

## **Luke 21:5-19**

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

## **By Your Endurance** - November 17, 2019

*Luke 21:5-19*

I'm sure you've noticed that every few years the news is full of stories about Christian pastor or scholar who has made a careful study of the Scriptures and because of their unique insight or method or skill at numbers, they and they alone have decided the world come to an end at a particular time and on a particular day. For a while, the story dominates the news. We learn of people selling all their possessions, quitting their jobs, and moving to exotic locations to be with the so-called prophet predicting the end. To date, it hasn't happened. But we know that already.

From the beginning of the church, there has been a quiet expectation that the world as we know it will come to an end. After all, the very first words of the Bible are "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The last words of the Bible are "Come, Lord Jesus. Amen." The underlying assumption is that we are living somewhere between the beginning and the end of time. When the world as we know it ends, there will be a new heavens and new earth and time will be no more.

It is natural, therefore, in a religion that speaks of beginnings and ends that people might want to know when the end is going to be.

Now most Christians, living 2000 after Jesus' earthly ministry, are aware that the idea of Jesus' return and a new heaven and earth are part of our beliefs, but at the same time, they aren't terribly obsessed with the end of the world.

Such was not the case 2000 years ago. In his ministry, Jesus did speak about an ending to the world as known by his followers. Some of his teachings urged his followers to be alert at all times because the end could come at any time. Jesus even said that some of his followers would not taste death before he comes.

The early church was in a quandary. The first followers of Jesus thoroughly expected the world to end and end soon. And frankly, it's hard to criticize them for wanting the world to end. After all, most of the first Christians did not have great lives. The reason the early church grew is that the gospel attracted people who were at the bottom of society: Women, slaves, poor people were heavily represented in the early church.

Jesus' message resonated with them for two reasons. First, Jesus preached the good news of a God who loved everyone equally and didn't care about nationality, social status, or gender. Second, Jesus said the present world would come to an end — and soon. Imagine, you were someone at the bottom of society, Wouldn't you be attracted to a religion that promoted the equality of all people and promised that the unjust, oppressive world in which they lived was going to end? Of course you would.

The problem for early Christians was serious: the promised end was not happening. People who based their faith on a world-ending event within their lifetimes were getting very confused and depressed. The same old world of injustice and oppression was still there. Life was getting worse, not better. The prophecies of Jesus weren't happening. If that part of Jesus' teaching was apparently false, perhaps the rest of his message was equally false. Who would believe in a God who did not keep his promises?

The Gospel of Luke, which we read from today, was written some forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. That would make it some time after 70AD. Why is this important? Well, just a few years earlier, the world came as close to ending as it would ever come. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed, utterly destroyed, by the Roman Empire. This is significant because Jesus spent much of his ministry and recruited many of his first followers from Jerusalem. When Jesus spoke of the end of the world, his listeners naturally thought Jesus was speaking in part about the end of Jerusalem.

So there it was. Jesus said Jerusalem would be destroyed — and it was. OK, so early Christians expected Jesus to return right after the last stone of Jerusalem fell.

But nothing happened. Destroyed city, no Jesus. What now?

What now is right now. What now is where we find ourselves today. I think it is safe to say that for just about everyone in this room, our lives have been shattered not once but many times, just like the Temple. Remember, for Jews, the Temple was the center of their universe. God lived there. Every year, literally hundreds of thousands of Jews would come from all over the world to gather during the holy days. For Jews, the destruction of the Temple was almost as life shattering as someone reaching into your body and pulling out your heart.

But that has happened to us, hasn't it? The history of human beings as a whole and the history of us as individuals is filled with loss, destruction, and pain. No matter how you look at it, our worlds have come to an end: some have lost parents at a young age. Some have been the victims of vicious violence. Some of us have been betrayed by partners, suffered the death of children, lost jobs, been caught in natural disasters. I don't need to go on, you get the idea.

For all of us, when our worlds are destroyed, when we lose everything that is familiar to us, when our routines are disrupted well beyond repair, we cry. We ask ourselves why is this happening. We beat ourselves up thinking that if only we had done something differently, the disaster would not have happened. Maybe so, but probably not.

Some biblical scholars claim that because Luke's gospel did not appear until after the destruction of the Temple, Luke could have put Jesus' words of prophecy about the Temple in his mouth, that he really didn't say them. However, the fact that many of Jesus' original followers, people who were

heard him speak, did not dispute Luke's account tells us that no, Jesus himself prophesied the end of the Temple thirty years before it happened. To be honest, it wasn't that hard. The Jews hated the Romans. They did all they could to subvert their rule. It was inevitable that the two sides would fight and that Rome would win and destroy the Temple as a symbol of their victory.

