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THE BEGINNING OF THE END

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Jesus said to His disciples shortly before His death: **“See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in My name, saying, ‘I AM He!’ and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains. But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations... And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”**

When Jesus’ disciples experienced these things after His resurrection and ascension, it might have seemed like that the world was ending, but Jesus had cautioned them: **“The end is not yet... These are the beginning of the birth pains.”**

The Church has suffered in this world since the days Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, and God’s Word says that it is going to get much worse for us before the end comes and Jesus returns in glory. We will be tempted to feel hopeless in the face of suffering. Jesus’ words are meant to encourage us in our faith, faith that will sustain us through whatever we must face until Jesus returns in glory. Jesus promises us, **“The one who endures to the end will be saved.”**

We are in the time of the Church year when we lift our eyes up to heaven in hopeful expectation of our Lord’s glorious return. We are at the “beginning of the end” of this sinful world. Jesus came to save us from this. So, instead of hearing with fear Jesus’ list of things that are against us leading up to the end, we need to hear them with faith as the very things Jesus defeated for us. Jesus said in the Book of Revelation, **“Do not fear what you are about to suffer... Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”** (2:10).

Jesus lays before us today the challenges to our faith in these last days and warns us not to allow them to lead us astray, wander away from Him and lose our faith.

The first challenge He says we face is being confronted with false gods and saviors. Jesus begins: **“See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in My name, saying, ‘I AM He!’ and they will lead many astray.”** Jesus Christ is true God Himself with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus shows by using as His own the Old Testament name of God, *Yahweh*, which was explained to Moses as meaning, **“I AM WHO I AM”** (Ex. 3:14). False Christ’s will come claiming to be God’s own Son. Jesus warns, **“Many will come in My name, saying, ‘I AM He!’”**

How does God protect us from being led astray by false Christs and saviors? We have God’s pure Word spoken to us through Jesus, His Son. Jesus teaches in John ten that He is the Good Shepherd, and we are His sheep. **“The sheep hear His voice, and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all His own, He goes before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers”** (Jn 10:3-5). We recognize the voice of Jesus by hearing and learning His Word. So, when we hear something different, we can reject it as false and flee from the one speaking it.

When your pastors, whom God has placed here to serve as the under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd, exhort you to come to church, attend Bible study, send your children to Sunday School, attend our parochial schools, have daily personal and family devotions that include the reading and learning of God’s Word with meditation and prayer based upon it, it is because we want you to hear the true Word of God so you will recognize what is false when you hear it.

The next challenge Jesus says we face in these last days is the world we live in falling apart: political unrest: **wars and rumors of wars**; natural disasters: **earthquakes and famines**, hurricanes, as well as other environmental disasters. Disease and death are all around us, reminders that sin has its consequences. When we see and experience these sorts of things, we are reminded that the end is coming.

How should we as Christians understand the political unrest around us? Elections were held recently. No matter how we think of the election results, God cautions us, **“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish”** (Ps. 146:3-4). The political leaders we want elected will not save us when elected, or, if they are defeated, it is not the end of the world. If your happiness and peace of mind is determined by politics, you probably need to reflect on who your god is, who you trust in for all good in your life.

The last sort of challenges to Christians in these last days are the ways we will be persecuted for faith. There will be trials before religious authorities and political powers. Families will be divided over who is God, even to the point of death. As the world around us moves ever farther from faith and trust in God, Christians who refused to be silent but keep confessing the true faith will be hated for the sake of Jesus' name. What should our response be to religious persecution? Silence is not an option.

Experience has shown us that those who opposed the Gospel of Jesus and Christian life according to God's Word begin by asking us to be tolerant of them in the name of love. Then they ask us to support their sinful lives and unbelief as something good. Then, if we do not support their deviancies, they attack us as haters who must be silenced and removed from society. Christians must not respond to them in hate, but we must not be silent; the truth must be confessed in the face of the world's lies and opposition.

When faced with such challenges, Christians seize them as opportunities to speak up and confess our faith in Jesus. He has warned us in advance that this will happen to us so we can **bear witness before** others when it happens. Jesus adds promises to strengthen us in our witness in these days before the end comes. The good news of Jesus Christ will be spread throughout the whole world. **And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.** When evil forces in the world try to drive out the Church from one place, it spreads to other places. When the world tries to silence the Gospel, God works together for good in the mission of the Church, with people everywhere hearing and believing the Good News of Jesus.

God promises that His Holy Spirit will be with us to keep us in the true faith and endure in these difficult times. **And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.** Jesus is not saying here that the Holy Spirit works in us apart from the means of grace: the hearing and learning of God's holy Word, Baptism into Christ, and the Sacrament of Jesus' body and blood. The words the Holy Spirit will give us to speak when called upon to confess our faith in the face of persecution is the Word of Christ we have heard and believed leading up to that.

A time is coming when God's Word of truth, the Bible, will be banned among us by the forces of evil, even as it is banned already in some places in our world like where Islam exercises totalitarian control. When this happened in the past, like in Communist countries, the government could outlaw believing in God, but they could not stop Christians who had learned God's Word from remembering that Word, believing that Word, and sharing that Word with others, even though it meant putting themselves at risk of punishment if caught. We need to prepare ourselves, our children, and grandchildren for when those days come so we will not be left without God's Word to sustain us.

All the things Jesus describes in our Gospel Reading are happening right now. We are living during the "beginning of the end" of this world. We face these challenges with faith, not fear, with hope, not hopelessness.

Some of my favorite words in the Bible are in today's Epistle from Hebrews 10. They remind me of how God will sustain the Church in these last days. **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.** The beginning of the end is upon us. Jesus promises: **"The one who endures to the end will be saved."** Amen.