

## **Wars and Rumors of Wars**

**Mark 13:1-8**

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Rev. John Burns

University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740

Website: [www.weareubc.org](http://www.weareubc.org)

If Harold Camping is correct, this will be my last sermon. Should the retired civil engineer turned religious broadcaster and president of Family Radio Worldwide actually be a true prophet of God, today you will enjoy your last Sunday dinner. There is no need for you to mow the lawn this week or pay your bills or even go to work, if the man whose voice can be heard on your radio every day is right. For Harold Camping is sure that Christ will return on May 21, 2011.

Camping says he definitely has it right this time. He's missed it once or twice before, but now claims that he has figured out his mistakes, recalculated the years according to his newly enlightened interpretation of Biblical prophecy and now has his prediction exact. Hundreds of Camping's followers have taken to the streets not only here in Washington but in New York City, LA, New Orleans and cities and villages around the world to do as they should do since they fully believe the end is here. They are warning everyone they meet to get right with God before the Almighty brings time to a close this Saturday. Numerous supporters have cashed out their life savings and sent all their money to Camping to use in this last ditch effort to save as many souls as possible before time is no more.

One of the reasons people like Harold Camping can convince folks that the end of the world is near is because of the words Jesus said hours before his death. All four gospels record various versions of the words found in Mark 13. As the disciples admired the prominent stones that made up the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus shocked them by asking, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Assuming that Jesus' enigmatic prophecy referred to the end of times, Peter, James, John and Andrew pulled Jesus aside and asked Him when the temple would be toppled and what signs would be given before the disaster occurred. Jesus replied, "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed, this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

New Testament scholar Lamar Williamson says this passage provides a "happy hunting ground" for people fixated on finding clues to when the world will end. When we have a series of awful events like Katrina, Haiti, Japan and more recently Spain as well as the devastation left by natural disasters in Alabama and now along the Mississippi River, folks like Harold Camping start popping up, quoting Jesus and saying, "the end is really near." And because Christ's words are sufficiently nebulous to be applied to any number of calamities, people can be persuaded that our remaining days are precious and few.

The big Biblical obstacle with jumping on Harold Camping's train to glory, however, is found in Mark 13:32 when Jesus says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come." Based on those words, it seems more likely that Jesus will return on any day other than May 21, 2011.

Another reason someone like Harold Camping can convince many folks of his views is because all of us grow weary of the pain and suffering caused by natural disasters and war. We all long for the heartbreak and agony of violent death to come to an end. When someone tells us Jesus is going to act in a week or two to stop suffering and war forever, part of us really wants to believe that's true. One day, Jesus will bring time as we know it to a close, but that is not likely to be this Saturday, so we are going to have to find another way to live in this world where wars and rumors of wars continue. Jesus said we would have to find a way to be Christian in a world of violent conflict until God brings the curtain down on our earthly journeys. Just in case the world doesn't end this Saturday, we need to know how to live as disciples of Jesus in a world that is constantly, one way or another, at war.

Some Christians think that our faith really doesn't speak to war. In fact, they believe that our faith is silent on all sorts of societal and political issues and centers only on the personal matters of our lives. Not long ago, I was in Duncan Doughnuts waiting on my car to be serviced at a nearby dealership when I heard the man at the table in front of me make a call on his cell phone. I started eavesdropping on the call when I heard the man ask, "And how is your church doing?" By listening intently while trying to appear engrossed in my book, I soon discovered the man, who appeared to be past retirement age, was talking to a Christian friend in Alabama and wanted to know how the friend's church building was doing after the storm. After listening to the report on the other end of the call, the man in the doughnut shop enthusiastically said that he had been able to preach in a local Baptist church the last four Sundays. Then he added, "Hey I've got news. . . I'm moving to Myrtle Beach." The recipient of the call must have asked why for the preacher replied, "because there are too many (then he whispered too low for me to hear) moving in to my neighborhood and I've got to get out. I figured if I'm moving anyway, I might as well get out of Maryland for its overrun with Democrats and Liberals." Then he added, "pray for me to sell my house and get a good deal on one in Myrtle Beach."

