

Prepare for Persecution

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of March 2003. The preacher is Ian Weaver.

His sermon is entitled Prepare for Persecution and is based on Luke chapter 21 verses 5 to 24.

It's a bit intimidating to stand here and look at this passage in the aftermath of this week, which of course has been a terrible week on the world stage with the war against Iraq.

But I just want to, before we go any further, I want to say that it is my belief that the war against Iraq is not the beginning of the end of the world and that is actually going to be treated in more depth next week, what the beginning of the end of the world is.

This passage is not about that. It's about something completely different, which is persecution, as the title of the service has been suggesting to us tonight. Okay, that said, has anybody seen the film Home Alone?

[1 : 1 2] It's a pretty old one now. Probably the older people here have seen it and the younger people will have had it referred to by their parents. Yeah, okay. It's quite a funny movie and if you're a kid, it's funny or a deprived adult like myself.

It's also funny because laughs come cheap in that movie. But it's based on the most horrifying premise, if you're a parent like myself, that you would go on holiday and forget to bring one of the kids.

The whole purpose of the movie is that the family go away on holiday and they leave their youngest, the most fragile kid at home. In fact, it's so ridiculous.

They get all the way across, halfway across the ocean to Hawaii or some holiday destination and they suddenly decide to do a check of the number of kids that are with them and they suddenly realise that one's missing, left at home.

Now, what happens for that kid is that he's very happy and living on his own for a while because he actually doesn't get on all that well with his family. He's probably about five or six and he suddenly discovers that burglars are after his home.

[2 : 2 4] Now, what was kind of cushy for a while, being on his own, suddenly becomes a nightmare. Now, the good thing is that he's intelligent and he manages to stave off these burglars.

I hope I haven't ruined the movie for somebody. But he's able to do that because he prepares himself for their attacks. Now, what would happen if you got left behind?

Not in that scenario, but in any scenario. Maybe it's happened to you. Those of you who follow the Geelong Football Club and lament the case that they do that would remember the preliminary final of, what was it, 1986 or some time.

Gary Sidebottom got left waiting on the road between Geelong and Melbourne and probably cost us a place further in the finals. But he got left behind and he was very upset afterwards.

How would you feel if you got left behind from something important? What would it feel like? Anybody who's been, got lost in a supermarket as a small child might be able to remember what it feels like.

[3 : 34] Did anybody do that? I did. It's horrible. You suddenly say, hang on, where's mum? And there's all these big people around and you realise all of a sudden that if she's gone, I don't even know how to get home.

So it's terrible. You feel really lost and you're struggling. Maybe hurt. Maybe angry. Maybe disappointed. In the passage that we've had read to us tonight, Jesus is preparing intentionally to leave the disciples, his closest friends, remember, behind.

Now they don't know that, but that's what's going on. They don't know where he's going and they couldn't achieve what he could achieve, so that's why they couldn't go with him.

Only one person, as we know, could achieve on the cross what Jesus achieved, paying the price for our sins. But Jesus wanted to prepare them for what lay ahead.

He had hinted that he was leaving, but they hadn't really got it and I don't think they really, really get it until he appears to them after the resurrection. But that's for a little bit further down the track with you.

[4 : 51] If you were preparing to leave somebody behind, wouldn't you want to be saying something like, it'll be all right. I'm sure you'll cope. That's hardly the direction Jesus takes.

He warns them that life will be terrible. Let's just have a look. He says, When you hear of wars and insurrection, do not be terrified, for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.

He goes on to say, nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, plagues, dreadful portents, and great signs from the heavens. In other words, amazing stuff is going on, but it's not nice stuff.

It's terrible stuff. I guess the only thing we can think about in terms of the war against Iraq at the moment is that we recognise that it's terrible. And it gives us some hint of the sort of thing that Jesus is talking about.

He says, this must happen. There's going to be wars and it's going to be terrible. And you are going to be able to deal with it. They will be persecuted for being followers of Jesus.

[6 : 01] And everything that they previously held dear about their Jewish faith, particularly the temple and Jerusalem itself, would be left in tatters.

Now, this passage comes amidst the ongoing conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day.

It comes just before the Last Supper, the betrayal, and the crucifixion. So, in the context of Luke's Gospel, it's at a really pivotal point. The whole book is building to the climax, which, of course, is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so, here we have this pivotal moment and Jesus is preparing his disciples for something really important. And the really important thing is, is a noble task and is exciting, but it's actually terrible.

It's filled with horror. This is the job of the disciples. And what he does in the middle of this conflict, and it's no wonder, it's no wonder they crucified him.

[7 : 08] Because he was working against the powers and authorities on earth in Israel at the time, now, he prophesies against the temple. And that's, you can gloss over it.

