



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Setting the Stage for End Times

Ready: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow | Part 8
Tim Badal | February 28, 2016 | 1 Thessalonians 4 & 5



As we continue in our series entitled “Ready,” we’re going to be in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5. We’ve been focusing on what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ as we await the Lord’s coming. The Apostle Paul has been writing to this 1st-century church in modern-day Greece, telling them they need to be ready for all that happens in life—especially when it comes to living a life that pleases God.

So far they’ve learned what it means to be ready to endure hardships and afflictions, ready to live upright and holy lives, ready to love one another, as well as how to be ready to serve and honor God in all they say and do. They’ve learned to be ready to live pure lives in a world of impurity. Paul has been readying the people for a conversation he’s going to have in the last two chapters of this book which contain the crux of what they—and we—need to be ready for.

You see, we live ready lives in all those different ways because we believe the truth that Jesus Christ is going to come back one day. We are told to be ready for that coming. We’re going to finish this letter over the next couple weeks, and then we’ll move into 2 Thessalonians, Paul’s second letter to this same group of people. The theme of being ready for the coming of our Lord and Savior is a central theme in the last part of this letter and almost all of the letter we’ll look at over the next couple months.

What I want to do now is to hit a “pause” button on our series. Before we move any farther into the text, I want to establish some terms and truths. We know that Paul has heard from Timothy about what has been going on in Thessalonica and have been reading some of what has concerned him about the church in Thessalonica.

Beginning in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul addresses what seems to be an issue, where someone in the church had lost a Christian brother or someone through death, and the Christians were beginning to wonder what happens to a Christian who dies before the Lord’s return. Where do they go? What are they doing? Paul addresses that in the passage we’ll preach through next week. But then the question arises: what happens if we are alive at the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? So Paul addresses how that all is going to take place. He’s going to tell them they need to be ready—whether for death or for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in the clouds one day.

I’m glad the Holy Spirit through Paul addresses this because even today there’s great confusion on the questions of death and what the end times entail—not only for the unbeliever but for the believer as well. So our task now will be to understand some of the foundational truths surrounding the issue of the end times. But before I begin, I will tell you it’s a very different message than any I’ve preached in a long time, if at all. Those who have been around for a while know that we grab the Word of God and go verse by verse, working through the text. But today I don’t have any particular text I’m going to walk through. We’ll go back to 1 Thessalonians next week to continue our study, but today I want to look at the Scriptures theologically. I want to provide an understanding of what the Bible says about the end times issue. This will be a little headier, but I want you to stick with us. The Bible tells us we’re to love the Lord God with all our heart, soul...what’s the third one? Our mind (Matthew 22:37). So stretch your mind today. We’ve got a lot of work to do, but it’s an important truth we’re going to share.

When I was in high school, I loved sports—and they kept me busy—but the time of the year I enjoyed the most wasn’t the three sports seasons I was a part of, but the time when the school musical took place. I know it might surprise you, but I was quite the

thespian back in my day. I thought I was going to Hollywood, and then they told me I had a face for radio. So I reluctantly accepted the hard truth of that. But while I loved sports, there was something pretty impressive about being part of a production with lots of people.

I enjoyed the plays we did and still remember them. We did things like "South Pacific," "The King and I," "Oklahoma"—which was my favorite one of all—and "Carousel." I remember dozens upon dozens of students getting together, everyone playing their part. But while we were memorizing our lines and rehearsing, there was always a group of people who were doing what was just as important but who never got any applause. They were never seen. They never had any lines. But their part was just as huge as the main part of the play. They designed the sets. They made sure all the props were in the proper place. You see, without the set, without the props, it would be hard for the audience to see what was going on and really get into the story.

But here's the thing. We are enthralled with the actors, with the plot line, but rarely do we do the groundwork that's needed to make sure that in the plays of life—if you will—the proper stage is prepared. I remember even as an actor, as I would be practicing with my fellow actors, we would have trouble finding our bearings without the proper props. But the team would say, "Don't worry. We'll have it there." Then when it was time for the dress rehearsal, everything was in its proper place—then as an actor, I came to understand the greater depth of the story.

