

5 Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. 6 Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 8 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

9 “You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. 10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. 11 Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

If you’ve ever read fortune cookies they’re really vague. “Good things are coming in your future. You will meet someone important.” You think, “That’s great!” But imagine reading one that said, “You will break your leg today.” People wouldn’t be so eager to read them if they had that stuff in them.

Now imagine sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to what He said would come. **“Wars and rumours of wars are coming. Earthquakes in various places, and famines. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues.”** It would be bad enough that the wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines would happen to everyone. But for the Christians Jesus predicted even worse things - being arrested and flogged in synagogues - specifically for their confession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Notice also how Jesus said panic would be easy to spread? **“When you HEAR of wars and rumors of wars.”** The news can make you scared. What people say and what you read on Facebook and the Internet can be terrifying. I have seen pictures and videos of ISIS crucifying children and running over people with tanks. I have heard reports of how some of these extremists may be mixed in with the refugees that are coming into our western world. It is easy to be afraid. But Jesus says, **“Do not be alarmed.”**

A part of you might say, “Whaaaat?” It’s like when you drive by an accident or see someone that is about to get in an accident - to have the police say to you, “Nothing to see here. Move along.” Are you kidding me? But there’s a reason for this. Alarm is what causes people to panic and do things they wouldn’t normally do and believe things they wouldn’t normally believe. That’s why Jesus also says you have to **“watch out that no one deceives you.”** False teachers thrive on alarm. That’s how John Tetzel sold indulgences through the Catholic Church - giving promises that through a piece of paper the people of Germany could escape the fires of purgatory. With all that’s going on in our world, just recently eBible made another prediction of the end of the world. The Guardian reported,

“While our planet may have survived September’s ‘blood moon’, it will be permanently destroyed on Wednesday, 7 October”. The eBible Fellowship, an online affiliation headquartered near Philadelphia, has based its prediction of an October obliteration on a previous claim that the world would end on 21 May 2011. While that claim proved to be false, the organization is confident it has the correct date this time.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/06/end-of-world-7-october-ebible-fellowship>

Even though God’s Word is clear that no one will know the day or the hour, it doesn’t keep people from believing such nonsense. In fear they want to find someone who has the inside scoop; who can tell them how to interpret the times and know the future with certainty so that they can maybe escape the problems to come.

Even apart from Christianity you can also see how people are willing to gobble up anything a scientist will tell them about how to prevent global warming in hopes of somehow saving our planet from man made disaster. So we are told how to reduce our carbon footprint in order to save the earth. Much of this is driven by fear of what will happen to our planet.

Jesus speaks of bad things happening, but He doesn’t seem to be panicking over it at all. He just says, “**It is necessary**” for them to come. Why is it necessary? Because we live in a sinful world that is under a curse. Sinful kingdoms are going to fight for more power and control. Disasters are bound to happen in a world that is cursed to die. There will be earthquakes, famines, and wars. Jesus never said that He was going to stop it from happening. He isn’t going to stop wars. He isn’t going to stop death from happening. He won’t even stop His believers from being imprisoned and whipped and put to death. Luther had to face this back in his time as he was declared a heretic and could have faced death as John Hus did a hundred years before his time. So we witness this happen especially in Islamic countries today.

As bad as the disciples would have it, whatever they witnessed were only going to be the beginning of birth pains. As birth pains become more frequent and painful as they progress, (or so I’ve heard), so these wars and earthquakes would be more and more deadly as time would go on. I don’t know whether they are statistically increasing, but they are still happening. In the 2004 tsunami an estimated 230,000 to 280,000 people died. In 2008 some 87,000 Chinese people died as a result of an earthquake and I didn’t even remember hearing about it. It has been estimated that more Christians have been martyred in the last 100 years than in the previous 1900 years combined.

So when Jesus speaks to us and says, “**It is necessary**” for these things to happen and “**do not be alarmed**”, what is a portion of the lesson? We are not God. We are not in control. We can pray to Him and we should pray to Him. But we shouldn’t expect that we will somehow be able to create a utopia on earth if we just follow the right steps and take the right precautions in order to prevent emergencies. There is plenty beyond our control. Think of Luther’s time. He lived following the great black plague where 75 million people died as a result. Several of his own children died at a young age.

