

## Living in the “Before” Time

Sermon by Jonathan Phillips

Scripture Text: Luke 21:5-19

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In the Gospel passage we just read, we see that the people following Jesus were amazed at the beauty of the temple in Jerusalem. The temple wasn't just a building for the people; it was the house of God. King Solomon had built the first temple hundreds of years earlier. It was filled with imported woods, fabrics, gold and jewels. It was a worthy home for the God of Israel. But it was destroyed when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and the people were taken into exile. After 70 years living in exile in Babylon, the people returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. But it could hardly compare to the splendor of Solomon's temple, simply because the people returning from exile did not have the resources that Solomon had.

Now – hundreds of years later – during Jesus' lifetime, the temple was undergoing a massive reconstruction project. By the point of time in Jesus ministry that we read about this morning, the temple was more beautiful than even Solomon's temple had been. If you and I were in that crowd that day, we would marvel at the beauty of the temple. It was made from huge white marble stone that were up to 36 feet (11 meters) long. In the sunlight the temple looked like it was glowing. It was decorated with jewels and tapestries, bronze ornaments and golden doors.

This was the temple. This is where God lived. So when Jesus says it will be destroyed, the people want to know when this will happen and what the signs will be to signal the destruction of the temple. When they see the signs, they'll know that the temple's end is near and they'll get ready.

So Jesus says, “Let me tell you what will happen. There will be those who come and claim to be the messiah. They will say the end is near. But don't listen to them.”

Then he says, “There will be wars and insurrections. But don't be terrified; the end won't come right away.

Then he says, “There will be natural disasters – earthquakes, famines, and plagues.” And then he says something *really* interesting. We expect him to say “these are the signs. *Then* the end will come and the temple will be destroyed.” But instead, he says, “These are the signs. But *before* all of this...they will arrest you, persecute you, hand you over to the synagogues and prisons.” *Before*. We want to know about what comes after. But Jesus is interested in the time “before.” *Before* the signs, when his followers are being persecuted.

After Jesus tells about false messiahs, about earthquakes, famines, wars, after he tells them that they'll be betrayed, imprisoned, maybe put to death, probably hated because of his Name, Jesus says (in vv. 18-19), “but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.” This is the Good News. “They can rob you of your physical life, but they can't take away the promise of the resurrection and new life with Christ. You won't be sorry in the end.” A few verses later, (in verse 28) Jesus says, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

We need to listen to Jesus' words that he spoke to the people in Jerusalem. We, also, need to focus on

the “before” time. Like them, we are challenged to live faithfully with perseverance, resting in the assurance of God’s provision. Relying on him in every moment. When our resources fail, He is there. When our families and friends betray us, he is there. When arrested, persecuted, and even put to death, he is there.

God is faithful to those who follow Him. Even when persecution comes, God has not abandoned those who follow him. Instead, Jesus tells us that those times are opportunities to testify to our assurance in Christ and to spread the Gospel.

Early Christian Traditions tell us what happened to the disciples of Jesus. We cannot be certain of the details, but it is apparent that the early Christian leaders underwent persecution.

We are told that:

- *Simon Peter* was crucified. He felt unworthy to be put to death in the same manner as his Master, and requested to be crucified upside-down.
- *Simon’s brother Andrew* was also crucified.
- *James*, the brother of John & Son of Zebedee, was put to death by the sword (we can read in Acts.)
- *James the son of Alpheus* was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple, and when the people realized that he had survived, he was beaten to death with a club.
- *Thomas* was pierced by the spears of 4 soldiers.
- *Simon the Zealot* was killed when he refused to sacrifice to the sun god.
- *Matthias* (chosen to replace Judas) was burned to death.
- The apostle *Paul*, as we read in the NT, was imprisoned for several years. Tradition says that he was beheaded in Rome.
- *Barnabas and Stephen* were stoned to death.
- *Matthew* was martyred by the sword.
- *Mark* was dragged by horses until he was dead.
- *Luke* was hanged as a result of his preaching.
- *John* faced martyrdom when he was boiled in a basin of burning oil but miraculously survived. He was then sentenced to prison on the island of Patmos.

