

The Best Is Yet to Come
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Mark 13:24-27
Saints Triumphant B

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So how's life going for you? Better than ever and only ever getting better, right? Only up, up and up. No? But wasn't that the promise of our youth? Wasn't that what we were told as good American children? Work hard, apply yourself and your life will benefit. If you put in the time and the effort your life will get better. You'll get more stuff, finally have enough to be comfortable without worry, and you'll be able to handle any problem that comes your way. Isn't that the social contract we were given? It was for me, anyway.

Well maybe today you're having a good day. Maybe today you feel on top of the world. But I'm going to take a wild swing and guess that you don't feel like that all the time. Instead, there's probably days where it feels like a struggle just to tread water as it were in life without sinking deeper. After all, there's so much that goes on outside of our control, isn't there? The world is spinning out of control, our lives are constantly afflicted with trouble and our own bodies rebel against us. Everywhere we look there's something trying to crush our hope and our spirits with something else that's only getting worse, not better.

Technology is amazing, and thanks to it, we can be instantly aware of any tragedy that goes on in any part of the world! The internet is even better than the nightly news could be at just beating down our spirits over all the horrible things that go on in our world. Sure we can always find out about the latest natural disaster that's killed hundreds or thousands or more, but better than that, we have instant access to examples of the worst that humanity has to offer as well. Mass murder, persecution, rape, abuse and all kinds of other twisted evils fill the pages of the news...and *then* there's the stories that turn our stomachs because those reporting on it either don't consider it as evil as we do and even sometimes go as far as to applaud the display. The corruption of our society in allowing so many sexual vices to become acceptable practice while the majority cheer it on just pushes to crush our spirits further.

Even if you make the wise decision of tuning out all that sensationalist nonsense from the world news, it's not like there's nothing locally to put you in the same sort of mood. People aren't what they used to be, and even in our local communities, selfishness and laziness rears its ugly head more often than it used to. Community spirit seems harder to maintain and it's harder to trust and not just have to grab for yourself whenever you can. Our own families are hit with struggle and strife from within by that one troublemaker who seems to only care for themselves, and exists solely to sow discord in the family structure with their gossiping and griping.

And then there's yourself. After all, none of us are getting any younger, right? I know some of us feel it more than others. Can't move like we used to, not without some serious pain anyway, can't see or hear like we used to. Can't remember or think as fast as before. Every day the life we have seems to just slip a little further away.

So, thanks Pastor, I wasn't feeling depressed but I sure am now, what was the point of all that? Well, the point certainly wasn't to depress us in the end, but we do need to recognize exactly what our world and our own lives are really like, especially if we're a little too much in love with this life and this world. And we need to know exactly why it is that way so we can have our expectations set properly. The idea that this world can get better or that our lives can get better is an illusion that only leads us away from the real happiness and real healing that our God wants to give us. The sooner that illusion is crushed for us, the better. The longer we live with that delusion, the more we waste time and effort.

You see this world, this life, it can't get better, it can only get worse. This world is broken by sin. We like to think of sin as something we do, but remember the base meaning of "sin"? It means to miss the mark, to not quite be what it ought. The whole world is in this state. Creation itself groans under it. As it goes on, the world is literally tearing itself apart from the forces of sin and only the grace of God himself holds it together in any kind of shape. Maybe that begs the question, if God can keep it together, why can't he keep it together better than he does? Why is so much awful when he could make it better? Because God isn't interested in fixing this world, he's interested in rescuing you from this world. And we need that rescuing because we are just as corrupt and broken as the world itself. We look around at the world and get caught up in misery and despair when we should be filled with trust for the God we know is still in control of this world. We lament the terrible things that happen as though God made a mistake in allowing them. We question and doubt his goodness and for that, we should be destroyed at the end along with this world.

But God had a solution. The world was beyond repair, but you were not beyond saving. You ruined your own chances of being rescued on your own. You are not good enough, but God would accept a substitute. Justice could be satisfied if someone else paid for you. So we know how our Savior Jesus lived a holy life for you, took your sins on himself at the cross and bore the wrath of the Father against all your crimes. The payment was made, complete and finished. And it was accepted. Jesus rose to life as a promise, as a deposit and guarantee to you of the new life that is now yours.

