

“The Signs of the Times”

(Luke 21:9-19)

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My actual title for today’s message is, “Staying Sane When the Whole World Goes Crazy” but that was too long to fit on the marquee outside. So, I decided that “Signs of the Times” would work as well.

Being a missionary, I really like missionary stories. One of my favorite is of a couple who, after decades of faithful service overseas, was returning back to the States. Their heart’s desire was to stay on the field, but their age and failing health concerned their mission board and after packing up their belongings they boarded a steamship bound for New York.

Also traveling on the same ocean liner was a popular, well-known government official and his wife. Over the weeks at sea this elderly couple observed the official’s drunkenness, womanizing, and foul language. It was a marked contrast to the lifestyle to which they’d become accustomed. They grew even more disheartened, when, upon their arrival in New York, the official and his wife were greeted with great fanfare—a brass band, reporters and photographers, roses for his wife—the works!

And so this aged missionary couple, health broken and spent in their service for Christ, walked off the gangplank and through the crowd, unmet and seemingly unknown. As they walked, a tear trickled down the husband’s cheek.

“What’s wrong?” his wife asked.

“My whole life I’ve given to serving Christ. We’ve spent ourselves for Jesus and nobody is here to greet us. There’s no bouquet of flowers for you.”

His dear wife thought for a minute and then said, “Honey, we’re not home yet. *We’re not home yet.*”

Yes, when we get home, the Bible says that there will be no more tears nor sorrows. And the Bible also promises believers peace and joy, right here and right now. But it does *not* promise shelter from disappointments, the absence of trials, freedom from persecution, or even protection from violent death. What the Bible promises is peace and joy *in the midst* of such trials as we rely upon the Lord.

It seems that lately, everyday has one more bit of news that makes our world more and more chaotic! Last week the Philippines endured the worst storm in recorded history, millions have had their healthcare unexpectedly cancelled, there’s war in Syria, many are fearful of nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran, unemployment is still above 7%, government officials’ behavior is increasingly outrageous, God is being gradually removed from our culture, etc. I could go on, but you get the picture.

In our text, Jesus emphasizes that many cataclysmic events will take place well before the end (vs. 9, 12). His words apply to believers in trying situations down through the centuries, from

those living at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem all the way to those that will live just before His second coming. His words are meant for our troubling times as well.

However, it is through His words that Jesus is showing His followers how to hold on, not only to their sanity, but also to their faith, when the world around them is chaotic and seemingly out of control.

When the whole world goes crazy, God's people can remain sane by knowing that all things are under God's righteous, sovereign control. Rest assured that none of today's troubles have caught God by surprise!

Jesus' purpose was not to satisfy curiosity about the end times. Rather, He was trying to instill assurance and faith within His disciples so that they would not fall away under intense persecution or world chaos. That is His purpose for us today, as well.

The descriptions Jesus specified can be seen in every age of the church, for from the beginning there have been counterfeit messiahs, national and international upheavals, and religious persecution. But these things will increase and intensify as the time of Jesus' coming draws near.

Thomas Campbell, British poet and educator, said that "coming events cast their shadows before" and he was right. There will be religious delusion (vs. 8), and even God's people will be in danger of being deceived. Satan is a counterfeiter who for centuries has led people astray by deceiving their minds and blinding their hearts. Israel was often seduced into sin by false prophets, and the church has had its share of false teachers (2 Peter 2).

Most people are naturally concerned about the future, especially when world events are threatening, therefore, religious racketeers can prey on them and take advantage of them. In every age, there are those who either claim to be the Christ or claim to know when He will return. These false prophets often "use" the Scriptures to "prove" the accuracy of their predictions, in spite of the fact that in Matthew 24:36-44, Jesus clearly stated that nobody knows the time of His return.

Additionally, in Acts 1:7, when the disciples asked Jesus when he was coming back, He replied: *"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.* (New International Version)

"Be not deceived!" is our Lord's admonition, and we must take it to heart. The only sure way to keep our balance in a deceptive world is to know the Scriptures and obey what God tells us to do (2 Peter 3:17-18). It is foolish and hurtful to become so obsessed with Bible prophecy that we start to neglect the practical things of the Christian life. Blessed are the balanced!

Jesus says in vs. 9-11 that there will also be international distress. I have a friend who has been keeping track of the earthquakes that have occurred in recent years. Another has compiled a list of all the wars and attempted invasions. Both have overlooked the fact that Jesus said that wars, earthquakes, pestilences, and famines by themselves are not signs of His soon return. These things have been going on throughout the history of the world.

Our Lord's admonition to His people is, "Don't be terrified!" These things must come to pass; there is nothing anyone can do to prevent them. This does not mean that God's people are

submitting to blind fate; rather, it means they are yielding to the plan of a loving Father, “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will...” (Ephesians 1:11 NIV)

Finally, there will be religious persecution, both official and personal. Of course, there has been religious persecution ever since Cain killed Abel. In the book of John, Jesus promised that His people would suffer (John 15:18-16:4, 32-33). And that promise holds true today according to 2 Timothy 3:12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...” However, the persecution in the end times will be much more severe than today's and many will give their lives for Christ.

So when the whole world goes crazy around us, we can remain calm and sane by knowing that all things are under God's righteous, sovereign control. Even if we die for our faith, we will live forever with Him.

In the meantime, take heart, when things get to a certain point of distress, God either makes a way out or He gives us grace to endure. Either way, the pain is alleviated. And I know this for a fact. When I was a missionary in Nigeria, I had a couple situations that afterwards, I realized could have been the end...of me! But before that realization even came to my mind, there was a grace that carried me through, a grace that kept me oblivious of just how dangerous was the situation. His grace truly is amazing!!

I began this sermon with a story and so I'll end with this one, which is true:

During the second century, the aged bishop Polycarp was arrested and brought to the Roman arena to die in front of the cheering crowd. The proconsul pressed him hard to renounce Christ and spare his own life. Polycarp replied, “For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” The proconsul warned that he had wild beasts. “Call them,” said Polycarp. “I can burn you with fire,” the proconsul warned. Polycarp replied, “The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished. There is a fire you know nothing about—the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment, the fire reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate? Do what you want.”

The proconsul shouted to the crowd that Polycarp had confessed that he is a Christian. The crowd shouted that he must be burned alive. They quickly collected the wood. Just before it was lit, Polycarp prayed, thanking God that he had been counted worthy of this day, to partake in Christ's cup of suffering. The fire was lit and Polycarp stepped into the presence of his Lord.

God gives special grace at such times. But we all need to ask, “Do I have that kind of confidence in the righteous, sovereign God? Do I truly trust God with my life?” If I do, I can stand firm even when the whole world goes crazy, because my trust is in the faithful God.

And if you find you're just not there yet in trusting Him, then maybe you can hang onto this:

We're not home yet. *We're not home yet!*

LET US PRAY