TO STAND BEFORE THE SON OF MAN

Luke 21:1–38

Key Verse: 21:36

“Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

Today, to be “chill” is popular; to be “uptight” is laughed at. But in this passage Jesus gives some serious warnings about the world we live in. He predicts the end of the world and his coming back in power and great glory. The time between now and then is going to be really hard. He tells his followers how to survive spiritually until that day. In this study we especially want to learn what he meant by being “able to stand before the Son of Man,” and how we can live that way. May God speak to us personally today.

Jesus was in Jerusalem for the last time. He had just warned about leaders who dressed and prayed like they were ultra-religious but who were seeking their own glory. To Jesus, things were not as they appeared. In chapter 21 this idea is continued. Let’s look at verses 1–3. Here, “the temple treasury” referred to 13 offering boxes in the Court of Women; these boxes were made in the shape of a trumpet. Jesus had just made this point about people using religion for their own glory, and when he looked up, he saw rich people putting their offerings in. It seems they too were seeking personal glory through their monetary gifts. Maybe they wanted to be seen as great, generous benefactors in the eyes of people. Maybe they were competing with each other in how much they could give. Then Jesus noticed this poor widow. What did she offer? Two very small copper coins. In fact, they were the coins at that time with the absolute least value. Compared with the rich, this lady and what she offered looked kind of pathetic. But Jesus saw things differently. To Jesus, she gave more than all the others! How could that be? He said she gave out of her poverty, and that she gave all she had to live on. To Jesus, the literal amount wasn't the point. The point was the real love for God that motivated her offering, and the real personal sacrifice involved in making it. Why did he tell his disciples this? Maybe he wanted them to learn how to give like she did. More likely, he wanted them to have spiritual discernment not to be swayed by rich people and their big money. He wanted them to learn how to value people like this widow and her offering. God’s church is built not by big money but by people like this poor widow.

But his disciples didn’t seem to be getting the point. Look at verse 5. They were star-struck by the adornment of the Jerusalem temple. This temple was world-famous. King Herod had built it, and it was huge. Josephus commented that it looked like a snow-capped mountain in the sun (*Jewish War* 5.5.6). Tacitus said it was “immensely opulent” (*History* 5.8). Its massive stones were gold-plated, and it had gorgeous colorful tapestries hanging as curtains at its entrance. No wonder Jesus’ disciples were impressed! But look at verse 6. Jesus wasn't impressed at all. In fact, he predicted its total destruction. Why? Was he saying that God is anti-opulence? Maybe. But the reason it would be destroyed was because the people would not recognize God’s Messiah (19:44). How did the disciples react? Their excitement suddenly cooled. Look at verse 7. Jews had the idea, popular at the time, that if the Jerusalem temple were destroyed, it would be the beginning of the end of the world. They knew many Old Testament prophets predicted that day. They called it “the day of the Lord.” The disciples wanted to learn more about it, so at least they asked Jesus about it.

How did he answer? Let’s read verse 8a. We should read this, conscious that Jesus is talking to us. Let’s read it again. Here “deceived” literally means “led to wander,” “led astray,” even, “led to rebel.” It’s a sobering definition. It tells us that not being deceived is more than just knowing which signs to be on the lookout for. Not being deceived is really about not letting our hearts be led astray from Christ. What deceives us? First Jesus mentioned false messiahs who say “I am he” and “The end is near.” But they’re not just people who claim to be the Messiah and claim to know when the end is. A false messiah can be anything or anyone that gives us a false hope in this world. A false messiah is anything or anyone that leads our hearts away from Jesus.

Jesus said there’s another source of deception. Look at verse 9. It’s wars and uprisings. Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.” In Greek the word for “afraid” here is much stronger, more like “terrified.” Of course, suddenly being in the midst of conflict and rebellion can be frightening. But we need to know that if ever we let fear capture our hearts, whatever its cause, we become susceptible to being deceived and led astray from Christ. Jesus said these things “must happen first.” It means God already knows about it all and he allows bad things to happen. Horrible as things may seem, we shouldn’t be deceived into thinking the end will come right away. Moreover, we need to see that God is in control even when things seem to be out of control. God is working out his own plan. So we don’t need to fear. Jesus added that the sufferings will get much worse. Look at verses 10–11. International destabilization, natural disasters, terrible events and even great signs in the heavens are all more indicators that the end is coming.