Today what I want to do is set the stage, set up the backdrop of understanding end times. Some of us have no idea what the topic of the end times is about. Some of you are new to church and aren't sure of anything I'm talking about. You'll hear a lot of big words today, although I'll try to keep it as simple as possible. But this all may be new to you.

For some, this has caused great consternation and confusion. In some churches this has caused conflict. For centuries Christians have tried to understand the subject of end times. We've tried to understand what the Bible says about it. Turn to the History Channel and you will see show after show celebrating the prophecies of a man named Nostradamus. And there were a dozen after him, people who weren't followers of Christ, but who were trying to know what the end of this world would look like. Whether you believe them or not, they gave prophecies which have been interpreted in many different ways.

If you've been a believer any length of time, you know that the issue of end times is something that becomes central to many people's understanding of Scripture, as people seek with great speculation to understand what the Scriptures have to say about the future. This was true in the days of the Thessalonians. They had questions. They wanted to know, to understand what God's plan was for them, what His plan was for the world. And the book of Revelation hadn't even been written yet.

Many of us today find ourselves trying to work through these issues so we can be ready for the coming of the Lord. Yet throughout church history, this topic has primarily been a secondary issue. Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox—the three branches of Christianity—all agree that Jesus Christ will one day come back for His people. That's a truth that everyone affirms. But in the last 80 years or so, especially in evangelicalism, the issue of end times has become central to our understanding of Scripture. As a result, thousands of books have been written and tens of thousands of sermons have been preached on this subject. We know of dozens upon dozens of failed predictions—some recently—of Christ's returning on a certain date or at a certain moment. Listen, none of that was about the return of Christ. That debate is more about how those people might look and the dates themselves.

Today I'm preaching to a varied group of people. Today you're going to hear a lot of things you don't understand, but I'm asking you to stick with me. It will hopefully all make sense in the end.

I want to introduce some of my friends who are trying to understand the end times. I'll call my first friend Clueless Chloe. She has absolutely no idea what I'm talking about today. Quite frankly, she doesn't understand half the stuff I say, but I'm a funny, nice-looking guy...just kidding. But she's here. She's not sure why, but she's hoping to get some answers.

Another of my friends is Who-Cares Wilma. She's given little thought to the promise of Scripture, but is so enthralled with the things of this world she can't imagine the Bible ever taking center stage. Wilma is content to live her life, viewing Jesus as a historical figure consigned to the past and never coming back—because no human being has ever been able to do that. She's Who-Cares Wilma.

Then there's Disbelieving Darla who has been a Christian for a long time, but has grown tired. The struggles of the world and its garbage are weighing heavily on her. For years she has prayed and hoped for the coming of Christ, but it seems just as far off as it did when she started—and as a result she's losing hope, wondering if it will ever happen. She's Disbelieving Darla.

Then there's Scared Scarlett. Scarlett loves the Lord deeply, but she reads the books and sees the movies and she's freaked out. She doesn't want to be left behind. She's worried about the ongoing and growing persecution in the world and can only find herself looking with fear and trepidation at anything she reads in the Scriptures that speaks of the future. She's freaked out.

Then there's my friend Newspaper Ned. He's the one who looks at Bible prophecy as the latest installment of national treasure, a biblical and prophetic game of Clue. He utilizes present-day events to put together the pieces of a divine puzzle with the hope of doing one thing: to establish an exact timeline for the events to occur. His main focus is finding the Antichrist. Who is that great man of evil? For Ned, by the way, it usually is the leader of the opposing political party. What happens then is the Scriptures look more like the cover page of a cheap tabloid magazine than Holy Scriptures. That's Newspaper Ned.