The eyes of faith view this world through the cross of Christ. Everything you see is filtered through that image of God sacrificed for your sins to set you free. We see the sinful corruption that clings to everything and what happens in our world makes sense. We see the people who are cut off from their God and slaves to their sin, and what they do in this state is not at all surprising. We see the world not as a place to be rescued, but as a place to be rescued *from*. We feel the loving arms of our God, wrapped around and protecting us from the worst while allowing us enough trouble to remember we need him and his deliverance yet. And we see the harassed and helpless souls that will die without God as people we want to help, not hate.

And yet, knowing just how broken this world is doesn't quite remove the burden of living in it, does it? Each day still brings new troubles and new aches and new pains designed to steal away our peace each day that we're here. And on top of it all, the burden of the sin that is still in us each day weighs heavier every time it drags us down to its level. We know that we are a new creation in Christ, the old has gone, the new has come. We are the new self that will live forever with the Lord. The new self that loves our God, understands that his will truly is best and wants to carry it out. And yet despite our yearning for that perfection of the Lord, we are still chained down with the burden of our own sin. Even when we don't give in to it, the temptation still gnaws at us constantly. And when we do fall, we feel the burden of letting down ourselves and our Lord. We know there is forgiveness, and we rejoice that our God reminds us constantly of that forgiveness, but the daily struggle can become so wearisome on top of simply dealing with the effect of sin on our lives and in our world.

My brothers and sisters, it is difficult. I am not here to tell you some magical bit of truth that will suddenly make all that struggle go away or stop you from giving in to sin for the rest of your life, or anything like that. What I am here to tell is that this is what we should expect, we should expect difficult days. We should expect that things will get worse, not better. We should not try to fix this world but rather strive, like our Lord, to rescue as many as possible before it is too late.

But I am also here to tell you that this is not all there ever will be. That is the truth that keeps us going, that we use to encourage each other going forward and gives us the drive to continue. The world will not spiral downward forever. Our lives will not be stuck getting worse forever. There is an end. And the end is the best thing for us that there ever could be. Our Lord tells us about this in our gospel today: <read text: Mark 13:24-27>.

This follows a section of Jesus describing for us what the days leading up to this will be like. And it's not a pretty picture, as we've been able to look out at our world and see. But here he tells us what will happen following those days. There will be an end. The lights will go out, the stars will fall from the sky. Doesn't exactly seem like something to look forward to there, but look at what goes with it. Jesus will return at the same time and we who are his elect, we who trust in him for forgiveness and eternal life, we will be gathered up by his angels and taken to him, our Savior and our brother.

You see, despite all the great and terrible signs that are promised on that last day, it will not be even a moment of fear for us. We will know. When that trumpet sounds we will know exactly what it means. It means the struggle is past. Our Savior is here to take us away from all this. The victory he won for us on the cross has arrived fully for us. The sin and evil of this age will be destroyed and swept away by his mighty arm and all that is left will be those of us who share his triumph in glory forever. We ourselves will be changed, made glorious and holy like him. No longer just counted as holy by his merit, but made holy. No longer tormented by sin and temptation, we will be free of all that causes us grief and pain within and without. The years that we have had to endure here will be the blink of a memory, as eternity of triumph and victory stretches before us.

Not that we are left helpless now. Our Lord still rules this world. He is still directing everything for our benefit. Doing whatever is necessary to keep us in our saving faith until that great day when we are rescued. He is helping us now, allowing difficulty when necessary as discipline to keep us on the path. But he gives us this promise and this picture of the eternal future to lift our spirits now and carry us forward as we wait for the great and glorious day of the Lord. Brothers and sisters as you carry the burdens remaining in this life, let this promise and picture give you strength and courage. Use this promise of the final triumph to encourage each other in these last days. There is trouble now, it's not going to stop so long as we're here. But that trouble is not all there is. By our Savior Christ, the best is yet to come. Amen.