

Hope for the End

Luke 21:5-19; Isaiah 65:17-25

We talked last week about some of the teaching that Jesus was doing in the Temple courts in Jerusalem in the time between the Triumphal Entry of Palm Sunday and His arrest, trial, and crucifixion. We focused on a particular teaching where the primary audience was a group of Sadducees, and the message was one of those hit-you-between-the-eyes things about the reality of resurrection and eternal life. We need to keep that teaching in mind as we look at this passage for today.

READ Luke 21:5-19

Out of context, this passage could read like any number of passages from Old Testament prophets. But we need to read this teaching from Jesus the same way we read the prophets, in the big picture. And the big picture for the prophets never ended with just warnings and reminders of the consequences of disobedience of God. All that was there, of course, and disobedience of God always had consequences, and still does, but the whole of the prophetic message always included the promise of hope for restoration of right relationship with God. That hope was never just wishful thinking, but it was grounded in the truth of God's love for us that never fails, never gives up on us, and never closes the door our return to God from wherever we wander off to. So we need to read what Jesus is teaching here about the end of time as we know it, the end of this age, in that same context. Jesus was just teaching about the reality of resurrection and eternal life, and now He is teaching about the reality that this age will end, which will usher in the new age of the kingdom of God. These teachings go together.

That said, Jesus is teaching some important stuff in this passage and in the rest of chapter 21 about what happens between now and the end of this age. He is not teaching this to us to scare us or to have us sit wringing our hands worrying about it or to send us off looking for signs so we can predict when it will happen. If you read any of this, or any of the other many parts of Scripture about the end of this age and do any of those things – live in fear, worry about it, or spend time trying to predict it – you missed the point, and the Teacher is really frustrated with you. What Jesus is doing here is providing

guidance to the people of God for how to live while we wait. We are still living in the same age as those taught directly by Jesus, so these lessons are clearly for us as well. This is all great stuff, and all perfectly consistent with other guidance in Scripture from the prophets through the letters of Paul and John and on to Revelation. What are we supposed to get from this? Here are a couple of highlights:

- False teachers and false prophets and false messages claiming to be of God are always going to be around. The test is always whether teachers and prophets and messages are consistent with what we know about God and what God has revealed in His Word. If you are insufficiently grounded in God's Word, calling out false teachers is going to be tough, and I guarantee you that if all you are getting is this time on Sunday morning, it is not enough. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that they should "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." [Ephesians 6:17, NIV] as part of the full armor of God that the Christians should be wearing as we wage our eternal battle against the forces of evil, and false teachers and false teaching are weapons on that side. Without the Word of God, we face the enemy unarmed.
- Life as the people of God while we wait is not going to be easy. God never promised us anything different from that. The person living in right relationship with God is going to be at odds with the world all the time. Among other things, that means that if we are living a life of mercy and justice and forgiveness and grace, we will be so dramatically different from the world of fear and revenge and self-centeredness that the world will, as Jesus says, treat us badly. If we are not currently at odds with the world around us, it might lead us to wonder if the world has noticed our life or we are just blending in.

So where is the message of hope and restoration in this? We have to go back to the discourse of Jesus and the Sadducees, who did not really accept the teachings of the prophets. In shaking their foundational disbelief in the concept of resurrection to eternal life, Jesus also shook up their attitude about the prophets. They could not ignore the parts of Scripture that they were uncomfortable with. Ignoring the prophets meant that the

Sadducees missed not only the warnings and challenges, but also missed the concept of the Messiah and the promises of restoration to right relationship with God in eternity. One of the most beautiful pictures of that relationship is near the end of the work of the prophet Isaiah.

READ Isaiah 65:17-25

This message was delivered to a complacent, drifting people. It was likely a hundred years or so after the first of the people of Judah began returning from exile in Babylon. The return was not so much a mass movement of people as it was a trickle. They had gotten pretty comfortable in Babylon, and the Babylonians had so thoroughly destroyed Jerusalem that returning didn't look all that great. But they did return, and got themselves busy rebuilding the wall around the city and the temple. Not much else happened, though. There had not been a general restoration of the Kingdom of David, there had been no great King and no triumphant establishment of a great nation. Because that was the restoration they sought the most, they missed the restoration of right relationship with God and began to wander spiritually. They went through the motions of worship, but their hearts were not in it. They began to toy with the worship of other gods, and their societal and cultural structure started to crumble.

So here in Isaiah 65, we are presented with a picture of the new heaven and new earth that is not some vague notion about some undefined potential future occurrences. Just as Jesus talked about how life in full relationship with God starts now, this Word from Isaiah describes a life of joy and peace that can make a difference in the world now. What God is creating here is a new Jerusalem, not some dressed-up version of the old one, but a completely new one. It would be so much better, so different, that the old Kingdom would not even be worth remembering.

We need to hear this, too, because we need our world to be different. We need our world to not be what we have made of it, but what God created it to be. We need our relationship with God and our relationships with each other to be what God intended.

Isaiah tells them, and us, that our world, our lives, can be different. We can be a delight and a joy to the nations, not dispensing fear and judgment, but mercy and grace

and a welcoming spirit. Our lives can be productive, not just filled with meaningless activity. Our work can have real value for ourselves and for our children. There would be no more injustice. And there would be peace.

This is not some utopian or unrealistic dream; this is the description of life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This is the vision of the abundant life that Jesus promised all who would believe, and it can be real in us now.

Our world can be different, starting with your little world and the lives of people who you touch every day. You can be a joy; you can be productive, you can treat all people with justice and fairness and dignity, you can be an instrument of God's grace and peace. And one person at a time, you will make a difference. This country and its people are in a generally sorry spiritual state, and Christians need to be all about making a difference. Our problems do not start with our government. Our government acts with the same self-centeredness as the people, and there is no leadership there to move us to something different. Our prayers for something different should start with ourselves and the everyday people who are not making a difference.

Isaiah tells us where to start – by being open to oneness with God, to a relationship where we are truly in tune with God's will, where we are ready and willing to act as agents of God's mercy and justice and grace, where our will is God's will.

God's grace and God's love for His people drive God to not leave the world the way it is, but to keep in on the march toward the day when God's kingdom will come. As we wait faithfully for that day, we have the gift of Jesus Christ – God with us; we live in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and we know the promise of eternity. With that power and that hope, we can make a difference. God can make a difference. Open yourself to the potential of a different world, now, here, by opening yourself to oneness with God, to the perfect relationship that God wants with each one of us. Open yourself to Him, and let Him make a different world in you.

Amen.