

Ready for the end

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Date: 13 February 2022

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from Luke chapter 21, verses 5 through to 38.

Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another.

Every one of them will be thrown down. Teacher, they asked, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?

He replied, watch out that you are not deceived, for many will come in my name claiming I am he. And the time is near. Do not follow them.

When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.

[1 : 13] Then he said to them, nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison. And you will be brought before kings and governors and all on account of my name.

And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

You will be betrayed, even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends. And they will put some of you to death.

Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm and you will win life.

[2 : 33] When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Let those in the city get out. And let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment and fulfillment of all that has been written.

How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers. There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people.

They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.

[3 : 37] People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world. For the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the sun of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near. He told them this parable.

Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

Truly, I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life. And that day will close on you suddenly like a trap.

[5 : 0 0] For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

Every day Jesus was teaching at the temple and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives. And all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple.

Well folks, I don't know about you, but for me, one of the things I've found most difficult these past couple of years, and especially the past three months, has been plans having to constantly be changed and rearranged.

You envisage for yourself coming back from paternity leave with a brand new sermon series to kick things off and instead get hit by a chest infection. You make careful arrangements to meet at Gowan Bank while the halls close for the holidays and a local outbreak makes that rather unwise.

You plan to see your family at Christmas and somebody tests positive and all bets are off. Doubtless you have your own equivalent stories of how plans have changed and been rearranged in doubtless frustrating ways.

[6 : 2 1] We're inclined to make our plans, aren't we? We want to know what's coming. Our desk is covered with sheets of paper with the whole of this year planned out, at least in outline form.

We want to know what to expect. And partly that's because we want to be ready. We want to prepare appropriately. Part of it's natural curiosity that we like to know what's happening.

Part of it is a desire to be in control. Not just to know what's coming, but also to decide what's coming. We want to be the ones in the know. However much someone else does or doesn't know, I want to know more than them.

To have the inside track. We want to know the future. And that isn't a new desire for us today in 2022, is it? When the people ask Jesus in verse 7, when will these things happen?

What will be the sign that they're about to take place? When they ask that, it's this same attitude at play, isn't it? And again, as they ask that, there's a mixture of good motives and bad motives, or at least less good ones.

[7 : 3 0] And watching how Jesus responds to that question, we see that he does give them some information. He isn't refusing to engage with them. But he's not at all interested in addressing idle curiosity.

He tells them, and therefore tells us, tells us what we need to know. And for the rest, he invites us to trust God.

He invites us to be confident that he knows the future, even when we don't. To trust that God has things under control. To believe that when we look at a world that seems to be out of control, that in fact all is proceeding according to plan.

Jesus intends to prepare his disciples spiritually for what lies ahead. He's not interested in imparting apocalyptic secrets to satisfy their curiosity, or to give them an opportunity for smugness about what they know and others don't.

He wants to tell them what they need to know in order to be prepared in their spiritual lives. Now, before we dive into the specifics of this particular passage, we need to recognize that there are a few different categories of signs being discussed here.

[8 : 48] And if you're confused by how all the different things relate to one another, well, you're in good company in that confusion. Because so were plenty of the people listening to Jesus at the time, and so were plenty of people writing learned commentaries today.

It isn't easy to tease apart the different strands, but with care we can see the different dimensions, the different aspects of what Jesus is talking about. We can understand what we are meant to know.

So we can distinguish first between, on the one hand, signs of the end, and then on the other hand, signs of what we might call signs of the age. And some of what Jesus talks about here points to that definite climactic point.

And some of it is more ongoing, what we should expect to continue year by year. Then within that signs of the end, within the kind of climactic definitive things, there's two different ends to consider.

Within the signs of the end, there's signs of the end of the temple, and there's signs of the end of the world. So you've got some signs that point to the imminent destruction of the temple, some that point to the shape of the age in which we live, these last days, and some that point to the end of the world.

[10 : 06] And if we act as if signs that talk about the general shape of the age are telling us the end is coming tomorrow, then we'll get mixed up. If we don't understand that some of those signs were pointing to the specific end of the temple that happened a couple of thousand years ago now, then we're going to be looking for signs that aren't coming, because they've already been.

So we need to distinguish carefully between the different signs and what Jesus intends us to understand from. So we'll take a journey through this dialogue here in chapter 21, and let's see what we find.

The scene is this. Jesus is still teaching in the temple complex. He's been doing that since the start of chapter 20. Luke just presented us with Jesus, taking note of the generosity of the widow who puts in her few small copper coins, that widow who trusts God absolutely, demonstrated by giving all that she had.

And now we have some of Jesus' followers commenting on the magnificence of the temple. And fair enough, it really is a very impressive building.

Apparently the interior stone blocks were 67 feet long, 7 feet high, and 9 feet wide. That is a big brick.

[11 : 26] This is an impressive structure. The whole building is adorned with gold and jewels, apparently to the extent that when the sun comes up, you can't look directly at the walls. So great is the reflected light, the reflected glory coming off this building.

This is a serious piece of engineering. The people are understandably proud of it. And it's not just any building, is it? It's not a monument to capitalism. It's not a monument to some great military victory.

No, this is a temple. And in the understanding of the Jews of Jesus' day, Jerusalem and the temple within it are impregnable. Nothing can possibly threaten the temple.

God's never going to let anything happen to Jerusalem. Jerusalem. This is the symbol of national pride. This is the symbol of religious pride. This is emblematic of their understanding of God's favor towards them.

