

Stand Firm

Luke 21:5-19

November 14, 2010

Having come to the end of our series on John's letters, we find ourselves in the lectionary again. In God's wisdom and grace, however, He has brought us to a passage that answers a couple of questions I have been asked in the last couple of weeks. I know there is always interest in the end times, and it is a topic that has been raised again recently. When this passage came up as an option for this week, it was the obvious choice. Of course, this passage is only the introduction to the issue and the first part of Jesus' answer. The rest of His reply will have to wait until next week.

The event started when the disciples commented on the beauty and glory of the Temple. They noticed the stones from which it was cut. They noticed the gifts that were given to God to make the building one of the most magnificent structures in the ancient world. It was a grand project that was decades in the building.

It was also the center of Jewish life. The temple was the place where God had chosen to put His name. It was the location on earth that they believed they could meet the Creator and Lord of the universe. This is even more overwhelming than the physical structure itself. More impressive than the building is what went on there—the interaction of God with His people. The building represented God's presence with those He had called to be His and to whom He had given His name.

Jesus' response to their awe at the temple was **surprising**. Here they were in what would likely have been the largest, strongest, most impressive structure

most of them would ever see, and the place where God had told them to meet Him, and Jesus told them, "*As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.*" (v.6) It was almost inconceivable that the temple should cease to exist, or be utterly destroyed in the way Jesus was describing. Jesus' statement was even considered blasphemy by some at the time. Speaking against the temple was seen as speaking against God Himself.

It is an unfortunate human tendency that we begin to confuse the ways and places in which God meets us with God. The Jews were so dedicated to the temple that they were missing what God was doing in their midst. They were so taken by the glory of what they could see, and repulsed by the lack of visible glory in Jesus, that they rejected God in the name of protecting His temple. Building grand edifices to God's glory and for His worship is not a bad thing, as long as the building does not take money that should be used for ministry. Even worse, we can begin to actually worship the building, not doing what God wants us to do in an effort to protect and preserve the structure He has given us to use. We must be careful that we are always ready to follow God's **will** and direction, and that we are never more tied to the things we build for His glory than we are to Him.

The disciples must have thought the temple was something that would last a long time. It was huge, strong, and the symbol of God's presence on earth. That Jesus would predict that not one of its stones would be left on another got them wondering how long it would take. So, they asked.

The disciples asked two very good questions. The first was, “When will it happen?” The second was, “How will we know it is about to happen?” Jesus made no attempt to answer the first question, but He did go into some detail about the second. Jesus’ answer to the second question not only constitutes the rest of this morning’s text, it continues for another seventeen verses. We will look at them next week.

What, then are the events that will take place? Jesus began with the false starts. These are the things that will happen that will get the attention of the world and the people around the church. The church will be tempted to see in them the coming end, but they will not mean that the end is near.

Jesus began with an important command: “*Watch out that you are not deceived*” (v.8) A lot of people in the church are watching out for the signs of the end, but Jesus is just as concerned that we watch out for lies and being led in the wrong way. We need to watch the world around us and we need to hold to what Jesus said. He will come back to this point later. For now, we need to look at the things Jesus said will seek to lead us astray.

The first of the things that will seem to signal the end, but do not, is the false **teachers**. There will be people proclaiming, in Jesus’ name, that the end is near. They may even claim to be Jesus. The simple command from our Lord is, “*Do not follow them.*” (v.8)

Just as we are not to follow those who claim to be Jesus or who teach the end is near, we are not to be frightened or worried when we hear about wars and revolutions. The world worries and frets over many things. We do not need to worry or fear them, however.

Jesus has told us they are coming. They do not take God by surprise. He is not caught unprepared. It is all part of the unfolding of His plan, and we can trust that He will bring the greatest amount of good out of it. More importantly, we can simply trust Him. We have no need to fear what the future will bring. We know wars and revolutions are coming and will continue until the end. Their presence does not mean the end is here yet.

