

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, 6 “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.”

7 They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” 8 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.

9 “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.” 10 Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

12 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. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

SALVAGE DOGS

I grew up in a beautiful church.

It was the old First Baptist Church of Bluefield, WV, built in 1907. It had stained glass windows and a wonderful oak balcony in which the choir sat. The church also had the distinction of having a handmade pipe organ.

The sanctuary’s glory had faded even in the days of my youth. We were no longer the First Baptist Church. We were the During Street Chapel, a small church with a ministry to poor people in an economically depressed part of town.

But, the majestic old building still captured my imagination. We know that God is not limited to a building, but our thoughts about the divine are often attached to the worship spaces of our youth. And this was true for me when it came to this old Baptist church.

More than that, this church was an important place for my family.

My mom played the organ there for over 30 years. My father, sister and I sang in the choir. We taught Sunday School and Vacation Bible School in that church.

My brother and my sister were married in that building. In fact I carry a picture of that sanctuary and my father in my phone. It was a significant place for me.

But, as time passed our family moved away from Bluefield, and we lost touch with what was going on in that place.

That was until I was watching the DIY network and a program came on called "The Salvage Dogs." The Salvage Dogs are some good old boys from Southwest Virginia, my wife's old hometown of Roanoke, Virginia. They own a salvage business called "Black Dog Salvage."

Each week they would go to various locations and salvage what they could from building that were going to be torn down. This particular week they were going to Bluefield to salvage some doors, a pipe organ and a balcony from my old church.

I was fascinated and horrified and that same time.

The church had been taken over by a different group. Their more Pentecostal style of worship did not include choir lofts or pipe organs. And unfortunately the church also had severe water damage. The beautiful pipe organ had been damaged, probably beyond repair.

And so they began to take my old church apart. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't been so profane in the way they did it. They laughed as they took down a poster depicting the manger scene. They took down the beautiful oak doors that separated the sanctuary from the fellowship hall.

As they worked I noticed that the floors in the fellowship halls were the same ones I used to clean and shine on Saturday each week. But, now they were covered with grime.

A closer look at the walls revealed brown stains everywhere from water damage. To me it almost looked like the building was crying at what had happened to it over the years.

But, the most shocking part of the program was yet to come. In order to get the pipe organ out of the building they had to completely dismantle the choir loft. They took out bayonet saws and circular saws and chopped the beautiful curved loft into manageable sections for removal.

They stood around one section of that choir loft and said, “You know this would make a great bar.” And then they stood around laughing and joking about that for the camera. I thought about all those times we had taken an oath not to drink in that very building. You see, in the Baptist church not drinking alcohol is an article of faith.

That made their actions especially uncouth and insensitive. I could just imagine the reaction of my old pastor to that scene.

They dismantled the pipes to begin the removal of the organ, and as they did it they began to blow through the pipes making various noises. Once again their profane and insensitive actions made the destruction seem even worse.

Finally, they unceremoniously pulled the organ out. Since it was a custom job there was no real case in behind the keyboard. It was very awkward to move with a ton of cables sticking out the back. As one of the “Salvage Dogs” put it, “We did it no favors putting it on the truck.”

Finally, they tried to remove a beautiful cast iron lamppost that stood in front of the church. They decided to pull it over by attaching it to their truck. Unfortunately, it fell too fast, and it broke on the ground.

The program ended with before and after pictures. In the before picture I saw the beautiful old balcony and the organ intact.

And then they showed what the place looked like after they had done their salvage work. There was a gaping hole where the organ and balcony once stood. The sanctuary was now joined to a fellowship hall that was in much need of repair.

I thought to myself, “It might have been kinder if they had just torn the place down.”

WHEN THE TEMPLE FELL

When the Temple fell in Jerusalem, I think many people may have felt this same sense of remorse and longing except to the nth degree.

The Temple was more than just a place to worship for the Jews. It was *the* sacred space. Even thinking about the Temple falling was just too much to handle.

There was a reason for that. They had already experienced the destruction of their Temple once before. When the Babylonians took God's people into exile, they destroyed the city and burned God's house to the ground.

This was more than just a national crisis. It was a great theological crisis. Where was God in this great tragedy? Why didn't God come to their rescue as God did in the past?

During the Exile they reflected on this and decided that God was punishing them for their unfaithful and unjust ways. They remembered what the prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel had said.

The Temple was no longer God's house. The glory of God left the Temple and God's people for a while so that they might repent and go in a different direction.

The Temple had to fall so that God's people might be saved.

This was the bitter but necessary lesson that God's people needed to learn. God was greater than the Temple. God was greater than the fortunes of any one nation.

God was the Creator of heaven and earth. If you want to worship this God you have to imagine a glory that is greater than any earthly Temple. Their concept of God was way too small.

Isn't that how it is with most of us? Our concept of God is too small. We confine the Holy to the place where we worship on Sunday morning. We think of God in ways that are limited by our own history and our own preferences.

And when we do that, what happens to us when the Temple falls? What happens to us when people that are totally unconcerned about the sacred places of our lives destroy those places?

From a national standpoint, the attacks of 9/11 gave all of us a sense of profound uncertainty. What we thought was solid fell. And it has taken us many years to recover.

The same was true for God's people. They never fully recovered from the fall of that first Temple. The Romans were just the latest nation to control the affairs of God's people. The promise of the Promised Land had dimmed considerably.

