

CHAPTER 13

What If Things
Get Worse?

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars,
but see to it that you are not alarmed.

— MATTHEW 24:6 NIV

Fear of Global Calamity

I could do without the pharmaceutical warnings. I understand their purpose, mind you. Medical manufacturers must caution against every potential tragedy so that when we take their pill and grow a third arm or turn green, we can't sue them. I get that. Still, there is something about the merger of happy faces with voice-over advisories of paralysis that just doesn't work.

Let's hope this practice of total disclosure doesn't spill over into the delivery room. It might. After all, about-to-be-born babies need to know what they are getting into. Prebirth warnings could likely become standard maternity-ward procedure. Can you imagine the scene? A lawyer stands at a woman's bedside. She's panting Lamaze breaths between contractions. He's reading the fine print of a contract in the direction of her belly.

Welcome to the post-umbilical cord world. Be advised, however, that human life has been known, in most cases, to result in death.

Some individuals have reported experiences with lethal viruses, chemical agents, and/or bloodthirsty terrorists. Birth can also result in fatal encounters with tsunamis, inebriated pilots, road rage, famine, nuclear disaster, and/or PMS. Side effects of living include super viruses, heart disease, and final exams. Human life is not recommended for anyone who cannot share a planet with evil despots or survive a flight on airplane food.

Life is a dangerous endeavor. We pass our days in the shadows of ominous realities. The power to annihilate humanity has, it seems, been placed in the hands of people who are happy to do so. Discussions of global attack prompted one small boy to beg, "Please, Mother, can't we go some place where there isn't any sky?"¹ If the global temperature rises a few more degrees . . . if classified information falls into sinister hands . . . if the wrong person pushes the wrong red button . . . What if things only get worse?

Christ tells us that they will. He predicts spiritual bailouts, ecological turmoil, and worldwide persecution. Yet in the midst of it all, he contends bravery is still an option.

"Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.

"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to

death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. 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.” (Matt. 24:4–14 NIV)

Things are going to get bad, really bad, before they get better. And when conditions worsen, “See to it that you are not alarmed” (v. 6 NIV). Jesus chose a stout term for *alarmed* that he used on no other occasion. It means “to wail, to cry aloud,” as if Jesus counseled the disciples, “Don’t freak out when bad stuff happens.”

The disciples were making a big to-do over the buildings of the Jerusalem temple. Impressed with the massive hewed stones—some of them nearly twenty-four feet long—the followers applauded the awesome structure with its variegated marble that resembled the waves of the sea. Jesus was not so impressed. “‘Do you see all these things?’ he asked. ‘I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down’” (Matt. 24:2 NIV).

Imagine someone forecasting the collapse of the White House, Buckingham Palace, or the Louvre. Wouldn’t you want some details? The disciples did. “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (v. 3).

Sitting on the Mount of Olives, in full view of the temple and the City of David, Jesus issued a “buckle your seat belt, no kidding, life can be fatal to your health” warning.

He began with “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many” (vv. 4–5 NIV). Note the twofold appearance of the word *many*. Many deceived and many deceivers. Churches are petri dishes for self-serving egomaniacs who masquerade as ministers of God. They will do so “in his name,” claiming a special status, a superior spirituality. They boast of insider information and adorn their teaching with phrases like “God told me . . .,” “God spoke to me . . .,” “God led me . . .” They present themselves as religious gurus, code breakers, members of an inner circle, implying that they have access to knowledge unavailable to the common person. Some even position themselves as Jesus himself, “saying, ‘I am the Christ’” (v. 5).

Jose Luis de Jesus Miranda is among them. He does not merely talk about or pray to Jesus. This man claims to be Jesus reincarnate. Unlike Jesus of Nazareth, this would-be Jesus from Puerto Rico teaches that there is no sin and that his followers can do no wrong. Thousands of adherents in more than thirty countries have swallowed his Kool-Aid.²

Don’t be misled, Jesus warns. Don’t be wooed by their slick appearances, silver-tongued oratory, or performances. Later in the same sermon Jesus said, “False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible” (Matt. 24:24 NIV).

