

THE END IS NOT NEAR

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Grace Church in New York
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From the Gospel of Mark: *“For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be. (13:19)*

And from the letter to the Hebrews: *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (10:31)*

Some years ago a funny little book called The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook was all the rage. The purpose of the book was to give you tips to increase your odds of living through your worst nightmare, should it ever come upon you. For example, have you ever wondered what to do if your parachute fails to open? You jump from a plane, you pull the rip cord, and nothing happens. What should you do? Take notes, because I’m going to tell you. First, signal to a jumping partner whose chute hasn’t yet opened. Next, when your partner gets to you, hook your arms through the two straps of his front harness, all the way up to your elbows, and grab hold of your own strap. Then, when you are ready, tell your partner to open his chute. Finally, hold on no matter what, even though the shock of the parachute’s opening will probably break your arms and dislocate your shoulders. It may sound gruesome, but it sure beats the alternative.

Here’s another one: for reasons I will leave to your imagination, you find yourself needing to leap from a moving motorcycle to a speeding car. What should you do? Again, you might want to write this down, given the likelihood of your being in this predicament. First, wait for a long, straight section of road. Next you maneuver the motorcycle as close to the car as possible. Then you stand crouched with both of your feet on either the running board or the seat. Hold onto the throttle until the last possible second. Finally, time the leap so your torso lands in the car. If someone inside can pull you in, all the better. What happens if you miss the window? You can survive that, too. The book says to tuck and roll away from the vehicles (and if you don’t know how to do that, you can turn to page 82 for instructions on how to jump from a moving car).

The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook spawned a whole cottage industry; calendars, board games, even a TV program picked up the theme. The authors followed up the original book with editions for surviving your worst case scenarios of travel, dating and sex, and golf. Notably absent from the sequels, however, is a worst-case scenario survival handbook for the Great Tribulation. Perhaps the authors never attempted it because they knew that Mark, the Gospel writer, had beaten them to the punch. Today’s bizarre reading from the 13th Chapter of Mark is like a worst-case scenario survival handbook. Over the centuries many interpreters have concluded that Mark is asking us to imagine ourselves in a situation called the Great Tribulation, a period of time that the Bible says will occur before the Second Coming of Jesus, and the end of the world. Mark tells his readers it will begin with the defilement of the Temple, a reference to the times in Jewish history when occupying powers attempted to erect statues of pagan deities on the altar of the Temple. Suppose you walk into the Temple one day, says Mark to his readers, and you see this “desolating sacrilege” set up where it ought not to be. What should you do?

Well, here’s Mark’s advice: the Great Tribulation is upon you; by all means, get out of town, flee to the mountains. If you’re on the roof of your house, don’t come down through the

inside. Jump and run! Tuck and roll! If you're out working in the field, don't go back to your house; leave everything behind. Ladies: try not to be pregnant during the Great Tribulation, and it will be easier not to have little children in tow. Beware of false Christs and false prophets who will show you signs and wonders in the attempt to lead you astray. And finally, as a last resort, pray that all this may not happen in winter. *For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of creation which God created until now, and never will be.*

There it is, friends: survival tips for the Great Tribulation. I hope you were taking notes. But I ask you: what do you think is the likelihood of your ever facing the apocalypse? I'm going to go way out on a theological limb today and say that it's not even as likely as your needing to jump from a motorcycle to a car. I can't, in good conscience, stand here and declare that you really ought to have a detailed plan for what to do in the event of the Great Tribulation. Sadly, throughout history more than a few individuals and groups have gone off the deep end over this one. Even today people still get worked up about the possible ending of the world. The latest hype has to do with a calendar that the ancient Mayans devised to count the days for 5,126 years. Apparently, it runs out on December 21, 2012 at 11:11 pm. The blasted thing will just stop right in the middle of the local nightly news. Yolanda Vega won't even get to announce the winning Lotto numbers. Time's up! It gets worse. At the very same time, the sun will be perfectly aligned with the center of the Milky Way, a configuration of heavenly bodies that hasn't occurred for 26,000 years.

What could it all mean? A Hollywood movie foretelling doom and disaster opened on Thursday. ABC's Nightline included a segment about it on Friday. The internet sages and seers are in overdrive. A few earthy-crunchy types are predicting happy things: 2012 will usher in a new age of heightened spiritual awareness and higher consciousness. Not so, say most other reliable sources on the world-wide web. It will be the end of civilization as we know it. When the sun lines up with the Milky Way, planet Earth will turn completely upside down, and spin the other way on its axis. The good news here, I suppose, is that if the world turns upside down, the Mets will collapse into first place and win the World Series in 2013. As for me, I'm not counting on October baseball at Citi Field anytime soon. My prediction is that on the morning of December 22, 2012 the sun will come up and the only fear of being left behind is that you will have just three shopping days left until Christmas. The end is not near. The apocalypse is not now.

