation we're in. And it's rescue not just from the wars that cause death and suffering. But it's rescue from death itself. And that mission alone, that mission, that mission that God is on through His church and all who call themselves Christians, is the only reason for the delay.

That is the only reason for the delay in Christ coming back to fix this world. And so if you are part of His church, if you call yourself a disciple of Christ, that should be your only focus, your primary focus, before anything else.

But if you are involved in that mission, and we can be, every member of the church is called to be involved in some way contributing to the mission of taking the gospel out. But it won't be easy.

[23 : 29] It is a war. And so before I finish this morning, I want us to see what Jesus says to His disciples about the real war. The war that they were going to suffer in Jerusalem, bad as it was.

The war in Ukraine and Russia. The war in World War II between Axis and Allies. Whatever wars are going to come next century, in the century after that. They are not the real wars.

This is the real war. Read from verse 9 with me. But you, be on your guard. They will hand you over to local courts.

And you will be flogged in the synagogues. You will stand before governors and kings because of me as a witness to them. And it is necessary that the gospel be preached to all nations.

So when they arrest you and hand you over, don't worry beforehand what you will say. But say whatever is given you at that time, for it isn't you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death.

[24 : 28] And a father his child. Children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

The disciples want to know about the signs of the coming war of the Romans against Jerusalem. And how to be ready for it. And Jesus later tells them. But first He tells them how to be ready for the real war.

They will face. These disciples all would suffer for the gospel message. They proclaim the gospel message about the return of Christ. The only reason that there is a delay in Him coming back is so that that gospel message can go out.

But there are enemies who want to stop that. Spiritual and physical. Because a world in rebellion to God doesn't want to hear that they are not in charge. And that is why when you share the gospel, it is not going to be easy.

Most of the people you share the gospel message with will not take it well. Because they want to be in charge. We all do by nature.

[25 : 33] And ever since then, therefore, ever since Jesus has warned His disciples of the real war they are going to face. And the enemies that are going to try to shut them down.

Ever since then, century after century, in between all the wars that have happened. The real war has been waging underneath them all.

The war against truth. And we know that. Before we had the headlines of war in our newspapers, we had all kinds of battles against truth in our world.

Today's battle is God's design for sexuality. And how that, the truth of what God wants and how He made us, is being attacked from all quarters.

But in every century, every generation, it's been something else. It's been some other deliberate attack on truth. See, so throughout all the wars that we read about, on the global stage, there is this underlying war that is underneath them.

[26 : 35] Or the war against truth. And as God, through His church, mounts this rescue mission, which is the only thing that needs to happen before the fixing of everything, there are enemies against it.

And that is the war true disciples are called to engage in. Bringing truth into a lost world. And not to be distracted by all the other wars. That is our calling.

That is what Jesus goes on to tell His disciples. Don't be distracted. Realize the real war that you are to engage in. And focus on that.

We have a dog. He's an Irish terrier. I've spoken a lot about our dog in the pulpit. He provides a lot of sermon illustrations. He's a naughty boy. But he's adorable as well.

And he's mischievous. But he's an Irish terrier. And I read up about Irish terriers. And one of the things I read about them is, and it testifies to our experience of him, they're very focused on what's in front of them.

[27 : 42] So I play rope with him in the garden. When I do, the whole world fades away and he just focuses on that rope. When I throw a ball for him, the only thing in his universe is that ball. These species are known to be very focused on what they're doing.

And it's because of that, very interesting, they were used in the First World War by the Allied forces to be messenger dogs in the trenches. It's amazing. So they would put a message, they would give a message to this dog in a pouch.

And these Irish terriers would be running through the trenches, giving messages to different parts of the army, with bombs going off around and planes coming in. And these terriers would just be focused on their mission.

And they wouldn't let all this stuff distract them. Well, that is what God is calling us to do. Because we've got a message. We've got a vital message for this world.

And there are bombs going off and there are planes going down. And there are all kinds of distractions in our world and in our lives. But Jesus is calling us to just be focused on the message that the world needs to hear.

[28 : 40] Because that is the only reason that he hasn't come back yet. It's for that message to go out. And so what else is more important than that? What else in your life is more important than you, if you're a Christian, being involved in taking the gospel out into the world?

Jesus did go on to tell his disciples about the coming Roman War. And we're going to look at that next week. But the main message in summary that he tells them in the next few verses is actually run away. Run away as fast as you can from this war.