But Jesus spends the most time—eight verses—preparing us for the persecution he says will come even before these things. Look at verse 12. Getting arrested, hunted down, dragged to court and put in jail are really tough experiences that make a person feel totally helpless. In fact, during such persecutions many Christians had all their property confiscated and some had to flee abroad and become aliens. Why do such persecutions come? Jesus says, “all on account of my name.” It happens when we don’t hide our faith, but clearly say, "I believe in Jesus." It happens when we don’t live for ourselves, but really live for Jesus. Being brought before even governors and kings is an intimidation tactic to get Christians to deny their faith. What did Jesus say? Read verse 13. Even when we’re strongly persecuted, it’s not the time to get scared or try to protect ourselves. Jesus says it’s the time to bear testimony to him. It’s what the early Christians like Peter, Stephen and Paul did. “Bear testimony” means to use these opportunities to explain graciously why we revere Christ as our Lord and have hope in him (1Pe3:15). Many of us find it hard to articulate our faith, especially under pressure. We can feel so inadequate. Jesus knew this and gave us some promises. Read verses 14–15. Jesus himself had just been under such attack. But God gave him words and wisdom that his enemies couldn’t resist or contradict. Jesus promises to make us just like him. How? We shouldn’t get stressed and fearful trying to prepare ourselves and do it by ourselves. We need to just rely on him; that’s when he’ll give us the Holy Spirit. It’s not our own courage or smartness or ability; it’s the Holy Spirit who gives us courage and such amazing words and wisdom. Jesus warns that the persecution might get really painful and overwhelming. Read verses 16–17. This may sound kind of foreign and extreme to us. But it’s still happening, especially in places where there is little to no Christianity. Sincere believers in such places really suffer. How hard it is to go through this kind of persecution! It’s like standing all alone with everybody--at work, at school, friends, family--really against you. What did Jesus say? First, he said in verse 18, “But not a hair of your head will perish.” What could it mean? He already said some would be killed. It’s got to mean that though our bodies may be destroyed, our souls will be perfectly preserved. Jesus said earlier that we shouldn’t be afraid of those who kill the body but after that can do no more (12:4). Next, Jesus gave us the best encouragement ever. Let’s all read verse 19, with conviction. Here, “stand firm” is not the best English translation. In Greek the word is “hupomonay.” Literally it means to “patiently endure” or “persevere.” It was one of Apostle Paul’s favorite words; he used it 15 times in his letters in the New Testament. When we experience suffering, it’s so easy to buckle. It’s so easy to lose it. But it’s at those very moments of suffering that we need to really exercise our faith in Jesus. It’s faith in Jesus that helps us patiently endure and persevere. If we do, he promises we will “win life.” Here the word “life” is literally “soul.” It reminds us of his words, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?” (9:25)

In verses 20–24 Jesus goes on to predict more detail about the fall of Jerusalem. These things happened in the year A.D. 70. Compared to the accounts in Matthew and Mark, Luke’s is most simple. But why do we need to know all this if it already happened long ago? Luke described for his Gentile audience the fall of Jerusalem not only as God’s punishment on the Jews in fulfillment of prophecies (22), but also as a preview of the final judgment that will come on “all those who live on the face of the whole earth” someday (35). Luke also uniquely mentions in verse 24 “the times of the Gentiles.” It refers to the era when non-Jews become open and receptive to the message of salvation. It’s all part of God’s plan, and it’s been happening the past 2,000 years. After the times of the Gentiles, God’s plan is that finally many Jews will also receive Jesus (Ro11:11ff.).