I don't tell that story merely to criticize the man on the phone. Most of us seem to be more comfortable living in communities in which our race is at least a sizable minority. The man's attitude about the transition of his neighborhood was lousy, but his discomfort with the great change occurring around him was human. My purpose in describing the conversation is to illustrate how we all sort of miss the full teaching of Jesus Christ. To that old preacher, God evidently had nothing to say about welcoming newcomers to his neighborhood or about any merits Democrats or liberals might have to offer our society. God, according to this man's conversation, was only concerned about his personal issues, that he sell his house and get a good deal on one down south.

Jesus has guidance to help us with our personal problems for sure, but the Lord also directs us in our response to larger world issues as well. So what does Christ teach us about living in a world with wars and rumors of wars? Many Christians believe that Jesus commands pure pacifism as a response to war? Others believe Jesus is a strong proponent of war. Several years ago when I was going in and out of shops near Gatlingburg, Tennessee, I came across an artist who had painted Jesus as Rambo. The Christ figure was wearing a crown of thorns but had belts of bullets wrapped around his chest and a machine gun in each hand. Underneath the picture were the words, "Prince of Peace." The picture seemed obscene to me. Over the years, I've come to believe that Jesus was neither a pure pacifist or Rambo.

Winston Churchill famously said, "Anyone who is not a liberal at twenty has no heart and anyone who is not a conservative at forty has no brain." I was definitely a political liberal at twenty, but, to the dismay of many of you, I didn't become a political conservative at forty, nor am I one at 54. I don't think Jesus had a political party and I don't think Christians have to be Republican or Democrat; I think we have to follow Jesus.

My view on war, as a follower of Jesus, however, has changed some over the years. I hope you will hear me say that even in my most radical days, I felt nothing but admiration for those who served our country in the armed forces. Even in the waning days of Vietnam, when some in our nation responded despicably to returning soldiers, I held strong convictions that the men and women who wore the uniform of our military deserved our gratitude, respect

and the best care available as they returned home. I feel even more ardent about that today. Tax me to support returning veterans and I'm happy to pay that bill, of course that's just the old liberal in me talking.

My problem is not with soldiers, it is with the horrific acts of war we ask our soldiers to commit. Many of those acts of war throw me into great conflict with the teachings of our Lord who said, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." I've been struggling a lot with those words since the day we shot an unarmed Osama Bin Laden and thousands of our fellow citizens took to the streets in celebration. Don't get me wrong, I haven't shed any tears for Osama. From all accounts he was a mass murderer who, no doubt would have killed many more innocent people down the road, I don't grieve his death. But the moral part of me would have preferred that he had been arrested like that other madman, Sadaam Hussein, taken somewhere to stand trial and executed by the state, if warranted, after all the evidence was presented.

By the way, it was information about Sadaam that altered somewhat my view of violent intervention. My doctor is a Kurd from northern Iraq. He is a kind and friendly man that has given me great care. I didn't bother to ask him about his nation of origin until recently. In response, my doctor said, "some of you Americans don't like George Bush, but my people would kiss his feet." Then he launched into a vivid description of the atrocities committed by Sadaam Hussein and his sons upon the Kurdish people, detailing the most vicious treatment of women and the extermination of over one hundred thousand Kurdish people. Following those tails of horror, the good doctor described the relative peace, tranquility and prosperity that exists in his region today and said, "arresting and executing that madman was the most just act perpetrated by your country in my lifetime." I still have many questions about the war in Iraq, but my doctor's testimony engraved a deeper awareness in my heart of what the devout Christian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to believe in World War II. Namely, that there are people in this world whose behavior is so destructive, violent intervention is warranted to put an end to their reign of terror.

Certainly that conviction applies to Osama Bin Laden. Yet something about the way we killed him has bothered what I believe to be my Christian conscience. I suspect those Navy Seals had justification for their actions. Maybe they feared that if they attempted to arrest Bin Laden, he would trip some suicide bomb and kill them all and maybe he would have done just that. I'm sure there were military reasons for the way in which Bin Laden was dispatched, but I have been uneasy with the way it went down. My inner conversation on the fate of Bin Laden became even more conflicted last week when I received a poem from my friend Terry Minchow-Proffitt. You might remember when he was here a few weeks ago, I said he was a poet and that he kept chickens. A few days ago, he sent me a poem that was ostensibly about his chickens, but, he claims even without his awareness, it was really about Osama Bin Laden.

