***PRAY FOR STRENGTH!***

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November 28, 2021

Texts: Luke 21: 25-38 and 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

*Wait for the Lord whose day is near.*

*Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Take heart.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The songwriter who penned those words we just sang found his inspiration from the 27th Psalm, but I suspect he may also have been familiar with that Gospel passage we heard moments ago. The Day of the Lord – that day when “*the Son of Man comes in a cloud with power and great glory”* to use Luke’s words - is described as a day for which we need to be strong and take heart, for it is a day, says Jesus, when “p*eople will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world*.” It sounds very little like the Advent days we begin today, waiting with great anticipation to celebrate the coming of a babe to Bethlehem at Christmas; it sounds more like time spent waiting for a hurricane to hit your home or perhaps like the waiting of soldiers preparing to debark onto Omaha Beach on D-day. It is waiting for the unknown, not knowing the precise time the waiting will end or what exactly will come at the end of the waiting, but with a sense of fear and foreboding of what it might be. *Wait for the Lord. Be strong. Take heart.*

In fairness, not many of us are really waiting for that day, day to day. We don’t wake up in the morning wondering, “Is this the day the Lord will return?” We don’t go to bed at night wondering if the Day of the Lord will arrive before the alarm rings. We make summer vacation plans and decorate for Christmas and go about our lives without much thought about that day of which Jesus spoke, that day for which he told us to be alert, which suggests perhaps that we are not really alert at all. “*Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life, and the day catch you unexpectedly*,” he says. Yet here we are two thousand years after his death and resurrection, worrying about

the state of the nation

and the state of the world

and the state of this pandemic

and the state of our health

and the state of our Christmas lists,

without a thought for the state of our faith or the return of the Lord in power and glory any day soon. Into our states of oblivious worry Jesus speaks these words of caution: “*Be on guard. Be alert. Pray that you may have the strength to escape all these things*.” The antidote to the worry seems to be prayer – prayer not to escape all these things, but prayer, says Jesus, for ***the strength*** to escape all these things.

We cannot escape the Day of the Lord. No one is going to somehow deliver us from the challenges which it offers. That was certainly true of the reality Jesus’ followers experienced in the early decades after his resurrection. Christians were persecuted simply for believing that the risen Jesus was Lord of all. That holy affirmation posed a threat to both Caesar who declared himself to be lord, and to the Jewish establishment who refused to acknowledge Jesus’ claim as Messiah and found his message of sacrificial love and servanthood to be a threat to their power and prestige. Pray for strength, says Jesus, strength in the face of persecution, strength in the face of trial, strength to face the coming Day of the Lord! Pray for strength!

In our nation there are folks who are vaguely familiar with the dire predictions of that Day of the Lord and are using it for their own unholy purposes to fan flames of fear among their followers. Just two weeks ago, one such false prophet, who was found liable for spreading false information about the Sandy Hook school shootings, told a cheering crowd that the end-times prophecies were playing out before their eyes and that they were living in the most important time since Jesus walked the earth.[[2]](#endnote-2) The point of his prediction was not to encourage faithfulness on the part of 21st century disciples of Jesus, but to stoke fear in the hearts of his own followers in the hope that they would take up arms and flex political power in pursuit of Christian nationalism that would merge faith and flag. As Sarah mentioned last week, a similar effort was pursued in Germany in the 1930s with the rise of the Third Reich. Today, as in the first century, the antidote to fear is not arms or oppression of enemies, but prayer for strength to persevere faithfully – which means as loving servants of God and neighbor. Pray for that kind of strength, says Jesus, strength of spirit, strength of faith, strength of will to remain faithful to God and God alone, come what may!

That strength is not the strength of muscled bodies, military might, or political power. First century images of strength were etched into minds by the soldiers of Rome – strength through force, strength through violence – not unlike that strength which come to some minds today. The cross was the ultimate example of Rome’s strength – a symbol of what Rome could do and would do to anyone who challenged Caesar’s authority; Rome saw as strength its power to take life brutally and publicly whenever it chose. Two thousand years later, strength seems still to be cast in violent terms as nations bristle with ever more sophisticated and powerful weapons and highly trained armies with which to intimidate other nations, while individuals in our own nation keep their guns readily available to prove themselves strong against the threat of any neighbor. In rebuke to that concept of strength the psalmist sings:

*Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,*

*but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God.*

*They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright. (Ps.20:7-8)*

That image of rising when others fall is echoed by Jesus as the faithful response to the coming Day of the Lord. While others *faint from fear and foreboding*, Jesus encourages us to stand up and raise our heads, “*because your redemption is drawing near*,” he says. The Day of the Lord itself may be daunting, but faithful disciples understand that something greater is happening in the midst of the chaos – redemption in the hands of the One who is the Great Redeemer, the Lord God Almighty. The strength for which we pray is the strength to persevere faithfully when others wilt from fear, trusting the promises of God to redeem and save us. It is encouragement not to give into fear, but to stand strong. In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela, a man who faced fear and persecution across his life, suggests:

*Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it...The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fea*r.[[3]](#endnote-3)

What Christ offers us is not a fear-free life, but a means to conquer that fear through faith and prayer. *Pray for strength*, he says. Instead of trembling in your shoes at the Day of the Lord or whatever other challenge arises, instead of being frozen into inaction, instead of living with daily dread, pray for strength – strength to persevere, strength to do the right thing, strength to face whatever challenges arise, strength to remain faithful when your faith is sorely tried. Pray even for the strength to keep on praying when the answer you long for is long-delayed or you are having trouble praying! For, the source of our strength, the source of our hope, the source of our salvation is the God to whom we pray.

In her book *Pray Without Ceasing*, Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger urges us to pray as an act of faith. She writes;

*Prayer is, as John Calvin recognized, the ‘chief exercise of faith.’ Through it, faith is nourished, hope is renewed, and our love for God is strengthened.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

In praying for strength, we may find our love for God strengthened and our hopes renewed even in the face of hopeless situations. For in praying, we acknowledge that we are not alone; God is with us! And being assured of God’s presence we may be not only more hopeful but also more faithful. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul prays for that church he so dearly loved:

*May the Lord so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

Paul anticipates that same Day of the Lord of which Jesus spoke, and asks God to strengthen the Christians in Thessalonica for it. It is not the strength to do battle but the strength of heart to be holy; and by *holy* he means, not somehow removed from others, but faithful in the midst of others! It is, in short, being the faithful disciples Jesus calls us to be on that Day of the Lord when Jesus returns. It is akin to the eloquent prayer of Leslie Newbigin:

*Give me, Lord a stout heart to bear my own burdens, a tender heart to bear the burdens of others, and a believing heart to lay all my burdens on you, for you care for us.[[5]](#endnote-5)*

We do not know when that Day of the Lord will arrive, but we know the Lord will care for us on that day. We are not to wait idly by or to live in fear of its arrival. We are to prepare for that day by preparing our hearts, by praying for strength, and by serving faithfully day after day after day. As you prepare your home for the coming of Christmas in these coming days, prepare your heart for Christ’s coming as well – by praying! And may Paul’s blessing be a blessing for you and upon you:

*May the Lord so strengthen your heart in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints* whenever that day may be! Amen

1. “Wait for the Lord”, Taizé Community, 1984 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Event where Michael Flynn appeared is a who’s who of new Christian right”, Bob Smietana, *The Washington Post*, November 26, 2021, p.B2 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Nelson Mandela in Long Walk to Freedom, p.542 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing*, Eerdmans Publishing Co:2006, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Leslie Newbigin, in *The Complete Book of Chrisitan Prayer*, Continuum Publishing Company:1997, p.189 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)