

## “Stand Firm”

### Luke 21:5-19

A Sermon Delivered by  
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We are at the end of the Church year. In fact, next Sunday, which is Christ the King Sunday, is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. So, it makes sense that the scriptures for this Sunday address the end of the world and, specifically, what to look for before that happens. We spend so much time planning our worldly future and sometimes our next vacation that we often forget that our own lives in this world will not last forever. The plans we make must always consider our final destiny.

In today's passage from Luke's gospel we find Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem. He is nearing the end of his earthly life. Some of the people around him were awestruck by the beauty of the temple because it was one of the most impressive buildings in the world at that time. To most Jews it was a place made to last forever. It was the “soul” of the Jewish faith, just as Rome is for Catholics. So when Jesus said, “You know all these things that enamor you? The time will come when everything will be destroyed.” Those who heard him must have thought he was either completely off his rocker or guilty of blasphemy.

Turns out, he was right. As the result of a rebellion by the Jews against the Romans, Jerusalem was attacked and the city and Temple were completely destroyed. The Holy of Holies, a place so sacred that only the high priest could enter it once a year, was ransacked and the sacred vessels carried off as booty... or spoils of war, if you can't get past the word “booty.” All that is left of King Herod's mighty monument in Jerusalem today is the “Wailing Wall”. For many Jews, including Jews who converted to Christianity, it must have seemed like the end of the world. Early writings of Christianity focused on what they believed was the imminent end of the world and the return of Christ in judgment. In the later writings, the focus shifted to how to make the best use of time until Christ actually returns.

Anyone who tries to predict Christ's return is either a false teacher or is ignorant...or both. Because while scripture gives us signs, it does not predict - at least not prediction that we can guess ahead of God. The purpose of prophecy is to show us that God is in control so that we are not afraid. We can see and have confidence in God. His plan does not center around our comfort, but our hope in our eternal reward. In the passage we read, Jesus tells His disciples some of the warning signs. They are the things we see happening in our world today. It is not coincidence. Jesus specifically warns us here about three very real dangers.

First he warns in Luke 21:8 “Watch out that you are not deceived.” When FBI trains its agents to identify counterfeit notes, they are not required to study fake bills. Instead they undergo a thorough study of genuine currency – how it looks, how it feels. One agent said, “We get to know the real thing so well, so thoroughly, that it's easy to spot the fake.” The key to knowing falsehood is...knowing the truth. That's why it is so important for us to read it, hear it, to study it, and to memorize it. Attend Sunday School or Bible Study faithfully. Ask questions. Seek to understand what you read. We must not fall into Satan's trap. His strategy has not changed. The first thing he did to Adam and Eve was to deceive them. The first thing he did to Jesus when He started His ministry was try to deceive Him in the wilderness. Our spiritual enemy is still at it today. He uses three steps to deceive us:

First, Satan disputes God's Word. In Genesis 3:1, Satan asks, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” He suggested to Eve that somehow she had misunderstood what God meant. You thought you know God's Word, and then someone comes and said that there is a new interpretation to what God has said. You're confused. And then you'd probably say, “Now, I'm not sure I know what the Bible says.

Second, Satan denies God's Word. In Genesis 3:4 he says to Eve, "You will not surely die." The road from doubt to denial is very short. It starts with doubt, and if you do not take care, you'll end up denying the Word. Doubts are natural, but make sure you are looking in the right place for answers.

One author, Dr. David Jeremiah, describes it very well in his book, *Until He Comes*, "... every time you try to find an interpretation of a Scripture that will permit you to do something you know is wrong – every time you give a little ground to the devil and lose some ground from the Word of God – it isn't long until Satan drives a truck through that opening and dumps a load of stinking garbage in your life."

Third, Satan displaces God's Word. In Genesis 3:5 Satan says, "For God knows that in the day that you eat of it your eyes will be open and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." In other words, go ahead, do what you think is good. It is no longer important what God thinks. Little by little you give Satan a foothold into your life.

