

# What Lasts?

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Preaching on:

Luke 21:5–19

What lasts? Really lasts? In a world where things are constantly changing, and where disaster seems to always be right around the corner, and where there is endless turnover in trends, and truths, and regimes, and borders, what really lasts? What do you think? Maybe nothing truly lasts. Maybe eventually everything is gobbled up by the inexorable woodchipper of time. Maybe everything is eventually lost. Maybe, but I don't think so. And I don't think Jesus thought so either. Jesus, I think, wants us to know that the things we typically think are going to last aren't the things that are really going to last. Jesus doesn't want us relying on the wrong things—things that eventually rust, or get eaten by moths, or get knocked down. He wants us to experience the things that really do last.

Take the Temple in Jerusalem. In Jesus' day it was the center of religious, political, and economic power. That seems like a place that ought to last! And it was huge too. It covered 35 acres. A NYC block covers five acres. Imagine 7 city blocks, and it's 14 stories tall at its highest point. That seems like something that should last, doesn't it? And did I mention it was made entirely out of stone? There's this one stone in the Western Wall that we think is the largest stone ever used in construction in

human history. You might be able to squeeze that stone into our sanctuary if you took out a couple of walls, but the problem is that it's so heavy that nobody alive today has any idea how to move it. That seems like something that should last! And by the time Jesus came along the Temple was already like 600 years old. Doesn't that seem like something that's just going to be there forever?

But while everyone else is admiring the architecture and the stonework and the views, Jesus reminds them that even this Temple—this ancient, stone seat of power and the center of their world—will not last forever. And he was tragically proved right. About four decades later the unthinkable happened—the Temple was utterly destroyed by a Roman army during the sack of Jerusalem.

Now, this might feel disappointing to you if you were hoping that Jesus' mysterious words in our scripture reading this morning were about *the* Apocalypse—some vague notions of the end of the world cobbled together with little pieces of the Bible taken out of their original contexts. I hate to disappoint, but Jesus was not talking about some event in *our* future. He was talking about an event in *his* future, now far in our past.

But he was also making a larger point, wasn't he? Even the Temple will one day be gone. If it hadn't happened in the year 70, it would have happened eventually. Wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, pandemics, comets and asteroids—eventually something is going to take us out. Scientists tell us that the whole Earth will be gone in five billion years and the sun in 10 billion. And some billions of years after that the entire universe may just stretch itself out into an empty, cold, lightless infinity. So, what really and truly lasts?

When confronted with the possibility of *the* apocalypse or *an* apocalypse (little apocalypses are happening all the time—a divorce, a job loss, a cancer diagnosis, a natural disaster) when we face these possibilities, one response is the fear response. The fear response says, I should try to placate the power in charge of apocalypses so that apocalyptic things don't happen to me. I will believe in God, so that God will protect me from all the trials and tribulations of the world. This perspective finds it's "highest" expression in the entirely made-up "doctrine" of the Rapture—in which obscure biblical verses are strung together to suggest that at the beginning of the looming end of the world all the good, believing Christians will be whisked away to Heaven and the ungodly along with all the other religions of the world will have to suffer the plagues and wars of the end of times all alone. I mean hadn't you heard? Bad things never happen to good people! That just wouldn't be fair!

Jesus puts it simply for his followers (not for his non-followers, he said this to his FOLLOWERS): You will be arrested, persecuted, imprisoned, tried, and hated. You will experience division, betrayal, and the loss of family and friends. And some of you will even be executed. And then Jesus says something very strange. He says, "But not a hair of your head will perish." That's a very strange thing to say to someone you've just predicted may very well be put to death.

*Well, they're going to kill you. Yeah, they're definitely going to do that. But don't worry about your hair. Your hair is going to look great the whole time.* No, I think it's almost like a riddle. You may suffer. You may die. But not even one hair of your head will be lost. Because, beloved, whatever trial or tribulation you may pass through (and you can be certain that you're going to pass through some) Jesus wants you and me to be the things that truly last. Jesus wants us to endure. And when we endure, he says we gain our souls.

In the turmoil of the world and in the trials of our lives, it is our authenticity, our forthrightness, the expression of our character, our truth, and our selves that matter most. Life is hard. But you have a destiny—God's plan for you. This destiny, these plans, are built into your life, they are a part of you, they are you. Now, when tragedy strikes in your life, as it probably has before and certainly will again, the person who God made you to be doesn't suddenly go away. In fact, sometimes it's in the walk through the valley of the shadow of death that we discover more deeply who it is that God made us to be and we can express more fully what it is that God gave each and every one of us to express. Do you believe that? Do you believe that you have a destiny, that God has a plan? Do you believe that there is something inside of you that God created in you and that your life—its joys and its sorrows—is just God's way of giving YOU every opportunity to come out as fully as possible?

If you don't quite believe it, let me suggest a prayer you can pray starting today. Pray, "God, I believe that I am here for a reason." It's a very short prayer. It's like a breath prayer, you can pray it all day long on repeat, if you want. But even if you just pray it a few times a day, take the time to pray that prayer. I am here for a reason. When you pay attention to your life and when you walk out into the world with that prayer in your heart, you might begin to see your opportunities a little differently. We have a couple pairs of prayer partners in our congregation this month. Prayer partners, why don't you discuss this together. What am I here for? We need to live this question out as the question of our lives, at all times. We need to believe that whatever we face, when we are living faithfully to who God intends us to be, the expression of those gifts will outlast stone and outshine the sun.

Do you believe that? Can you believe that an act of simple generosity or human kindness or music making or falling in love will last longer and matter more than all the stars in the sky? Do you believe that something will last? Do you believe that you're a part of it?

God, I believe I am here for a reason. Amen.