

Things That Have to Be Endured

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

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I was reading the news on CNN's web page last week and saw a cluster of articles that made me think of our text from Luke. Here are the titles of those articles:

Man Dies as Venice Faces Its Worst Floods in 50 Years

"Unprecedented" Bushfires Rage Across Australia

Arctic Conditions Are to Blame for at Least Four US Deaths. And the Weather Will Get Worse

Red Tide Is Back Off the Coast of Florida. Residents Aren't Sure How Much More They Can Take

Flooding. Bushfires. Arctic conditions. Red tide. They do sound a bit like that mysterious passage from Luke 21. Could we be approaching the end of time? Unfortunately Luke 21 has been misused and abused through the years. Those who thought they could predict a date for the end of time have coupled this text with passages from the book of Revelation, Daniel, and others, then applied their special calculations and formulas, and arrived at a supposed date for the end of the world. Airplanes will fall from the sky, they warn us, because believing pilots will be raptured right out of the cockpit. Cars will crash on the roadways because believing drivers will be suddenly taken up into the heavens. So far these predictors of the end of time have been 100% consistent—consistently wrong, that is! Any time you hear someone claim they have it all figured out remember what Jesus said. No one, not even Jesus himself, knows when the end is coming.

No, that approach to Luke 21 is unfortunate. It completely misses the point of this teaching, which is very important. New Testament scholars call this text the Temple sermon. When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the final time, his death upon the cross just days away, you may remember that he cleansed the Temple, driving away those who were misusing the Temple and

declaring, “My house shall be a house of prayer.” Jesus then told a parable, suggesting that the religious leaders, by rejecting him, were actually rejecting the work of God. Of course, that enraged the religious leaders. They would have done violence to Jesus, but they feared the people, who hung on every word he spoke. The religious leaders tried to trap Jesus in his own teachings, hoping to discredit him before the people. And then, as Jesus denounced these leaders for taking advantage of widows, a poor widow actually walked up to the Temple treasury. She had only two copper coins left, Luke says. She placed both into the Temple treasury. Jesus praised her as a model of faithfulness.

Then Jesus launched into the Temple sermon, this mysterious teaching about the destruction of the Temple and impending wars and natural disasters. Not one stone of the Temple would be left upon another, Jesus warned them. Their beautiful, magnificent Temple would be utterly destroyed. It was hardly imaginable. He then cautioned them to beware of false messiahs claiming that the end was near. There will be wars and insurrections, he said. Nation will rise up against nation, kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines, plagues, and maybe even an arctic blast.

People of faith will be arrested and persecuted, he said. They will be handed over to authorities and brought before judges because of their faith. Jesus said that their closest loved ones would betray them. When that happened, Jesus said that he would give them the words to speak.

It all sounds rather dreadful, doesn't it? You can see why some might be attracted to the sensational quality of this text and attempt to use it and others to predict the end of time. We've had some unusual weather, right? That must be a sign of the end, they reason. We've had wars and insurrections and earthquakes. All these must be signs of the end of time, right?

No, this text is really not a predictor of the end of time. That's not its purpose. The last verse of our text tells us what this passage is really about, and it is far more important than the end of time. These are Jesus' words, “By your *endurance* (through all those hardships) you will gain your souls.” The NIV translates it this way: “By standing firm you will gain life.” I like The Voice translation best: “By enduring all these things, you will find *not loss but gain*—not death but authentic life.”

Jesus was telling those gathered at the Temple that day one of the most important lessons of life—hardships are inevitable and sometimes they just have to be endured. We can't change the weather. We can't stop nations from rising up against nations. We can't stop all the hardship that comes to visit us. We must simply endure, believing that endurance has its own reward.

I think about what some of you are going through and it just breaks my heart. We all know and love Gunter and Anne Livingston. We know the great challenge they are facing. Patrick's family. The Dardens. Your family. How do people of faith face such hardships? Wring our hands and fret? Curse into the darkness? Wither away into nothing? No. People of faith turn their faces toward God and trust in the ultimate goodness and power of God. They endure. Is it easy? No. Is it fun? No. Can you make it? Yes. And according to Jesus, it will lead not to loss but gain—not to death but to authentic life.

Do you remember the Greek story of Pandora's box? Zeus was the king of the Greek gods. He didn't want humans to have access to fire, remember? Prometheus, on the other hand, wanted good for humans, so he found a way to bring fire to them. In response, Zeus presented Prometheus' brother, Epimethius, with a gift, Pandora, the first woman. She came with a box with a label on it telling the couple to never open the box. Epimethius insisted that Pandora obey the warning label. She must never open the box.

One day while Epimethius was away, Pandora's curiosity got the better of her. She decided to take a quick peek into the box. Besides, who was Zeus to tell her not to do so. Looking around to make sure no one was watching, she opened the box just enough to peek inside. As she did so, ghostly forms gushed from the box, unleashing all the evils now known to the world.

Here's the part of the story many people don't remember. At the bottom of the box, the last thing to come out, was something that wasn't evil at all. Waiting at the bottom of Pandora's box was hope.

That's what the Temple sermon is really about. When your Temple crumbles, when your earth quakes, when all manner of hardship visits you, endure. Stand firm. Hope.

The Temple sermon presents two contrasting ways to interpret the Bible. One is sensational. It focuses on prophecies of the future. It tries to unravel the mysteries, predict the exact dates, even though Jesus warned us not to do that. This first method is so focused on the future that it disconnects from the here and now. That is its fatal flaw.

The second interpretation calls us to extraordinary dedication to the present, which is far more important than the end of time. It calls us to be in the present, whatever that is for you and me, to embrace it, cherish it, and if necessary endure it. That endurance, Jesus said, leads us to authentic life.

What is your life like today? Everything may be fine. I hope so. If everything is not fine—your Temple is crumbling, your earth is quaking—maybe the Temple sermon is for you. We must own responsibility for our lives and change what we can change. But at the end of the day, we also must acknowledge that some things cannot be changed. They have to be endured. So turn your face toward God and trust in the ultimate goodness and power of God. Endure. Stand firm. Hope. And it will lead not to loss but gain—not to death but to authentic life.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we believe that one day you will create a new heaven and a new earth, a realm where there will be no more weeping, where infants do not die, where people do not labor in vain, a realm where the wolf and the lamb shall feed together. Until that day comes, help us to endure. Amen.