

And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above;^[a] and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. Daniel

April 70 AD, though Jerusalem had been under siege by Rome for years, the fighting intensified as Passover drew near. Jewish Pilgrims appealed to the commander of the Roman forces, Titus, for permission to enter Jerusalem. He allowed them to enter, not out of mercy, but as part of his strategic plan to devastate the Jews and the city of Jerusalem. He had no intentions of allowing those - entering the city to worship for Passover - to leave the city. The pilgrims were more mouths to feed which would cause the food supply to be used up more quickly and get this mission over with.

Titus had an army of 60,000 troops along with another 16,000, who were responsible for supplies and logistics. The Jews had nothing in comparison to Titus's professional army, with only 23,000 troops waiting for the Romans attack inside of Jerusalem's walls. Titus had already cut off communication between the Jews in the countryside and those in the city and cleverly added to the confusion by allowing a large number of noncombatant pilgrims to enter the city. With the strain of the pilgrims, food supplies were quickly depleted and famine set in.

Titus ordered troops to encamp on the Mount of Olives to the east of the city. Though the Jews continued to resist the onslaught from the Roman troops through various sorties, Titus tightened his grip and the sieged progressed. For 24 days the Roman troops used bronze-headed battering rams to crack the city walls. While the constant battering continued outside the walls, inside the walls three Jewish groups defending different areas of the city were fighting among themselves. One group attacking the other to take over the other's territory.

In the midst of in-fighting, the Jews were able to have minor successes which would temporarily stop Roman advances. In one case, while Roman forces were building and erecting ramps to give them a pathway over the city walls, Jewish forces were tunneling beneath them and caused the ground under the Roman troops to collapse resulting in a large number of men to be lost.

The veracity of the Jewish fighters caused Titus to recalculate his plan. Rather than attempting to take the battle inside the city, he tightened his blockade by ordering his troops to construct a line 4 ½ miles long encircling the city and preventing any supplies to be smuggled in to the Jews. He ordered anyone attempting to reach the city, to be crucified and left on display as a warning.

Josephus writes the conditions inside the wall were so dire that wives would snatch the food from their husbands, children from their fathers and most pitiable of all, mothers from the very mouths of the infants. So crazed with hunger were the defenders that they resorted to eating leather belts and harnesses.

Throughout the summer the siege continued, the Jews making minor advances, but with starving forces it was impossible to hold the enemy off. Early September, Titus' forces broke through the walls of the temple and as a victory celebration, ordered that a sacrifice of a pig be offered at the eastern gate of the temple. Nothing would have been more blasphemous or insulting to the Jews. The earthly home of their God had been destroyed, the once gleaming, white marble temple on the hill, was now ashes and rubble, only the Western wall remained as testament that the temple had ever been there.

As trophies of his victory, Titus captured the golden table of shewbread, the seven-branched candlestick, and the roll of the law, relocating them to Rome.

The Jewish men who were not killed in the slaughter that followed, were sent to live out their lives in forced labor, while their wives and children were sold as slaves.

The Romans denied the Jews, who had escaped to the countryside, the opportunity of rebuilding the temple and established a permanent garrison to guard the area in hopes of obliterating the Jewish faith. They abolished the Sanhedrin and in its place formed a Roman pro-curator's court.

With the temple destroyed, sacrificial Judaism ended in horror and Temple left in ashes.

Josephus, our major source for all this information, does not name a single Christian victim in connection with great Jewish War. Why not? The earliest Christians largely escaped all this horror for two reasons: (1) Only four years before the war's outbreak, James the Just of Jerusalem, the first Christian bishop according to Acts 15, was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin, which must certainly have led the struggling Jewish-Christian community to think about leaving. (2) Eusebius (You-see-be-us), the "father of church history," also tells us that Christians were warned by an prophecy to flee the city some time before war's outbreak. In fact, they evacuated to Pella and other cities north of Jerusalem, and so escaped the Roman siege and conquest.

This siege gives us context for our readings today from the gospel of Mark and Hebrews. The gospel writers and the writer of Hebrews believed that the trouble of Israel had begun with the invasion of Babylon and continued through their own day. In learning more about the siege of Jerusalem, I was fascinated to discover that God worked through the wars of man to put an end to the temple sacrifice. When Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the temple was torn, the old way of "housing" God was over and yet many Jews would not embrace the work of the cross and the

resurrection of Christ, but continued to cling to the temple and the sacrifices of animals.

With the coming of the Messiah, His death and resurrection, God was making a way for the world to receive the message of salvation, rescue, and deliverance through His righteous ones, who would live by faith.

In this passage, the writer of Hebrews encourages believers to take courage in the midst of terrible times and hold on to their faith. In the chapters to follow, he continues to unfold what holding on to their faith looks like as he recounts in chapter eleven how the heroes of the Old Testament were looking forward to this new inheritance, in chapter twelve how we must get rid of weight preventing us from running the race well, and embrace a disciplined life. Finally in chapter thirteen the writer expands on how we must live practically as a family.

