Stand Firm to the End

Matthew 24:1-51
Key Verse: Matthew 24:13
“but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

How many of you have ever thought about what the end of the world will be like? Some of you may have lived through the panic of the year 2000, when it was thought that the world would descend into total chaos as the computers would revert back to the year 1900. Or would World War 3 start and we all annihilate ourselves with nuclear weapons? Could a meteor come to hit the earth, or would the sun explode billions of years later and engulf our world? Perhaps these don’t scare any of you, and you know as the Bible says, that the end of the world will come when Jesus comes again. So now the question might be, are you ready for him to come again? To be honest, I used to be unsure about this. Now I no longer doubt. My faith is small, however, but the good news is, I am growing in assurance of the truth more each day. In today’s passage, the disciples had the same question about the end of the age, but Jesus makes very clear the way of salvation. I pray also that you may grow in faith, in hope, and in assurance of your salvation when Jesus comes again.

Look at v.1, “Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.” The time was Tuesday evening in the last week of Jesus’ life, just two days before he would be crucified. Earlier that day Jesus got into a conflict with the religious leaders and teachers of the law. As we heard last week, he denounced them for their hypocrisy and indicted them for the murder of God’s prophets and messenger, but in the very same sentence, in the very same breath he held out his hands, longing to forgive them and take them to himself, but they were not willing. Without the forgiveness of God, only judgment remained. He warned them with the truth, “Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ (Matt 23:38-39).” After he had said this Jesus and his disciples left the temple to go back to Bethany, about 1.5 miles away, where they were staying before the Passover festival. The disciples must have pondered Jesus’ last words in the temple. The temple, desolate? We will not see Jesus again? As they were leaving the temple the disciples said, “Look Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” (Mark 13:1). They must thought, how could something so big, so beautiful become desolate? In Jesus’ time, the temple was still under construction, but King Herod made it a very ambitious building project. The eastern side of it was adorned in gold, so the sun shone on it for miles away. The walls were made of white marble, so up close it looked like the sea, and from afar looked like pure snow.

Jesus responds to them, “’Do you see all these things?’ he asked. ‘Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another, every one will be thrown down. (v2)” The disciples must have become even deeper in thought now, as they made their way out of Jerusalem. They took a break on the Mount of Olives. Sometimes, he even spent the night on the Mount. From that mountain you could

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see the golden sunset blanketing all of Jerusalem. There was a burning question in their hearts, look at v.3, “As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. ‘Tell us,’ they said, ‘when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’” Mark tells us that it was Peter, James, John and Andrew (Mark 13:3) who came to him privately. Now look at their question. They connected the destruction of the temple with the coming again of Jesus Christ. They also connected the come of Christ with the end of the age. They had some idea that Jesus was the Messiah who would come and establish God’s kingdom here on earth. They wanted to know when, and what would be the sign of that time. Their understanding of the kingdom of God was not perfect, however. They may have thought that the kingdom would have appeared right away (Luke 19:11), and that Jesus would somehow disappear and reappear as the undisputed Messiah. I’m not sure how much they believed in his death and resurrection at this point, and even in John’s gospel we see that they did not know where Jesus was going up until the night of his death (John 16:18). But they ask, “when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of the end?” Jesus answers their question in reverse order, first telling them about the sign, and then telling them when, and throughout this teaching he helps them prepare for those last days.

Jesus’ first words in response are, “Watch out that no one deceives you.” What is he preparing them for? He is preparing them for an indefinite period of time when he rises from the dead and ascends to heaven, until he comes again. During that time there will be many who will claim they are the Messiah, but they really are not. He tells them in v.6, “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” Jesus says, “see to it that you are not alarmed.” I think there can be some degree of fear when you hear about war. Jesus will even tell his disciples to flee when appropriate. What Jesus means here is “don’t panic.” Don’t lose your mind, and don’t become hopeless when you hear of wars and famines and earthquakes. It might seem like the end of the world, but it is not. Jesus says such things must happen, but the end is still to come. They happen because of sin and the curse of sin. Because of sin, nations are at war. Because of the curse, the earth groans. But Jesus said these are the beginning of birth pains. As we know with the birth of a child, the frequency of contractions increase and so does the pain, until the child is born. Likewise, we will see increase in the intensity and frequency of wars, famines and natural disasters right before God’s kingdom comes. In Christ, this should not cause us to panic, but even be a little bit hopeful.