So that's the sermon I was going to preach today: the Great Tribulation is not at hand; let's take a balanced view of these apocalyptic passages. That's what I was going to preach, but then I started paying closer attention to the week that was unfolding. Did I see signs of the approaching Great Tribulation? Not a one. But let me tell you what I did see: I saw lots of life's lesser tribulations. I saw lots of everyday worst-case scenarios playing themselves out and destroying people. For military personnel in Ft. Hood, Texas, it was business as usual on November 5th as they waited in a medical facility for pre-deployment examinations. Then Major Nadal Malik Hasan, an Army psychiatrist, burst into the room and started shooting. Was it the end of the world? No. But for thirteen murdered people and their families, it was the end of *their* world.

For the unemployed it was another week of searching for work and eating into their savings. Conventional wisdom says the economy is rebounding, and if that is true we can all rejoice. But for those who don't know how they will make the next mortgage payment, the recovery may be too late for them to avoid financial ruin. Did the collapse of the economy spell the end of the world? No. But for millions of people it has meant the end of *their* world. And so it was in AD 70. Only forty years after Jesus spoke the strange words of Mark 13, everything he predicted came to pass. The Temple was destroyed, and for the Jews, their entire way of life

lay in ruins. Was it the end of the world? No. But it was the end of *their* world. So I haven't seen any signs of the Great Tribulation, then or now, but I have seen plenty of life's lesser tribulations which, if you happen to be on the receiving end of them, don't seem all that little. In fact, they are worst-case scenarios, every one of them. I can only imagine the panic of the skydiver whose parachute fails to open. What should you do? What can you do?

Let's have a pop quiz at this point. Do you remember what to do when your parachute fails to open? Are you supposed to flap your arms vigorously on the off chance you may become the first human to fly like a bird? Are you supposed to produce a pocket knife and slice open your parachute pack? Were you instructed to aim yourself toward very soft ground, and then tuck and roll as it says on page 82? No, none of these will help you survive. The first thing to do is signal a jumping partner whose chute hasn't yet opened. Do you remember the instruction? Did it come as a surprise to you? It did to me. It assumes you have a jumping partner. It assumes that when you left the plane and started your descent to the earth, you were not alone. Imagine that.

Signal your jumping partner. That's a pretty sound piece of basic Christian wisdom for facing life's lesser tribulations and worst-case scenarios. The Christian faith assumes that we have a jumping partner. We have *God with us*, Jesus, whose Spirit is available to us and accessible for us at all times and in all places. *Where can I go then from your Spirit?*, asks the Psalmist (139) of God? *Where can I flee from your presence? If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast.* Whether it's your worst-case scenario, or one of life's lesser tribulations, or in fact the Great Tribulation itself, you can signal your jumping partner. In the words of today's Psalm (16:8), *I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand I shall not fall.* You can set the Lord before you. You can call on Christ. You can wrap your arms around his promises. By the power of his Spirit, He is available to save your soul. Not only that, you can call on the help of the Lord through his Church, imperfect though we often are. We are the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Jesus in this world, here to provide counsel and comfort and company through all of life's lesser tribulations.

Signal your jumping partner. Forgive me for stating the obvious, and dispensing what is merely good advice. The gospel is good news, not good advice. But my good advice to you is to accept the good news – the good news that you have One in this life whom you can signal. You would think that reasonable, educated people wouldn't need such a reminder. But I never cease to be amazed by the number of people who completely miss the point. They look on life as if they were tossed out of the plane with a faulty parachute and no jumping partner, only to plunge through existence alone until returning to the dust. Or they see aid but prefer to go it alone. Or they actually do ask for help, but refuse the type of help that is offered.

I'm trying to imagine a real skydiver with a failed parachute saying to himself, "Gee, I'd really rather tough this one out alone; it would be too embarrassing to be seen landing with someone else's assistance. I'd rather go splat like a rugged individual." Or imagine the same free-falling skydiver actually signaling his jumping partner, but when the two come together he announces, "No, that's not the type of help I want; we've got to do it my way, you see, or else no way at all. Good-bye then." Do such conversations sound absurd to you? They don't sound absurd to me, because I've heard them all.

Friends, the apocalypse is not now. The end is not near. The Great Tribulation is not at hand. But life's lesser tribulations are always upon us, perhaps even in the form of your worst-case scenario. What should you do? How can you survive? Set the Lord always before you,

because when he is at your right hand you shall not fall. In other words, signal your jumping partner. Call on the name of the Lord, and don't let go. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But it sure beats the alternative.

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The Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook was written by Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht, and published by Chronicle Books in 1999.