

*Mk 13:24 "But in those days, following that distress, 'the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
25 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'  
26 "At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and  
glory. 27 And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends  
of the earth to the ends of the heavens."*

Dear Friends In Christ,

A church youth group was on its way to a national youth rally. (By the way, Paladins for Christ, we just got the poster for the 2016 WELS International Youth Rally. It's in the hall.) As I was saying, several years ago there was a youth group going to a rally. This group was from a remote, rural congregation. As the van travelled to the rally, it rolled through the city of Chicago. For at least one of the kids, it must have been his first time to go to Chicago, because when the van passed the then-named Sears Tower, a kid cried out, "Whoa! Look at that building! It must be as tall as five silos!" It wasn't me, but it could have been. When you grow up in the country, the city is an amazing place.

### FINAL VICTORY

#### I. Before Triumph, Distress

This does have something to do with our reading. Our reading is from somewhere in the middle of a chapter. But to get the flavor of the reading, you have to know something his disciples said at the beginning of the chapter. At the beginning of Mark 13, Jesus' chosen disciples from Galilee... well, let's just say it this way: There was a reason the city slickers of Jerusalem made fun of the Galileans. They were just the sort of people who would measure skyscrapers in silos.

Mark chapter 13 begins by telling us, "*As [Jesus] was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!'*" (1). He was amazed. To his country-boy eyes, God's temple in Jerusalem was almost unbelievable. Add this magnificence to the recent events of Jesus' miracles and huge crowds following him. Sure, Pharisees and Sadducees were laying down verbal mine-fields. But Jesus passed every test. The disciples' expectations kept growing.

A couple weeks earlier they had had an argument. Remember that? Who would be the greatest in Jesus' kingdom? Who could sit at his right or left? It was the same exuberant optimism when this disciple made that comment about the temple buildings. The kingdom Jesus would build would be simply glorious, and they would be in at the ground floor. And what better place for Jesus to reveal himself than in the shadow of God's temple?

Then Jesus did what he always did. He burst their bubble. "*'Do you see all these great buildings?' replied Jesus. 'Not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down'*" (2), and for the next twenty-some verses Jesus relates tales of woe and suffering; great lines like, "*Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom... All men will hate you because of me... Those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning.*" If they were following him around the dusty paths of Palestine for a cushy cabinet position, Jesus served notice that they would be disappointed, very disappointed.

Then, we come to our text. Jesus said, "*But in those days, following that distress...*". Jesus added realism to their dreams. Jesus' realism took into account this truth of the Bible, "*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22). Yes, we will enter heaven, but first...

What distress have you experienced? Maybe you recently saw the heartbreaking picture of a one-

year-old hugging her 40 year old mother with stage four cancer. And there are the distresses no one shares: the worries of keeping a living wage and the frustration of a car that needs repairs you don't have money for. Others walk around with the empty feeling that the closest family members—those who should have the most concern and loving—have no real care or concern, or maybe worse. And that was only the beginning of what Jesus was talking about. He was including in the massacre of hundreds of civilians that just happened in Paris, or happens every month in Nigeria or Yemen. Jesus was including the 21<sup>st</sup> century Syrian Christians persecuted for their faith, and the creationist scientist hedged out of his job because of his certainty that God did create this world. That is what Jesus meant when Jesus told his disciples about *“that distress.”* He speaks the truth that in this world, we will never achieve a Christian Golden Age. That was the mistake of those earliest Christians.

One veteran pastor always liked to emphasize that Christians should show the joy of the Gospel in their lives. Because we are saved by Jesus for eternity, we ought to be joyful people. I agree. But to say that good Christians just bounce from one happy day to another is neither the truth nor what Jesus promised. Only *through* many hardships do we enter the kingdom of God. Notice the preposition he used. He used that word “through.” Twenty tons of rock excavated from the bowels of the earth, heated to melting passes through the fire. Only then do you have an ounce of refined gold. *That* is the focus of Saints Triumphant Sunday. But unless you consider the distress, the hardships, you cannot really understand the Triumph of the Saints. Never do you feel healthier than after you have been sick. It is only when we realize the depravity of our sin that we appreciate the gift of forgiveness. And it is because of the brokenness of this world and its distresses that we truly treasure eternal life.

## II. “Saints Triumphant” – Who Are They?

*“But in those days, following that distress...”* Jesus tells us to look after that distress. Something better will come.

There was a time past when we, in Christian circles, talked of the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant. The Church Militant refers to us Christians here on this earth. Now before anyone misunderstands me, I need to clarify what the phrase “Church Militant” means.

