

LUKE

Part 77: "The Apocalypse According to Jesus"

Luke 21:5-38

By David A. Ritchie

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Scripture Reading

"And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.' And they asked him, 'Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?' And he said, 'See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives. But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.' And he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this

generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.' And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him" (Luke 21:5–38, ESV).

Introduction

The Bible teaches that all of human history is part of God's grand story of redemption. This story has a beginning, a conflict, a turning point, and an end. We typically use the words "creation," "fall," "redemption," and "restoration." And if you know the end of the story, it helps you understand and interpret the rest of the story.

I'll give you an example. A few years ago, our oldest child was about a year old. We were less than one year into replanting Redeemer, and we were sleep-deprived new parents. My parents agreed to watch our son for an evening, and we were going to do something that we hadn't done for a long time – we were going to see a movie in the theater. At the time, we weren't even up to speed on the movies that were showing at the moment. We just knew we wanted to see a movie.

So, Kate and I looked up what was playing. Out of the list of shows, my wife was convinced that she knew the movie that I would want to see. She said, "You're going to want to go see *Lincoln*, right?" But I said, "Not really." She asked, "Why? You typically love history movies." I said, "Yes. But it's been so long since we've seen a movie together, and I'm pretty sure that one has a sad ending."

Knowing the end of the story matters. It helps build a sense of expectation for what is coming.

Now, we have arrived at a moment in our journey through the gospel of Luke, in which Jesus gives his primary teaching that concerns future-oriented prophetic predictions. It is called the "Olivet Discourse."

The "Olivet Discourse" has many readings and interpretations. Some view this teaching as referring exclusively to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Some view this teaching as referring exclusively to the end of time. I am going to argue that Jesus is talking about both things.

Jesus is going to clearly prophesy things about the coming destruction of Jerusalem that will take place during the generation (or lifetime) of the disciples. This judgment on Jerusalem functions as a type of shadow or microcosm of the day when Jesus will return to judge the world and make all things new.

In biblical studies, we call this an “apocalyptic” sermon. The word “apocalypse” literally means an “unveiling.” It is as if Jesus is lifting the curtain that veils our knowledge of the future so that we might know how the story of redemption ends. This is, in other words, *“The Apocalypse According to Jesus.”*

As we work through this very long and complicated text today, I want to show you three things: *1.) How Jesus Unveils the Past, 2.) How Jesus Unveils the Future, and 3.) How Jesus Unveils the Present.*”

Exposition

1. How Jesus Unveils the Past

One of the big ideas that Jesus is teaching in this passage is the coming destruction of Jerusalem in general and the Jewish temple in particular. This prediction came true in the historically documented destruction of Jerusalem in the year A.D. 70.

Why do we think that this passage has something to do with this specific historical event? Well, let’s look back at the context of this passage: *“And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ‘As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down’* (Luke 21:5–6, ESV).

Jesus and his disciples are in the city of Jerusalem, where Jesus has been teaching in the temple. One day, as Jesus is leaving the temple, he hears his disciples marveling at the beauty and grandeur of the temple complex (show picture of the [Jerusalem Temple](#)). And, in all fairness to the disciples, the temple was a glorious building. In fact, this building was most likely the most impressive structure that these men had ever seen up until this point in their lives.

But Jesus really kills the mood with what he says next. Every single stone of this beautiful building will be torn down. I cannot begin to stress enough how shocking and offensive this statement would have been for a Jewish audience to hear.

The temple was the centerpiece of the Jewish religion. It was the one place where atoning sacrifices were made. It was the one place where priests served, so as to mediate a relationship between God and his people. It was the one place where God was supposed to dwell on earth among his people. It was the most important and visible symbol of the Jewish nation. For this place to be destroyed was an unthinkable horror.

I can still vividly remember the day of September 11, 2001. On that day, the United States was attacked by terrorists, resulting in the deaths of nearly 3000 Americans. But in addition to the tragedy of death and destruction, these events were significant in that they attacked symbols of our nation. The Twin Towers and the Pentagon: these were not mere buildings – they were symbols of the economic and military might of America.

As deeply impactful as the events of 9/11 were upon the psyche of the American people, the destruction of the Jewish temple would be *more* impactful upon the Jewish psyche.

And the destruction of the Jerusalem temple came to pass. After a series of revolts from the Jewish people, the Roman Empire eventually sent an army to bring destruction upon Jerusalem and the Jewish people. In the year A.D. 70, Roman legions led by the future Emperor Titus began a military siege of Jerusalem.

Look at Jesus's words of warning concerning this event: *"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written"* (Luke 21:20–22, ESV).

