

“How Long, O Lord?”

Mark 13:1-13

At our Circuit Pastor’s Conference a couple of weeks ago, we were studying this text, talking about Jesus sitting on the Mount of Olives overlooking the Temple. One of the pastors said, “I suppose you can see the Temple from there.” I was the only one in the room who had seen it firsthand. I remember that view. It is beautiful. The city of Jerusalem is a magnificent sight to see. Every building is made of stone, and those stones have a story to tell.

As the disciples look out at the stones of Jerusalem, they are wondering about the End Times. Jesus has predicted absolute destruction will happen – not one stone will be left upon another. The disciples ask the obvious question, “When will these things happen? How long? And what will be the sign so that we can be ready?”

This past Tuesday morning, I read an article that 400 rockets had been fired by the Palestinians overnight. When we were in Jerusalem, our tour guide Johnny let me know that there had been rockets fired out of Gaza that night. There was no imminent danger but, in his words “we need to be smart.”

When we were on the Mt. of Olives, the thing I remember the most were the Palestinian kids throwing stones and the police showing up with tear gas and AK-47’s. Thankfully they only used the tear gas. Jesus says,

“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet.”

And now when you look upon the city of Jerusalem, there are foundation stones from Jesus’ day. There are structures and walls built on top of that from the time of the Crusades and from the time of the Ottoman Turks – as many of the structures built by the Crusaders were destroyed. When we sailed on the Sea of Galilee past the Horns of Hattin. I think I was the only person on the tour excited to see this. It is two treeless hills where the final battle of the Second Crusade took place in 1187 AD.

So many crusaders were killed or captured that they could no longer wage war. The Turks controlled the land. Until two years later, when the 3rd Crusade brought war once again. This is the one led by Richard the Lionheart (who we know from stories of Robin Hood) and although they reconquered parts of the land, they failed to recapture Jerusalem. And six years after that, the 4th Crusade was called so that they could recapture Jerusalem. This one was an absolute failure. The only conquering they did was ransacking the Orthodox Christian city of Constantinople – because the Eastern and the Western churches had some major grievances with each other. As Jesus says, “Brother will deliver brother over to death.”

The point that I am trying to make is that the signs of the end have been happening for a very long time. Jesus says, “These are but the beginnings of birth pains.” I don’t know how familiar you are with “birth pains,” but my two daughters were born in a hospital in Ashland, WI that did not perform epidurals. Malinda received no drugs with Julianna. With Annalisa, we got to the hospital at 4:00 AM. She had back labor, and it just kept getting worse and worse. They gave her a shot of morphine in her spine to “take the edge off.” I had breakfast, lunch, a couple snacks, supper. When the baby seemed ready, Malinda pushed for three hours. It

seemed like it would never end. (And the cafeteria quit serving after 7:00PM). And she endured pain that I cannot imagine.

The signs of the end of the age: war, famine, natural disaster. Jesus says, these are like birth pains. When labor pains start, it is painful and highly uncomfortable – so I have been told. Looking out over Jerusalem, from the Mt. of Olives, you can see the results of war in the stones.

Jesus prophesied that “there will not be left one stone upon another.” In 70 AD, not only was the Temple and the city of Jerusalem destroyed, but the historian Josephus recorded that the Romans killed 1,100,000 people. They also cut down every tree within six miles of the city. In the Garden of Gethsemane, there are old trees. Olive trees never die unless you tear up the roots. It is assumed that at least some of the trees present today grew out of the stumps left behind.

But imagine what the Christians in that day must have thought concerning how soon the Last Day would come. How could it get worse than that? Jesus says it will. Beyond the horrors of war, famine, and disaster, all of the world will hate those who bear Christ’s name. We see the end drawing near – just like the Christians in the first Century, and just like the Crusaders, and just like basically every generation who has looked at this sinful, fallen world and cried out with the words of the Psalmist, “How long, O Lord?” How long will you tolerate this evil? How long will you allow Satan to be loose?

How long? That is the question the disciples asked. That is the question we ask. How long before the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?

Standing on the Mt. of Olives, looking out over Jerusalem, you can see the result of war. In those stones, you can also see the Word of Christ fulfilled. Exactly what He said about Jerusalem came to be. Those wonderful, great buildings – the Temple and its courts covered an area of

22 football fields with the Western Wall of the plaza being 9 stories tall from its foundation. Those wonderful, great buildings were thrown down. This was the kind of destruction no one could imagine. Yet, it truly did happen.

Christ our Lord carried His cross just outside that city and the Son of God poured out His blood for your sin. That is the kind of act of mercy and grace that seems too good to imagine. Yet, it truly did happen.

He was laid in a tomb, and on that Sunday morning, He rose from the dead – conquering death for you and me, so that the grave will not hold us either. That is the kind of promise that seems too good to be real. Yet, Christ did rise, and you will also.

Jesus speaks of the end of the age. There will be war, famine, disaster, hatred – these are just the beginning of birth pains. At the very end, the world will endure pain and hardship in a way that I don't believe we can imagine – yet, it will happen. So we pray that the Lord will shorten those days.

Christ promises that He will come once again and bring an end to this fallen world once and for all. It seems like an ending too good to be true. Yet, it will happen. And even if all the world turns its hatred upon those who bear the name of Christ and seeks to silence the truth, as Jesus says of His disciples, "If these [men] were silent, the very stones would cry out" [Lk. 19:40].

Looking out over Jerusalem, to this day, the stones "cry out" and are a continual reminder that the promises of God will be fulfilled. Jerusalem was destroyed, just as Jesus said. The Son of Man was lifted up on the cross and on the third day rose from the dead, just as Jesus said. Christ our Lord will return, just as Jesus said. It will happen. Only God the Father knows how long that will be. So we pray that the Lord will shorten those days, and we pray "Thy kingdom come." Amen.