Luke Lesson 83 (2021)

**BE ALWAYS ON THE WATCH AND PRAY**

Luke 21:5-38

Key Verse: 21:36

“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.”

 In the previous passage, Jesus warned his disciples against the teachers of the law for their deceptive and greedy lifestyle, saying, “They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished more severely.” (20:47) Jesus also drew his disciples’ attention to the poor widow’s offering, who had to give all she had to remain in the corrupt religious system. It’s disturbing to know how these religious leaders took advantage of vulnerable people, including poor widows and orphans. The Jerusalem Temple was no longer the symbol of God’s glory but the sign of corruption.

In today’s passage, Jesus predicts the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Today’s text contains a lot of information that stirs our curiosity about the end times. So, throughout history, many Christian disciples attempted to speculate the end times based on the description of today’s passage and the likes (Mt. 24; Mk 13). I believe that most of us tried to figure out certain truths about the end times. Unfortunately, however, even though some speculations seemed to be convincing, most of them were incorrect. I guess we can almost say that today’s text is one of the most misunderstood and frustrating Bible passages. It’s frustrating because we try to find something we want to know from the passage that Jesus didn’t mean. Our focus is wrong. No matter how hard we struggle, we would never know the exact time of Jesus’ second coming or the actual events that would indicate the end times until they happen.

So, what’s the point Jesus teaching in this long extended passage? Well, it’s obvious. Jesus wants his disciples to be prepared no matter what happens in the world. It’s clear to us when we pay attention to the phrases, such as “Watch out that you are not deceived,” (8) “Do not be frightened,” (9) “Make up your mind not to worry,” (14) “Stand firm…,” (19) “Stand up and lift up your heads,” (28) “Be careful,” (34) and “Be always on the watch, and pray.” (36) Benjamin Franklin, one of the most important founding fathers of the United States, said, *“Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.”* Let us learn how to prepare ourselves for whatever challenges we face in today’s world.

Look at verse 5. “Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God.” The statement of this verse sets the direction of the discussion that Jesus is about to open. Several disciples were fascinated and commented on the majestic stonework of the temple and the beautiful decorations on the walls. The Jerusalem Temple in Jesus’ time was not the original temple that King Solomon built in 957 B.C. It was destroyed in 586 B.C. by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and reconstructed by Zerubbabel in abound 516 B.C. after the people of Israel return from their exile. The second temple was not so glorious compared to the original temple built by King Solomon. King Herod had initiated the extensive renovation of the existing temple, decorated it with marble stones, gold-plated gates, doors, and pillars. Herod’s temple was majestic and beautiful (Pic#1).

Of course, Herod did it NOT to honor God but to gain the approval of the Israelites. The beauty of the temple was well known even to the surrounding nations. It was the heart and soul of Jewish spiritual and cultural heritage. The people of Israel felt proud of their Temple. According to Mark’s account, some disciples said, “Look, Teach! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” (Mk. 13:1)

Their remark was innocent. Yet it prompted Jesus to pronounce an ominous prophecy against the Temple? Look at verse 6. “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.” Jesus had already announced the destruction of the city of Jerusalem as he entered it, riding on the donkey’s colt (19:41-44). Now, he predicted the collapse of the gorgeous temple building, and his disciples were shocked. The disciples could never have imagined that the temple building, which was thought to be the house of God, would collapse. However, if it would happen, as Jesus predicted, it represented God’s judgment against the nation, the severing of fellowship between God and nation, and the inability of the Jews to worship God. It meant the world went upside down. Look at verse 7. “‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?’”

In the following verses, verses 8-36, Jesus unfolds a lot of information concerning the end time signs. But his main focus was how his disciples should conduct during difficult times.

Look at verse 8. “He replied: ‘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.” Jesus warns first against false messiahs who are professional and religious liars. No matter how convincing they may sound, his disciples should discern that those who claim to be the messiah and those who claim to know when the end will come are nothing but liars. No matter how convincing they may sound and even claim to have received spiritual revelation, we should keep our distance from them. Jesus said, *“Don’t be deceived by them!”* By the way, why would Jesus warn first against false messiahs? It’s because there are many religious liars everywhere who prey upon weak, innocent, and vulnerable people. We surely need critical thinking to have discernment and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In verses 9-14, Jesus mentions a lot of challenges that we should face in the world. ***First, we should not be frightened by the general signs of the broken world system (9-11).*** Look at verses 9-11. “‘When you hear of wars and uprising, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.’ Then he said to them: ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines, and pestilences in various places, fearful events, and great signs from heaven.” All things mentioned in these verses are terrible; wars, riots, natural disasters, pestilences, fearful events. When those things happen more frequently, we naturally become frightened and panic as if the end of the world is very near. But Jesus said that they are not the end time signs, and we should not be frightened. Those are the beginning of birth pains (Mt. 24:8; Mk. 13:8; Ro. 8:22-23).

Apostle Paul explains what birth pains are. Romans 8:22-23 states, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” When we think of the things happening, such as wars, uprising, natural disasters, famine, pandemics, we are frustrated and feel helpless. But Apostle Paul compares them to the pains of childbirth. Those birth pains are the universal struggle for the new birth through its painful process of restoration and transformation in the broken world system. These birth pains are necessary. And they are the sign of hope for the day of our adoption as God’s children, the redemption of our bodies.