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus wrote a firsthand historical account of the siege of Jerusalem. It was a siege that lasted four months, three weeks, and four days, during which the Holy City was surrounded and cut-off from all external supplies. Inside, the citizens of Jerusalem suffered immensely, enduring starvation, disease, insanity, and even cannibalism. I read some examples from Josephus's account, and I felt they were too horrific to share in a sermon like this.¹ But suffice it to say, Jerusalem fell. The temple was destroyed. True to Jesus's prediction, not one of the stones of the temple structure stood upon another (show [2The Western Wall](#)). And today, all that remains of this once grand structure is the western portion of the retaining wall that formed the foundation of the temple complex.

Jesus's word came true, and this horrific event came to pass within the generation or lifetime of the disciples (Lk 21:32). He predicts some other astonishing claims associated with the generation of the disciples. They will be cast out of Jewish synagogues (Lk 21:12). They will be persecuted. Some of them will even be betrayed over to the authorities by their own family members because of their loyalty to Jesus. But they will also stand before rulers and kings and bear witness to the gospel (Lk 21:13). You don't have to look much further than the New Testament book of Acts to know this all happens.²

In fact, Jesus's words are so accurate and so specific in this passage that most critical scholars believe that Luke's gospel must have been written well after the year A.D. 70. No mere man could have predicted these events. I believe those critical scholars are wrong about the first point, but they are correct about the second. Jesus is not an ordinary man. Jesus is capable of predictive prophecy concerning future events because he is the sovereign Lord of history.

¹ Josephus tells the story of a once respectable woman named Mary, daughter of Eleazar, who was pregnant when the Roman armies invaded. She lived in rural village and fled to Jerusalem for refuge. After having her home raided for food multiple times, driven insane by hunger and suffering, she slaughtered and consumed her infant son. Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 737–738.

² See: Acts 4:26; 9:15; 12:1–11; 23:24–24:27; 25:1–26:32

And if Jesus's words are accurate concerning the events of A.D. 70, there is no reason to doubt that he is accurate concerning the events to come. That leads us to point number two.

2. How Jesus Unveils the Future

Now, for a moment, let's ask a very reasonable question. Why should we presume that Jesus is talking at all about anything beyond the year A.D. 70.?

We have to remember that for the disciples, or any Jewish person, Jesus's prediction that the temple would be destroyed was like saying the world was going to end. In other words, for them, the destruction of the temple and the end of the world were the same things. We can see that especially clearly in Matthew's parallel account of this passage: *"As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"* (Matthew 24:3, ESV).

The disciples think they are asking one question. But in reality, they are asking two questions. There is question number 1, which is: *"Jesus, when will these things – meaning the destruction of the temple – happen?"* And there is question number 2, which is: *"What is the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"*

The destruction of the temple has already happened. But the end of the age is a future reality that awaits us. Jesus will tell us about both realities in this sermon.

Jesus lists several signs that will precede the end of the age that are all evidences of the brokenness of creation that comes from sin: war, famine, plague, pestilence, natural disasters, and false teachers and messiahs (Lk 21:10-11). There will be signs in the heavens and roaring in the seas, which in biblical and prophetic language represent the rise and fall of empires and nations (Lk 21:25).

And here too, Matthew's gospel offers some illuminating language. Matthew refers to these signs as *"birth pains"* (Mt 24:8). In other words, these types of events are like contractions that precede labor.

Now, I have not personally ever been pregnant. But I have been very near to several pregnancies. And I remember attending my first child birthing class with my wife, as the teacher taught us about how to discern contractions and when we needed to go to the hospital.

And there are two types of contractions. There are "Braxton Hicks" contractions, which are normal contractions that like unto a woman's body practicing labor, but they do not lead to birth. Then, there are labor contractions. These are the real deal. These are the contractions that mean the baby is coming. And as every parent in the room knows, the doctors can give you a due date, but no one really knows when the baby is going to come. The baby will come when the baby comes.

So too with the end of the age. Now, with the current news going on with the coronavirus, I know there is a lot of people asking, “Is this it?” The truth is that I don’t know, and neither does anyone else. I’m inclined to say it’s more of a Braxton Hicks. The reason being that right now less than 5000 people have died world-wide of this virus. For context, the Black Plague killed 25 million people. International terrorism is a scary thing, too, no doubt. But 85 million people died in World War 2. My point is, when real contractions hit, I don’t think anyone will have to ask.

And it is after those true contractions and birth pains that the Son of Man will come. Look at verse 27: *“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory”* (Luke 21:27, ESV).