That's what we'll see. The disciples must get out of Jerusalem. They must flee to the hills. Run away. Avoid it as much as you can because you have a more important war to fight. Jesus wanted his disciples to stay alive to proclaim the gospel.

And that's what Christians in wartime are called to do. To proclaim the gospel. They may also be called upon to engage in the wars. Of course we're called upon to help the victims and pray for them as much as we can.

But the main thing, disciples of Christ are called upon to do in the time of war is to proclaim the gospel to people who are surrounded by death. Because you know what?

[29 : 53] Wartime is the one time people are actually listening. I read this week a Christian in Ukraine who's still working there to do exactly that.

And they said, suddenly there are no atheists in Ukraine. Because when you're surrounded by death, all you want to know is how to escape, not necessarily, you know, the troubles of life, but death itself.

And the only message that tells you effectively how to escape death and judgment is the gospel. And in every generation, God actually allows these things to happen, therefore.

God allows wake-up calls in every century. Whether they be wars, whether they be pandemics, whether they be natural disasters. That is another reason why Jesus calls them necessary.

They are wake-up calls. And we go, I mean, that's pretty mean to send wars and allow wars to happen when you could stop them. We're going to die anyway.

[30 : 57] And so getting a wake-up call, uncomfortable as it is, to remind us of our mortality and our need to hear and trust the gospel, is more important than our comfort in this life.

And so God will allow these wake-up calls, wars and pandemics. And so even if the worst happened, and even if things went really south because of this war in Ukraine, and Putin pressed the nuclear war button, and the West responded, and the ballistic missiles fired from the submarines, and cities were flattened.

Let's pray that doesn't happen. But even if it does, what would we do? What would you do? If you read, if you got home this afternoon and you read that London has just been attacked by Russia in a nuclear bomb blast, what would you do?

What would you do if all hell broke loose on earth in nuclear war? We would do the same thing as Christians have always done. We would preach the gospel to those who desperately need to hear it.

And as we focus on that, God gives us assurances that He is with us. I wonder if you noticed in that passage. Before we finish, I just want to end on a good note. Because look at this.

[32 : 08] In both the wars, in the wars that happen around us every day, and in the real war, God is giving assurances that He is with us. In the war of truth, God is with us, empowering our message, even if we're hated for it.

Look again at verse 11. When they arrest you and hand you over, don't worry beforehand what you will say. Say what is given to you at the time, for it isn't you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. God in His Spirit will be with His people, even when they suffer, for telling the gospel message.

He is there with them in the trenches. He is there with us in the trenches, whether it be at work, whether it be out in the street, wherever we are sharing the gospel. He is with us, empowering our message.

But He is also with us in the surrounding conflicts. In the global and political conflicts that we inevitably will get caught up in. Christians will.

There are Christians in Ukraine caught up in that conflict now. Now, Jesus also assures His disciples that when they are caught up in this war, God will be with them. Look again at verse 20.

[33 : 07] He's talking about this war that's going to happen in Jerusalem. And it's going to be terrible. And He says, if the Lord had not cut these days short, no one would be saved. But He cut those days short for the sake of the elect whom He chose.

God was involved in the war in Jerusalem. In many ways, actually. But one of the ways He was involved in is preserving His church in that war. So that His church doesn't get destroyed.

You see, as we look around in the world and we see a world full of chaos and war, that doesn't mean God is not here. He is.

He's here in the middle of all the chaos. Bringing eternal life through the gospel. As Christians faithfully like those we saw in the video earlier, continue to proclaim the gospel.

And make that their laser focus. And as the kingdoms of the world fight each other as they inevitably will, God is growing His kingdom underneath it all.

[34 : 05] And not all the wars in the world can prevent that from happening. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for this passage. We thank You that You have been involved in just our sermon preparation and our breakdowns of the passage.

And that we scheduled this sermon to happen at this time when we desperately need to hear these things. We thank You, Lord, that You're in control.

That You're here with us. That You're guiding us through Your truth. And, Lord, we thank You for reminding us why there is a necessary delay. And we pray, Lord, that You would help us not to get distracted.

Help us, as You say, not to worry about these things. But to know You are here, You are in control, and we have a job to do. And, Lord, help us to be wise, to use the time we have to do the work of Your kingdom in whatever way we can.

In Jesus' name. Amen.