

WHEN THE TEMPLE FALLS

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Luke 21:5-19

Back in 2014, for Spring Break, my wife, daughter, and I traveled to Paris (the one in France).

One of the first things we did when we arrived in that city was to visit Notre Dame Cathedral. Notre Dame is located on the Île de la Cité, the island in the Seine River, right in the heart of Paris.

It just happened that while we were there in 2014, Paris was celebrating the 850th anniversary of that famous house of worship.

Twice that week we visited Notre Dame. We simply could not take it all in in one tour. We also spent a lot of time outside the building marveling at its architecture. We recognized that we were looking at one of the great buildings of the world—religious or otherwise. We marveled at its flying buttresses, its stained-glass windows, its statues and gargoyles, the great organ and bells, the towering spire, and so much more. Notre Dame has played a central role in the history of France. It witnessed wars and revolutions, the coronations and funerals of royalty. It simply oozed with history.

Now, I want you to imagine that you are there with us, back in 2014, and while we are standing there gazing upon the cathedral, commenting on its magnificence—its size, its stonework and carvings—someone were to walk up to us and stand in front of us and proclaim to us with convincing authority (and in English), “You know, in five years, this will all just be a pile of rubble.”

What would our response be? We would likely look at this person with incredulity because that makes no sense. Notre Dame is 850 years old. It has stood the test of time. It is an icon of the Western world and loved by all. It would never become “rubble.” That is inconceivable.

So anyone who makes this claim is either running a scam or just not firing on all cylinders.

Either way, with a few shared glances, our group quietly agrees that it is best if we all just move on. So, we walk away pretending that we are extremely interested in some other landmark.

However, what I asked you to imagine is exactly what happens in our scripture reading today from the Gospel of Luke. Except that the place of worship is not Notre

Dame, but the great temple in Jerusalem. And the person making this prediction is not some stranger, but Jesus.

We find this account near the end of Luke's gospel. Jesus has led his disciples to Jerusalem for what would be his final visit to that city. He is with his disciples, and they are standing in the courtyard of the great temple. Jesus and those with him are looking at the temple and admiring its magnificence and splendor. No doubt, there were some among Jesus' followers for whom this was their first trip to the big city. They are pilgrims, but they are also tourists. It was only natural that they should stare with awe upon this incredible structure that they had only heard about.

And as they look and comment Jesus says to them: *As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.* The temple, Jesus is telling them, will become nothing more than a pile of rubble.

The temple that stood in Jerusalem in Jesus' day was, in fact, the Second Temple. The first had been constructed by King Solomon in the Tenth Century BC. That temple was the home of the Ark of the Covenant and was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC.

The Second Temple was built about 70 years after the destruction of the first. We can read of its construction in the book of Nehemiah. The Second Temple underwent a massive renovation during the reign of King Herod. Herod spared no expense in this project. He doubled the size of the temple mount, rebuilt or replaced every part of the temple including its massive foundation stones. The renovation was completed about 10 years before Jesus was born and was one of the larger construction projects of the time.

Tragically, in the year 70 AD, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple as they put down a Jewish rebellion. Just as Jesus had foretold 40 years earlier, the great temple was reduced to rubble.

So, in our reading from Luke, when those around Jesus hear him say that the Temple will be destroyed, they ask him when this will happen. What will be the signs?

But Jesus does not answer their questions. In fact, he has already said on more than one occasion that *no one knows the day or hour.* It is not his place to lay out a timetable of events.

Instead, he warns them saying: *Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, I am he! and, The time is near. Don't follow them.*

He goes on to say: *When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes and famines and plagues and dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.*

He warns his followers that they will be arrested and persecuted. They will be dragged into the synagogues and prisons and brought before kings and governors because of Jesus' name. Because of Jesus, because of their faith, they will suffer.

That must have been a sobering moment for the disciples. They had traveled to Jerusalem with Jesus to celebrate the Passover Feast, and he is standing in front of the temple telling them that the temple will be destroyed, and they will face persecution and rejection. And while this sound like the end, Jesus adds these words, *This will give you an opportunity to testify.*" Testify to what? They can take their persecution and use it to testify to him, to the gospel, to God's promise of salvation.

And if the followers of Jesus are anxious about what they should say when they testify, *Don't be*, Jesus tells them. *I will fill you with the wisdom you will need to out argue any opponent.* And in the process, *You will gain your souls.*

As one theologian puts it, the people with Jesus had a choice. They could take Jesus' words as a warning and begin preparing for the end; they could hunker down for the terrible days to come and do nothing.

Or they could "chuck all of that and hear these words as an invitation to live now by faith and hope." And living by faith and hope will, as Jesus says, *Give them an opportunity to testify.*

For us, maybe now is the time to testify. Maybe now is the time to share the gospel in our community.

I know that some of you feel a heightened anxiety about our congregation. You look around on Sunday and you don't see as many people as there were two years ago. And you worry that our church is dying, that the end is near, that *the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another.*

I, personally, can also see that there are fewer of you than there used to be and while that distresses me, I've also learned not to become overly worried about the future of the church. The church is remarkably resilient; it is surprisingly strong. Throughout history, the Christian church has faced far worse than this, and it has

survived for 2000 years. As Mark Twain wrote when his obituary was published, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” The body of Christ is not dead.

The church has survived wars and plagues and scandals and more. But the church survives not because of us but because of the gospel message and the power of the Holy Spirit. In the church, we have something unique and special that you can't find anywhere else. If we choose to be a welcoming community of disciples of Jesus Christ continually demonstrating God's reign, then we will survive. If we can testify to the power of Christ in our lives, we will flourish.

In 2014, I visited Notre Dame, and five years later, the building was rubble. On the evening of April 15, 2019, a fire ignited in the attic of the cathedral, likely from a short in some wiring. The fire quickly spread and gutted the structure. But the church cannot be kept down. Almost immediately, work began to rebuild Notre Dame. That project will take years and the world is cheering it on. One day, I hope to revisit that landmark and observe the resurrected church.

In matters of faith, we always have a choice. We can bewail our misfortune and hunker down and wait for the end. Or we can stand up and testify to the world the glorious message of the gospel. We tell of Christ love for each of us—a love that brings us closer to God, the love that builds up the church. I say testify.

Amen.