"Do not be deceived" is Jesus' first warning.

Jesus' second warning is "Do Not Fear." Look at Luke 21:9

9 "But when you hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately."

"Do not be terrified." If our hope is in God and if we believe that He is in control, we can be confident – even in a world gone mad. When trouble strikes, our foundation is revealed. Those who build their houses on sand never have peace in the storm. I saw yesterday in the news of two homes in Florida that are completely destroyed because of an enormous sinkhole. Apparently, the drain water mixes with the limestone and it creates a cavity where everything above it just sinks into this chasm. A couple of weeks ago in the same state, a man was swallowed alive by a sinkhole, never to be found again.

In our modern culture, even Christians have been persuaded to place their hope in things and circumstances instead of in God. When people lose their sense of false security, they begin to search for something stable. That is our opportunity to point to the hope we have in Jesus Christ. The enemies of the Cross proudly challenge Christian values. But atheism only prevails when the sailing is smooth. You notice that in tragedy, you never see people proclaiming atheism. Instead people practically beg for prayer. They always search for peace and look to God or someone who knows God. Our job is to point them to the hope found in Jesus Christ. He is the only lasting peace anyone can have. That is a powerful testimony in a world whose sense of security has been shattered.

This does not mean that we are indifferent to world events. We feel the pain of the loss; the anger against the attackers; the fear of the tragedy. Emotions are normal; they are God-given. But we take refuge in knowing that God is in control. Jesus told us beforehand so that when we see these things, we do not succumb to the sinkhole known as the fear of the world, but we build our lives on the solid foundation, the rock of Jesus Christ.

Third, and along the same line, Jesus tells us not to be distracted. Look at Luke 21: 10-13.

10 Then He said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

11 "And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven.

12 "But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake.

13 "But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony.

Jesus sums up His prophecy of wars, sorrows, and persecutions by saying, "but it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony". This is the ultimate purpose of all these things. When the world is comfortable and everyone says that there is no need of God, it is difficult to share the hope of Jesus Christ.

Billy Graham was called by God to preach the gospel to the world. His calling began right after World War 2. As he toured battered Europe, the damaged buildings were still filled with bullet holes and bomb damage. People were seeking hope, peace and answers. The world had just been on the brink of destruction. Nothing was stable and no one was at peace. The result was an unprecedented response to the gospel.

When prosperity abounds, people forget God. When people have no fear, they also do not fear God. When life is comfortable, God is irrelevant to most people. Jesus said that the coming of troubles will be an occasion to testify. The world will ask 'why' and look for hope. We may not be able to answer 'why', but we can answer the 'what'. What is the meaning of life? What is our purpose? We can explain that we live in a world filled with sin and human beings are controlled by sinful human nature. Those who hope in this world will always be disappointed and have foundationless lives. The world focuses on prosperity and peace. When peace is lost, prosperity is meaningless.

We have a calling and God sends us out "as sheep among wolves" for the purpose of bringing people to Jesus Christ so they can be forgiven just as we have been. Glorifying God and having a personal, intimate relationship with God always has been the purpose of our lives. Our calling and command is to bring others into that same hope.

Do not be deceived. Do not be afraid. Do not be distracted.

Let us pray.

Creator God, in whom we find our hope and purpose, speak to us. Open our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts and minds to your good news and calling. You tell us to give thanks in all things. That's a difficult command to follow, especially when we cannot see the purpose of continual suffering like that seen in the Philippines this week. We trust you for the bigger picture and ask that you would comfort your people and provide for their needs. May their hearts be receptive to your mercy and eternal hope.

We pray for those throughout the world who are being persecuted for their faith in you. Give them strength and courage until they are rewarded with their eternal blessing and peace. Bless their families with physical and spiritual protection.

Finally, Lord, give us strength and discipline that we might love you with our whole heart, mind, and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.