

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)

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Responding to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Intro

I'm interrupting the series on the Ten Commandments to respond to the current crisis in Europe. I don't feel like I could be faithful to the Lord or to you if I tried to pretend we could ignore what was happening in Ukraine.

I'm not an end-times enthusiast—I don't read everything in the news through the filter of an end-times chart. I've studied the book of Revelation and taught it, but it's not my main cup of tea. I happen to think that the people with the charts are most likely the most wrong about the end-times. My personal conviction: Jesus will probably return within the next 500 years; I could be wrong.

I'm not given to conspiracy theories: the doomsday preppers don't interest me and I'm not about to encourage you to start storing up food and weapons in your basement. One of my favorite men I've known, Nick Willems, who as a young man/teen was a part of the Dutch resistance when the Nazis invaded Holland, told me that the first thing that invaders do is commandeer the food and the weapons. So you're not likely going to get to keep what you've stored if the whole world falls apart.

I also don't pretend to have a prophetic understanding of what is going on right now, or what is going to happen, and I would be extraordinarily cautious, even skeptical, about listening to someone who claimed that they did have such an understanding.

All of that being said—I think we are at a critical point in time; it feels like a *kairos* moment, one of those moments that historians will later identify as the tipping point for whatever it is that is going to follow.

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Where are we?

As many have pointed out, Vladimir Putin is following Adolph Hitler's playbook, almost exactly. Hitler may not have invented "the big lie," but he used it to perfection: repeat a big lie loudly enough and often enough and many people will eventually believe it. Those lies became the justification for his actions, and the Holocaust and WWII were the result. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has placed

the world in a very similar position, if not an identical one, as Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938.

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- An evil dictator with designs on expanding his "empire" as far as possible, who is counting on the timidity, the lack of common commitment, disunity, and reluctance to engage in war on the part of those who are his enemies
- The prospect of a war that will engulf the continent of Europe; this time with the threat of nuclear weapons
- America weakened and concerned about a second front in the Pacific (this time from a stronger world power—China)

In this paralleled position, the biggest question is, "Will the response of the West be that of Neville Chamberlain, or is there a Winston Churchill with a spine who can lead a united alliance of the Western nations?"

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What could happen?

I am not an expert in military strategy or tactics; but it is extremely difficult to imagine Putin simply pulling back his forces, even if Russia were to be crippled financially by the sanctions currently in place. Barring a miraculous divine intervention along the lines of what we read about the destruction of the Assyrians in the OT, I expect that the only way the Russian army retreats is either a convincing defeat that forces them to withdraw to their own borders, or the conquest of Ukraine (and the other nations on whom Putin has his sights—the Baltic states, at the very least) and institution of a puppet government, in which case some of the forces could be removed to other fronts.

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The situation is complex, of course, and there are a great many possible outcomes. But I can foresee three possible scenarios that are the most likely—or some variation (and I should hasten to say that this is simply my own opinion):

(1) Russia's conquest and take-over of Ukraine is allowed to stand, as NATO elects to simply protect its own borders. But this fails to stop Putin, who solidifies his hold on Ukraine and begins to move on the Baltics. Puppet governments are solidified in Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Kazakhstan.

(2) Ukrainian resistance and sanctions prevent a complete takeover of Ukraine, for now, but cannot prevent Russian occupation of much of eastern Ukraine. The western portion of the country is greatly weakened, and settles into a protracted conflict for control of the country, similar to what has been going on in the east since the occupation of Crimea (with the separatist factions in the east).

(3) NATO recognizes the need to defeat Russia's attempt to regain its former empire and engages in a war that involves the whole European continent. The US is forced, by the terms of our treaty, to join the alliance and enter the war.

The next question, is what happens when China decides to use this occasion to do what it has threatened, namely retake Taiwan (with whom we also have a treaty that requires us to defend them in the case of an attack).

