

# A SAVIOR *for* ALL PEOPLE

A Study of Luke's Gospel



## LESSON 21 Luke 21:5-38

### Information for Teacher

Last week's lesson contained an above average number of text units to study, so if you don't want to spend the whole class period on this apocalyptic discourse, and you didn't have time to finish all of last week's material, it is fine to revisit some of last week's lesson.

This week's text is a different kind of material than we've studied so far. This text, in which Jesus talks in somewhat confusing terms about the impending destruction of Jerusalem, has been widely read and since it is apocalyptic, it has been variously interpreted and misinterpreted.

You'll need to do your best job at balancing the *informational* portion of the lesson with the *transformational* part, which is admittedly tougher to work out. There is some application here, so this lesson will make a valiant effort at bringing it out. However, it will be helpful if your class can have a framework to interpret this passage, since it is indeed widely misunderstood.

### Introduction

In last week's lesson, Jesus hinted at the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem. This would occur in the year 70 AD, when Titus and the Romans would lay siege to Jerusalem and destroy the city. Keep in mind that Luke is writing his Gospel *after* these events, so while Jesus' words served a *predictive* function, Luke's account serves as an *explanation after the fact*.

Many read this passage (and its parallels in Matthew 24 and Mark 13) and are confused as to what exact events are referenced. While Matthew's account is a little more abstract, using phrases like "when you see the abomination that causes desolation...", Luke's is more concrete, stating "when you see the Roman army encircling Jerusalem" (Luke 21:20). Regardless of the differences in the accounts, many see part of the text referring to the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem, with the other parts of the account referring to the final return of Christ to earth. We'll try to work on that a little bit.

Some, however, think Jesus is *only* talking about the "end times." As we move through the lesson, we'll point out things that make no sense if Jesus is *only* talking about the end times and not the imminent destruction of the actual city of Jerusalem.

## The Biblical Text

### Luke 21:5-11 (Signs Marking the Destruction of Jerusalem)

- Some of Jesus' disciples begin **admiring the temple**, adorned with stones and other gifts dedicated to God.
- In response to their naïve admiration, Jesus decides to tell them **what's in store for this temple** as well as the **rest of Jerusalem**.
- He tells them that at some point, all the stones they are currently admiring will be **topped** (21:6).
- The disciples, surely shocked and dismayed at this prediction, ask **when** this destruction will happen.
- Jesus gives **three markers**:
  - First, many **false messiahs** will come (21:8).
    - They will claim "I am [the Messiah]" and "the time is near."
    - The disciples are *not* to follow these false messiahs.
  - Second, there will be news of "**wars and uprisings**" (21:9-10).
    - They are *not* to be alarmed by these pieces of news.
    - These wars must happen first, but they do not mean "the end is near."
    - These wars include nations fighting other nations, or kingdoms fighting other kingdoms.
  - Third, there will be **natural disasters**: earthquakes, famines, and pestilences.

• ***What would the destruction of the temple mean for the Jews – socially, politically, psychologically, etc.?***

### Luke 21:12-19 (Enduring Persecution)

- Before all these signs pointing to the end, there will be **persecution** for Jesus' followers.
  - Jesus' followers will be **jailed** and will be brought before **civil authorities** because of their **allegiance to Jesus**.
  - This persecution, however, is a way to "**bear testimony**" to Jesus (21:13).
- Jesus tells them to decide *now* **how they will act** once the persecution starts.
  - They shouldn't worry about how to **defend themselves**. In fact, self-defense is not part of the instructions here. They are to **submit** to this persecution.
  - Their "self-defense" will instead be *verbal*: Jesus will give them "**words and wisdom** that none of [their] adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (21:15).
- Even their own **families** will **betray** them – even putting them to death (21:16).
- *Everyone* will **hate** the disciples because of Jesus.
- Jesus now says something that seems **contradictory**: "Not a hair of your head will perish" (21:18).
  - Didn't he just predict that some of them would be **killed** (21:16)?
  - It seems that Jesus is saying that while some followers would be killed during the persecution that would happen **before the destruction**, none would die in the **destruction itself**.

- Jesus has just given them **instructions** on how to leave the city to escape the destructions.
- Tradition holds that **no Christians died** in the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem, precisely because of heeding Jesus' warnings.
- Later, in 24, Jesus says that "**they**" (not "you") will fall by the sword. He has been addressing his disciples as "you" and switches to "they" when talking about who will be killed in the actual siege.
- The final verdict: "**Stand firm**, and you will win life" (21:19).