In the only New Testament event where a Christian raised a sword – Peter in Gethsemane – Jesus, with ice in his voice, ordered him, “Put it down.” When on trial, Jesus himself said, *“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest... My kingdom is from another place.”* (Jn 18:36). No, the Church Militant has nothing to do with violence. Paul said, *“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but... against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil.”* (Eph 6:12). The phrase “Church Militant” means that as long as a Christian has life, there will be a real and bitter spiritual conflict.

It is not the battle fought by soldiers. It is the battle of children to keep their hearts obedient to their parents. The battle of men and women in their prime to live pure lives in an age which celebrates immorality. The battle of seasoned Christians to not give up in the face of unrelenting attacks on our faith. The battle we all fight against prejudices, not just of race, but those based on wealth, intelligence, social status or rivalry. Part of that battle is daily returning to our Lord and admitting our short-comings, our sins, our failures and trusting him to forgive us.

In contrast to the Church Militant stands the Church Triumphant. Not a single person hearing this message has crossed over from the Church Militant to the Church Triumphant. Every single one of us is still in the Church Militant, fighting the battle of faith. And yet, two people who were with us last year at this time have achieved that final victory: Billy Stratton and Monique Granicki. By God's grace, God kept them in the saving faith. To their end, they trusted in Jesus as their Savior. And at their end, their Lord took them to be with him.

We are part of the Church Militant, the Church Not Yet Triumphant. On this Sunday of Saints

Triumphant, we celebrate those Christians who have gone before us, who fought the battle of faith, and ended life in triumph.

### III. The Goal

In contrast to the distress of this world, Jesus tells us that when he comes again, he will bring something very special.

If you have ever kept chickens, you have known a special joy. Every day, you go out to the chicken house. You reach into the nests and find the eggs. There is no feeling in the hand like those eggs—rounded and smooth like the smoothest rocks you find in a stream bed. Yet unlike rocks, they hold a comfortable warmth from the sitting hen. Going back to the house with a dozen eggs in the basket, you feel a strange contentment.

More securely than I could ever collect eggs and put them in a basket, at the end of time Jesus will send out his angels and gather us from the ends of the earth. His angels will take us from wherever God brings back to life our bodies, and those angels will bring us to our Savior. All the troubles and fears and pain that we have experienced will be over. Then we will begin life the way God created it to be, before Satan fell and mankind chose to rebel. No longer will we be the Church Militant, but the Church Triumphant.

In our reading Jesus talks about the moment the rearguard of the Church Militant finally crosses the river out of enemy territory, to become the full Church Triumphant. ***“At that time [after the distress] men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heaven”*** (26-27).

You know, when those country bumpkin disciples looked at that temple in Jerusalem and said, “Hey, Teacher! Look at these great magnificent buildings! Won’t it be great when the Messiah’s kingdom becomes a reality here on earth?” Jesus popped their bubble—but not like people usually do.

It’s almost like Jesus is saying, “Disciples, don’t look at those glorious temple buildings and create a heaven based on what you see with your eyes. You guys have no imagination.” He doesn’t shut them out of heaven. Instead he tells them, “You guys aren’t thinking big enough. Heaven is not a kingdom of God on this earth, or even one nation under God. It’s bigger and better than anything you can imagine! Every trace of sin, and every trace of sin’s curse will be gone.”

It has been remarked that the Bible doesn’t so much tell us what heaven will be like, as what it will *not* be like. No fears, no tears, no scorching sun, no chilling cold. Like Jesus speaking to the disciples, the only way it can be explained is as *not* like your experiences in this life. Heaven will be better.

A certain boy in early grade school had a very good friend. They did what first and second graders did: played baseball, shot marbles, talked together at lunch, and enjoyed the freedom of recess. Their friendship grew. But in third grade that boy’s friend was diagnosed with leukemia. It was the sad story of declining health, fewer days at school, more and more at the hospital. There were no miraculous recoveries in that young life. And then it was over. At his friend’s funeral, when the boy saw his own mother grabbing a tissue out of her purse to dry her tears, the eight-year-old simply said, perhaps thinking of all his friend’s pain and trouble, he simply said, “Why are you crying? He’s in heaven now.” Yes, he was an eight-year-old Triumphant Saint.

May Jesus’ words about the final victory all Christians will have, may that encourage and comfort you. For we live in a world which has its distress, ***“but following that distress... the Son of Man will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”*** And ***“we will be with the Lord forever;”*** saints triumphant. Amen.