Meet Political Polly, who learned her ways from Ned, but goes one step further. She begins to use end times prophecy to determine who we should support in the world. She's willing to give some countries passes, while giving others only condemnation and punishment. She tries to understand how to vote based on what will bring forth the end times or what will cause them not to take place. This type of prophecy causes human beings to be viewed as pawns in a prophetic chess match instead of being people who are loved by God.

Then there's my friend Confident Carl. Now, before we go any farther, let me tell you there's a part of each of these people in your preacher. I can't tell you how many internet searches I've done on the issue of eschatology. It has sent me on a million searches. I, like you, love to speculate. I, like you, am at times mesmerized by the idea of the future. But we need more Confident Carls in our midst. Carl is one who knows as much about the Scriptures as the others, but he recognizes the allure to end times pursuit can be fleeting and can lack the fruition God requires of us.

So his is an ongoing pursuit of holiness. Carl recognizes that God is doing His job and has called us to do the same. God has said He will bring forth the end just as He brought forth the beginning, and our focus should be to love one another, to reach the lost and to live our lives in accordance with His Word. Carl is the living example of a couple quotes I'd like to share with you.

Rather than spending all our time reading magazines and books, trying to figure out what the future might hold, maybe we should spend more time just getting to know Jesus better. Then when the future becomes present, we'll enjoy wondrously close relationships with the Almighty, and we'll be walking with our Lord Jesus Christ no matter what happens.

James Edward spells out Carl's position very well: "The premium of our discipleship is not based on predicting the future, but on our faithfulness in the present, especially in times of trial and suffering and adversity."

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and 5:1, Paul gives us in essence two poles that we have to hold in tension. In verse 13 he says, *"But we do not want you to be uninformed..."* So to my friends who say, "You know what? These are too hard to understand. It's too difficult, so I'm not going to worry about it. Ignorance is bliss." Paul says, "That's not good enough for a follower of Jesus Christ." We need to know some information that the Scriptures have declared about the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But on the opposite end of the spectrum, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:1, *"Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you..."* Paul is echoing Jesus' statement that no one but the Father in heaven will know the time or the date (Matthew 24:36). Paul doesn't want them to be uninformed—that's the one side—but he also doesn't want them to think they'll know everything either. So we're going to hold in tension this information he does give without understanding the full picture.

Before we dig into the passage next week, let's do some groundwork to understand how the church has viewed these things and how our church in particular will address these things in the weeks to come.

1. The distinction we make between various doctrines.

We all do doctrine and theology every day. How we understand God, how we understand ourselves, how we understand the world is doing theology. We must understand that people take the study of end times very seriously, and in some ways rightly so. While that may be personally acceptable, it is imperative that we put our understanding of particular doctrines in their proper place.

For almost six years I've taught a theology class at this church, and one truth that you have to understand is that not all doctrine is created equal. The Bible tells us much about many things, but the Bible does not tell us about all things equally. There are

things the Bible majors on; there are other things the Bible minors on. We need to focus on what the Bible majors on as well as being committed to focus on the minor details. So how do we break it up? The Bible seems to break it up in four ways.

First, there are doctrines or beliefs for which we would die. What I mean by that is these are truths we hold with great fervor—non-negotiables. If someone doesn't hold to these, they aren't a true follower of Christ. One example would be the deity of Christ. You cannot be a Christ follower and not believe that Jesus Christ is God. Because if He's not God, then how did He rise from the dead? If He's not God, then how can He be seated at the right hand of the Father in glory and majesty? If He is not God, then we have bought into a story of a martyr and not the King of Kings.

But when it comes to the issues of end times, what doctrine we would die for? The very truth that Jesus Christ is coming back. Why? Because if Jesus Christ isn't coming back, then He told a lie to His disciples in John 14 when He said, "I'm going to prepare a place for you. And if I'm going to prepare a place for you, then I will come back and bring you to be with Me." Well, if He's not coming back, He just told a bald-faced lie to His closest associates. If He's not coming back, then He lied in the second to the last verse in the Bible, Revelation 22:20, when He said, "*Surely I am coming soon...*" If He's not coming back, then Jesus just lies and at numerous times says, "I'm coming back." He's a liar and the truth is not in Him. As I said, all branches of Christianity say Jesus Christ is coming back. They differ on the details, but on that one truth they agree.