Jesus turns up the heat in v.9, “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.” This just got really serious. Not only might your country be at war, but you personally will be persecuted, hated, and put to death because of Jesus. Persecution will cause many to fall away from the faith and betray one another. People will renounce their belief in Jesus in order to survive, and may even report on their fellow brothers or sisters. On top of that, many false prophets will appear and deceive people. They will try to lead people away from the faith, and instead lead people to themselves. We see in our time false prophets. There was a man who claimed Jesus would come again on May 21, 2011. Many people sold their homes, some lost their life savings because they believed that man. When the end did

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not come, I would not be surprised if several left the faith because of this man. It also gave a reason for non-believers to mock Christians. Jesus says in v.12, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.” This is a sad reality, and we also see this in our society today. People love their comforts and their pleasures. They care more about themselves that they will not help someone in trouble. We were talking last night about a video that you can see of a man who was beaten unconscious, fell onto a street and robbed, and as people passed by nobody bothered to help, or even move him off the street. Later a taxi drove by and ran the man over, causing him to die. We see this in our own city, in how the shootings have increased. What could cause one person to shoot someone else, and often not feel any guilt or remorse?

Why do you think God has allowed wickedness to increase, and false prophets to arise? Why has God allowed persecution, and wars, and famines? Part of it is to show the utter sinfulness of sin, and to show why these things must come to an end. It is to show that God’s wrath upon this sinful world is just. But what else is all of this suffering for? How can Jesus tell his followers not to be alarmed at the threat of war? How could he tell them not to fall away in persecution or death? What is the believer’s source of strength? How can a believer not panic in uncertain times or fall away because of danger or temptation? It is faith. Suffering always refines and purifies faith. Why would God lead his church through such dark times? It is to test and show their faith, which is like pure gold. It is often the hard times that draw us closer to God, and help us to depend on him more. Difficult times, more often than easy times, strengthens our faith. And that is what will save us in the end. That is what will save us at the end of the age: faith, faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus tells us this in v.13. Can we all please read v.13 together: “but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.” The person who has faith in Jesus to the end, even in war, or famine, or earthquakes, or persecution, or even death will be saved.

Jesus wants to give everyone in the world an opportunity to know him, and then to trust and believe in him. Look at v.14, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” That’s why the delay. That’s why there is this whole period of time when Christ rose from the dead until the time he comes again – so that the gospel will be preached in the whole world. What is this gospel? It is this: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).” The gospel is the love of God for sinful man. It is the cure for our love growing cold. Rather, our love gets hotter, it boils over because of the great love God has shown to us. God himself has come to you. He loved you first, when you did not love Him, He loved you. All the world stood in rebellion against God, you and I were destined for death because of our sins – but Christ came to die in our place for the forgiveness of our sins. He gave his life for ours. All of your sins are forgiven in Christ. Everyone in the world will have the opportunity to hear this message and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sin, but sadly, not everyone will believe.

Jesus continues to prepare his disciples by foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem. He says in v.15, “So when you see standing in the holy place the abomination that causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand.” There are many interpretations about

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what is the abomination that causes desolation. Abomination means destestable, and desolation means complete destruction. So an abomination that causes desolation is something horrible that causes complete destruction. The simplest interpretation is to look at Luke 21:20, the parallel passage, which says, “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.” The abomination is the Roman Army, who will commit great atrocities and annihilate Jerusalem. When the Roman Army begins a siege against Jerusalem, Jesus tells his disciples to flee. If you were on your rooftop enjoying some sun, take the fire escape and get out – don’t go into your home to get anything. If you were out in the field, don’t take you cloak. And pray it won’t be in the winter, making roads more difficult to travel, or on the Sabbath, because before the destruction, even Jewish Christians still observed restrictions not to work or travel in the Mosaic Law. The destruction of Jerusalem happened in 70 AD, around 40 years after Jesus made the prediction. It is interesting to note that historically, before Jerusalem was destroyed, all of the Christians fled to a town called Pella. This is documented and noted by a Christian historian named Eusebius in the 4th century AD.

Josephus, a Jewish historian, who was an eyewitness to the destruction, writes that 1.1 million Jews were slaughtered during the siege at Jerusalem. During the siege, the same horrors that happened in Old Testament times happened at Jerusalem. There was starvation, cannibalism, and mothers might have even eaten their own children. There were also so many crucifixions that the Romans ran out of wood for the crosses. The city was burned and reduced so bad that a visitor would come to Jerusalem and could think it had never been inhabited. The destruction of Jerusalem was truly a time of great distress unequaled from the beginning of the world until now. Those days were cut short, otherwise, all of the Jews would have been exterminated. But so that the gospel could be preached, a remnant was spared. The Romans took no joy in wiping out Jerusalem. The Roman general Titus, a Gentile and a pagan, refused to accept a wreath of victory, saying, “There is no merit in vanquishing a people forsaken by their own God.” Even a non-believing Gentile perceived the judgment of God over a city that crucified the Son of God.

