**STAND FIRM, AND YOU WILL WIN LIFE**

April 17, 2016

Luke 21:5-38

Key Verse 21:19 “Stand firm, and you will win life.”

Last week, we learned that we are not born to die; we are born to live. We are born to be immortal children of God who will be like the angels, glorious and majestic. But in this world, we must suffer. So Paul wrote in Philippians 3:20-21, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” The second coming of Jesus Christ is the most glorious and the most anticipated event in history. There are about 330 general prophecies in the Bible about Jesus Christ; 110 of them are about his first coming and 220 of them are about his Second Coming. So there is a huge amount of Scripture that focuses on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Someone has estimated that over 1500 verses in the Old Testament looked to the return of the Messiah in glory and judgment. Our Lord Jesus referred to it 20 times and there are over 50 times in the New Testament we are warned that he is coming. Does the second coming matter? Yes, it matters more than anything else because the end of the story is the reason for the story. The end of history is the reason for history. The reason for Genesis is to get to Revelation. So in today’s passage we learn from our Lord himself the important features of his return, the signs leading up to it and how we are to prepare for it. Then we will worship better because we will worship the coming King, anticipating his full glory. It is going to be a great privilege for us to look ahead and see how it all ends.

But many don’t care about meeting Christ as seen in the following story: “The devil was planning to destroy the world. He called in his chief assistants. Anger stepped in and said that he would set brother against brother. Lust said that he would replace love and turn people into beasts. Greed advocated his passion for turning loose all the covetous cravings of the soul. Gluttony, Envy and Jealousy each had their audience with the devil as they presented their plans for destroying the world. The devil was not satisfied. Finally the last one came in and said, ‘I shall talk to people about what God wants them to be. I shall encourage them to follow the plans and purposes of God.’ The devil was not happy at such talk first. But the little devil went on, ‘However, I shall tell them there is no hurry. Wait until tomorrow. Don’t start until things are more favorable.’” The devil laughed and said,’ You are the one who shall go to earth and destroy it. You shall be called Procrastination.” Or another trick of the devil which is popular is to place high importance on our accomplishments as seen in the following: Ted Williams, the baseball star, had a great day at the plate hitting two home runs and going four for four at bat. Besides his fielding that day was remarkable. A young reporter came into the locker room and said, ‘Mr. Williams, you did everything today but walk on water.’ With that Williams turned to the locker room attendant and said, ‘Fill the shower, Today is the day!’”

Look at verses 5-6. “Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, ‘As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.’” The disciples were not from Jerusalem, but were from Galilee. We would say that they were “country bumpkins.” They would have seldom been to Jerusalem and thus would have seen the grandeur of the temple as tourists. The temple was impressive not only for its beauty but for its size. The foundation stones were almost the size of box cars (67 ft. long, 18 ft. wide, 12 ft. high). The temple was indeed, both great and glorious, especially to the disciples of Jesus. Jesus’ remarks are especially devastating, since the temple was the heart and soul of Israel’s worship. In verse 7 they voiced their concerns, “Teacher, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”

It is clear that the disciples viewed what Jesus had said about the destruction of the temple as synonymous with the end of the world. They were of course mistaken because a lengthy period of time would intervene between Jerusalem’s fall and the Second Coming. But there was a connection between the judgment executed upon the nation and the temple on one hand, and the final judgment at the end of the age. The disciples’ questions had two parts. They wanted to know (1) When will all this take place? (referring to the destruction of the temple) and (2) Will there be any sign ahead of time? The Lord’s reply comprises what is known as the “Olivet Discourse,” which is the greatest sermon on prophecy ever preached.

The disciples like many of us today, were concerned about the wrong things. They wanted to know information that would be of no real value to them, other than to satisfy their own curiosity. Jesus was more interested in affecting their conduct rather than satisfying their curiosity. Jesus, however, knew that if the disciples looked for signs they would be susceptible to deception. In the midst of all these tumultuous end times events Jesus specifically warns the believers about some real dangers.

**First**, Jesus warns, “don’t be deceived.” Toward the end of the age, Jesus has warned us that there will be an increase in deception and a tremendous potential for people to be deceived. In verse 8, Jesus says, “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them.” In 2011, one false prophet claimed that the end of the world was coming on May 21. There was a mass hysteria. This is exactly what Jesus warned against. Many people are susceptible to false prophets because they want to escape sufferings. Corrie ten Boom wrote a letter in 1974 warning against not preparing for coming persecution: “There are some among us teaching there will be no tribulation, that the Christians will be able to escape all this. These are the false teachers that Jesus was warning us to expect in the latter days. Most of them have little knowledge of what is already going on across the world. I have been in countries where the saints are already suffering terrible persecution. In China before the communists took power in 1949, the Christians were told, ‘Don’t worry, before the tribulation comes, you will be raptured.” Then came a terrible persecution during the communists’ reign. Millions of Christians were tortured to death. Many more lost their faith, disillusioned and disappointed. Later I heard a Bishop from China say, sadly, “We have failed. We should have made the people strong for persecution, rather than telling them Jesus would come first. Tell the people how to be strong in times of persecution, how to stand when the tribulation comes, to stand and not faint.”