There are doctrines we debate. These are issues that don't reach the same level as the doctrines for which we would die. These are doctrines the Scripture seems to be clear on, but you can take more than one path in understanding them. One issue that is hotly debated—not just in this church, but in all churches—is the question of salvation. Who plays the major part in salvation? Is it God, or is it man? We hear words like predestination and free will, and we can debate that over and over again. I can show you verses on free will and you can show me verses on predestination, and we can have an argument—and it's a whole lot of fun. That's what Bible students in Bible colleges all over the place do at night instead of playing video games. They debate these things.

At the end of the day, these debatable issues are ways we set apart churches. They make their way into doctrinal statements. They find themselves patterning how we do ministry. They're important things. But if someone disagrees with you on a debatable issue, this doesn't consign them to being unbelievers.

So, what do we debate about regarding the doctrine of end times? I would say one of the debatable things is the nature of the millennium. In Revelation 20, John says there will be a thousand-year reign of Christ. He will come and reign on earth for a thousand years when He comes the second time. Some believe that to be a symbolic thousand-year reign. Some believe it to be simply a symbol of a reign that's already taking place in our hearts. Others believe that in fact is a literal thousand-year reign that will happen here on earth. Nobody really knows, right? We haven't lived there yet. So we can debate these things—and churches do.

There are doctrines we discuss. These are stated in Scripture, but there's no clear consensus on how to understand them. People have strong opinions about them, but at the end of the day—if we're really honest—we can never be 100% sure on our position. When it comes to the end times, we discuss the timing of a rapture, or the nature of the tribulation, or other events. At times our discussion can become debate because it's fun to do. It's interesting to speculate, but we can't be quite sure. We don't know what to make of it.

Finally, there are doctrines we dump. These are things that were never meant to be made into beliefs or doctrines. Paul says in Titus 3:9, "*But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.*" These things only cause quarreling and fighting. When it comes to end times doctrine, we need to dump any discussion that seeks to pinpoint the date of the coming of our Lord. Why? Because Jesus specifically said no one will know the hour or the day. If Jesus says that, why would we invest time and energy trying to pinpoint or predict the time? If our Lord and Savior said, "Hey, only the Father in heaven knows these things," we need to dump that idea, helping people understand that it's not doing good eschatology—the study of last things. These are the distinctions between doctrines.

2. The diversity of beliefs about the end times.

We need to ask: where has the church been on this issue of end times? Remember, all branches of Christianity agree on the coming of the Lord one day, but Christians differ in their understanding of how to interpret the Scriptures that talk about end

times. I'm going to look at four groups very quickly with an overview of their end time beliefs. Where does each group fit on the spectrum?

The first view is called the preterist view. The church asks, "How do we interpret Scripture?" Preterism is a view that the book of Revelation is a prophecy of events that already took place in the first century. One of the things they will debate is the writing of the book of Revelation. Many people wonder if it was written around 80–90 A.D., or was it written around the time the books of Thessalonians were written, in 50 or 60 A.D.? Preterists read these books as saying, "Listen, there's a whole lot of bad stuff coming." They see the beasts and the judgments and people running for their lives that John describes in Revelation as being events that happened at a particular time in the first century.

Historians would say that the worst time for the Jewish nation was A.D. 70. In the years preceding that, the Jewish people had rebellion upon rebellion against the Roman Empire. The Emperor Titus—not the same guy who wrote the book of Titus—got so sick and tired of dealing with the Jewish people that he besieged the city of Jerusalem. He starved them out. Then at their weakest point, he sent in what at the time was one of the largest armies ever assembled in human history, and absolutely decimated the city of Jerusalem. Thousands upon thousands of people were killed. People ran for their lives. To defy the God of Israel, the Romans burned a pig on the altar that was dedicated to the Lord. It was called "the abomination that causes desolation."

