

## Are You Ready? Luke 21:5-38

There are fewer biblical teachings that we get more wrong with less excuse than the doctrine of End Times. Although Jesus was entirely explicit in discouraging speculation in his own lifetime, and Luke recorded it for his own generation, contemporary Christians still cannot resist the trap. The lead up to AD 2000 was particularly egregious. At least the publisher of the silly *Left Behind* series, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, had the sense to list it as fiction (in the '60s, such books promoted themselves as 'non-fiction', proving to be an embarrassment when 1980s came and went without the predicted events occurring). Amazon.com, though, is clearly closer to the mark in placing the series under the 'fantasy' genre. Worst of all, these books use biblical texts like this one – intended to discourage speculation – as the basis for their imaginings. This week, we look to Luke 21 not to answer our speculative curiosities, but to learn what Jesus intended in his own time, and how that applies to our day.

### Day 1: Luke 21:5-6 Warning #1: Destruction is coming!

Throughout the longer section 20:1-21:38, Jesus is teaching in the temple. This setting is particularly significant. When Israel was conquered and exiled in 587BC, the temple – and the entire city of Jerusalem – was demolished. Once the Jews returned, under the urging of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai, they slowly rebuilt the temple, but it never reached its former glory. Then Herod, a half-Jew, became king prior to Jesus' birth. To gain acceptance and gratitude from his subjects, he launched a massive building program lasting over eighty years. He doubled the size of the temple, and adorned it with gold plate and white marble. So in Jesus' day, the temple was significant in two respects. For one, it was magnificent. For the other, it was, as it always had been, the locus of God's presence among his people. If they wanted to meet with God, the temple was the place to go.

Jesus has already cleansed the temple, censuring its abuse by the powerful and privileged religious leaders of his day. Now, he predicts the destruction of the temple. As this section begins, a disciple comments on the beauty and grandeur of the temple. Though it was decorated with gifts purportedly for God, Jesus warns, "It is all going to tumble down."

Even this early in the story, we can take away a legitimate lesson. What is the role of buildings in the worship of God? Even in Jesus' day, when the temple legitimately claimed special status as the locus of God's presence in the world, the building was always secondary to genuine worship and faithful obedience. When the people thought that they could live however they wanted, so long as

they worshipped God in the temple, the prophets objected, and warned of judgment. In our day, God does not dwell in buildings, but in the midst of his people. The building is merely a convenience. All the more, then, it is genuine worship and faithful obedience that God seeks from his people. Buildings are fine, when heavily utilized in ministry, and feasible to construct and maintain, but they are not sacred to God. Instead, it is we, his people, who are now his sacred dwelling. So how we treat each other matters greatly (1 Cor 3:16-17).

### **Day 2: Luke 21:7-9 Warning #2: Don't be tricked!**

Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple prompted an obvious question: "When will that happen?"

Jesus anticipates two crises. First, the horror of destruction: the Roman forces will destroy the temple, the city, and the nation. Second, the crush of unrealized expectations: the Old Testament prophet Zechariah had prophesied a future time when gentile nations would attack Jerusalem; the city would be captured, the houses ransacked, the women raped, and half the inhabitants dragged into exile; but then, at the darkest hour, God would intervene, standing astride the Mount of Olives, destroying Israel's enemies, bringing eternal peace and world preeminence to Jerusalem and its people (Zech 14:1-11).

In Jesus' time, proud Jews chafed under Roman occupation. Militants had already rebelled several times. Another spark could set the whole nation ablaze (that spark would come within a generation after Jesus' own death, during 67-70 AD). Some who read Zechariah were emboldened: even if the full force of the Roman army did attack, God would intervene to lead them in overwhelming victory, ushering in eternal peace, prosperity and preeminence. "No," Jesus warns, "destruction will come at the hands of the pagans, but God will not intervene. So beware of those who preach revolt, who claim to be Messiah, who promise the divine intervention predicted by Zechariah. Destruction will come ... but not yet the end times, not right away. That will come later."

Remarkable that Jesus' words urging his contemporaries *not* to expect the end times soon are regularly invoked today to tell us that we *should* expect the end times soon!