**Second**, Jesus warns, “don’t be afraid.” Look at verse 9. “When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.” In verse 9 Jesus corrects the mistaken impression of the disciples that “everything that seems to be a sign of the end of times is in reality such a sign.” It is a mistake to take these signs of the end of ages as infallible indications that end of the age is immediately in sight. But Jesus said, “the end will not come right away.” In verse 11, Jesus also speaks about great earthquakes and famines and pestilence in various places. According to Matthew’s account of the Lord’s message, he summarized all of the above as merely “the beginning of birth pains.” (Matthew 24:8) As the time of the birth gets closer, the pain increases, the intensity grows and the frequency grows. Likewise, earthquakes and wars, and disasters will increase and intensify as the time of Jesus’ coming draws near. At the end of birth pains, there is a new life. Likewise, at the end of all these terrible calamities there will be a new world. So instead of being afraid, we should look forward to Jesus’ coming and new life with him.

Look at verses 12-13. “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me.” The persecution being described here is something that will take place in the immediate future. Rather than being blown away by persecution (whether it is religious, secular or domestic), we are to persevere, to endure, to stand firm. We are not to be frightened into failing to be a witness for Christ.

Corrie ten Boom told the following story: “Several years ago I was in Africa in a nation where a new government had come into power. The first night I was there, some of the Christians were commanded to come to the police station to register. When they arrived, they were arrested and that same night they were executed. The next day the same thing happened with other Christians. The third day it was the same. All the Christians in the district were being systematically murdered. The fourth day I was to speak in a little church. The people came, but they were filled with fear and tension. All during the service they were looking at each other, their eyes asking, ‘Will this one I am sitting beside be the next one killed? Will I be the next one?’ I told them a story out of my childhood. “When I was a little girl,” I said, “I went to my father and said, “Daddy, I am afraid that I will never be strong enough to be a martyr for Jesus Christ.” “Tell me,” said Father, “When you take a train trip to Amsterdam, when do I give you the money for the ticket? Three weeks before?” “No, Daddy, you give me the money for the ticket just before we get on the train.” “That is right,” my father said, “and so it is with God’s strength. Our Father in Heaven knows when you will need the strength to be a martyr for Jesus Christ. He will supply all you need – just in time…Suddenly a spirit of joy descended upon that church and the people began singing, “In the sweet, by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.” Later that week, half the congregation of that church was executed. I heard later that the other half was killed some months ago. But I must tell you something. I was so happy that the Lord used me to encourage these people, for unlike many of their leaders, I had the word of God. I had been to the Bible and discovered that Jesus said He had not only overcome the world, but to all those who remained faithful to the end, He would give a crown of life.

How can we get ready for the persecution? First, we need to feed on the Word of God, digest it, make it a part of our being. This will mean disciplined Bible study each day as we not only memorize long passages of scripture, but put the principles to work in our lives. Next we need to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Not just the Jesus of yesterday, the Jesus of History, but the life-changing Jesus of today who is still alive and sitting at the right hand of God. We must be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is no optional command of the Bible, it is absolutely necessary. Those earthly disciples could never have stood up under the persecution of the Jews and Romans had they not waited for Pentecost. Each of us needs our own personal Pentecost, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We will never be able to stand in the tribulation without it. In the coming persecution we must be ready to help each other and encourage each other. But we must not wait until the tribulation comes before starting. The fruit of the Spirit should be the dominant force of every Christian’s life. Many are fearful of the coming tribulation, they want to run. I, too, am a little bit afraid when I think that after all my eighty years, including the horrible Nazi concentration camp, that I might have to go through the tribulation also. But then I read the Bible and I am glad. When I am weak, then I shall be strong, the Bible says. Betsy and I were prisoners for the Lord, we were so weak, but we got power because the Holy Spirit was on us. That mighty inner strengthening of the Holy Spirit helped us through. No, you will not be strong in yourself when the tribulation comes. Rather, you will be strong in the power of Him who will not forsake you. For seventy-six years I have known the Lord Jesus and not once has He ever left me, or let me down. “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.” (Job 13:15)

**Third**, Jesus warns, “don’t be distracted.” Look at verses 34-36. “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap…Be always on the watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.” Look at the parallel account in Matthew 24:37-39, “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.” Jesus said that when the end of the age comes, it will be like it was in Noah’s day. When we read that we tend to think that he is talking about that it will be evil as it was before the Flood. But when it says that they were “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,” it is not describing something evil. Although there was great evil in that day, that is not the problem that is being described here. His message is that people across the world in that day were caught up in doing the ordinary things. They were taking life as it came, just living day to day. And they were completely ignoring the warnings all around them. Rather than turning to God in repentance, they were drifting along with the prevailing culture, living lives characterized by the attitudes of the day. And Jesus says that is the way it will be before he returns.

Jesus warns us of three great dangers:

1. We are not to be deceived into thinking that we can escape the sufferings.

2. We are not to be frightened into failing to be a witness for Christ.

3. We are not to be distracted into living as if this life is all there is.

Jesus promises us, “Stand firm, and you will win life.” (19)