

Luke 21:5-28 Straightening Up

The Word of the Lord from Luke 21: "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The Lord in His Temple The Lord is in the temple. The Lord is in His temple in our Gospel lesson for the day. Mark it well, for He will never be in that temple again; and the consequences are beyond staggering.

Listen carefully to the final words of our Old Testament lesson, which are also the final words of the Old Testament. In Malachi 3, the Lord promised that He would suddenly come to His temple. In Malachi 4, He promised to send John the Baptist as the second Elijah. John would turn hearts, and he would do so by pointing both young and old to the Lord, come in the flesh. He would come with salvation for all. Deliverance from death and eternal life would be theirs, because the Lord was present with His people. Because of His coming, there was only one thing that could go wrong—that would be if the people rejected the Lord. If they didn't want the Lord of life present, He wouldn't force Himself upon them. He'd leave them. They'd be on their own. What happens to sinners apart from God who gives life? Eventually, only death and destruction. So the Old Testament ends with the Lord pleading with His people to listen to John the Baptist, "lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

In our Gospel lesson, the Lord has come. Prophecy of Malachi fulfilled: He is in His temple. He has amply demonstrated that He has come to save and deliver: He's healed the sick, made the blind see, even raised the dead. He's constantly warned people of the wages of sin, constantly taught them that He has come to bring them eternal life, to deliver them from their enemies of sin, death and devil. He's told them not to rely on their own efforts, because that won't do. The Lord is in His temple with grace and life. Nothing could be better than that.

By the end of the week, the people are going to make sure that He's not there anymore. To be certain, they're going to haul Him away from the temple, out of the city, and onto a hill where they'll put Him to death. The people know the prophecies of Malachi, both the promised Messiah and the consequences of rejecting Him...and they're about to reject Him anyway. Forty years later, the temple that they want to preserve without Him will be utterly demolished, along with the rest of Jerusalem. The prophecy of utter destruction will take place because they reject the Lord—the Lord who warns them again of the temple's destruction in our Gospel lesson today.

How can this be? How does this happen? I tell you this: Jerusalem is destroyed because its inhabitants have an improper distinction of Law and Gospel.

They've got the Law wrong. Over time, they've come to believe that the big enemies aren't sin, death and devil, but the Gentiles—namely, the Roman army. They've come to believe that the land is occupied because of their transgression, that the wages of sin is Caesar, not death. They've also come to believe that, if they just clean up their act enough, then the Messiah will come. If they do the hard work of fanatically keeping all of their purity laws—if they just straighten up and fly right enough, then the Messiah will come and reward them for their efforts. Because they have the Law so wrong, they also have a different gospel: they believe the good news is that the Messiah will come and save them by driving the Gentiles out of the land: their salvation will be that they live in the unoccupied, independent kingdom of Israel forever.

So the Messiah comes, born of Mary. He comes to His temple, declaring that He has come to save them by His work—save both Jew and Gentile, save them from death and give them eternal life in heaven. But the people are working hard for a messiah to save them from the Gentiles so that they can have their nation back for themselves. Because of this, they want a different messiah than Jesus in the temple, especially since this Jesus tells them to honor Caesar. So just a few days after this, they'll take Him out to Calvary and kill Him to be rid of Him. God will grant their desire: He'll tear the curtain in two inside the temple to show them that He's not there anymore, that they're on their own.

What happens over the next forty years? The fanaticism grows. More and more, the people of Jerusalem believe that their messiah and salvation will come when they keep those purity laws enough— and part of that purity will mean evicting those unclean Romans from Jerusalem. That's exactly what they try to do...and Rome responds by invading and destroying the city in unspeakable brutality and violence. The people of Jerusalem do not straighten up, but are bowed low. The city is trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, just as Jesus says. The utter destruction takes place because they rejected the Messiah, because they demanded that the Lord leave. These are the days of vengeance, to fulfill what is written.

All of this is what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel lesson. People are admiring the giant stones that make the temple walls, so He warns them they will soon be rubble. His followers are startled and ask for more information. He doesn't tell them when it will happen, but rather warns them some more. He warns them to beware of false christs, because after He is crucified the people will look to other messiahs and idolize them. He warns against false notions of the end of the world, because people will continue to declare that a new age will arrive if they only keep the Law purely enough and get rid of the Romans. He warns them that nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom: in just a couple more days, the kingdoms of man will conspire to kill the King of heaven and earth. He warns them of earthquakes and signs in the heavens, both of which will take place at His death as the earth shakes and the day turns to night.

He also warns His followers that they will be persecuted—by Jews, by Gentiles, even by family: if unbelievers have rejected the Messiah, they will also reject His people. Some will even be put to death.

But! But the people of God are not forsaken. Even if all the world hates them, Jesus will still love them so much that He gives them His Word. He gives them what to say. He gives them what to believe. He doesn't withhold His promises, but continues to make sure they are proclaimed: and because His Word endures forever, it will give endurance to His people—and by that God-given endurance of faith, they will be saved.

After these words to His followers about the impending end of Jerusalem and His ongoing grace for His people, Jesus then turns to the impending end of the world—and His ongoing grace for you.