As terrible as that destruction was, it was not the end. False Messiahs and prophets would still appear, some even with the power to perform great signs and wonders. But the Messiah is not a person that only a few people know. The Messiah isn’t someone who might be found in some remote place, and the Messiah isn’t someone who is in a secret place. The Messiah won’t be found only in China, or Germany, or Uganda, or the US. The Messiah will be known and seen by everyone. Look at v.27-28, “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.” Jesus includes a proverbial saying, vultures can see a dead animal from a mile away – likewise, we will also be able to see Jesus even from far away when he comes again.

His coming will also be accompanied by signs in the sky. When the times of suffering for the church have completed, the sun and the moon will be darkened, and the stars will appear to fall from the sky. People will see these wonders with their own eyes. Just as the sky went dark when Jesus hung on the cross, these supernatural phenomena will accompany the second and final

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coming of Christ. In verse 30 Jesus gets to the disciples' question of what the sign will be. It says, "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory." The sign of the coming of Christ is Jesus Christ himself. The sign of the end of the world is Jesus himself. For many, it will be a time of mourning, because they have willfully rejected Christ, and now they see him. For others, it will be a time of excitement and joy, to finally see the Lord Jesus Christ. It depends on your relationship with him. There was a person I worked with at my company for 8 years, I have never seen his face. He works in the Florida office, but I work with him on an overnight maintenance task every quarter. He is one of the nicest guys I have ever talked to. Just this past month he flew in to Chicago, and instantly we greeted each other with a big smile and a handshake, finally getting to see the face of the voice behind the phone. So will it be with those who love the Lord. He will send his angels to fly you into heaven, and you will meet him personally, and see with your own eyes the face of the Jesus Christ the Son of God.

After telling them all of these different signs, especially major sign of Christ himself, Jesus gives a short and simple parable of a fig tree. When the twigs are tender and the leaves come out, you know that summer is near. This is a reliable indicator of the summer. The sky might not always be blue. The rain falls randomly throughout the year. You can feel the temperature, but you can't really see it – but the fig tree, year after year, will definitely tell you it is summer when you see leaves. So Jesus tells them also to look out for the things he told them about, but Jesus is talking to them about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. He promised them these things will happen in his generation, and they were all fulfilled, 40 years later. There were wars and rumors of war, false Messiahs and prophets appeared, we see them in the book of Acts and the other epistles. Rome laid sieged to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Jesus says in verse 35, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." There are parts of Jesus' words that have not been fulfilled yet, such as the darkening of the skies and his coming. But these indicate the passing of heaven and earth, but even then, Jesus will come. He promised he will come, and he will be true to his word.

In v.36-51, Jesus answers the question about when he come. Look at the answer in verse 36: "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." So when will he come again? No one knows. Only God knows. That's the answer. The truth though, is that there is a set and appointed day that Jesus will come again. It has been fixed from before time existed. Jesus compares this situation to the time of Noah – people were going about their daily business when one day, the flood came. What is also interesting is that while Noah was building the ark, he preached repentance for decades, but no one believed and ignored his message. Jesus will not come at a time when the world has destroyed itself in wars. Jesus will not come after a meteor hits the earth, or the sun scorches it. Jesus will come at a day like every day. For some it is war every day. For others, it's going to work or to school or serving in any other way. Jesus then tells another parable about a thief who comes when the owner does not expect. He is reiterating the fact that he will come again at a time no one expects – so watch and be ready.

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So will you be ready when Jesus comes again? Will you be ready for the end of the world? Where will Jesus find you when he comes again? We are living in the last days, there are wars, famines, earthquakes, false teachers and persecutions, but we do not have to be alarmed. It seems more and more difficult to live as a Christian, but after the testing of the church is complete the end will come. So keep the faith in every circumstance. Trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and remember how he saved you by his blood, that you might share in eternal life with him and have a place in his kingdom. Keep your hope alive that Christ will come again, and that you have been washed clean in him. Love one another, just as he commanded. May the love of God be your source of power to serve the king. Remember the gospel of the kingdom. If you neglect it, or ignore the call to repent and believe, you will fall into sin and find yourself drinking with drunkards. If God punished his own people in Jerusalem so severely for their hypocrisy, what will happen to those who reject his offer of peace and forgiveness? They will be cut to pieces, or in other words, flogged, or punished severely, and assigned a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 24:51). God is gracious, see he has not come yet, and why? Because he is making the offer of salvation to the whole world through the gospel of the kingdom. But he will come at any time now. Expect him any day. Keep watch, heaven is coming! May your faith be tried and true, stand firm to the end, and you will be saved!

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