How does this apply to us? We’re not persecuted. We are not risking our lives for the Gospel. We don’t have to worry each day about the possibility of dying for our faith. We enjoy the privileges of living in a country that is predominantly Christian. Even though many in this society may not have a living faith in Christ Jesus, and many do not understand what we believe as Evangelical Protestants, we are still able to worship freely and to call ourselves Christians without fear for our lives or the lives of our families.

So, how does this apply to us? (1). First, we should be thankful to God, thankful for our freedoms, thankful that we’re not persecuted.

(2) Second, we should pray for those who are being persecuted for their faith. There are places in this world where it is illegal to be a Christian, and illegal to convert others to Christianity. There are missionaries and church leaders in these countries that we must pray for, who risk their lives to spread the Gospel. And we should do what we can to support persecuted Christians around the world.

(3) Third, we should live our lives with the same dedication and integrity as those who remain strong in the face of persecution. The persecuted Church often grows because believers are dedicated to what they believe in. But sometimes believers who do not face opposition do not develop their faith.

A few years ago, I read a book which was written in the 1960s entitled *God's Smuggler*. It's authored by a man named Andrew who grew up in Holland during World War II. After he became a Christian, he became burdened for the persecuted church in the communist countries of Eastern Europe. Brother Andrew, as he became known, smuggled Bibles into these countries (the countries of Russia, East Germany, Albania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, and yes, here in Romania). He would search for Christians and give Bibles to them, since it was often difficult to find a Bible in their language. Perhaps more important than bringing the Bibles, Brother Andrew brought the message of hope. He reminded them of the promises they have in Christ. He encouraged them to continue in their faith. He greeted them in the name of Christians in Holland. And he assured them that people outside their country had not forgotten about them and were praying for them in their persecution.

About 10 years ago, Brother Andrew wrote a sequel to *God's Smuggler*. In it, Brother Andrew shares the story of Jan, his coworker, who visited a church in East Berlin shortly after the Berlin Wall had fallen.

“On the first Sunday after the Wall fell, Jan told me he was especially looking forward to attending church in East Berlin. Surely it would be a great time of rejoicing, of praise and gratitude to God for freedom restored – freedom to worship, to teach the Bible, and to evangelize without fear of punishment. But when he arrived at the church, he was shocked to find it nearly empty. Why? Because most of the members had gone to West Berlin to shop.”

During persecution, the Germans in East Berlin had stayed true to their faith. But with new freedoms and new opportunities came new distractions. They sought after these new things which were appealing to them.

Just like them, it is easy for us, since we are not being persecuted, to become distracted from our Christian walk. We're enticed to trust in the material and physical things in the world rather than in God. (*If you'd just have this, your life would be so much better. And if you buy this, your life would be so much easier. You're not complete without this.*) But whether good or bad, these things won't last. So whether in bad times or good, we must trust in God, the giver of all things. When all around us seems to fall apart, God will be there, and he will provide us with what we need.

Our families will fail us. Disease and death will come upon us. Our jobs are not guaranteed. Our money is not what sustains us. Where do you look for strength, security, and hope?

The Temple, as magnificent as it was, did fall. In fact, the construction process was completed in the year 64 AD. I can only imagine its beauty - 35 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. But only 6 years after the temple was completed, the Jewish people revolted against Rome, and temple was burned and destroyed. Today in the place where the great Jewish temple once stood are two Muslim mosques: the El-Asqa mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

The temple has fallen, but God has not failed. Like the disciples of Jesus, we live in the “Before” Time. Persecution may or may not find us, but we are to remain true to the Gospel, knowing that our God does not fail us. We are able to put our hope and trust in Him. So again I ask you, “where do you look for strength, security, and hope?”