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You didn't come here today to hear about projections of possible geopolitical scenarios. But these possibilities are going to affect you—even if the US does not end up in a war in Europe. Here's some of the ways it could do so (from an article by Becky Sullivan on the npr.org webpage from last Wednesday, right before the invasion began):

1. Collateral damage from the sanctions could affect prices worldwide, including commodities and components in things we use or need; such as gas and oil prices (which have already shot up); food prices; components in computers, such as semiconductors, and catalytic converters.
2. Global markets could tank, affecting retirement accounts and investments.
3. Russia will probably increase its already-sophisticated and widespread network of cyberattacks on American institutions and systems, which could interrupt, damage, or even cripple power grids and other infrastructure, local governments, hospitals, businesses. Along with this would come the continuation of their attempts to spread misinformation and stoke conflicts via social media platforms.
4. Europe would face an enormous refugee problem, with estimates of 1-5 million refugees from Ukraine fleeing to neighboring countries.

How should we respond?

Before I answer this most important question, I'd like us to read Luke 21 and look at what Jesus told his disciples about a time not unlike what we're facing.

[Slide 7] *Luke 21:5-36 (read)*

Luke 21:5-36

5 Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, 6 "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

7 “Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”

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8 He replied: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. 9 When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”

10 Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

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12 “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. 13 And so you will bear testimony to me. 14 But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. 15 For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. 17 Everyone will hate you because of me. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 Stand firm, and you will win life.

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20 “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. 22 For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. 23 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. 24 They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

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25 “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. 26 People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. 27 At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

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29 He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 30 When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. 31 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

32 “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

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34 “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. 35 For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

[Slide 14] Luke 21

Jesus’ words to his disciples concerning the destruction of Jerusalem/Last days

Primary focus in Luke’s account of Jesus’ warning is the destruction of Jerusalem: fulfilled in 70 AD when the Romans besieged the city, destroyed the city and the temple, killed thousands, took thousands into slavery, and crucified tens of thousands; Christians in Jerusalem remembered his words, fled to Pella (in Jordan), and were spared (though this exacerbated the conflict with Judaism).

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He warns them not only about the war that will come; but:

- Danger of false prophets, claiming to be him, misleading people
- Persecution, including betrayal, which will allow for testimony about him
- The greater danger of becoming spiritually dull, rendered insensitive to the truth/HS because of dissipation (wasteful living, living to have fun, partying), drunkenness, worries of life (seeking security in the things of this world–e.g., retirement, comfort, concern for self– and focusing on temporary cares–vacation, stuff, hobbies, recreation, etc.

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When you see the world caving in, your response should be: we’re closer to the return of the Lord; we’re closer to seeing the coming of the kingdom of God, the end of the nightmare, the restoration of the world to righteousness.

We ought not be shocked when wicked people do wicked things. The world is not nice. People everywhere are infected with sin, and apart from coming to know Christ, they will act in their own evil self-interests. If they happen to also have power, and ambition, and hatred and nothing to restrain them—they will use their power however they can. They will covet and lie and cheat and steal and murder and be immoral and cover it all up in order to get power, keep power, increase power.

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So, what should we do?

1. *Keep alert—stay tuned in spiritually.* The temptation is to close our eyes and ears and pretend that nothing is going on. Fill our hearts and minds with the weather, sports scores, TV shows, gossip, and conversations about our doctor visits (“organ recitals”). Instead we need to pay attention to what is going on, with an ear to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us.

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2. *Prepare your heart and your mind (and maybe your budget) for hardship.* There is a very real chance that what is going on in the Ukraine could explode into WWII. Our comfort and prosperity could quickly be reduced to levels we haven’t seen in sixty or seventy years. Be grateful for the comfort and blessing God has given you, but don’t expect that it is a right that you are owed. And don’t gripe if things get tough. Like the saying on the slide in the welcome loop says, “*Don’t pray for an easy life, pray to be stronger people.*”

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3. *Keep the perspective of heaven squarely in your sights.* Kings and kingdoms will all pass away—but the kingdom of God remains forever. War is hellish. But there are a lot of things that are worse than wars, even wars with the threat of nuclear attacks. One of the things that is worse than war is the enlargement and entrenchment of an evil regime with power. And actual hell is infinitely worse than earthly wars.