The End is Near

At the start of verse 25, our text switches from the destruction of Jerusalem to the end of the world: the "times of the Gentiles" are fulfilled and finished on the Last Day. Jesus describes the end with these words:

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of

what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. (Luke 21:25-27)

As Jesus spoke these words, so we are to hear them with Jerusalem's destruction in the background. As He describes the future destruction of Jerusalem, He tells that there are parallels to the future destruction of the world. The world will end, and it will end with distress, perplexity, fear and foreboding among the nations. In the end, like Jerusalem, it will be utterly destroyed. On that day, all will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory. And they will be terrified.

Why does it end this way? For the same reason that Jerusalem fell—the same improper distinction of Law and Gospel. People have a twisted understanding of the Law. Therefore, they see no need for the Gospel: more to the point, they see no need for the Lord and so they want to get rid of Him, too. This in turn leads them to follow all sorts of false christs and false end-of-the-world views. Let's illustrate.

People have all sorts of twisted understandings of the Law, though I think we can fit them all into a few examples. Some will echo the Pharisees of Jesus' time, saying that their god gives a set of commandments by which they can earn salvation. Now, if you earn your way to heaven by your works, then you don't need Jesus to do it for you: thus, you'll either ignore Him or even want Him removed from the picture, because your god will see Jesus as a false teacher for warning you against saving yourself by works. This is true for all sorts of religions around the world. It also a religion of the sinful nature that is in your heart. It creates a false end-of-the-world view, one in which you envision God saying, "Heaven's yours, because you earned it."

Others will twist the Law to say that it's more a set of guidelines than hard-and-fast, make-or-break, do-or-die rules. Just do your best, and God will love you for it. But if you earn your way to heaven by doing your best, then you don't need Jesus to do it for you. In that case, you might once again push Jesus aside and say, "I don't need You." Or else, you might reinvent Jesus: "I don't need You to be my Savior, but I need You as an example and life-coach to keep me trying hard to do my best." This also is rejecting Him as the Savior. It creates a false end-of-the-world view, one in which you envision God saying, "Heaven is yours, because you did your best."

Others will twist the Law to say, "Since I don't believe there is a God or an afterlife, I don't believe that He gave us any laws to follow or created a hell to avoid. Those commandments might work for you, and they might even help society run efficiently, but that's all they're good for." Now, if you don't believe in God and His Law, then you won't believe that there's sin you need to be saved from or a heaven to be saved to. If that's the case, you don't need a Savior and so Jesus is rejected once again. This creates a false end-of-the-world view, one in which the world just ends because it wears out.

Here's the truth: while there might be a million different variations on the themes above, they're all one giant rejection of Christ. There seem to be endless deviations to human religion, but they all deny the Gospel. They all want Jesus gone. That's what sin does: it wants Jesus gone.

And that is why the world is going to end—not because it wears out, but because the time will come when the Lord's patience ends and He says, "If you do not want Me, then you don't have to have Me around. I will give you a place where you need never have Me around again." That's what hell is. The only reason that this world holds together as well as it does is because it isn't God-forsaken, because the Lord still attends to it for the sake of His people, for the sake of Christ. Look at the rubble of Jerusalem after Jesus was rejected—hell is the ongoing, chaotic destruction in a place where there is no mercy of God because its inhabitants do not want Him there.

In the meantime, the world has its share of troubles, afflictions and disasters—some might say death throes to indicate that the end is coming. But for you, these are not death throes. They are birth pangs. They are reminders to you that Jesus' Word remains true. It remains true that this is a world of distress and perplexity. But it is also true that your redemption is drawing near. So while all the world is in distress at the thought of death and endings, it is not so for you: Jesus says, "Straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Dear friends, with this text the Lord does not give you a schedule for the end, nor does He want you to obsess over it. Rather, He would have you be prepared for it whenever it occurs. And you are prepared for it because of what He tells you in His Word. He tells you that, although the world wishes He were gone, He is still very much present and findable.

Just as one could point to Him in our Gospel lesson and say, "There is the Lord in His temple," so you can you today. You point to His Word and say, "There, in the Word, is the Word made flesh." And so He is. Jesus still speaks to you by means of His Word. By His Law, He shows you your sin and need for His grace.

By His Gospel, He speaks that grace and redemption into you. He tells you what He will tell you on Judgment Day: "You're no longer guilty, because I have died with your guilt already. That's why heaven is yours." And that's the message we declare to the world, that others might be prepared for Judgment Day.

You point to the font, to Holy Baptism. The Messiah is present there, too. He has joined you to Himself, to His death and resurrection. That is key for Judgment Day, for in Baptism the Lord says to you, "You will not die for your sin on Judgment Day, because I've joined you to My death for your sin. I've joined you to My resurrection, too, so heaven is yours. Straighten up and raise your head, because I have redeemed you." And you point to the altar, to the Supper, where the Lord gives you His body and blood—His risen body and blood that has conquered death, descended into hell and come back again for you. No destruction for you, because the Lord strengthens and preserves you unto life everlasting.

The Lord is still present in His temple for you: that's why this world is not forsaken. It's just that, rather than a temple made of large stones, He now dwells in the temple of His means of grace—but He just as surely, fully there as He was in the temple in our text. It's little wonder that the means of grace are held in such low esteem today, for Christ was treated the same way in Jerusalem. But He is present, and He will not forsake you. Whatever distress you see in this world, the Lord is as near to you as His Word and Sacraments. You will not be put to shame on Judgment Day. You will straighten up and raise your head in the presence of your glorious risen Lord, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen