

One day in seminary one of the Old Testament professors asked if anyone knew where to find the most archeological artifacts from ancient Israel. One of my classmates raised their hand and said, “The British Museum?” Not what the professor meant, but not wrong. Considering that at the height of their global expansion, the sun never set on the British Empire, their passion for collecting treasures from historical empires makes sense. From our vantage point, we see a whole history of civilizations and even empires rising and falling—it’s just what they do: Egypt and Babylon, Greece and Rome, the Aztecs and the Incas. When we read *Life After Doom* last spring for book study, I was struck by Brian McLaren’s suggestion that people living through the fall of a civilization may not realize that’s what is happening. Just as Rome wasn’t built in a day, neither did it fall all at once; there was probably more than one Roman citizen who thought if they just had a better Caesar, or a more functional senate, or a more powerful military to deal with those pesky Visigoths that they’d finally get back on track. It’s either optimism or hubris that we can look at the evidence of extinct civilizations behind glass displays in museums but think that *our* culture couldn’t possibly fail. And whenever we do see the pillars of our own institutions beginning to crack or even crumble, we think it must be a sign that the *whole world* is ending. We are not alone; it’s been that way at least since Luke wrote his gospel.

Jesus and his disciples spent most of their ministry in small towns and fishing villages around Galilee, not in big cities or the Jerusalem temple. Whether this was the first time the disciples had ever seen the temple, or their appreciation was renewed with each visit, they couldn’t help but comment on its grandeur. People still come from all over the world to pray at the small remaining section of the western wall of the temple’s foundation, which hints at how massive the building would have been, especially for the time period. More than just a place of worship, the temple represented God’s presence with the nation: the original temple that King Solomon had built was destroyed by the Babylonians, then rebuilt when the Persians allowed Israel’s exiles to return home; that second temple was expanded by Herod the Great into the beautifully adorned structure that captivated Jesus’ followers. But Jesus shares a surprising piece of news: *As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another.*

It would seem that Jesus is predicting an unimaginable disaster. *When will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?* If the temple, which physically appears too big to fail, and spiritually represents the presence of God, and politically symbolizes Israel’s existence as a nation, is going to be destroyed, we can see why the disciples want a head start getting as far away as possible from whomever or whatever is capable of causing that much destruction. For Jesus’ contemporaries, the end of the temple would surely signify the end of the world as they know it—if not the end of the whole world for everyone.

But here's the thing: by the time Luke wrote his gospel, it had already happened. The Romans destroyed the temple in the year 70, and it was never rebuilt. Judaism shifted from a religion of temple sacrifice to the study and practice of Torah, which could be done anywhere, so not only was the building and the center of Israel's culture gone, their whole spirituality changed. The most unimaginable catastrophe that could have happened to Jesus' followers had happened, yet life went on. By the time Luke's community heard his gospel, the worst thing that could have happened to *Jesus* had happened—he was crucified. But then he was resurrected and ascended, and his disciples kept on going; the way of Jesus spread, and in 2000 years, through wars and insurrections and earthquakes and famines and plagues, the church, the body of Christ, lives on.

Every couple of years, someone predicts that the end is near; sometimes they even give us an exact date. Yet, we're all still here. Jesus tells us not to be led astray and not to follow the people who are making those predictions. When we look at all the chaos in the world—and make no mistake, there is absolutely chaos in the world—but when we see that, we are not to be afraid. We can expect natural disasters and weird astronomy and nations rising against nations because that's what nations do. Every generation looks around and thinks things can't possibly get any worse; the world must be ending, and the world *as they know it* very well may be. But our faith is not meant to be grounded in human institutions or earthly structures; our faith is in the God who was there in the chaos at the beginning, and who came in the person of Jesus to walk with us through middle of our struggle, and who promises finally to gather us home for eternity. We don't know the timing of the end of the story, but we do know how the story ends, and spoiler alert—on the other side of all that chaos, it's good.

Luke was writing to people whose world had been turned upside down and who expected Jesus to come back and come back soon. But in the meantime, they had to get by on faith that wasn't crushed when the stones of the temple were crushed, faith that wouldn't waiver when people doing decidedly un-Jesus-y things said *I am he!* Luke was writing to people who were trying to follow the way of Jesus even though the world around them wasn't giving them much help or encouragement. Luke was writing to us.

Back to the fall of the Roman Empire, I have now added Latin as the third language that I have quit trying to learn on Duolingo, so I won't even attempt to say this in the original, but there is a Latin proverb that says *If the wind will not serve, take to the oars*. In other words, even when the circumstances around us don't make faithful living easy for us, we are still called to go forward, to persist. But here's the thing that would not have factored into the Stoics' philosophy: if we think of the wind not just as wind but as The Wind, The Breath, The Spirit of God—that Wind never fails. God is always empowering us for the journey. So no matter how rough the world around us gets, may we always be resilient and courageous, not because of ourselves but because we know the steadfast loving kindness of the One who is giving us endurance for our souls.