

Be Prepared (pt 4) – Do Not Be Troubled

People seem to be captivated by fear. Fear of the pandemic, fear of economic upheaval, fear of war, fear of death, fear of the unknown, etc. How are we supposed to respond to these various fears? Do we ignore them in hopes they will go away? Do we adopt a fatalistic acceptance and say whatever will be, will be? Do we melt into a panic? In the same passage we started with a couple weeks ago, where Jesus warned us not to be deceived by false teachers in the end times, He gave instructions about fear in the face of coming events. We turn again to Matthew 24:4-6

“And Jesus answered them, See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.” The word “alarmed” here means “to make an outcry” – like when you are suddenly scared, and you shriek or yell. It is translated as troubled or frightened in some translations.

Look at some of the things Jesus told us to expect as this age nears its end: deception from false teachers, increasing wars and rumors of wars. In v. 7 we find widespread famines, pestilence, and earthquakes. He’s not candy-coating things for us. These events mean trouble and suffering for many people – including us. Our salvation doesn’t give us a pass to evade difficulties, sorrows, or suffering. What did Jesus say about these things? “See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.” He said these events are warning signs that the end is coming, but is not yet here. There’s no reason to panic, but there is reason to prepare. We prepare our minds to endure those things, and we also take practical steps where we can.

As we said in the first two messages, the most important preparation for these things is to abide in Christ, to know that you have received His salvation and are resting in His daily and eternal care. When we know the eternal destiny of our souls is taken care of, we can face trouble in this life with hope. Job, perhaps the most famous sufferer in human history, said, “Though he slay me, I will hope in him” (Jb 13:15) and “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.” (Jb 19:25-26) Job truly did suffer, and he struggled to deal with it, yet he continued to trust in God and His ultimate deliverance.

As Jesus prepared to leave this world, He told His followers in Jn 14:1 – Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. (I go to prepare a place for you, will come again, will take you to be with me – v. 2-3) Jesus said He was not simply leaving His followers, but was preparing a place for us – a place beyond this world’s suffering – so that we can be with Him for all eternity. One of the things we should do as believers in Christ Jesus is look forward to the eternal hope He has given us, the glories and joys of Heaven as we enter His presence. That promise of eternal blessing is intended to help us patiently bear the suffering we face here in this life.

Peter picked up on this thought in His first epistle. Now, Peter knew a bit about suffering. He was imprisoned for preaching Christ, and He was ultimately put to death for it. He wrote – Even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled. (v. 15-16 in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, prepared to make a defense to those who ask the reason of your hope; when you are slandered, they will be put to shame) How should we prepare to face suffering? Be prepared to give an answer for why we have hope in Christ.

Paul also knew a bit about suffering in this life. He detailed some of his experiences in 2 Cor 11:23-27 - imprisonments, countless beatings, five times whipped, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, endangered by Jews, Gentiles, and false brethren, enduring hunger and thirst, exposure to the cold, sleepless nights, etc. Paul then went on to describe a "thorn in the flesh" that God gave him, "a messenger of Satan to harass me" in order to keep him humble. We don't know what that was; maybe the continual types of suffering he endured, perhaps poor eyesight, maybe the lasting effects of his previous beatings. He pleaded with God for relief from whatever that difficulty was. In response to his plea for help in his suffering, Jesus responded, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (12:9) He learned that God used those things to make him more dependent on the power of Christ in his life. God was being glorified as Paul rested in His grace and faithfully served God through suffering.

When Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, they were troubled that the Day of the Lord had already come, because they had endured many trials. Paul told them "not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed (troubled)...to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." (2 Th 2:2) He gave them instructions about events that were to happen in that day, but went on to a couple very important points that we should pay attention to. First, down in v. 15 - "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us..." Especially when we remember that there will be false teachers, we need to stand firm and hold to the teachings given by the apostles in the Word. Second, look at v. 16-17 - "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good word and work." As we hold firm to His written Word, Jesus - the living Word, will give us comfort and hope. This actually points us back to our starting point - Abide in Christ. The emphasis now isn't on the receiving of salvation, but remaining in His comforting presence.

Jesus is able to comfort our hearts and encourage us in the midst of our trials. With His comforting presence and hope, we will be able to continue faithfully in the good work He has set down for us.