I won't read you the poem, I'll just tell you the story behind the poem. One night Terry heard a commotion coming from the chicken coop and he went out to find his only rooster dead. He said he looked like a broken umbrella laying in the middle of the yard. Looking around Terry found the culprit, an opossum, playing possum lying motionless by the fence. Terry grabbed a shovel and walked over to the varmint intending to crush his head, but then his compassion took hold and he stopped. He poked the opossum and the killer hissed to life and took off through the hole he had made under the fence. All the hens gathered around Terry and clucked at him in what he interpreted to be anger and disbelief over his lenient response to the assassin.

The next day, Terry purchased a "haveaheart trap" intending to catch the murderous opossum and place him in the woods far from Terry's chickens. After purchasing the trap, Terry stopped by the grocery store and asked the butcher what to put in the trap. The butcher gave Terry a package wrapped in brown paper. "No charge" he said. When Terry got home, he took the trap to the back of the yard and opened the wrapped package to find a chicken neck. As he baited the trap, the hens went crazy clucking at him, livid at what he was doing.

Terry had compassion for the critter but the chickens paid for it with the neck of one of their own. Its an awful truth. If we had used a have a heart trap for Osama, would he have escaped or would it have led to additional violent deaths of the innocent? Does my preference for compassion sometimes eventuate in the needless suffering of people who need protection? Are there people in this world so vile, so disturbed, so heartless that violent intervention is required for the safety of vulnerable citizens? Would even Jesus advocate the use of deadly force to stop evil regimes from wreaking havoc throughout the world?

Veteran and peace activist Paul Chappell does not presume to speak for Jesus, but he does say violent intervention is sometimes justified, but only as a last resort. Chappell says he was taught this truth at West Point. In his officers training, Chappell learned that all wars are like natural disasters, once they get started, they are almost impossible to control and civilians always bear the brunt of the suffering.

In his book "Will War Ever End? A Soldier's Vision of Peace" Chappell states that war is an awful necessity at times, that must be waged, not as nation against nation, but as people of good will united against terrorism wherever it is found. In addition, the man who has served in both Iraq and Afghanistan writes that to widen the realm of peace, we need to invest as much in peacemaking as we do in preparing for war. Peace and security, Chappell teaches, is never won by killing our enemies, because such killing simply creates more enemies. Peace and security is only truly established by winning our enemies over to a vision of mutual respect, safety and freedom. Too little effort, Chappell says, is expended in that direction.

As we try to find a word from Jesus to help us live in a world with wars and rumors of wars, we should not interpret his words to mean he favored war anymore than his comment that we will always have the poor with us means he was for keeping people poor. I think the words indicate that Jesus was a realist who understood that human sinfulness will continue to perpetuate the use of violence in both the pursuit and repression of evil for as long as the earth endures.

I wish old Harold Camping was as right as he thinks he is. I wish that this Saturday, we'd all awaken to the sound of angels singing as Jesus descends from the clouds to put an end to all human sinfulness and establish the eternal reign of the Prince of Peace. Should that not happen, however, we'll have to go on living in this world of wars and rumors of wars. Maybe the best posture we can take is the one demonstrated by Jesus when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Knowing that a horrible war lurked on the horizon that would bring the wrath of the Roman Empire down upon the violent leaders of his own nation, Jesus wept and said, "if you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

To act like war is never a necessity in a flawed world is to practice a naivete rejected by Christ. However, to celebrate violent intervention as a response to evil is to practice a joy over the effects of sin that is also foreign to the ways of Jesus. To live as a Christian in a world with wars and rumors of wars means we must pray for and pursue peace with all the faith and energy we have while, at the same time, acknowledging that war is a persistent consequence of the evil and human sinfulness in this world. In addition, if we share Christ's heart, we will respond to both the elusiveness of peace and the prevalence of war with tears and prayers not glee and dancing in the streets. Amen.