Multitudes and miracles. Large audiences and spectacular deeds. Throngs of people. Displays of power. When you see them, be careful. High volume doesn’t equate with sound faith. Don’t be impressed by numbers or tricks. Satan can counterfeit both.

Filter all messages and messengers through these verses: “And who is a liar? Anyone who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Anyone who

denies the Father and the Son is an antichrist. Anyone who denies the Son doesn't have the Father, either" (1 John 2:22–23 NLT). False prophets always minimize the role of Christ and maximize the role of humanity. Be doctrinally diligent. Stick to one question—is this person directing listeners to Jesus? If the answer is yes, be grateful and pray for that individual. If the answer is no, get out while you still can.

Along with heresy we can expect calamity. "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains" (Matt. 24:6–8 NIV).

Nature is a pregnant creation, third-trimester heavy. When a tornado rips through a city in Kansas or an earthquake flattens a region in Pakistan, this is more than barometric changes or shifts of ancient fault lines. The universe is passing through the final hours before delivery. Painful contractions are in the forecast.

As are conflicts: "wars and rumors of wars." One nation invading another. One superpower defying another. Borders will always need checkpoints. War correspondents will always have employment. The population of the world will never see peace this side of heaven.

Christians will suffer the most. "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold" (Matt. 24:9–12 NIV).

Paradise is populated with people whose deaths fulfilled this

prophecy. Peter. Paul. Stephen. James. Ignatius of Antioch. Polycarp. Justin Martyr. Origen. The world hated these Christ-followers.

Hatred still abounds. Voice of the Martyrs, a Christian agency that defends religious liberties, contends that more Christ-followers have been killed for their faith in the last century than all previous centuries combined. The names of Paul, James, and Peter have been joined by Tsehay Tolessa of Ethiopia, Xu Yonghai of mainland China, Mehdi Dibaj of Iran.³ The Global Evangelization Movement reports an average of 165,000 martyrs per year, more than four times the number of a century past.⁴

America, proud as she is of religious freedom, suffers from increasing anger toward Christians. Professors publicly mock Bible-believing students. Talk-show hosts denigrate people of faith. We can expect the persecution to increase. When it does, fragile convictions will collapse. “The love of many will grow cold” (v. 12 NLT). Spiritual stowaways will jump ship. The halfhearted will become coldhearted. A great many church attenders will be disclosed as faith pretenders. They will not only leave the faith; they will make the lives of the faithful miserable.

Will this persecution come to us? For some of you it already has. For many of us it might. If we are thrown into jail for our faith or deposed for our convictions, may God help you and me to remember the counsel of Christ: “See to it that you are not alarmed” (v. 6 NIV).

Don’t freak out at the heresy, calamity, and apostasy. Don’t give in or give up, for you’ll soon witness the victory. “But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (vv. 13–14).

Jesus equipped his followers with farsighted courage. He listed the

typhoons of life and then pointed them “to the end.” Trust in ultimate victory gives ultimate courage. Author Jim Collins makes reference to this outlook in his book *Good to Great*. Collins tells the story of Admiral James Stockdale, who was a prisoner of war for eight years during the Vietnam War.

After Stockdale’s release Collins asked him how in the world he survived eight years in a prisoner-of-war camp.

He replied, “I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

Collins then asked, “Who didn’t make it out?” Admiral Stockdale replied, “Oh, that’s easy. The optimists. . . . they were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”⁵

Real courage embraces the twin realities of current difficulty and ultimate triumph. Yes, life stinks. But it won’t forever. As one of my friends likes to say, “Everything will work out in the end. If it’s not working out, it’s not the end.”

Though the church is winnowed down like Gideon’s army, though God’s earth is buffeted by climate changes and bloodied by misfortune, though creation itself seems stranded on the Arctic seas, don’t over-react. “Be still in the presence of the LORD, and wait patiently for him to act. Don’t worry about evil people who prosper or fret about their wicked schemes” (Ps. 37:7 NLT).

