

## [Luke 21:5-19](#)

It's hard to avoid the idea that we live in tumultuous times. Vladimir Putin has on more than one occasion threatened the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine or against Ukraine's supporters. Our economy is going into a recession. Nurses are relying on food banks to make ends meet. Some food banks are running out of supplies. And don't get me started on the turnover of Government ministers and Prime Ministers. We have had no peace since COVID.

In our reading, Jesus speaks to disciples and others who he knows will also face tumultuous times. Despite popular opinion (and the headings in the NIV) he is less speaking about the end times of all history and more prophesying what life will be like forty years hence when Rome crushes Jewish resistance and destroys the Jerusalem temple – an event that would feel like the end of the world to his listeners.

And here we are on Remembrance Sunday when we remember the slaughter of World War One, the so-called 'war to end all wars', and the Second World War, twenty-odd years later.

What Jesus teaches here helps us live through such crises. For sake of simplicity – and I confess it has been 'one of those weeks' again – I am taking my points from [Ian Paul's excellent article](#) on this passage.

He makes six points. Yes, six – but they are each brief and to the point. Here goes.

**Firstly, however big the catastrophe, God's purposes are bigger.** It's natural to be frightened, to despair, to ask questions, and to consider desperate actions. But nothing knocks God's purposes off course. God prevails. God has more free will than any of us, including those who use their free will for the most unspeakable evil.

Whether it's the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the Cuban missile crisis, or the threats of a little despot in Moscow, God always holds the trump card. His kingdom has come and is coming. He will prevail. Keep your faith in him.

**Secondly, don't be surprised if we're picked on.**

<sup>12</sup> 'But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.

Jesus prepares his listeners for possible persecution. We know that a few years before Rome took down the Jewish revolt there was the great fire in Rome, and the Emperor Nero made the Christians into scapegoats. It is a regrettable but common action by evil people to pick on minorities and victimise them or pass the blame.

In our day we have seen similar things happen, where minorities have been targeted. Only on Wednesday this past week, the fast food chain KFC mistakenly [sent a promotional message](#) out in Germany that said this:

"It's memorial day for Kristallnacht! Treat yourself with more tender cheese on your crispy chicken. Now at KFCheese!"

That their systems should accidentally put together the anniversary of the destruction of Jewish synagogues and other organisations, marking the time when it was no longer safe to be publicly Jewish in Germany, is an horrendous reminder of evil regimes picking on minorities.

True Christianity will always be a minority. If we are pursued unjustly, let us not be surprised. But as with catastrophes generally, let us remember that God is sovereign and in charge. We may or may not escape trouble, but he will bring good out of it.

**Thirdly, give testimony to Jesus.** If we do end up on the wrong side of the authorities or of those wielding power, do not be ashamed of Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> And so you will bear testimony to me. <sup>14</sup> But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. <sup>15</sup> For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

Trouble becomes our opportunity to tell that powers that be that their only hope of salvation is not in their own might but in Jesus Christ and him crucified. The power of the Holy Spirit comes to us in our difficulty and inspires us with divine wisdom. This may or may not help us in the short term, but be sure that the testimony will be there for the long run and be recalled down the generations. Our words are not just for our contemporaries.

**Fourthly, stay rooted in Jesus.**

<sup>8</sup> He replied: 'Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, "I am he," and, "The time is near." Do not follow them. <sup>9</sup> When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be

frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.'

Of course I hope we'd stay rooted in the teaching of Jesus anyway, but all sorts of people make outlandish claims that exploit a time of crisis or catastrophe. That does mean they are sound or true. Jesus and his teaching remains our plumbline all that is good, beautiful, true, and worthwhile.

**Fifthly, *expect division.***

<sup>16</sup>You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death.

<sup>17</sup>Everyone will hate you because of me.

When the pressure is on it will be on everyone and it will come close to home, even into the home. Remember how before the Berlin Wall fell people did not even know whether they could trust members of their own family, because they might be members of the dreaded Stasi. They could be reported to the authorities and imprisoned.

You may say this is not good news, and it isn't, but what Jesus does here is he prepares us. Don't be surprised by these terrible things, he says. This is why it is important to stay rooted in him and his teaching. If you don't, then you will succumb to the pressures and may turn. But if you do stay rooted in Jesus, then you have a solid basis for holding firm even in the face of the worst betrayals.

**Sixthly and finally, *endure to the end.***

<sup>18</sup>But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup>Stand firm, and you will win life.

When our kids were at school, it was recognised that the renewed emphasis in recent years on exam success – plus, I would suggest, the pressures of pushy middle-class parents – meant it was important for the school to teach them how to be resilient.

You hear a lot about resilience today. There has been so much talk about mental health issues resulting from the COVID-19 lockdowns. You can find all sorts of practitioners offering to teach resilience to adults as well.

And Jesus calls his followers to a spiritual resilience. Stand firm, he says. Other parts of the New Testament make similar calls on Christian disciples. To be faithful is to stand firm. Be resilient in your faith.

And although Jesus doesn't explicitly say so here, the assumption in the New Testament about standing firm is that like all the difficult things we are called to do as Christians, we are promised the help of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling what Jesus calls us to do.

It doesn't mean we won't be knocked down. It does mean we shall keep getting back up to our feet.

### **Conclusion**

You may think that I am painting a gloomy picture. What I want to do is bring before you a vision of realism combined with hope.

The famous writer on business leadership, Jim Collins, spoke about what he called the '[Stockdale Paradox](#).' This is how [Carey Nieuwhof paraphrases it](#):

Jim Stockdale was an American Vice Admiral captured and imprisoned during the Vietnam War. He was held and tortured for seven years.

Stockdale said the first people to die in captivity were the optimists, who kept thinking things would get better quickly and they'd be released. "They died of a broken heart," Stockdale said.

Instead, Stockdale argued, the key to survival was to combine realism and hope. In Stockdale's words:

*"This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end--which you can never afford to lose--with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."*

There is no getting around the fact that catastrophes in life are grim. We cannot afford to play pretend under the pretence of hope.

But as Christians we do have good news for those seasons. God is still in charge of the universe, and his Spirit enables to continue witnessing to Jesus and enduring in faith.