

“Living in Christ’s World: Standing and Falling”

Reading: John 11:21-26; Revelation 11:1-12

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In my younger days I loved to argue. I was never mean about it; I wasn’t one of those people who gets on the internet and picks a fight with a random stranger just for the sake of being horrible and saying horrible things. But my friends and I enjoyed taking contrary positions on things, anything, and then trying to annoy each other by proving one another wrong. It didn’t matter what we argued about, and in fact sometimes we took special joy in arguing at length on the most trivial of matters. We had an ongoing debate over the course of several years over the meaning of the word “whizz,” and whether something could whizz if you didn’t hear it. I *might* have been on the wrong side of that one, but I would never admit it. At that time in life, when you’re in high school and college and don’t have anything better to do, it was fun just taking a stand on something and fighting for it.

As I’ve grown older and have less time and less energy, I’m more discriminating about where I take my stands. Even if I think I’m right and am pretty sure I can prove it, it’s just not worth taking a stand on everything. It costs too much in time and relationships and credibility. Some things just aren’t as clear-cut as it seems; sometimes there’s room for honest disagreement. Sometimes you have to decide whether proving someone wrong is worth losing your relationship with them. In my younger days, taking a stand just meant refusing to budge and enjoying the argument that resulted. Now, taking a stand is not as easy for me as it used to be; I’m much more careful about where and how I stand.

If you’ve been following along with us as we move through the book of Revelation in this season, you may remember that climactic point when the seals are being broken, revealing God’s plan for the future and making terrible things happen on earth, and the world is going haywire and the sun is going dark and the ground beneath our feet is literally giving way, and all the people on earth, from the greatest to the least, cry out, “Who can stand?” It’s not even a question of taking a stand at that point, it’s a question of just standing up when the earth is shaking. The implication is that no one can stand when the world is ending. But then we continue to the next chapter, and we see the angels of God standing, and we see an uncountable multitude of God’s people gathered around God’s throne, and they’re standing. It’s not easy to see it in a book as complex as Revelation, but the point is that there is indeed solid ground, if you know where to stand. Our theme for this study is “Living in Christ’s World,” because Revelation shows us like no other book what it means for the world to be claimed by the living Jesus Christ, and if you’re living in His world, you have a place to stand even when everything around you is shaking.

It’s an interesting study to look through the Revelation and take note of who stands, and when they stand, and where. And while you’re at it, take notes on who falls, and who is thrown. Who can stand? Not everyone, and even those who can stand can’t do it everywhere. Those who can stand in the day of the Lord’s wrath are wise enough to know that you can’t take a stand on just any old hill. What about you? Where do you take your stand? When the earth is shaking under your feet, what hill do you run to? When you’re out in the world and someone says something, and you feel a twinge in your brain telling you *that’s not right*, when do you take a stand? And what do you stand on?

Our passage today from Revelation is a tough one. It's the part of the story when two witnesses come onto the scene, and these witnesses have been the source of contention and debate and varied interpretation ever since John first described them. We've asked the question, "What do we do when God's plan seems to have failed, when the injustice of the world seems to be winning, when evil seems to be ascendant, and when we've waited faithfully for Jesus to return but He hasn't?" We read John's story of seeing the risen, glorious Christ, beginning to prove to us that God's plan hasn't failed at all, we just haven't seen it all yet. We heard Jesus begin to speak to His churches, showing us that the everyday life and struggles of Christians matter in the grand scheme of things, if only you have ears to listen to what Jesus is saying.

Today we skip ahead a bit in the story of John's Revelation. John has been taken up into the throne room of God, and He's seen all of heaven gathered in praise of Jesus, because by His death Jesus redeemed the world. But that redemption isn't complete yet, and so we begin to witness the final actions in that redemption. John sees a scroll gradually unsealed and opened by Jesus, a revealing of that final plan that contains the answers to all of the questions we ask. As that scroll is unsealed, things begin to happen on earth: wars and earthquakes and terrifying attacks by ancient evils, all of which are intended to purge the world of sin, show people that the end is near, and give them the chance to turn to God. That's when they lift that cry, "Who can stand," joining in with the prophets of old who asked who could stand in the day of God's wrath. But they don't repent. They persist in their rebellion, and they reject God's warning.

By the time we get to the passage we read for today, God is preparing to make His big announcement, which comes just after the passage we read. God has purged the world, and now He's going to claim it, once and for all: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever," an angel is about to announce. And it's in preparation for that announcement that we get these two mysterious witnesses. Whether these are two literal people who will speak God's word before the end, or whether they're representative of God's people in general, or whether they're sort of the literary embodiment of God's word as a whole is up for debate, but they're clearly intended to call back two of the greatest figures from the Old Testament: Moses, the giver of God's law, and Elijah, greatest of God's prophets.