Avoid Pollyanna optimism. We gain nothing by glossing over the brutality of human existence. This is a toxic world. But neither do we join the Chicken Little chorus of gloom and doom. “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” Somewhere between Pollyanna and Chicken Little, between blind denial and blatant panic, stands the levelheaded, clear-thinking, still-believing follower of Christ. Wide eyed, yet unafraid. Unterrified by the terrifying. The calmest kid on the block, not for lack of bullies, but for faith in his older Brother. The old people of God knew this peace: “Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident” (Ps. 27:3 RSV).

After the bombs of World War II ravaged downtown Warsaw, only one skeletal structure remained on the city’s main street. “The badly damaged structure was the Polish headquarters of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the words on its only remaining wall were clearly legible from the street . . . ‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.’”⁶ This is the picture of the Christian hope. Though the world may collapse, the work of Christ will endure.

So, *see to it that you are not alarmed* (Matt. 24:6 NIV).

“*See to it . . .*” Bosses and teachers are known to use that phrase. “*See to it that you fill out the reports.*” Or “*Your essay is due tomorrow. See to it that you finish your work.*” The words call for additional attention, special focus, extra resolve. Isn’t this what Christ is asking of us? In this dangerous day, on this Fabergé-fragile globe, with financial collapse on the news and terrorists on the loose, we have every reason to retreat into bunkers of dread and woe.

But Christ says to us, “*See to it that you are not alarmed*” (NIV).

“*Keep your head and don’t panic*” (MSG).

“*See that you are not troubled*” (NKJV).

“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10 RSV).

Make sure the hull of your convictions can withstand the stress of collisions.

Builders of the *Titanic* should have been so wise. The luxury liner sank because contractors settled for cheap rivets and suffered from poor planning. Rivets are the glue that hold the steel plates together. Facing a shortage of quality bolts, the builders used substandard ones that popped their heads upon impact with the iceberg.⁷

How sturdy are the bolts of your belief? Reinforce them with daily Bible readings, regular worship, and earnest communion with God. “Courage is fear that has said its prayers.”⁸

And remember: “All these [challenging times] are the beginning of birth pains” (Matt. 24:8 NIV), and birth pangs aren’t all bad. (Easy for me to say.) Birth pains signal the onset of the final push. The pediatrician assures the mom-to-be, “It’s going to hurt for a time, but it’s going to get better.” Jesus assures us of the same. Global conflicts indicate our date on the maternity calendar. We are in the final hours, just a few pushes from delivery, a few brief ticks of eternity’s clock from the great crowning of creation. A whole new world is coming!

“These things must come to pass” (Matt. 24:6). *Must* is a welcome word that affirms that all events, even the most violent, are under a divine plan. Every trial and trouble has a place in God’s scheme. “The reason why we ought not be terrified is not because wars are not terrifying. Quite the contrary. It is because above all chaos reigns a divine plan.”⁹

All things, big and small, flow out of the purpose of God and serve his good will. When the world appears out of control, it isn’t. When

warmongers appear to be in charge, they aren't. When ecological catastrophes dominate the day, don't let them dominate you.

Let's trust our heavenly Father in the manner Peter Wirth trusted his earthly one.

Peter was a twenty-one-year-old university student when he began to experience severe pain in his right shoulder. He called his father for advice. Most students would do the same: call home for counsel. But few students have a better parent to call in such a situation. Peter's father, Michael, is a world-renowned orthopedic surgeon who specializes in shoulders. Peter calling Dr. Wirth with a shoulder problem is like Bill Gates's daughter calling him with a software question.

Michael initially attributed Peter's pain to weight lifting. But after numbness and tingling set in, the doctor grew suspicious of an extremely rare shoulder condition called deep venous thrombosis. A clot was forming in his son's shoulder, dangerously close to his heart. Michael was not only acquainted with the condition; he had coauthored the paper on how to treat it. He sent Peter to the emergency room and told him to request an ultrasound. Turns out, Michael's long-distance diagnosis was right on target. Peter was immediately admitted to the hospital, where the clot was dissolved, and his earthly life was extended.

Wouldn't it be great to have such a father?

We do. He has diagnosed the pain of the world and written the book on its treatment. We can trust him. "Everything will work out in the end. If it's not working out, it's not the end."