It's only two verses. When someone's speaking about the temple and how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he says, as for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left.

All will be thrown down. Now, that's just sort of like Jesus and his friends are walking along outside. Hey, look at Holy Trinity Donkers. They've just spent 1.5 million on their new buildings, or thereabouts.

It's all gone. It's going. It doesn't matter. But you see, we might say, oh, who cares?

It's only a building when all's said and done. We can always meet somewhere else. But for Jews, to say that the temple is going to come down is a really massive statement. Because the temple represents so much that's important about the Jewish faith.

[8 : 11] It represented to those people fundamentally the presence of God. It represented that they were the people of God. While the temple stood, they could be assured that God was with them.

That even though things didn't always go well for them all the time, God was there. And if they actually went into the temple, they could be just about near the presence of God. That was how to get in touch with God, was to go to the temple.

And it also represented that they were a people who had a God. They were a people who supposedly lived lives that were pleasing to God. And if they made any mistakes in any way, they could go and they could offer a sacrifice and somehow the relationship was supposed to be restored with God.

So in other words, it symbolised their relationship. It symbolised everything. If you think about your relationship with God, I don't know what it would do, what it would take to destroy that, but that's what it represented for them, that their relationship with God, their very identity as an individual and as a race of people would come down.

It's only two verses in the scriptures, but it's highly significant. Like everything else, Jesus was challenging. This too, the temple, needed to be driven from the disciples' minds as any form of security.

[9 : 35] And he does that by promising instead terrors, wars, earthquakes, famine, plagues, and persecution. He takes away the security blanket and promises them terror.

It's a pretty good technique, don't you think? Takes away security and now it's going to get worse. And so the drama that we had before was so poignant because this poor guy is getting picked on at school and smashed in the fire.

That was pretty, I like that touch actually. And he says it's worth it in the end. Well, do you think the disciples were saying that? He's talking about famine, persecution, plagues, earthquakes, wars.

Oh, but it'll be better in the end. What an amazing amount of courage it would take to say that. Well, now what is the basis of their courage? Jesus simply says, if we, I'm sort of really skipping through here, sorry, in verse, I had this in a different Bible before I changed because you're doing a different one, sorry.

Verse 15, thank you. For I will give you words. The security must be Jesus. Jesus says, I will give you words. I will give you wisdom to withstand all that sort of stuff that he was talking about.

[11 : 02] Their security has got to lie in Jesus. Now, this all may seem like, I don't know whether you realise, because these are all kind of, it's very ethereal, it's kind of out there for us because we can't relate to it.

But I don't know if you realise, but historically, most of this stuff, if not all of that stuff, actually happened within one generation of Jesus dying. If you read through the book of Acts sometime, which is worth doing, as some people say, it's like part two of Luke, you can see in chapter four there that the disciples were hauled before the synagogues and they were told not to speak about Jesus anymore.

You can see in chapter eight of Acts that a great persecution began against the Christians and Saul, who later became Paul, but Saul oversaw the stoning of the first Christian martyr Stephen.

In other words, people had rocks thrown at them, not just a slap on the head, but they actually had rocks thrown at them for being Christians. In chapter eight of Acts, you'll read about a famine.

In chapter 16, you'll read about earthquakes. And in chapter 22 and following, you'll hear all kinds of episodes of Paul being taken before kings and governors, just as Jesus had prophesied.

[12 : 17] And it gave him the opportunity to witness, as Jesus said would happen. These persecutions, these horrible things that will happen, will give you an opportunity to testify, it says in verse 13.

But he says, I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. And the final thing that happens, just to prove that Jesus' prophecies come true, was that in AD 70, the temple was in fact destroyed.

It did come down and there were no stones left standing. And you can read about that in Jewish history books. But the disciples had been well enough prepared that the word spread, the word about Jesus dying for our sins spread throughout the whole world and here we sit today.

They were prepared and I put it to you tonight that they were prepared simply on the basis not only of what Jesus had taught them but simply relying on Jesus himself.

Which is why your prayers of desperation in those moments when somebody's about to smack you in the forehead because you've been reading the Bible, Jesus, I need you.

[13 : 32] I need your protection. I need you to be with me. I need you to give me the words to say. They're the only words to say. Now you can't prepare, Jesus said. He says, I will give you the words to say but your reliance is to be on Jesus and him alone.

Because we too have been left behind. Everything that the disciples had held dear as Jews would eventually be turned upside down and Jesus said in Mark chapter 4 that they were to expect those things.

He says, when trouble or persecution comes, so what is it going to be for us? What is it going to be that turns your world upside down?

I pray it never happens but really we are so comfortable in Melbourne it's too easy to do nothing about our faith. Would you still believe if somebody you love died?