So keep your heart set on the things of God. Work for the kingdom of God; let the gospel do its work in changing people. Jesus is still alive and well and changing lives—so let him do it through you. We’re going to continue to pursue the kingdom of God, and Jesus is going to continue to build his church. What Jesus is doing here at FCC is going to continue; he didn’t bring us this far to leave us. The HS isn’t finished his work in this place with us. We’re staying on mission. When all the people around you are freaking out about the cost of gasoline and groceries, the drop in their IRA value, the possibility of being nuked, let them know about

the peace that passes all understanding; let them see it in you because Jesus lives in you. We have a hope that is beyond anything in this world. Hold onto it. And pray for a people whose only connection to you may be that they are human beings in need of the Lord and are under attack from an exceedingly evil government.

Prayer: [front center; slides change with each prayer point]

Find someone to pray with—we're going to pray together for a while; directed prayer points will come on the slides on the screen every minute or two (I'll indicate when).

- Pray for the nation of Ukraine, the people, the church; and for the people of Russia and Belarus; for the defeat of the Russian army and an end to the invasion and conquest of Ukraine
- Pray for the Christians in Ukraine and Russia, particularly the evangelical churches, which are viewed as cults by the Orthodox Church and by the government.
- Pray for the Jewish population in Ukraine (including the president, who I believe is Jewish), especially the Messianic Jews, and the work of Jews for Jesus in Ukraine. Under the Russian Czars, Ukraine was one of the places within the Russian empire that Jews were allowed to live (part of the "Pale of Settlement"). In 1941, prior to the Nazi invasion of Russia, it was the home to the largest populations of Jews in Europe. Special Nazi killing forces, the *Einsatzgruppen*, followed the army, rounding up Jews and massacring them in village after village, city after city across Ukraine.

Long history of anti-semitism in Russia; pogroms against the Jews in the Pale were brutal, particularly under the Bolsheviks and Communists during the revolution (1917)

Ukraine the site of a famous memorial to the massacre of Jews by Nazis invading in 1941. Approx. 800k-1.5 million Ukrainian Jews killed in the Holocaust.

Babyn Yar (or Babi Yar), now inside the city limits of Kyiv, was the site of a massacre of Jews during WWII—33,000 were forcibly taken to the site, where their belongings were taken from them, they were told to strip; then marched to a ravine where they were told to lie down on the bodies of those already in the mass grave and shot, one by one.

- Pray for the gospel to take root in the hearts of Ukrainians (and the invading Russians), for the extension of the kingdom of God
- Pray for missionaries, seminaries, and missions organizations who are working in Ukraine

[Slide for communion]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

[Slides for benediction]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

(From Wikipedia, “The Pale of Settlement”)

The Pale of Settlement . . . was a western region of the Russian Empire with varying borders that existed from 1791 to 1917 in which permanent residency by Jews was allowed and beyond which Jewish residency, permanent or temporary, was mostly forbidden. Most Jews were still excluded from residency in a number of cities within the Pale as well. A few Jews were allowed to live outside the area, including those with university education, the ennobled, members of the most affluent of the merchant guilds and particular artisans, some military personnel and some services associated with them, including their families, and sometimes their servants. The archaic English term pale is derived from the Latin word palus, a stake, extended to mean the area enclosed by a fence or boundary.[2]

The Pale of Settlement included all of modern-day Belarus, Lithuania and Moldova, much of Ukraine and east-central Poland, and relatively small parts of Latvia and western Russian Federation. It extended from the eastern pale, or demarcation line inside the country, westwards to the Imperial Russian border with the Kingdom of Prussia (later the German Empire) and Austria-Hungary. Furthermore, it composed about 20% of the territory of European Russia and largely corresponded to historical lands of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Cossack Hetmanate, the Ottoman Empire (with Yedisan), Crimean Khanate, and eastern Principality of Moldavia (Bessarabia).

(See further, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-pale-of-settlement>)