Hopefully that question is still ringing in our ears: who can stand? Who can stand when things are falling apart? Who can stand when God's plan seems to have failed? Who can stand when God's wrath seems to be unfathomable, unstoppable, and indiscriminate? Who can stand? These witnesses can stand: they're described as two olive trees or lampstands, once again hearkening back to ancient prophets describing agents of God. They stand, and they proclaim God's message to the world. But they don't stand for long, because a beast suddenly appears on the scene, an enemy, and they are killed, their bodies are desecrated, and they are left exposed in the street to be shamed by passersby. And we begin to wonder: what does this mean for God's people? Once again, has God's plan failed? Was God not strong enough to protect them? These witnesses weren't killed in spite of being faithful to God, in fact they were killed and shamed *because* they were faithful to God. So far the answer to the question "who can stand?" has been that God's people can stand, but now we wonder. Now we've seen them fall.

One thing you may not know about me is that I took Judo classes for a couple of years while I was in seminary. One of my classmates was my sensei, and it was a good opportunity to get off

campus and get some exercise. Don't be too impressed with my martial skill, though, because the class pretty much consisted of me, my sensei who could break me like a twig without breaking a sweat, and ten eight-year-olds who were half my height, so it made it hard to learn how to spar with no one anywhere near my skill level. But the first thing you learn in Judo, and I would guess many other martial arts are the same, is how to fall. No throws, no grips, no chokes, no arm bars, no nothing until you've spent a good amount of time falling. It seems silly at first; after all, falling should be easy. All you have to do is not stand up and let gravity take over. But falling *properly*, so that you minimize the impact and don't get hurt, takes practice. There's a time for falling, there's a technique for falling, and falling in the right way can actually be a strategic move: you can actually throw your opponent by falling, if you know what you're doing.

In the story of John's Revelation, falling well comes from standing well. If you don't stand on a firm foundation, you're bound to fall eventually, and you might join in that cry of "who can stand;" you might think no one could possibly withstand the tragedies that knock you down. If so, you might be surprised to see people standing around you, because they've got a firm foundation. What am I talking about? Again and again in the Revelation, John specifically points out those who are standing, and they're people who are either standing in the presence of God, or they're standing because they're God's agents. And likewise, John points out those who fall: those people who stand in the presence of God usually fall at His feet in worship. The exception is Babylon, the image of the systems and powers of the world opposed to God, and a lament goes up that Babylon will fall, and it will never rise again. And again, John points out when someone or something is cast down: the enemies of God, the beasts and monsters, are cast down into the Abyss or the lake of fire, as are those who persist in their rebellion against God.

These witnesses stood in the right place, but they didn't fall in the right place, so they'll stand again. If you stand on Jesus Christ, the only place you'll fall will be at His feet. They stood on Christ, but they were cast down by Christ's enemies, so therefore Christ will raise them up again. And that's exactly what we see happening: in three and a half days, they are resurrected, literally raised up, and John tells us that they stand on their feet.

One variation as the story goes on comes in the next chapter, where we see the ancient enemy, the great dragon, Satan, standing in opposition to the works of God. And instead of being thrown down, this dragon casts down stars with his tail, and we wonder again whether God is really strong enough: here's the enemy looking awfully powerful. But no, he does his best, but he, too, eventually gets thrown down, eventually to be tossed into a lake of fire as judgment. The enemy is impressive in his attempts to copy God's strength, but he doesn't have it in the end.

One of the things that this book of Revelation does, with all of its strange visions and monsters, is that it challenges the center of our world. I know it's easy for me to live as though I'm the center of the world, or at least I'm the center of my own world. If bad things happen to me, it's the end of the world. If I don't understand what's going on, the world doesn't make sense. But Jesus Christ redeems us; He sets us free from a self-centered world and helps set our feet on the solid ground of the real world, the world in which He is the center. Jesus is the standard by which all other things are judged, the light in which all other things are seen, the solid ground relative to which all other things move. If *my* world falls apart, *His* world, the real world, stands firm. So as long as I'm standing in the presence of Christ, the only place I'll really fall is at His feet. Seeing that reality, even

using the strange visions John gives us in this book, helps make sense of the traumas and the troubles that knock me off my feet. I can fall well when I know I'll get back up again. I can fall well when I know how to fall.

Where do you take your stand? What would it take to shake your world? If your health was threatened, would you fall? Your finances? Your relationships? Your family? Your sense of self-respect, or your pride, or your job, or your possessions? Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has shown us that He is the only firm foundation in the world.



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