Would that be enough to put you off your faith and become angry at God and not trust in Jesus anymore? would you still believe and stick up for your faith if people started giving you a hard time about it?

[14 : 50] A friend of mine some years ago gave up his faith when he was in Turkey and he met a Muslim and the Muslim said to him, oh your faith and mine, they're pretty much the same.

We're all brothers. And at that point you see he lost his distinctive, he couldn't understand that Jesus was different and he gave up his faith. Now it's pretty obscure but what would it take for you to lose your faith in Jesus I wonder?

I met a guy in Melbourne recently the other day who used to be a Muslim and living in Pakistan and if he went back he'd be shot for being a Christian because he's spoken about his Christian faith in Pakistan.

I don't know if you find that shocking but I do because I know I can walk down the street and freely talk about Jesus and people might laugh at me but they're not going to shoot me like we heard before.

That same guy cannot give out his address in Melbourne for fear of retribution. So actually it's not as far away as places like Pakistan.

[16 : 03] if we're going to stand up and be counted for Jesus sometimes it is closer than we think. Maybe that would be enough for you to lose heart.

But we too have been prepared. We've been left behind but we've also been prepared. Jesus said he would be with us to the end of the age. He said that to the first disciples.

He said to the first disciples also teach new disciples everything I've taught you. In other words if he's going to be with those disciples he's going to be with these disciples us. The same one who gave them words and wisdom will give us words and wisdom.

If you were ever under any illusion that being a follower of Jesus would be easy then I hope that this passage has set you straight. If you are after an easy life then please don't be a Christian.

And if your life is easy then what aren't you doing as a Christian? Perhaps you're not telling people you are a Christian.

[17 : 15] Perhaps you don't stand up for Christian principles in your school or work. Perhaps you prefer to stay temporarily and misguidedly cosy in your sin.

Maybe there's something you know the Bible said it's wrong but it doesn't seem to matter. You can get away with it if you want to. And perhaps you're not prepared to warn people about their sin and the coming wrath of God.

In which case this passage must sound like a lot of old cobblers. But if you are standing up for your faith and trying to live for Jesus in at least some of what you do then you will know of what this passage speaks.

You will know that it is uncomfortable. I know it is. I know that it takes so much courage just to tell my sisters about Jesus that it makes me sweat.

But it's nothing like what we talked about here. but I know it's uncomfortable. And you know that it hurts when friends and family turn against you either completely or partially, subtly or blatantly and you will know that the things you used to hold dear and which were major importance in your life once they've come crashing down will not give you strength to survive.

[18 : 41] The source of life comes from only one place or rather one person. The one who promised the first disciples and through them promised us also to be here with us.

Comforting, guiding, giving us words and wisdom which our adversaries will not be able to resist or contradict. Jesus has and is preparing us for the job at hand which is to be his disciples and make new disciples come what may.

In the run up to Easter it's useful to remember that Jesus said whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. Taking up crosses may well be metaphorical for us these days.

In other words we may not actually get crucified but it will still cause pain being a Christian and it will still be in the midst of conflict as Christians.

But he will still be there to see us through. Now I can't prove that to you right now. Each one here has to learn it for themselves.

[19 : 59] Each one has to be prepared to say yeah I am a Christian. I do accept the forgiveness Jesus has won for me and that is going to make a difference in my life. I am going to speak to other people about Jesus or find ways of doing it.

I am going to stand up for Christian principles. Standing up for what I know Jesus would want. I am going to do it. I am going to serve other people.

I am not going to have my own needs met all the time. And every time you do that it will be uncomfortable. This passage reminds us that whilst we can get blessed by God which we learn in other parts of the scriptures it will be tough.

And sometimes it won't feel like we are being blessed. And I just wanted to throw that in your face really because I think that is what the scriptures do to us right there and then. They say it is not going to be easy to be a Christian.

But Jesus says he will be there. He will give us words and wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. If you don't throw yourself out there you won't find that out for yourself.

[21 : 13] But if you have a go you will find Jesus is there with you. And so I simply wanted to invite you to take that on board. Preparing for persecution means simply preparing to be there with Jesus and to let him be there for you.

So I just thought that it would be good if we prayed and committed ourselves to following him and trusting him to be there with us. So let's do that. Lord Jesus we so much want to give you our whole lives.

But quite frankly some of these thoughts about following you are a bit scary. and a bit freaky. And war and persecution seem so far off.

Please help us to remember that you are there with us always. That you will give us the right words to say at the right time. And that your purposes will be fulfilled. And so we pray as the first disciples did when trouble and persecution came their way.

Lord consider their threats. And enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. We pray in Jesus name.

[22 : 37] Amen.