- ***What will life be like for true followers of Jesus during this time of persecution?***
- ***How does Jesus expect followers to behave during persecution?***
- ***What might Jesus mean by "win life"? (Other versions render the phrase "gain life" or "gain your lives.")***

### Luke 21:20-28 (Instructions on Surviving the Destruction)

- Now Jesus will give some **more information** concerning the actual **destruction of Jerusalem**:
  - When the disciples see Jerusalem **surrounded by armies**, they will know the destruction is near (21:20).
    - In Matthew's parallel account, he calls this "the **abomination that causes desolation**," quoting from the passage in Daniel 9 that Jesus is using to help predict and interpret the coming events in Jerusalem.
    - This phrase has been variously interpreted, but Luke's parallel and more concrete rendering (**armies surrounding Jerusalem**) helps us know exactly what Jesus is talking about.
  - Jesus gives certain groups instructions regarding where to go or not go:
    - The people in the Judean **countryside** should **flee** to the mountains.
    - People **inside** the city of Jerusalem should **get out**.
    - People in the **country** should **not go into** the city.
    - Ask yourself: if Jesus is talking about the end of the world here, what sense would these instructions make? Will fleeing the city walls allow you to **hide from God**?
    - Instead, it makes more sense to read this as **continued instructions** about the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem.
  - **Pregnant women** and **nursing mothers** will also have a difficult time.
    - Again, why would pregnant women and nursing mothers be singled out as having difficulty during the *final* judgment? But it makes sense that if people are trying to flee the city, pregnant women and nursing mothers will have a **difficult time making a quick escape**.
  - The people of Jerusalem will "**fall by the sword**" and will be taken as **prisoners** (21:24).
  - Jerusalem will be "**trampled on by the Gentiles**" (i.e., the Roman army) (21:24).
  - Even the sun, moon, and stars (i.e., **all nature**) will testify to this destruction (21:25).
    - There is some language in 21:25-28 that seems more **cosmic** in scope, suggesting something besides the destruction of Jerusalem. But

remember, for the Jews in Jerusalem (the center of God's presence on earth), this is indeed an **earth-shattering event** and so Jesus is using figures of speech (including **hyperbole**) to talk about the terrible destruction.

- “After Nero’s suicide in [AD] 68, four emperors followed in quick succession, each one at the head of an army. The much vaunted ‘Roman peace’ that Augustus and his successors claimed to have brought to the world was shattered from the inside. A **convulsive shudder** went through the whole known world. That fits verses 25-26 exactly.”<sup>58</sup>

### Luke 21:29-38 (The Fig Tree)

- Using a nearby fig tree for an example, Jesus reminds them that **all nature** has **signs** that point to change. A fig tree sprouts leaves when summer approaches.
- In the same way, all the previous signs point to the **approach of the kingdom of God**.
- Jesus uses language of **Daniel 7** when he talks about the “coming of the **Son of Man**” (21:27). All first century Jews would have been familiar with this prophecy – which describes a time when God’s people are **vindicated** and **rescued** from suffering at the hands of an **oppressive empire** – and would have understood the reference even better than we might.
  - “This prophecy imagines a great law court scene, in which God, the judge, finds in favor of his people, ‘the son of man,’ and against the oppressive ‘beast.’ The judgment that falls on the pagan nations is the same judgment that vindicates ‘the son of man,’ who is then brought on a cloud to share the throne of God himself.”<sup>59</sup>
  - “The best way of understanding this passage in Luke is then to see it as the promise that, when the Jerusalem that had opposed his message is finally overthrown, this will be the vindication of Jesus and his people, the sign that he has indeed been enthroned at his Father’s side in heaven (see 20:42-43).”<sup>60</sup>
- Interestingly, Jesus predicts that “**this generation** will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (21:32).
  - End of the world? If Jesus is talking about that, then he was wrong about the timing. Also, Luke would be a fool to put a **false prediction** of Jesus in writing.
- Harkening back to instructions on how to behave **in the meantime** (21:12-18), Jesus tell his disciples not to engage in “carousing, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life” because the destruction will come “suddenly like a trap” (21:34).

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<sup>58</sup> N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2004), 255.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, 256.

<sup>60</sup> Wright, 256.

- Jesus says the destruction will come on “all those who live on the face of the whole earth.” In other words, the destruction of Jerusalem will have **widespread effects** and **repercussions**.
  - You might think this is talking about the end times here, since he refers to the whole earth. But next, in verse 36, Jesus tells them to “pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen.” If Jesus is referring to the end times here, he would be telling his disciples that perhaps they can **escape the judgment**, when in reality we know that **no one will escape the judgment**.
  - Again, it makes more sense that Jesus is still talking about the destruction of Jerusalem, which they might indeed **be able to escape** (and indeed Jesus has given instructions to escape back in verse 21).
- *For Jesus’ disciples who would undergo persecution as the destruction of Jerusalem neared, what did the coming of the kingdom of God mean? Was it cause for despair or hope?*

## Application

- *How did Jesus’ message here about the judgment and destruction of Jerusalem give hope to his disciples? How can the concept of final judgment give us hope?*
- *How did Jesus expect his disciples’ attitude about all this to be different from the rest of the world’s attitude? More broadly, how should our attitude about judgment be different?*
- *Respond to this quote: “We prefer a ‘gospel’ without eschatology – a ‘good news’ without hope – because for many of us such ‘good news’ is not so good.”<sup>61</sup>*

Sometimes, we are tempted to think that what we believe about the end of the world doesn’t really matter. But in fact it does. “Our faith in the future is either corroborated or belied by our present actions...If I claim belief in a coming kingdom of peace, love, and justice, and meanwhile do not practice peace, love, and justice, all my protestations of faith will avail nothing.”<sup>62</sup>

## Next Week’s Text

Luke 22:1-71

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<sup>61</sup> Justo L. González, *Luke*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: WJK Press, 2010), 239.

<sup>62</sup> Gonzalez, 242-243.