

## What We Need to Know

Early in the writings of John Calvin known as the Institutes of the Christian Religion which was originally drafted in 1536, Calvin wrote extensively about this topic of knowledge. In fact the first chapter of the first volume of the final work is titled “The knowledge of God and that of ourselves are connected. How they are interrelated.” Calvin worked from the premise that all of humanity had an innate sense of God the Creator which is implanted by God and can be gained through observations of the universe—the handiworks of God and how God sustains what God created. However, observations alone do not lead to the true knowledge of God and remain incomplete but must be guided by the revelations God gives in scripture—through the prophets, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Calvin states in his discussion of knowledge that “If God had not judged it useful for men to know; he would never have bidden his prophets and apostles to teach.” So God has made available to us knowledge that we need; this knowledge is gained from the teachings found in scriptures—especially those pertaining to how we are to live together; those revelations which tell us how to be in relationship with our God; how to be citizens of God’s kingdom. Calvin also declares that God has revealed to us all that we need to know. And Calvin means it when he uses that word all. So when we look at the passages in scripture, whether found in sections of Daniel or Mark like those before us today which are called apocalyptic, we might wonder if we are seeking to receive the message which God is trying to reveal. After all, the original meaning of the Greek word apocalyptic is a verb which means “to reveal or lift the veil.” These passages always seem to be associated with events and imagery of a dire nature—an unraveling of the world as it is known—often destructively. The underlying theme and message of apocalyptic prophecy is of the great final battle in the cosmic spiritual realm, the one where God will prevail over the evil one. When Jesus began his opening sermon with “the time is fulfilled and the reign of God has come near” as Mark recorded in the first chapter of his narrative, then performed exorcisms the disciples considered them to be signs of the presence of the kingdom’s nearness and the true beginning of the end. They expected Jesus to continue unveiling other signs of the nearing end. As our last week’s passage ended Jesus has been pointing out the failures of those in charge of the Temple treasury to take care of the widows, yet as they are leaving one of the disciples remarks on the building—on its greatness. Jesus’ response is: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon one another; all will be thrown down.” Considering the probable time Mark’s narrative was actually written, this has always been considered as a reference to the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman occupation in 70AD. And it probably was. What is interesting is what are we to make of the discussion which then follows later between Jesus and the disciples when they are sitting across from the Temple on the Mount of Olives. Four of his closest disciples seek to ask him privately about this reference—they want to know more details about this coming event asking, “tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Like all of us, they want to know what to look for that might indicate danger; the motto of the Boy Scouts to “Be Prepared” is popular because it appeals to our basic nature—we tend to believe that if we know what is coming and can be prepared then we will be able to be in control. So the disciples seek to get those answers from Jesus. The question is—does Jesus really give

them any answers—and if so, what answers. When Jesus speaks the discourse he gives presents an interesting puzzle. In one sense Jesus is speaking in Daniel-like terms of the cosmic final battle. In another sense he is speaking of the more near-term ends which are brought about by political and religious forces in this broken world. In some of these verses Jesus is obviously addressing human-scale events—“Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray” In other verses, especially 7-8 where he speaks of wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, the language takes on a more cosmic context those predictions which are the classic signs of destruction beyond the merely local. He then speaks of the disintegration of the heavens and the coming of “the Son of Man.” So when we read these words again, are we like the disciples and so many in the past seeking to assign specific events to these “signs” so that we can better prepare? Is that what we think the knowledge that Jesus wants us to take from these words? Some of these events can always be found to exist, but the world continues. So what knowledge is revealed to us through these words? The conversation Jesus has with his disciples continues beyond today’s reading. Jesus continues describing unsettling events for many more verses and never gives the disciples a time, not a year or a decade. Jesus continues describing unsettling events for many more verses and never gives the disciples a time, not a year or a decade. The fact that Jesus doesn’t answer their question should be taken more seriously. More to the point, when he does answer it, eventually, the answer is completely in the negative: nobody knows when this will happen: “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 who do not know when the time will come.” Jesus then follows this with a typical story of this being like a property owner who goes on a long journey but will come back suddenly, expecting things to be in a good state when he returns. So, in the midst of all the descriptions of disasters which will come, what knowledge have we been given through this teaching? Probably, not to interpret current times through the lens of God’s judgment, but rather through the broken and sinful nature of our own politics and ways of dealing with one another; our failures to live into the teaching we have been given about being citizens living under God’s reign of caring for one another could account for much of the pain and suffering present. Jesus response is the first century equivalent of the famous propaganda poster produced by the British government during World War II that boldly proclaimed “Keep Calm and Carry On.” Jesus told his disciple life would not be easy, but trust in God means living a life expectant and hopeful for Christ’s return. There is no need for us to explain every turn in world affairs or in our own life in terms of God’s super-plan. Discipleship calls for a faith in which ultimately, despite our present struggle, God’s love is sovereign. We have no need to micromanage the signs of God’s judgment or presence. Instead we are called to manage our lives and conform them to God’s vision of justice, love and peace. Jesus does not tell the disciple that this will be easy. In fact, he warns them that it will definitely not be. He warns others will come to confuse us, and that we are easily confused. Jesus warns against alarm and overreaction. The faithful response to disaster is service to God and neighbor, not finger pointing or making shocking accusations. We must follow the lead of the one who healed at every opportunity, who urged care for those without food or shelter, who loved beyond all love even in the most desperate of times. Jesus gave a vague answer as to when God will renew the world in God’s justice, but his instructions for caring for our neighbors were

abundantly clear. When disasters hit, Jesus' follower should get to work and leave the end time prognostication to God alone. God has given us all the knowledge we need to be faithful and good citizens under his reign...the time when he will bring it into being fully realized among us should not be our concern if following those instructions are what we have listed as our scouts manual for being prepared. God has from the beginning made sure we know all that we need to know: God is love. God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son so that the world might be saved. What more do we need to know...we just need to follow the teaching of the one sent to redeem us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.