

Luke 21:5-38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 21, verses 5 to 38. 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.

[1 : 1 9] 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 fulfil 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.

[2 : 3 1] 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 and leave, 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. In Luke

chapter 21, the Olivet Discourse begins with some of Jesus' disciples admiring the temple buildings. [3 : 44] Jesus makes clear that these buildings are not going to survive, that one stone will not be left upon another. Jesus begins by listing a number of things that would occur before his coming, but which would not themselves be signs of his coming.

He ensures that his disciples don't jump at false positives. A number of potentially unsettling world events would occur before his coming. Jesus mentions famines, earthquakes, pestilences, other natural disasters.

The disciples will also face persecution. They'll be thrust out of synagogues. They'll be brought before rulers. This will serve as an occasion for their witness before the rulers. The witness of the disciples to governors and kings is important, particularly in the book of Acts.

Paul, like Jesus, faces four trials. And in these trials he bears witness to the gospel before kings and rulers. Jesus is a king and a ruler, and the disciples are his emissaries to the rulers of this world.

They will face treachery and betrayal. Even from their own families, their closest relatives will turn them over. They will be hated, but if they persevere they will be saved. Not a hair of their heads will perish, Jesus says.

[4 : 53] By their endurance they will gain their lives. There is something of a paradox here. When you're suffering the sort of persecution that Jesus describes, how can it be said that not a hair of your head will perish?

The solution to the paradox is found in the next statement. That you will gain your life through your endurance. This is what it means. Those who lose their lives for Christ's sake will gain them.

This is not the way that human reason would suggest to stay safe. You keep silent. You don't cause trouble. You don't rock the boat. You don't upset family members and people in authority who might turn you over.

However, to take that way is to lose your life. To forfeit your very soul. Jesus instructs his disciples to flee when they see Jerusalem surrounded by armies. And at this point the Jerusalem Christians did indeed flee to the mountains, as they were instructed by Christ, to Pella in the Transjordan. Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History Book 3 Chapter 5 in the early 4th century writes about this. But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approve men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella.

[6 : 03] And when those that believed in Christ had come there from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles and totally destroyed that generation of impious men.

These, Jesus says, are the days of vengeance to fulfill all that was spoken. Here Jesus is alluding to Isaiah Chapter 61 verses 1 and 2. The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn.

Now the interesting thing is we've had that verse before. That's been quoted in Luke Chapter 4 verses 18 to 19. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. There's something missing there.

[7 : 13] What's missing is the reference to the day of vengeance of our God. For many modern theologians, this has suggested that Jesus was just bringing a message of complete peace, no judgment whatsoever.

For John the Baptist, the question was, where is the fire? Where is the judgment that I was expecting this one coming after me to bring? Well here we see that element that was left out of the original quotation, surfacing again many chapters later, now in reference to that event in which Christ's wrath would truly be seen.

The fire is going to come, and it's going to come in AD 70. The time will be painful and difficult for all who must live through it, particularly for pregnant women or women who are nursing children. Israel will suffer the wrath of God, and Jerusalem will be occupied by the Gentiles, until the time of the Gentiles are fulfilled. The Jews will go into captivity. Reading such passages, many struggle with their language.

It seems cosmic and extreme. Surely the only thing it could seemingly refer to is a complete meltdown of the physical order. But that's not necessarily the case. If we look in Isaiah chapter 13 verse 10, For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light.

[8 : 25] The sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. Chapter 34 verse 4 of Isaiah, All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll.

All their hosts shall fall as leaves from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. Ezekiel chapter 32 verses 7 to 8, When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark.

I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord God. All of this language is being used to describe the fall of Babylon and Egypt.

These are historical events. This is not the meltdown of the physical order, but it is the end of a world order. The same is true of the destruction of Jerusalem. The whole world order will change. When we read the reference to seeing the Son of Man coming on the cloud, we think that this is a downward movement from heaven to earth. But it is the coming of the Son of Man into heaven itself that is in view here.

[9 : 28] The background of all of this is found in Daniel chapter 7 verses 9 to 14. As I looked, thrones were placed, and the ancient days took his seat. His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool.

His throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed, and given over to be burned with fire.

As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. 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.

[10 : 35] Seeing the son of man coming in a cloud is seeing the reality of this. Seeing the kingdoms of the world becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and Christ, which all begins with judgment falling upon Jerusalem.

And when they see this, they should lift themselves up, they should be alert, they should recognize that the days of the Lord have come. This is the vindication of the exalted son of man by the dispossession of the wicked tenants.

Jesus gives the parable of a fig tree, the fig tree being a symbol connected with Israel. Just as they are able to read the signs of the seasons in a tree, they shall see the signs of these times and recognize that the time has come.

And that generation will not pass away until everything occurred. Not just some of it, all of it. This makes it very hard to argue that this is referring to anything other than the events of AD 70.

In the statement about heaven and earth passing away, but Christ's words not passing away, Jesus is probably alluding to Isaiah chapter 51 verse 6. Lift up your eyes to the heavens and look at the earth beneath.

[11 : 38] For the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner. But my salvation will be forever and my righteousness will never be dismayed.

The fact that Jesus says that all these things would occur within that generation and then immediately declares how certain his words are has proved an embarrassment for many Christians.