### **Day 3: Luke 21:10-19 Warning #3: Stand strong!**

War, earthquakes, famine, epidemics, and natural disasters will sweep through one country after another. But those will not be the most pressing issues the Christians face. Instead, they will be targeted for their faith. They will be persecuted by Jewish authorities, and imprisoned by Roman authorities. Still, in the midst of this suffering, they can take consolation in two provisions. For one, persecution will provide opportunity for witness, and Jesus will give them the

necessary words. For the other, Jesus will ultimately bring them home safely, strengthening them to persevere through suffering and death, and into eternal life. (In this context, Jesus apparently intends a 'spiritual', rather than a literal, interpretation of "not a hair of your head will perish": their bodies may be killed, but by standing firm, they will ensure themselves of eternal salvation).

What does this passage say to us who face no persecution? Working from greater to lesser, we can identify three applications. First, God did not spare them persecution, so we should not expect God to spare us lesser ailments or disappointments. Secondly, if they secure their salvation by persevering through persecution, how much more we, who are required to endure much less, must persist in faithfulness to God, in order to be saved. Thirdly, if God promises to sustain them in their severe struggles, how much more he is able to sustain us in our lesser challenges.

#### **Day 4: Luke 21:20-24 Warning #4: Flee for your lives**

Judgment is coming, Jesus warns, and it will be unimaginably awful. There is no stopping it; all they can do is to get out of the way, and as fast as possible. The vast hordes of the Roman army will surround Jerusalem, yet this is not a simple matter of defeat by a superpower; it is divine punishment. Neither is it happenstance: throughout Scripture, God had warned his people. None will find mercy: women and children, the pregnant and the nursing, all will be crushed. This is not just distress and suffering; it is the wrath of God. The suffering is so bad, it will look like the end of the world. And it will sweep up not just the guilty, but also the innocent. So, Jesus warns, flee: those in the countryside, flee into the hills; those in the city, flee into the countryside. Run for your lives! All this came true, just as Jesus warned, in 70 AD.

What does it say to us, today, millennia after the event, in a country which has no fear of invasion? If nothing else, it serves as a portent of hell. Pastors do not like to preach about it, because congregations do not like to hear about it; no one likes to think about it. But if God allowed his people Israel to be destroyed for its sin, we delude ourselves to think that he will not carry through on his other threats. Yes, he is merciful; he loves the world; he is patient: we see the depth of his devotion to sinners in his sending of Jesus to die for them. At the same time, he is just, he punishes sin, and he has warned that those who do not embrace his son will suffer the consequences. We want to be careful how we say this to people, and how often; but we do them no service if we decline to speak what Jesus himself said.

Even then, it is worth noting that the destruction of Israel introduces 'the times of the Gentiles'. As we read the books of Acts, we discover that this means not just the time when the gentiles rule over the Jews, but also the time when the

doors to salvation open to gentiles. So the grace of God can even wring salvation for a new people, out of the condemnation of the old.

### **Day 5: Luke 21:25-28 The end of the world**

Here, at last, Jesus' teaching about the destruction of Jerusalem segues into a description of the end of time. The association of these two events is natural enough: the destruction of Jerusalem is so overwhelmingly violent that it seems as though the world is coming to an end! Well, it did not. But it will. And when it does, it will make the destruction of Jerusalem seem like a walk in the park on a warm spring day. The earth will be in an uproar, and its peoples terrified. Then the Son of Man will come in glory to redeem his people.

Jesus points his followers beyond the coming suffering to the glory which follows. He supposes that this promise of eternal blessing will strengthen them to persevere in persecution, and to endure the destruction of their country. We tend to be so caught up in the luxuries and anxieties of modern life that we neglect the promises of eternal blessing. We would benefit from recovering an appreciation for these future glories. Compared to what is to come, the wealth that distracts us now, and the suffering that unsettles us now, pale in significance.

### **Day 6: Luke 21:29-36 How to live in the meantime**

Jesus ends with several applications, related back to the initial question which precipitated the sermon: "When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?" Jesus offers several answers. First, they can read the signs in an orchard; they should be able to read similar signs in the heavens. Secondly, the first fulfillment of these warnings – the destruction of Jerusalem – will occur soon, within the lifespan of this generation. Thirdly, they must be ready at any and all times, lest they be taken unawares. Toward that end, they are to avoid excessive preoccupation with this life, whether with partying or with pursuing success. They should keep alert at all times. They may pray to avoid suffering. Most of all, though, they should pray for the grace to live in such a way that they will be vindicated whenever it is that Jesus returns.

For our part, we are still in this 'meantime' period of history. So this should be our preoccupation as we await Christ's return. Not speculation about the timing of his return, or about the events preceding his return. Much less partying or the headlong pursuit of success. But faithfulness and fruitfulness as we await his return, so that we can stand before him when he comes.