

Text: Mark 13:1-13 (NIV)

¹As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” ²“Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” ³As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴“Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” ⁵Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. ⁹“You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. ¹⁰And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. ¹¹Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. ¹²“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ¹³All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Theme: How Can We Stand Firm in the Midst of This?

The disciples marveled at the temple. It was a beautiful structure. It was one of the most magnificent structures of the ancient world. They also marveled at the stones. Some of them were 37 feet long, 12 feet high, and 18 feet wide. Imagine the engineering that it took cut them, get them up the hill on which Jerusalem is built, and then put them in place. It was something that they marveled at every time that they saw it.

There are many things that we marvel at in our world today. Our cities are filled with sky scrapers. In Milwaukee the Calatrava is a beautiful building. Our own church has very unique architecture. This past week someone who was never a member told me that he remembered when it was built because of its uniqueness. There are so many fascinating things that we marvel at today.

Yet, our Lord reminds us that all of these things will pass away. He told the disciples that not one stone will stand on another. In the last few years we witnessed the destruction of the World Trade towers by terrorists, the destruction of one of our cities by a hurricane, and the near destruction of our economy in the last year.

There are so many terrible things that happen in the world, and which will especially happen at the end of the world, that we might wonder how we can stand firm in the midst of it.

I. These great times of distress would be fulfilled in three ways.

The first was the destruction of Jerusalem. In the year 70 AD the Roman army came into Jerusalem and completely destroyed the city. The Jews were scattered throughout the empire. It was a time of horrible suffering for the Jews. Many of the things that Jesus prophesied about the second coming had an example in what happened in Jerusalem. It was a picture of the end of the world.

However, all of these things will also happen throughout the New Testament era, right up to the time when Jesus returns. Jesus tells us to watch out, so that no one deceives us. It was false prophets and false Christs that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem. In the last 2,000 years there have been many false prophets, who have deceived many people. The Lord speaks of wars and rumors of war. You can imagine how the people of Jerusalem first heard the rumors, and then the power of Rome came against them. In the last 2,000 years there have been many great wars. Just in the last century there were two World Wars and the Cold War. Now we have been in a war with terrorists for almost 10 years. There seems to have never been a time without war or rumors of war. Jesus talks of earthquakes and famines. You can't watch the news without seeing something about a natural disaster someplace. Jesus also speaks of persecution for His people. At first they were cast out of the synagogues. Then they were persecuted by the Romans. Even family members would despise them. Today we also see how difficult it is getting to confess Jesus as our Savior. It is as the Lord promises, *"All men will hate you because of Me."* Every generation has wondered how much longer they can hold out. When we look at all the evil in the world, we think that the Lord must be returning soon.

At the end, it will seem almost impossible to keep the faith. The New Testament often speaks of a short time just before the Lord returns when the suffering and godlessness will be almost unbearable. Revelation 20:7 says, *"When the 1,000 years (which is the New Testament era) are over, Satan will be released from His prison and will go out to deceive the nations... They surrounded the camp of God people."* It describes a time of unprecedented deception and persecution for God's people. Jesus says that even the elect would be deceived if that were possible.

II. In such distress it is difficult to stand firm.

It is even that way today. In our country our freedom of religion is a blessing, but it has also been used by the devil to create all kinds of strange religious groups, such as the Shakers, the Oneidas, the Mormons, and many more. There are many good things on Christian radio in Christian books, the internet, and many other things, but there is also a lot of false teaching. We look at how persecution is growing. We are allowed to have our morals as long as we keep them to ourselves. A bill that passed our state legislature last week will prohibit any judgement in sex education classes in our public school with regard to sexual orientation or relations outside of marriage. It's okay to talk about God today, but mention Jesus, and the hair begins to stand up on the neck of many people. In the midst of so much confusion and hostility, it often seems to be getting more and more difficult to know what is right or to confess Christ. It is easy to cave in and go with the flow.

III. But Christ gives His people the strength that we need to stand firm.

We find strength as we see how the Gospel is being believed. Jesus says that the Gospel must first be preached to all nations. The early Christians saw a miracle before their own eyes. They watched the Gospel go from Jerusalem to Samaria to Asia to Europe and to Africa. People from the entire Roman empire were coming to faith in Jesus as their Savior. All this happened despite severe persecutions. Today we as a congregation are so blessed to see a miracle before our own eyes as God has blessed us with the Hmong and French African ministries. It's not always easy sharing the buildings as we do, but I hear again and again from others what a special place Benediction must be right now. It is a miracle of God that the Gospel continues to spread to many ethnic groups, even today.

We find strength as we watch. Over and over again in this chapter Christ exhorts us to watch. In verse 23 He says, *“Be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.”* He ends the discourse with these words, *“What I say to you, I say to everyone, ‘Watch!’* Watch out for false teaching. We should know the Bible so well, that we can tell right away if something isn’t right. We need to be ready for times when people will put us down because of our faith. If we think that they will be loved by the world because we are Christians, we are in for a rude awakening. Jesus says, *“All men will hate you because of Me.”* We have to be ready for that. Many people also fall from faith when they see the suffering in the world, but Jesus also warns us of those things. There is much that can make us lose out faith. The Lord calls us to watch out for those things.

We find strength when God gives us the words to say. The same disciples who didn’t understand Jesus or were too timid to confess Him before His passion, spoke boldly and plainly about Him after Pentecost. The same Holy Spirit has been given to us. He also gives us the words to say. It often happens, that we are amazed that God gave us both the strength and the words to say when we were called on to confess Christ as our Savior. We know that it wasn’t from us. God’s Spirit gave us the words to say.

We find strength especially when we lean on Christ. There are dozens of admonitions in the New Testament to stand firm in the faith. How do we stand firm? Paul answers that question in Philippians 3:20ff, *“We eagerly await a Savior from [heaven]. The Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glory body..that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends.”* We look to Christ. When we are deceived or despair, we look to Him for the forgiveness of our sins. We find strength in Him in every time of need. But we especially know that this life is not all that there is. Christ has won something much greater for us. He will return at just the right moment and redeem His people. He will change our bodies so that they will be glorious. He will take us to His glory. That is how we stand firm, when we cling to Christ and His salvation.

When we spend all of our time marveling at the advances in this world, we will be unprepared when any of the signs of the end come upon us. False teaching, hardship, and persecution will only make our faith melt away. When the Lord returns, we won’t be ready. But we can stand firm though all those things, when we stand on Christ the solid rock, He will guide us through all the troubles of this world, until He brings us safe to His heavenly kingdom. May He grant each one of us that sure, strong faith in Him.

Amen.

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