### “Not Led Astray” Steve Finlan for The First Church, November 17, 2024

**Hebrews 10:15–18**

15And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, 16 “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds”; 17he also adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” 18Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

**Mark 13:1–7**

1As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” 2Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4”Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” 5Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. 6Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. 7When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.”

Sometimes what is old and familiar is very comforting. But sometimes what we need is something brand new, a new set of rules, a new vision of the world, a new chance for respect for those who were disrespected before. The idea of a new covenant was central to the teachings of the great prophets: the Isaiahs, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Ezekiel speaks of God giving people hearts of flesh in place of hearts of stone (Ezek 36:26). Second Isaiah says “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations” (42:6). But the most famous of these passages is from Jeremiah 31. Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:33–34 where God says that he will inaugurate a new covenant written on hearts and minds, and will remember their sins no more.

But Hebrews says more than this. He says this new covenant and this forgiveness have already happened, and there is no longer a need for sin-offerings, one of the main types of sacrificial offerings carried out at the Temple. In Hebrews’ mind, it is the sacrifice of Jesus that has rendered the sacrificial cult obsolete, and he says “what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear” (8:13).

Hebrews, which has the most thoroughly sacrificial theology of any New Testament author, also speaks of the sacrificial cult being inadequate and obsolete.

Jesus foretells the disappearance of the Temple itself, saying that the noble architecture his apostles admire will be completely thrown down. I think Jesus is foreseeing that Jewish nationalism was going to lead to a confrontation with Rome, and a disastrous result for the Jews. Unfortunately, his words became wrapped up with apocalyptic expectations of the end of the world. It really was the end of the Jewish world as it existed at that time, but it was not actually the end of the world, just the transition to a new era. Some false Messiahs would indeed come, including the extreme nationalistic Zealots who eventually took control of Judea, started a rebellion against Rome, and thus inevitably brought down retaliation.

The coming of the new covenant in Jesus’ teaching in the 30s a.d., was met with hostility by the entrenched religious authorities. The energy and power of Jewish religious motivation was then misdirected into nationalistic and violent paths, leading to the revolt and the war of the 60s, ending with the destruction of the Temple in 70 a.d. Christians were not drawn into the Jewish War on either side. The church historian Eusebius says (*Church History* 3.5.3) that the Jerusalem church received an oracle before the end telling them to flee east to Pella, which many did, avoiding the war altogether. It is probable that this, along with their record of Jesus’ warning to his disciples to flee when there is a sacrilege in the holy place (Mark 13:14; Matt 24:15), led many to flee. When the Zealots pushed out the priests and seized control of the Temple, and were robbing the common citizens, some Christians might have seen this as the prophesied sacrilege (<https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/75521/information-on-how-the-early-christians-prepared-and-or-fled-from-the-destructio>).

The Romans burned and knocked over the Temple. For Christians, it was a fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy. For unbelieving Jews, it was a repeat of the destruction of the First Temple at the hands of the neo-Babylonians six hundred fifty five years earlier. Judaism was forced to become a changed religion. No longer having a temple or a ritual atonement system, and no longer based in Jerusalem but scattered throughout the Roman empire, the religion focused on Torah interpretation and argument, eventually leading to several collections, the Mishnah, the Gemara, and others, full of stories, parables, and debates by and among the rabbis. The end of the Jewish Temple forced the beginning of what we call rabbinic Judaism.

Meanwhile, Christianity became a multi-cultural and largely Gentile religion, spreading throughout the empire and beyond. Essential to the Christian message is the idea of a new testament, that is, a new covenant, written on the heart and the mind. Christians develop a familiarity with Jesus’ voice, and they will not follow the voice of a stranger. They will not be led astray when many come and say “I am he!” (Mark 13:6). There are many psychologically perturbed individuals who have grandiose opinions of themselves, even claiming to be Jesus returned, some of them quite charismatic and able to gather followers. Those who know Jesus’ voice will not be misled.

People who have managed to get out from dictatorial cults have described some of the features of life in such sects. There is an undue reverence for, and loyalty to, the leader, accepting his theology without question. Along with this subservience comes a certain rigidity in thought. There is a hostility toward alternative ways of thinking, and an extreme barrier between “us” inside the sect and “them,” those outside. There also comes a sharp testing and judging of each member: are you sticking to the true doctrine, or have you wandered in your thinking? Sometimes there is harsh discipline for those who are deemed to have wandered.

We will not fall into such traps if we are growing up in Christ, and becoming spiritually mature. Jesus wants us to grow up and emerge as the original—and even quirky—individuals that we are meant to be. We know we need to be responsible for our own spiritual growth. We have to make our own decisions. No guru or would-be Messiah can make our choices for us. There is a covenant written on our hearts, in which God agrees to save us if we agree simply to love God and seek his will. We pray not to be misled in this chaotic and dangerous world, and to trust our life both here and in the next world into the loving hands of Jesus.