If we look at our own lives, if we look at the world clearly, we can predict what is going to happen if nothing changes. When we look at the times our worlds have ended, we can often see the clues, clues we ignore, that tell us disaster is coming unless something changes.

So here we are, or here we have been, looking out on the destruction and upheaval that we have faced in ways great and small. These things have happened once, they have happened many times. What should we do, because friends, I can guarantee that our individual worlds will shatter again? Over time, I've observed a number of ways people respond in the face of shattered worlds:

For some people, the answer is to pretend nothing is wrong. The worst things have happened, yet some pretend nothing has happened and they make no changes. They don't think about what to do next. They keep it all inside. They deny.

I don't think I need to tell you that denial is not a good plan for when your world turns upside down. Keeping the pain locked in and going about your daily business as if nothing happened will eventually destroy you. A lot of people simply get busy. They run around like a mouse in a maze thinking activity will make the pain go away. But when we deny our pain, confusion, and anger, know that these things will eat us up from the inside. They will cripple us mentally. They will cripple us physically, they will wreck us spiritually.

Some do the opposite. Instead of denying the end of their worlds, they actively acknowledge them. They do cry. They do talk. They do attempt to rebuild. But they, too, have a problem: they live in fear. They live in the fear that because their lives have been destroyed once, they will be destroyed again and they cannot deal with having to rebuild once more. So their solution is instead of getting busy as the deniers do, they play it safe. If they lost a partner for whatever reason, the answer is to never have a relationship. If they had a business that went bankrupt, they vow only to find safe, non-challenging jobs where failure is almost impossible. Some, when told they have an illness that will require a lot of treatments, will refuse because treatment might fail. Many say to themselves, whether they are eighteen or eighty, that it is too late to change.

But Jesus has the words of eternal life and eternal life promises one thing: we are loved, cherished, and valued by God both now and forevermore. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God because death and destruction do not have the final say.

For too many of us, the word death means one thing and one thing only: the cessation of our physical bodies. When we breathe our last breath, we die. End of our story.

Yet the reality is that we experience death many times in life, long before the end of our bodies. We die, friends, when our worlds are shattered. We die when we are hurt or abused. We die when we lose parents, partners, friends, and children. We die when our homes are destroyed or when we lose our jobs. We die when war, or violence, or climate change bangs on our doors. Oh yes, we die not once but many, many times.

So what do followers of Jesus do when we die? Do we live in denial? Do we live in fear? No. Christians can embrace death, Christians can endure the suffering, Christians can not only survive, but thrive because at the core of our faith is not death, but life and resurrection!

The destruction that Jesus talks about in today's lesson refers to everything in life that can and will go wrong. Hatred, arrest, and persecution comes in many forms. There have been and will be many times when friends and family will run away from us or discourage us or remind us of our failings predicting that nothing can change, nothing will get better, we are powerless.

But Jesus offers us a way out of the cycle of denial, of fear, of discouragement, of opposition, of hopelessness. He says that we cannot, we should not, we must not trust just in ourselves, but in the God who made us and in the Christ who died and rose for us, offering new life, redemption, and resurrection. This is the core of our faith.

Hear the good news! When our worlds are shattered, when disaster strikes, when we feel like everyone has turned against us, Hear the good news, we are not alone! Jesus promises that because he faced death and lost the world of his friends, his community, his family and went on to new life in resurrection, we can too! Every one of us who has lost our life, whether it is once or many times, every one of us who has lost our lives can by faith be resurrected! We can begin again. We can find new directions. We can face our losses without living in denial and without living in fear. We can do all these things when we trust in our guide, our friend, our savior to put the thoughts in our heads and the words in our mouths to find a new path forward.

Death does not have the final say. Destruction does not have the final say. Those who hate us do not have the final say. Circumstances and events beyond our control do not have the final say! No, we are alive! We are alive every day. We are alive in the Christ who loves us and was resurrected by God to prove that new life, new starts, new directions are always available to those who dare trust in Jesus Christ.

Go ahead! Embrace you current situation, whatever it is. Look at what is going on in your life realistically. Then, surrender your denial, surrender your fear, and surrender to Jesus Christ who will show you what to do. This day and every day. Forever and ever.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.