***Second, as Christian disciples, we should make up our minds not to worry when persecution comes (12-14).*** Look at verses 12-14. “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. But make up your minds not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves” Persecution comes to Christian disciples in various forms, physical, emotional, psychological, social, financial, and political. To be persecuted in any form is not a pleasant experience. We may become worried and try to avoid persecution.

But why does Jesus allow us to go through persecutions? It’s God’s way to bring our testimony about him to those who persecute us. Sometimes, persecution comes because of our mistakes and wrong things. Then what shall we do? Should we deny our wrongdoings? No. We should admit our mistakes and repent instead. In other words, we should remain authentic and transparent before God and before people. We become an excellent testimony to others not necessarily through our perfection but through our authenticity.

In verses 15-16, Jesus promises that he would be with us during persecution and give us words of wisdom to defend ourselves. It indeed requires our complete trust in him moment by moment. One of the most painful persecution is the persecution from our loved ones. Look at verses 17-19. “Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life.” Here, when Jesus said, “not a hair of your head will perish,” he didn’t mean that their persecutors will never harm Christians. Christian disciples can be miraculously saved or be martyred by those who hate Jesus and the truth. Whether we are saved or martyred, we should not compromise but stand firm. By standing firm, we win victory over death. In other words, we need resurrection faith, believing that if we die with Christ, we will also live with him forever. For to us, as Christian disciples, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

 In verses 20-24, Jesus predicts the actual fall of the city of Jerusalem. He also explains why it would happen. Look at verses 20-24. “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” These verses are too hard to read and swallow. In A.D. 70, just as Jesus predicted, Jerusalem was trampled on by the Roman armies, and the Jerusalem Temple was demolished. It was a horrible judgment of God for the nation Israel.

God is merciful, but he is not spineless. Throughout history, we know that God judged people according to what they have done, including the people in Noah’s time, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and others who live in willful rebellion against God and the truth. Therefore, we should not fool around but have a holy fear of him in our day-to-day living.

In verses 25-28, Jesus talks about the actual end-time signs that will happen before his glorious second coming. Read verses 25-27. “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” It’s hard enough to bear the destructive earthquakes, floodwaters, famines, and pestilences. How much more difficult it would be if the sun, moon, and stars start shaking. The disturbances in heaven will cause greater panic everywhere on the planet earth. All nations on earth, including the superpowers, will be in great anguish.

Look at verse 28. “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads because the redemption of God is near.” Probably the celestial catastrophe is the worst event in history. I hope that we don’t have to go through this terrible catastrophe in our lifetime. But even if we have to go through these catastrophic events, we should not worry. We should stand up and lift our heads. What does it mean? It means we should put our absolute trust in God. Worry is praying for failure. We, as Christian disciples, should not worry but put our complete trust in God. Philippians 4:6-7 states, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Before closing his instruction, Jesus spoke the Parable of the Fig Tree to reiterates the certainty of what he predicted, including the destruction of Jerusalem, the birth pains, a celestial catastrophe, the redemption of our body, along with his glorious second coming (29-33). Jesus said in verse 33, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Look at verses 34-35. “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. For it will come all those who live on the face of the whole heart.” Life in this troubled world is not easy for anybody. Both young and old, all of us have to go through many challenges and trials in this troubled world collectively and individually. Birth pains, such as wars, natural disasters, pestilences, cause all of us to suffer collectively. We also experience personal sufferings. Individuals experience success in their life but not all the time. Some successful people in the world also suffer from broken and unhealthy relationships, which cause them more stress and anxiety.

Erich Fromm, a Germain scholar, said, *“We live in the age of anxiety”* in 1941. Now, we can say that we live in the most anxious generation in the history of humankind. Anxiety is the most common mental illness of people in today’s world. Because of the increasing level of insecurity and uncertainty in today’s world, more people fall victim to alcohol addiction, drug abuse, and unhealthy behaviors. People are most afraid of death, losing their own life – the fear of death or dying. Even though we may not necessarily fear death, we can be highly anxious if we are overly attached to the things of the world. The more attached we are, the more anxious we become. Unfortunately, Christians are not an exception. That’s why Jesus had to warn his followers by saying, “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life.”

So how can we overcome our chronic anxiety? We should learn how to **“let go and let God.”** We should sincerely acknowledge that we are not in control, but God is. Look at verse 36. “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.”

So what did Jesus mean when he said these words? “Be always on the watch, and pray.” First of all, we need to make sure that we believe in God’s grace of forgiveness of sins through Christ’s death and resurrection. We may go to church faithfully every Sunday and even participate in Christian activities, even as leaders, without personally accepting the grace of forgiveness of our sins. So we must make sure to receive the grace of forgiveness of sins personally. And that’s not all.

We also need to live by the gospel principle day-to-day. We should be strong in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ through spiritual discipline. Otherwise, we remain weak and cannot endure all the challenges and hardships in this troubled world. No matter how challenging we may face, we can be victorious when we become strong in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Conferences and revival meetings are good because they can motivate and inspire us. But we can never become healthy and victorious disciples unless we are disciplined. It reminds us of what Paul said in Galatians 2:2, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” As as I said earlier, failing to prepare is preparing to fail. We should prepare ourselves for the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in our day-to-day living. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “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.” (36)