You might ask why they would think this happened in the past. Because when Jesus was talking about end times—in Mark 13 and Matthew 24–25—He said, "This generation will not pass away until the fulfillment of My words." What generation? Some future unknown generation? Or the generation He was speaking to? Again, these are hard verses we don't like to struggle with. Luke 9:27 says these things will come as a fulfillment that *"there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."*

Well, who holds these views? Some whack jobs? I'll give you names of two people I hold in high regard who hold this position—and many of you will know them: R.C. Sproul, a great Bible teacher, and Hank Hanegraaff, who on the radio is called the "Bible Answer Man." They both affirm the preterist view.

How about the historicist view? These folks interpret Revelation and all the prophecies of Scripture as telling us what is going to take place in the entirety of human history, from the ascension of Jesus Christ to the second coming. However long human history is between Christ's first coming and second coming, they believe it will be filled with these events. We cannot pinpoint with great accuracy what those events are, but they recognize these things are going to take place. At some point in the future, after all these events have taken place, Christ is going to come back.

The ones who hold this view are quite phenomenal. You might say, "I read Revelation through a futuristic perspective. Why would you consign it to the past?" Well, let me tell you some people who did: John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and the great Bible commentator, Matthew Henry. So we have the founders of the Presbyterian church, the Methodist church and the Lutheran church. But if you're not tied into denominations, the Bible you have in your hands has come by God's grace through two great men: William Tyndale and John Wycliffe. They all disagreed with many of us on the issue of end times.

Then there's another view: the idealist view. This view interprets Revelation, and passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, as being imagery contained in a book of symbols. According to them the images are not symbolic of events and persons, but only of abstract ideas such as good and evil. They would say not to pinpoint things in Revelation as being anything specific, but merely symbolic. The book was written to tell us that in the end, good will prevail over evil and that's the whole story. Revelation is thus intended to remind us that we should live godly lives, because in the end—even though we grow weary of the evil around us—God is going to win and good will always prevail. Adherents to this view include Augustine and Karl Barth, a theologian of a century ago.

All of these views are ones the majority of us don't hold to, yet many godly men and women affirm them. What is the final view? It's the futurist view. This view teaches that the events of prophecy—including those in the Scriptures before us next week and in the book of Revelation—are all going to take place sometime in the future. They have had some fulfillment in the past, but will have a clearer fulfillment at some point in the future. A futurist interprets the book of Revelation in the following way: chapter one describes the past; chapters two and three describe the present; chapters 4–22 describe the future.

Adherents to this view were many of the early church fathers such as Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Tertullian—disciples of the first apostles. But this view lost its way somewhere around the third century. The idea of interpreting the book of Revelation and the

Thessalonians passage in a futurist way disappeared from church writings from the third century until almost the 19th century. Only in the past 150 years or so has this view resurfaced—and it has come back with a vengeance. It's probably the most popular view in evangelicalism, and it's probably the view of anyone in this church who has a position on the issue of the end times.

3. The direction we take in teaching the end times.

Even though we may know how we would interpret these Scriptures, there remain other very debatable issues. What direction do we take? Moving from the universal church to the local church—Village Bible Church—how do we teach these things? On behalf of the elders, I wrote a distinctive for the small groups about how we approach end times—what we hold with a closed hand and what we hold with an open hand. While we're pretty open on a lot of things, there are a few "majors" that members of our church must hold to be in good standing. The church must have a position from which we preach.

Today, four campuses will hear the same message being preached, or approximately the same message with the same focus, and there are four different guys preaching. What if we all held different views? We would have one church, four campuses, and possibly four different views of the end times. There needs to be some level of unity in our teaching. So the elders spent some time in our last meeting with the teaching team working through these issues. How do we interpret Revelation? How do we interpret what's going on here?

