**The Destruction of the City of Jerusalem**

*In the past it was a common custom for Josephus’ account of the destruction of Jerusalem to be read on the 10th Sunday after Trinity. Josephus was a late first century Jewish historian. The following is a translation of the German adaptation of Josephus’ account that appeared in the Missouri Synod’s liturgical books until they began to be printed in English in the 20s and 30s. This account shows in detail how the prophecy in today’s Gospel reading was fulfilled in history.*

As the time approached wherein God would at last send forth His wrath against Jerusalem and the Jewish people, the entire Jewish kingdom was vexed at every turn. The high priests practiced tyranny against the other priests, there was hatred and jealousy among other officials, and much robbery and murder was found in and around Jerusalem. For this reason, the emperor Nero sent Gessius Florus to the Jewish lands. But the Jews were so obstinate in their greed, arrogance and wantonness, that they hunted down and killed five thousand of his men. The Jews were also fanatical about setting themselves against the Romans and revolting. When the emperor Nero became aware of this, he sent Flavius Vespasianus and his son, Titus, to Syria.

Vespasian came to Galilee, which was heavily populated, and laid waste to everything, there being no end of murder, plundering, and fire. Many thousands of Jews were slaughtered—on one occasion as many as fifty thousand valiant men, together with women and children. The soldiers spared neither old nor young, neither the pregnant nor babes in arms. On one occasion Vespasian send six thousand young men as slaves to Achaia, to dig on the Isthmus. Thirty thousand Jewish combatants were sold into bondage. In desperation five thousand threw themselves off of high cliffs.

As this was taking place in Galilee, a great crowd of rapacious people, at the instigation of Johannes, one of the great men, came to Jerusalem, so that he might use this rabble to break up the regiment there. There was also much secret murder, robbery, and plundering in Jerusalem. It also happened that several high priests were slaughtered, and much blood was spilled, even in the temple. Josephus wrote that twelve thousand of the best and noblest Jews were overtaken in this uproar and had their houses and possessions given as plunder to the mob and the vulgar and lowly.

So it was that even before agreeable weather returned, Jerusalem had been plagued with threefold misfortune, namely by a war with Rome, with insurrection, and with tyranny, which had faction rising against faction, shedding much blood. Now at the beginning of Winter, having besieged the city with Roman legions so that he might easily storm and take Jerusalem, Vespasian heard that Nero was dead. Being recalled from his legions to become emperor, he gave command of the Jewish campaign to his son, Titus.

Titus established his encampment near to Jerusalem and divided the legions to besiege the city from several sides. Meanwhile, a great host of people from all cities and regions were gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. There were also, as mentioned above, three factions in the city seeking to destroy unity and order. One element was the Temple faction, among these Eleazar, son of Simon, was the leader. The Zealots, an evil, hypocritical lot, hostile to the populace, belonged to this faction. In the lesser faction, Johannes, the source of all misfortune, as mentioned above, held sway. The principal faction was controlled by Simon, who with the help of twenty thousand Idumeans, sought to save the city from the wantonness and determined intention of the Zealots.

When Titus saw that the city was overcrowded beyond counting, he hastily armed and reinforced himself in order to lay siege to the city and, as Christ had foretold, to encircle it with wagons so that hunger might drive them to greater distress and anxiety. When the Jews saw this, they tried with all their might to hinder and prevent this, but they could not, for our Lord God wanted to make an end of them.

The city of Jerusalem was well fortified and had three walls. Therefore, the Roman forces approached in full force to storm the city, and after much work, the first and second walls were conquered and taken. At this same time, an innumerable multitude of people died of hunger, as Josephus wrote. The best of friends would often come to blows over a small piece of bread; children would often rip food from their parents' mouths. Neither brother nor sister had mercy upon the other. A bushel of corn was more precious than gold. Driven by hunger, some ate manure; some, the cinches of their saddles; some, the leather stripped from their shields; some still had hay in their mouths when their bodies were found; some sought to escape starvation by means of their own filth. So many died of starvation that 115,000 corpses were found in the city and buried. Hegesippus reported that, at one gate alone, several thousand were carried out, and that 600,000 died because of the siege.

Josephus reported that such a fearful, gruesome event occurred, that future generations would hardly be able to believe it. There was a respected woman, wealthy and well bred, across the Jordan, who had fled Jerusalem in fear with some others. Now, since the city had been so grievously beset with hunger, she slaughtered her young child in the cradle, roasted half of it and ate it. When the soldiers came by looking for food, she set the remaining portion before them. The soldiers removed themselves from this gruesome scene, and having mercy upon the miserable woman, revealed this event to the lord of Jerusalem.

The Jews occupied the Castle Antonia, which was a strong fortress. They also occupied the temple compound, from which a stream flowed into the city. It cost more to conquer this fortress than all other the others combined. Titus, however, fired up his men to storm the fortress by force. When the Romans had taken the castle, the trumpeter sounded a signal and all the Jews who had occupied the castle were slain or thrown from the walls, but some hurriedly escaped to the city in the darkness.

It is said that Titus wanted to spare the temple, but God decreed that it would not be spared. For after men had long talked and worked, and the Jews could not be moved, neither with threats or exhortations, to give up their fortified positions, the soldiers realized that the temple could only be conquered with fire. And in that hour the magnificent, exquisite and priceless building, which was celebrated far and wide, was burned and reduced to ashes. The priests had to beg and entreat pitifully to keep themselves alive, but the grace of God and men had run out. Titus, so Hegesippus writes, stated: “Now that their temple and services are gone, the priests are no longer needed.” This destruction of the temple occurred on the tenth day of the month of August.

After the destruction of the temple, the Jews that remained in the section of the city not conquered by the Romans thought to surrender themselves and went to Titus. Although they had not waited too long to make peace, and they did petition for peace and freedom because they were starving and in great need, nothing came of it, as it was only a few days since the city had been taken. Meanwhile, uncountable numbers of people, driven by anxiety and the distress of unbearable hunger, ran from the city into the hands of the enemy camp; there they sold themselves cheaply. It was then that the soldiers became aware that a certain Jew was picking gold which he had swallowed out of his own excrement. Thus a rumor began to spread throughout the entire camp. This rumor caused those soldiers who thought about it to believe that they could find gold in all the Jews who had come out of the city to their encampment. More than two thousand Jews were disemboweled in a single night; and many more would have suffered the same fate had Titus not decreed that the captives should not be killed.

Finally, the entire city of Jerusalem was conquered, neither young nor old were spared. Then a decree went out that all miserable people who were incapable of offering any resistance should be spared. But the city itself was thoroughly plundered by the foe, razed, burned and left in ruin. Only a few devastated buildings and towers were left standing to indicate that a city had once been there. The city was destroyed and razed on the eighth day of September, in the fifth month of the siege. Thus the most celebrated city in all of the East came to a miserable and lamentable end, as had been prophesied.