Look at verses 25–26. Here Jesus turns to that final day. These are the unmistakable signs that the end is coming. At that time many people will feel trapped and tormented on planet earth. Many will faint from terror as they see even the heavenly bodies shaking, expecting a horrendous end. But it won’t all just end in a big final meltdown or explosion. Let’s read verse 27. Here “the Son of Man” is Jesus. He’s the one people thought they could get rid of and never see again. He’s the one the world committed the greatest injustice against. He’s the one many people today still mock and ridicule and think a fairytale. But on that day everyone will see just how real he is. The first time he came to this world, he came as a humble servant and friend for even the worst people. But when he comes again, it’ll be as King and Judge. And at that time there’ll be no more second-chances. What did Jesus tell believers to do when they see his return? Let’s read verse 28. As we saw, it’ll be the time when many people will be in anguish and perplexity, fainting or hiding in shame. But for those who believe in Jesus, it’s the time to “stand up and lift up our heads.” To “stand up” figuratively means to “be elated,” and to “lift up your heads” means to be unashamed. Why should we be so joyful and unashamed? Jesus says, “…because your redemption is drawing near.” What’s this redemption? This time it’s being redeemed not from slavery to sin, but from having to live in this empty, fallen, perishing world under the curse. It’s the day believers receive a resurrection body, inherit God’s glorious kingdom and get to live with him forever. Let’s read verses 29–31. Jesus wants us to see these signs of the end like the buds on a tree in spring, with faith and hope that the kingdom of God is near.

Jesus wants us to believe that this is all true. In fact, he staked everything on it. Look at verse 32. Here “generation” can also be translated as “race.” Jesus knew it would take much time for all this to happen. He didn’t expect it all to occur during his disciples’ lifetimes, but over a long period of time. Even in the first century, people began to scoff at the idea of his coming again. 2 Peter 3:3–4 reads, “Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’” When we don’t believe Jesus’ second coming, we tend to cut loose, treat people badly and just live to gratify our flesh and get drunk (12:45). Jesus knew we’d have a hard time believing his coming again. So he said something to help us believe it. Let’s read verse 33. Jesus’ promise of his coming again is even surer than the seeming eternal stability of heaven and earth. His promise will surely come true someday.

Let’s read verse 34. Jesus gave this warning not to people in general, but to his disciples. He said all these problems start when our hearts get weighed down. When we’re discouraged, it’s so easy to zone out, go along with people and live like party animals, or to become full of anxieties. Jesus warns us that when we live like that, we’ll be totally unprepared for his return. Instead of being chill and just going with the flow or “doing me,” Jesus says we should “Be careful.” It literally means to “pay attention” or “keep watch”—like an alert driver at night or a loyal dog waiting for its owner at the door.

Then Jesus makes it even more intense. Let’s read verse 36. Here to “Be always on the watch” mainly means to always be paying close attention to spiritual things. How can we be watchful? Jesus says, “Pray.” He said back in 18:1 that we should “always pray and not give up.” When we pray, it shows we’re depending on God not ourselves. There’s no way with our own human faithfulness or willpower to live like this. We need to pray not just once in a while, superficially or feebly, but “always,” and fervently, really depending on God and asking his mercy. Only by God’s help can we escape all the temptations of this world to be deceived, to go astray and to start rebelling against God. Only by God’s help can we be able, in the end, as Jesus says, “to stand before the Son of Man.” But what does it really mean to “stand” before him? A great verse to explain it is 1 John 2:28: “And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.” To be ready to stand before him means to be confident and unashamed. How can we be like that? If it’s about what we do, our performance, we probably will never be really confident and unashamed. Even if we’re trying really hard, there’s always ways we’re lacking. We can be confident and unashamed before him not because of what we do, but because of what he did, because of his great love for us, which he demonstrated when he suffered and died for our sins. Because of his great love for us, we love him back. We continue in him, holding on to his great love. Only when we keep his love in our hearts can we be able to stand before him when he comes.

In the last two verses we see how Jesus lived to the end of his life. Each day he was sharing God’s word, and each evening he was praying. What a beautiful end of life! He set the example of how to live ready for his return. May God help us live like him.