We're going to come to a passage next week that speaks of the Day of the Lord. Does the Day of the Lord happen seven years prior to the coming of Jesus Christ because of the tribulation that must take place? Where do we date that? What do we do with Revelation 20? Is it a literal kingdom or a symbolic kingdom? These are questions to which some of you might respond, "Who cares?" I'm saying that at some level the church has to take a position on them. We have to interpret even the hard passages of Scriptures when we can.

So while our church doesn't have a litmus test for secondary aspects of end times, the teaching team recognizes we have to hold to a position. I want to share with you the position we've come to as we preach today to all of the people of Village Bible Church. I apologize for these big names—but the position we hold is called historic premillennialism. Historic means it's an old view, the one held by the early church fathers. Premillennialism says we believe in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ here on earth. It's not symbolic or allegorical. It's a real thing that will take place at some point in the future.

This position holds that since the ascension of Jesus Christ we have been living in the last days. So any time you see the phrase "last days," it's not talking about a time in the future. It's happening right now. We are in the last days. You might say, "Wait a minute. Days? It's been 2,000 years since Christ lived." Remember, to Christ a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day (2 Peter 3:8). He's got His own timetable.

So life as we know it is going to go on. There are going to be good times and bad times. We recognize that on this earth there will be areas of great peace and areas of great violence and persecution that will go on and on throughout the course of human history. But then at some point in the future—it may be tomorrow, it may be a thousand years from now—the world as we know it will endure a time of great tribulation, where evil will seem to have unprecedented power.

All the while, during that time, the church will still have major victories. How can that be? How can a church be under so much persecution and see so much growth? Well, let's remember the book of Acts. They're being thrown in prison. They're being killed. And what's happening? The church is growing and growing and growing. It will be the same during these days. Then at some point of God's own choosing, during this time of great tribulation, Jesus Christ will come again. He will establish His Kingdom and He will usher in eternity.

Now, some of you Bible students are saying, "Wait a minute. Tim, help me out with this position a little more. What are you saying and what aren't you saying?" What I'm not saying is that within this position is the belief in a post-tribulation return of Christ. I'll explain why in a moment. It also does not take a sharp distinction between the nation of Israel and the church. It sees the church as the fulfillment of Israel and yet not completely replacing it. There's a nuance there.

We agree with most of the early church fathers and a myriad of incredible contemporary theologians who hold to this position: Charles Haddon Spurgeon, George Eldon Ladd, Francis Schaeffer, James Montgomery Boice, Philip Ryken (the current president of Wheaton College), John Piper, Alistair Begg, D.A. Carson, Albert Mohler, Mark Dever and David Platt. These people would affirm the position we hold to here at Village Bible Church.

So what do we need to know about this? First of all, we hold this position in a charitable posture, recognizing that at the very essence of it, it's a position. We've got to take one, right? Here's the position we take: We recognize that there are great Christians, both past and present, both outside this church and within this church, who hold positions differently. We hold with great esteem and respect men and women who hold differing positions from ours. Some of my favorite friends, favorite pastors, hold stances different from what we're taking today. But thank God I will see them in heaven and they will see me. Right? We want to be charitable. It's a position.

Number two, we want to be careful to have a consistent interpretation. As a church, it is very important for us to look at Scripture in as clear and straightforward a way as possible. I know this will cause some people to wonder what I'm saying, but we do not make a sharp break between Israel and the church. We see each of them fulfilling a plan in God's vision, yet we believe there is one people of God—and we preach that way. If we made a sharp distinction between Israel and the church, we would never have preached on the Ten Commandments. We would never have preached much of the Old Testament. We would have said that was for Israel; let's just preach about what's for the church.

Our preaching model has never gone that way, but we have preached and understood that Jew and Gentile alike are grafted into the family of God. It's a consistent interpretation, allowing for a contingency plan. I know there are some here who put great hope in and take great solace from what is called a pre-trib rapture. I respect that. That's a great position to take. Great men and women have affirmed that position. But here's the thing. If I only preach that position, then when persecution gets hard you're not prepared for it. "The elevator's going to take us up, right? Jesus is going to come back. I don't have to worry about this great tribulation." If you're right and I'm wrong, we're both going to be blessed. I'm going to high-five you on the way up. But let's say you're wrong, and we're part of a tribulation like the world has never seen before. If our understanding of the Scripture is that without a shadow of a doubt we're going up before that tribulation takes place, we will be ill-prepared for what the Lord may have willed us to go through.