His daughter died in his arms at age 13. He knew life was fragile. He himself was at the mercy of what his elector decided to do with him; if he would hand him over to the emperor or not.

“Do not be alarmed.” Think of Jesus who faced arrest. He didn’t panic. He didn’t run. He knew He was about to die. It was foretold. It was what He came to do. So He said, **“I am he. Let these men go.”** Without a panic He took command of the situation. He allowed them to arrest Him without a fuss; for that is what He came to do; He came to die for you and for me. He spoke in confidence from the cross; promising forgiveness and committing His soul to the Father. He knew that He would rise, and He did. Scary as His task was to be punished for our sins; He believed in the end He would live as the victorious King; and He did. He did this to give us confidence to face death; knowing that our sins are paid for and loved by God.

Calmness in the face of threats portrays great faith. Just for preaching that you are saved by faith in Christ alone and for decrying the practice of selling a piece of paper for the forgiveness of sins; for daring to question the authority of the pope to issue such papers; Luther was deemed a heretic. He could have been arrested and put to death just as John Hus was. The threat was real. But Luther didn’t let fear get the best of him. It didn’t matter what they threatened as long as God’s Word gave him comfort; telling him his sins were forgiven and heaven was his through faith. God’s Word said that Martin would be saved by faith in Christ, not by submission to the laws and doctrines of the Church. So Luther stood firm. He faced their threats and spoke all the louder against their false doctrines because He knew the truth.

We face more and more threats today for standing on what God’s Word has to say about sexuality and about marriage; that God designed marriage to be between a man and a woman. We face ridicule from those within Christianity who say we are too stuffy or a bunch of homophobes and hate mongers and bigots. God grant us such a faith to focus on God’s Words to us in Christ; so that we can shut out all of the panic and the fear and just follow Jesus and stick to what the Word says. Think of what we sing in the Martin Luther hymn,

The word they still shall let remain nor any thanks have for it
He’s by our side upon the plain with His good gifts and Spirit
and do what they will; hate, steal, hurt or kill,
Though all may be gone, Our victory is won;
The kingdom’s ours forever!

Isn’t that why we come here? To hear the Word to quench our fears. We are taking an hour out of our lives to turn off the phones and the deadlines and just sit and listen and eat and drink of Jesus. We are here to find comfort from our fears. We remember in the midst of death that we have life and salvation in Christ.

What a beautiful word we have in today's text. Jesus said that all of these things that would happen are the "**beginning of birth pains.**" But what happens to women after they go through the birth pains? They give birth! Isaiah 26:19 says what will happen at the end of all things -

**Your dead will live, Lord; their bodies will rise—
let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy—
your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.**

So it's kind of an interesting picture if you think about it. All of these earthquakes are only a foreshadowing of the ultimate earthquake that will happen at the end of time, when Jesus shakes the ground and brings forth the dead. Even though the earth swallows up life in the deaths that happen in earthquakes and famines, the earth will also let them loose. For those of us who believe in Christ, God promises a resurrection to eternal life. We will experience no more death and no more temptation. Our souls have already been brought to life through baptism, and our bodies will be brought along for the ride at the resurrection from the dead.

Today we begin the four Sundays of the End Times. Are times getting worse? Of course they are. But that doesn't mean that God can't work it out for our good. When Jesus spoke the truth about how HE was the Messiah, His fellow religious leader put Him to death - thinking they would shut Him up. But through His death He fulfilled His prophecy and earned our salvation. Listen to how He spoke in the midst of that death; hear the words of comfort that He spoke in that most trying time; "**It is finished.**" Look at what Jesus accomplished, the salvation of the world.

When Luther tried to correct the false practices and teachings in his own church, he was hoping that they would welcome the reform. In reply it was his own church that rejected what he had to say from the Bible. Yet God used Luther's persecution as a megaphone through which the Holy Spirit could reveal Christ crucified to the world.

And so today, the critics and the enemies are getting louder and louder. They crucify us in the court of public opinion. They want us to be quiet. Islam is becoming more and more vocal and more and more vicious.

In the midst of all of this Jesus says, "**Don't be alarmed.**" Expect it to happen. Don't forget that you still have Jesus as your mighty fortress to save you from your sins and God's wrath on Judgment Day. No matter how painful the earthquakes and famines may be; there is still a final birth coming. Look forward to it. Keep on standing firm on Christ alone. Say with Luther, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."