Now, as we have journeyed through Luke, I have mentioned before that the title “Son of Man” is the primary title that Jesus uses to refer to himself. Other people call him the Messiah or the Son of the Living God. But Jesus calls himself the Son of Man.

This was not a term that Jesus made up. It comes straight from the pages of the Old Testament Prophet Daniel. In Daniel chapter 7, Daniel is shown a series of visions in the night. One vision is of various monstrous beasts that devour the earth, each of which represents different empires who conquer and rule the world (Dan 7:1-8). But then he sees the Ancient of Days, who is God enthroned in heaven, defeat and dethrone these empires of men (Dan 7:9-12). Then, he gives his dominion and rule of all nations to one who is like a Son of Man. I’ll read that portion of Daniel to you now: *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed”* (Daniel 7:13–14, ESV).

There are certain implications of Jesus referring to himself in this way. It means that we cannot take Jesus at his word and think that he was simply a wise human teacher. By saying that he is the Son of Man, Jesus is making a claim to divinity. He is saying, “I am the judge of the living and the dead that stands at the end of history!”

What the Bible teaches about eternal judgment can be an uncomfortable truth for many in our modern age. Certainly, judgment ought to be a sobering and serious matter. But it is also a matter of great hope. Because with judgment comes justice. Jesus is telling us that there is a day coming when the world will be put to rights because he will make all things new.

And if what Jesus says about the future is true, it shines new light on how we are to live our lives today. That leads us to our final point.

3. How Jesus Unveils the Present

In both cases, in the immediate future of Jerusalem in the first century and the ultimate future of God's people at the end of the age, Jesus is saying these things to call his people to be faithful, to stand firm, to trust that the Lord will provide, and to trust that in the end, God wins.

This means that with every day that passes, our redemption is drawing nearer; the time when all – not just some – of God's promises will come into being.

Jesus concludes this teaching with these words: *"But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man"* (Luke 21:34–36, ESV).

We live in a culture that is overwhelmed with the cares of this life. One of the great challenges of for the Christian in the contemporary age is to choose devotion over distraction. We must not become enchanted and sedated by the things of this world.

The kingdom of God is near. Cultivate awareness of this truth within your heart. The world is trying to sell you and convince you of a thousand other stories of how you might understand your life. But the gospel is the true story of human history. It is the story that unveils reality for what it is.

This is why we must devote ourselves to prayer, to reading the word, to worship: this is how we remember the true story.

Conclusion

This text is a tough one for me because I have grown up hearing a lot of sermons that have made predictions about the end times that never came true. I've come to distrust almost all end-times predictions.³

With that said, I now want to make my first ever end-times prediction. I believe this prediction is 100% accurate, 100% what the Bible teaches, and I am willing to bet my life on it.

Here is my end times prediction: *Jesus is coming back.*

³ When I was a kid, I remember going to church and hearing lots of sermons about the end of the world. These sermons both frightened and fascinated me. I remember one particular sermon about how Prince Charles of Wales was the anti-Christ. When I was a fourth-grader, I listened to that sermon on a cassette tape over and over again, and I was convinced it was all true. It was such an airtight argument. But nearly thirty years later, not only has Prince Charles failed to become the anti-Christ, he hasn't even become the King of England. I, many people who grew up in the church, became cynical toward all end times predictions.

Now, that might not sound all that impressive or earth-shattering to you. But I want you to consider how you might live if you were to truly live every waking moment of your life believing that Jesus could come back any day.

The truth that Jesus is coming back creates *urgency for personal holiness*. Why would we play around with sin and distractions, when eternity is just around the corner?

The truth that Jesus is coming back creates an *urgency for evangelism*. If we love our neighbors, why wouldn't we do everything we can to tell them about the good news of Jesus?

And above all, the truth that Jesus is coming back creates *unflinching, unconquerable hope*. There is hope when we suffer. There is hope when we witness the brokenness of this world. There is hope that one day all sad things will become untrue.

As the Apostle John declares: *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away'"* (Revelation 21:1–4, ESV).

AMEN.

GC discussion starters

- 1. Read Luke 21:5-38. Summarize some of the big ideas of this passage the best you can.*
- 2. Part of this teaching refers to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Part of this teaching refers to the coming of the Son of Man at the end of the age. How might the destruction of the temple relate to the return of Jesus at the end of history?*
- 3. Read verse Lk 21:34-35 again. What does it look like to live our lives according to these words?*
- 4. How might Jesus' sermon in Luke 21 create a sense of urgency regarding the call of all Christians toward personal holiness and evangelism?*
- 5. How might Jesus' sermon in Luke 21 create a sense of hope in the life of a believer?*

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