Let me illustrate it this way. When I get on a plane, I assume the plane's going to take me from one point to another without any issue. But these flight attendants get up and say, "Thank you for flying with us. While we intend that you will get to your destination safely, in the event that we lose cabin pressure, masks are going to come down. You'd better put that on or you're going to die—especially you big men in the front row here; you don't have much oxygen already. Get that mask on. Oh, and by the way, we don't anticipate that this plane is going to careen into the ocean, but in the case that it does, your seat will become a flotation device."

Why do they do that? Because they recognize that if something happens, you need to be an informed individual, not a misinformed individual. In that moment, you need to be ready to act, not ask questions. We teach a post-trib position here as a teaching team because pastorally we want to prepare you so that in the event of an emergency you're ready to serve and honor God no matter what comes. If you're right and we're wrong, then we're in heaven and we'll be happy to concede that point.

Finally, we hold to a celebration of God's plans. End times were not written about to freak people out. Do you know that? And yet 99% of Christians are freaked out when they read this stuff. End times wasn't supposed to be written so we would go on these all-out journeys to find a Bible code to figure out times and dates. Paul says it twice in the passage we'll look at next week: "Encourage one another. Comfort each other with these words." Why? Because we have a God Who knows the end from the beginning and the beginning from the end. He's got it all figured out, and He's got it all ready. He knows exactly what's going to happen and He knows exactly where you're going to be—and in those moments and those times we can celebrate that God is good and He's got a wonderful plan for our lives.

We move then to the description Jesus gives about end times. In Mark 13 we find the single most concise passage of Scripture on end times from the mouth of Jesus. You're sensible people, but let's walk through a very natural reading of the text. Notice the description Jesus gives. If anybody knows about end times, Jesus knows it. Can we agree with that? Listen to what He says in Mark 13:1–7:

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "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, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" 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. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet."

So in verses one and two, what do we see? Seemingly it's the events of the first century. Then what we see is the persistent ebb and flow of history. There are going to be wars. There are going to be rumors of wars. Verse eight, *"For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes."* So He's saying, "Disciples, Christians, when you experience an earthquake, don't think it's My coming. There are going to be a lot of them. There are going to be famines." *"These are but the beginning of the birth pains."*

Then in Mark 13:9–13, He goes to the personal experience of end-time living for Christians:

"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. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, 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. 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. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

You say, "Wait a minute. That's not happening here in America." Sure it is. Some of you are ostracized right now from your family because you follow Jesus Christ. In some of your marriages, because you're a believer and your spouse is not, are experiencing great turmoil. There are stories upon stories of Muslim converts in the Middle East whose children are turning their parents in because they bowed the knee to Jesus. And the next thing the parents see is their children in the hands of Islamic terrorists, putting them to death. This is what's going to happen. It will be the personal experience of Christians living in the last days.

Notice what seems to be a personification of evil: *"But when you see the abomination of desolation standing..."* How can something stand? It's got to be a person. *"...where he..."*—notice the personal pronoun—"ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains." Jesus says someone is going to come, and in the moment when he comes, it's going to be ugly. You'd better start running away from this guy. He's not going to bring peace and joy. He's going to bring terror in his wake—the personification of evil.

Then in verses 15–23 there's a period of great emergency:

"Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. False christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand."

So there's going to be this period of great emergency. And right when things are at their worst, He says:

"But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 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 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."

We call that the Day of the Lord. That's what Paul is going to talk about in 1 Thessalonians 5. You see, Jesus doesn't give us a whole lot of details, more than we need to understand.