HEROD'S TEMPLE

But, a bright spot was Herod's Temple. Yes, Herod was not the nicest person in the world. Well, it was worse than that. Herod was absolutely crazy and ruled with an iron fist.

But, he did one thing right in the eyes of the Jews. He rebuilt the Temple and restored it to its former glory. Actually, Herod had a knack for building, and the Temple he built included other buildings outside the Temple, the Temple Courts that made this one of the wonders of the ancient world.

All told it took over 80 years and several generations to build the Temple and all that went with it. But, for the Jews it was worth it.

And that's where today's lesson starts.

People are admiring the Temple and its beautiful workmanship. Jews came from all over the world to worship in the Temple at Jerusalem.

(This was so important to the Jews that even when the Romans had Jerusalem completely surrounded and under siege in 70 AD, there were still people who came to worship at the Temple. By the way, the Romans in a very clever ploy allowed these pilgrims to enter Jerusalem to go to the Temple. But, then they didn't let them leave and thus draining the resources of the city at a quicker rate.)

Anyway, when Jesus heard these folks praising the workmanship of the Temple, He said something very shocking. Jesus said, "...the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." This Temple that looked so solid and so spectacular would not last forever.

(In fact the Temple would be burned to the ground when the Romans finally conquered Jerusalem just a few short years after Jesus said this. The destruction of the Temple would create a big hole in Jewish life, and God's people would be scattered all over the ancient world.)

But, in Jesus' day such a tragedy was unthinkable. In fact to even suggest something like this would get you into big trouble with the authorities. (It was sort of like talking about bombs or weapons in an airport. Such talk was just not allowed.)

In fact when Jesus was tried before his crucifixion, his talk about the destruction of the Temple was mentioned as part of the reason that he should be condemned. If you said bad things about the Temple it was tantamount to saying bad things about God and God's people.

A SIGN OF THE END?

So, if the Temple would fall, the people were sure that the Apocalypse was not far behind. That's why the next question from the people was a question about signs of the end.

When will this take place? What will be the sign?

There's a "Far Side" cartoon in which a somewhat bookish-looking boy is trying to enter the Midvale School for the Gifted. He's carrying a book under one arm and leaning with his other arm, straining to open the door.

On the door there is a sign in great big letters. It read PULL. Sometimes even the brightest people have a hard time reading signs.

Jesus' point about the Temple was not complicated.

Messiahs will come and Messiahs will go. There will be dire predictions based upon earthquakes, wars and signs from heaven. There will even come a time when the Temple will fall.

But, the important thing is not what happens. The important thing will be how disciples respond to such circumstances.

The disciples of Jesus would be severely tested. But, when that time comes the disciples of Jesus should not trust in what they know or what they can do. They are to trust in God to give them what they need when they need it.

There is nothing that lasts forever...except the promises of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. That is our true Temple.

Heads may roll. The Temple may fall. But, in life and in death we can trust the fact that you belong to God. Jesus put it this way, “Not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

In other words, we cannot know the truth of God’s promises until we live them. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,

“...suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

When the Jewish psychiatrist, Victor Frankl was arrested by the Nazis during World War II, he was stripped of everything...property, family, possessions.

He also had another possession that was near and dear to him. It was a book that he was writing on the importance of finding meaning in life. Those concepts would later form the basis for a kind of psychotherapy known as logotherapy.

When Victor arrived in Auschwitz, the manuscript was hidden in the lining of his coat. But, then even that was taken away.

He wrote, “I had to undergo and overcome the loss of my spiritual child. Now it seemed that nothing and no one would survive me; neither a physical nor a spiritual child of my own. I found myself confronted with the question of whether under such circumstances my life was ultimately void of meaning.”

He was still wrestling with that question a few days later when the Nazis forced the prisoners to give up their clothes.

Frankl said, “I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherit the worn out rags of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber. Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in the pocket of my newly acquired coat a single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book which contained the main Jewish prayer, ‘Shema Yisrael.’”

(That prayer goes, “Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”)

Victor continued, “How could I have interpreted such a ‘coincidence’ other than a challenge to live my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?”

Later as Frankl reflected on his ordeal, he wrote in his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*,

“There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst of conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning to one’s life...*he who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.*”

That’s what Jesus does. He gives us a reason to live, a why to live for even when the Temple falls and all around us is death and destruction.

This past week I read something written by the Lutheran minister, Dietrich Bonhoeffer right before he was executed for his opposition of the Nazis. He wrote,

“O wondrous change! These hands, once so strong and active, have now been bound. Helpless and forlorn, you see the end of your deed.

Yet with a sigh of relief you resign your cause to a stronger hand, and are content to do so. For one brief moment you enjoyed the bliss of freedom, only to give it back to God, that he might perfect it in glory.”

When we think about the apostles and those who died for the faith, we recognize that most of us have not been tested as they were tested. Most of us have not experienced the betrayal of family and friends. Most of us have not faced martyrdom for our faith.

We have not seen the Temple fall.

But, the time will come. All of us in some way will come to a time of testing.

We will in our own way see the Temple fall. The people and places that meant so much to us will pass away. We will sit in stunned silence unable to say anything.

And it is at that moment that the grace of God as revealed in Jesus will speak for us. We will learn to live our faith instead of just talking about it.

We don't know when it will happen, but the Temple will fall.

But, take heart. Not a hair of your head will be harmed in the process.

The Temple will fall, but the foundation of our faith will remain firm.

Martin Luther, a man who knew much persecution and uncertainty in his life put it well when he wrote, "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing."

Amen.