Indeed, the world will begin to fall apart. Not only will political turmoil engulf the earth, natural disasters will strike as well. Just as the prophets predicted, Jesus confirms that, “*There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.*” (v.11) This is typical language for “Day of the Lord” prophecies. Here, Jesus is talking about the end times, but these events are not limited to that time only. There have been wars, earthquakes, famines, disease, and fearful events ever since sin entered the world. These are the results of humanity’s unfaithfulness to God and His way. Even the great signs from heaven have occurred occasionally. The Bible describes an increase in these things as God’s wrath is poured out on sin, but these things, and the results of God’s anger, have always been with us. As we watch, we should pay attention to these things, and we are called to help those in need, but we do not need to get too excited about them.

Jesus wasn’t just speaking to the world in general, however. He was speaking to those who called Him, “teacher.” For them, things would be worse in a way. Before all these event took place, before the temple fell and the world came to an end, they would be persecuted.

They would be arrested, dragged into religious and civil court, tried with blasphemy, treason, and be a follower of Jesus. As the world slides into darkness it continues to lash out at the **truth** and the light.

Yet even this persecution is used by God as it gives His people opportunity to point out the stark contrast between the way of the world and the way of the cross. Even though it is shining the light that brought the world's attention to the church and thus led to the persecution to begin with, the church is called to continue to shine, even in persecution, so that those around us might know the truth and the light that are only found in God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Because of this promise that our witness will continue, and we will be witnesses to the very courts before which we stand and the people around us who oppose our message, Jesus gave another command. *"Make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves."* (v.14)

This is something we do **now**. We need to make up our minds now. before the persecution and troubles come, that we will not worry when they do. We need to make up our minds now how we will respond when we are called to suffer for our faith. We are to work now on building a relationship with God that will strengthen us when persecution comes. We need to build our spiritual muscles now, because if we wait until we need them it will be too late.

If we are prepared we will not have to worry about how we will defend ourselves. God will give us what we need because we have learned to listen to His voice. He will give us wisdom the world cannot contradict. They

will not like the wisdom. They will still reject the message. Even though we will win the argument and the truth will be revealed, giving the right answer and standing for the truth may be the very things that get us killed. Look at what happened to Jesus and Stephen. Yet, if Jesus died for the truth that we are sinners and cannot save ourselves—if Jesus died on our behalf so that we might have life—we ought to stand firm in that truth and hold tightly to Him whatever the cost and wherever it leads.

Jesus' followers can even expect to be rejected and betrayed by those closest to them. He said some would even be put to death by their family members. At the very least, everyone will hate His followers, simply because they are His followers.

The question often comes up about whether or not the church will be on the earth during the great tribulation. Will Jesus return and rapture His people from the earth before God's wrath is poured out, or is the church present during that time of great testing and punishment of sin? This is a question that is on the minds of many, and good, Bible believing, Christians continue to come out on both sides of the issue. Jesus' answer about what signs will come with the dismantling of the temple also helps us understand the issue of the church's relationship to the tribulation.

The **church** does not get to escape pain and suffering. If anything, being a follower of Jesus increases the suffering we have in this world. The benefit is that it also gives us hope in the midst of our suffering that God is at work in us and eternal life in His glory awaits us. Persecution gives us the opportunity to

live for Him, see His glory worked out and revealed in us, and to exercise our faith. It is a chance to rest in Him and remember His promise to Paul, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Yet we have a promise, *“Not a hair of your head will perish.”* (v.18) Clearly, in light of the persecution and betrayal Jesus has been talking about, we are not meant to take this literally. This is a proverb used in Jesus’ day to remind one another of God’s watchcare and concern. It was a reminder that God **knows** what is going on and He will guard and guide those who are His own.

The key to understanding what Jesus meant when He said that not a hair on the heads of His followers would perish is found in His next statement, and the end of this morning’s text. Jesus went on to say, *“By standing firm you will gain life.”* (v.19) The issue is not one of comfort. It is one of life. This is closely related to Paul’s statement that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Jesus gave Himself for us, to save us from our sin, and redeem us from our corrupt generation. He died for us so that we might live for Him. This is a faith in which we can stand firm, because it is God who gives us the strength to stand. Our Master and example is the one Who slept in the boat even as the storm raged around Him, secure in the knowledge that He was in the Father’s hands. We, too, can live and rest in the knowledge that there is **nothing** that surprises God or that can pull us away from Him. We can stand firm in the faith that He has given us and gain life as the result.