4. What is God's design for addressing the end times?

So what are we to do with the description He gives? Let me close with this. Why would God whet our appetites with some of this information and then not give us any more? So we can fight and bicker amongst ourselves? He could tell us more, but there are some things He keeps to Himself. If He declared all of Who He is, then He wouldn't be God. We would know all that God is. God says, "There are things I'm going to hold back, because I'm God and you're not."

So why does God share these things? Why does God share 1 Thessalonians 4:13 through the rest of the book and all of 2 Thessalonians? Let me give you a couple reasons.

Number one, to provide insight into the future. Paul tells us he does not want the people to be uninformed. He doesn't say, "I want you to know all the information. I just don't want you to be uninformed." This allows us to plan. This allows us to prepare. This allows us to see what is going on around us with a particular lens. God wants His people to know these things—but not all of it—to prepare for His coming at any time.

It is to promote hope amidst grief and trouble. In 1 Thessalonians 4:18 he says, *“Therefore encourage one another with these words.”* Again in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, *“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”* End times remind us that God is in control and that we can have hope in that. We don’t need to be filled with fear. We don’t need to be filled with dread. Why? Because it points us to God’s sovereignty. He’s on His throne. He’s got it all figured out. He’s not worried about the devil. He’s not worried about an antichrist. He’s not worried about people fomenting with great anger against Him. He is settled, seated on His throne, and He is seeing each event play out just as He knew it would.

It puts eternity into our hearts. Natural man says eternity is a circle, but that’s bad doctrine. We learn that from Simba and Mufasa, but Disney has some bad doctrine—actually a lot of bad doctrine: Life is a circle. We live, we die, someone takes our place. Life just keeps going and going. No, the Bible speaks of life as linear. You have a beginning and an end. Man lives once, he dies and then comes judgment, Hebrews 9:27 says.

If I have a God Who says He created me at the beginning, Who knit me together in my mother’s womb, and He is the same God Who will judge me in the last day, then shouldn’t I think about how He wants me to live between those two dots? Shouldn’t I take into great consideration that He has a plan and purpose for my life, and not that I can do what I want, how I want, with whom I want, when I want, where I want? If I am to close my eyes in death and open my eyes to a righteous Judge, I’d better understand what He’s going to judge me on. I’d better understand how I ought to live. End times teaching puts eternity into our minds so when we make temporal decisions about what we do in life, they make sense

These truths should promote a heart for evangelism. We believe Jesus Christ could come back before the end of this message. Some of you think that’s a thousand years from now—but it could happen at any time. And if Christ can come back at any moment, and the judgment can take place, then shouldn’t we be seeking the salvation of our family and friends? Should we not seek the salvation of our communities? Should we not be bold in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ that gives sight to the blind and life to the dead? Should we not proclaim the gospel so we can help people around us be prepared for the judgment of God that is to come?

The Bible says that on that day of judgment, if your name is not written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, you’ll be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15). I don’t want that for my friends. I don’t want that for my family. So that should convince me of the realization that God has shared something with me that He says is going to happen, and it should reorganize the way I live my life, the way I spend time with my neighbors, the way I reach out to my unsaved friends and family. I am motivated to take into consideration their future, not just my own. To share the gospel of Jesus Christ is the pinnacle of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. It is to say that my eternity isn’t more important than someone else’s. So I’m going to do all I can to share the good news of Jesus Christ with them, so that we might spend eternity together.

I understand that this message is hard. I know some of you are saying, “Wait a minute—that was a lot of information.” Be students of the Word. Study it. We need to understand this and we should not allow it to puff us up. Rather, it should motivate us to godly living. If your thinking about the end times doesn’t change how you live a holy and upright life, then it is not of God. If it causes you to be afraid when Scripture says, “Do not be afraid,” or it causes you to be anxious when Scripture says, “Do not be anxious,” then you’re misunderstanding what the Scriptures have put forth regarding the end times. End times understanding is to bring comfort, peace and joy—because God is on His throne.

So with that framework, we will pick up next week with 1 Thessalonians 4:13.