In the face of coming trouble, the way of life would vanish forever, for those whom this letter is written. Their beloved city would be destroyed, their place of worship turned to rubble. Their families of origin would change: by division of some remaining in Judaism and some accepting Christ as Savior, by death through the coming persecutions, and through the great scattering of believers throughout the known world.

It occurred to me as I was preparing for today, that Hebrews could be seen as a survival guide for these new believers, the writer is basically saying, "Here's how and why to hold on to your faith and how carry on in the midst of utter collapse."

The writer of Hebrews describes how God reorients the temple from a place in Jerusalem, to a sanctuary within the hearts of those who receive Him. In the midst of God's new creation, He teaches that Jesus is a worthy sacrifice once and for all. The writer clearly makes the case that Jesus is God and that He is the

ray of God's sun. In Jesus we see God's greatest glory and God's greatest humility. He reminds us that even in the face of trials and persecutions, God will not abandon us. In the midst of the warnings, in chapter 13, the writer offers us a reminder on hospitality. He writes:

Let ^ubrotherly love continue. ² ^vDo not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby ^wsome have entertained angels unawares. ³ ^xRemember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴ ^yLet marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge ^zthe sexually immoral and adulterous. ⁵ Keep your life ^afree from love of money, and ^bbe content with what you have, for he has said, ^c"I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶ So we can confidently say, ^d"The Lord is my helper; ^eI will not fear; what can man do to me?"

⁷ Remember ^fyour leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and ^gimitate their faith."

When two of our kids, Benji and Abbey were in middle school, they took a class at our homeschool co-op called Survivors. In this class they learned how to build a protective structure out of branches and vine and a roof made of leaves. I remember the lean to they built next to our house that lived there for much longer than Andy and I expected. They learned how to forage food that could sustain them, look for water sources, and make a fire, as they read stories of survivors in the books, Hatchet and My side of the Mountain. They loved the adventure of surviving as lone wolves in a harsh world.

In contrast the book of Hebrews offers us solid reasoning of the life we have in Christ by being made right with the Father for all time, practical instruction on hospitality, and the important

matters of their life together. To some this may seem impractical, but let's take a closer look.

The book of Hebrews is written to a group of people with an extensive web of family relationships. They knew who their ancestors were and what tribe they belonged to, their survival depended upon those family relationships. The writer understands that with the unraveling of their deeply knitted relationships, they needed to know how to carry on. He casts a godly vision of the reordering of the temple, he also reorders the family as a community of Jesus followers. **Not doing away with family ties, but understanding that living together as followers of Christ is not about surviving as lone wolves but thriving as a well ordered family.** They were instructed to:

Love each other

Show Hospitality

Visit those in prison

Let marriage be pure

Keep your life free from the love of money and be content with what you have

Remember that God will not leave or forsake you

Remember to follow your leaders

What was true for early Christians remains true today. We have a solace in the midst of whatever uncertainty is going on in the world. Our faith in God, friendship and family found in the body of Christ are the means of survival, but even more than that, a grace that God has given us to thrive in the midst of a troubled

world throughout time. Of course food and shelter are vital for survival, but as we follow the guidance we are given in Hebrews, those needs will be met.

We see this played out in the book of Acts

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.”

There were no needy persons among them. (Pause and count to 3)

They were cared for by each other. The apostles didn’t do all the work, the needs were met because everyone did their part. They followed the principles that the writer of Hebrews records, for the rest of us -those who were not there to see how God worked his grace through those who followed Him.

Our parish is deeply committed to hospitality and personally this has been a core call of God in my life. And yet I’m the first to say, it can be hard living at any time in history, accomplished only by God’s grace. But it seems particularly out of step in a culture that prioritizes and has popularized “living your best life” by checking off the bucket list of personal experiences. This obsession of our age has proven lacking; It is clear chasing after “living my best life,” hasn’t led to a country of fulfilled individuals, but of insatiable consumers, for whom happiness is still unrealized, loneliness at all time highs, and extreme division - a way of life.

We have a great hope to offer our world, a family ordered according to God's love. This is not a nebulous feeling, but a boots on the ground, counter-cultural caring for one another as Christ cares for us.

What does that look like? We are blessed in our parish to have encouragement to develop a sense of family in our monthly table groups (if you aren't in one, Thomas can help you connect). Our student, women's, and men's ministries as well as our outreach ministries like Madison Place, help us meet one another, give us an opportunity to develop friendships, and serve our community. But only casually dipping a toe into an opportunity cannot produce the kind of deep relationships that are able to entrust another with the content of our hearts. We must take seriously the importance of these relationships as God's means of grace for our survival in a turbulent world and commit ourselves to moving beyond, a Sunday passing of the peace to become formed as spiritual brothers and sisters, sharing our sorrows as well as our joys and serving a hurting world around us.

God calls us to live a life that loves so generously that fear cannot find a place among us. May we wholeheartedly pursue this holy gift of grace together and in His power, and make famous the name of our God Father, son, and Holy Spirit.