The mark of God's power. The visible demonstration of God's authority. The guarantee of his protection. So they believe. And Jesus says, verse 6, The time will come when not one stone will be left on another.

[12 : 42] Every one of them will be thrown down. This is unthinkable. The pious Jew cannot get his head around this. How can God permit the temple to be destroyed?

But that's precisely the point. This temple that should have helped people draw close to God has in fact become emblematic of the religious structures and understanding that actually are functioning to keep people away from God.

It's not doing what it's supposed to do, drawing close to God. Instead, it's keeping people away. And what Jesus said would happen, that is exactly what did happen.

This is a matter of undisputed historical fact. AD 70, the temple of which Jesus spoke, it is comprehensively destroyed by the Roman army. The western wall that remains today is part of the foundations of Herod's extension of the temple complex.

It's not the wall of the temple proper. The temple was utterly destroyed. Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled. Now, those who are inclined to be skeptical will of course argue that the Gospels were written after AD 70 and therefore there is no evidence of prophecy because those writing these things down just put it in after the fact.

[13 : 59] Those predisposed to doubt will always find their reasons to do so. But to those of us willing to take the Gospels at face value, given the starting point that this is an accurate account of Jesus' words, well, at that point, this is then a massive reassurance to us, isn't it?

But to recognize that Jesus knows the end before the beginning. Jesus knew what was going to happen 40 years after his death. And he told people so that they could know and be prepared.

All the days of this earth, all the days of our lives, were written in God's book before a single one of them came to be. Folks, we do not need to fear the future because God has planned it.

Because he knows everything that will come to pass long before it does. So given that, given that everything is planned, given that God knows the future before it comes, it's reasonable then to ask in verse 7 to us, well, when?

When will these things happen? What will be the sign? And this question comes as a response to Jesus' prophecy about the destruction of the temple. They're asking, when will this knocking down happen?

[15 : 18] But that's not all that they're asking about. Because, you see, the question isn't, when will this happen? The question is, when will these things happen? For Jesus' audience, in this, to them, utterly bizarre world, where the temple could conceivably be destroyed, as they try to wrap their heads around that possibility?

Well, surely, the destruction of the temple would have to be wrapped up in the end of days, would have to be part of the winding up of all things. For the Jews, the destruction of the temple is naturally seen as an eschatological event.

The end is nigh. So when is this end coming? And Jesus' first response is a warning. Don't get mixed up. Don't get carried away.

Don't think that every little thing that happens is a sign that the end is upon us. No, these things that Jesus talks about in the following verses, these are, if you like, the signs of the age.

These are the things that must happen first, before the final end. The end will not come right away. So when nation rises against nation, that's regrettable, but it doesn't mean your time is up.

[16 : 33] The earthquakes, the famines, the pestilences, the great signs in the heavens, they don't mean it's all over. These are symptoms of living in a fallen world. These are signs of the age in which we live.

Watch out that you are not deceived. I mean, it happens time and again, doesn't it? Somebody declares that they have calculated the date.

They've worked out the precise day on which the end will come. They may or may not also proclaim themselves to be the Messiah reborn, saying, I am he. This has happened down through history, hasn't it?

Doubtless, this will continue on into the future. People saying that they have worked it out, proclaiming their Messiahship. But Jesus says those who wish to follow him must not be led astray.

I think there's something in these pronouncements from these cult leaders. There's something in them that appeals to the part of us that wants to be in the know, that wants to be on the inside track, to think, I am one of the select few to whom the time of the end has been revealed through Bob the prophet over there.

[17 : 46] We're the ones who know when the end is coming. And people become ensnared in these cults and follow these deceivers. Now, whether or not you've ever dived into some of these calculations and the equivalencies of, you know, this symbol maps onto this world leader and this story of a flood is that flood over there and this war is...

Whether you've dived into those attempts to match things up or not, I have to say I haven't been particularly tempted by those sort of schemes. But what I do find myself doing is I find myself looking at the general shape of things, looking at the things that happen in the world around us and I find myself thinking, surely this must be near the end.

Surely these cataclysmic events cannot continue much longer. Surely catastrophe after catastrophe, it must be that Jesus is coming soon. Terrorist attacks, wars, pandemics.

That's what I find myself thinking. But then I look at these verses and I have to say, well, this is exactly what Jesus told us to expect in an ongoing fashion as the signs of the age.

These are marks of the age in which we live, not the end. Do not be deceived and think the end is coming when it is not. Similarly, along with all of these cataclysmic events, similarly, the persecution is sure to come.

[19 : 18] Now, given the introduction here in verse 12, before all this, they will persecute you. Given that introduction, I think Jesus probably has in mind principally the persecution of those to whom he's speaking directly.

He's thinking about the particularly intense persecution of the apostles and the early church. You know, the emperor Nero sending people to the lions and that particular period of persecution.

Can't remember now whether I've got my dates right, whether Nero's before or after AD 70. Anyway, that particular early persecution, before the war that results in the destruction of the temple, came this persecution that sees many of God's people handed over to the synagogues and the kings and the governors.

So that's the immediate context. That's kind of what he's directly addressing. But it seems to me that the comfort that he offers them as they face that situation then, that comfort is also available to you and to me.

That when people face persecution today, it is still true that we can know that Jesus expected it. He said, in this world you will have trouble.

[20 : 28] And therefore we can respond in the same way that those early apostles were called to respond. Verse 13, bearing testimony to Jesus. Confident that the words will be given to us.

And the promise of verse 18 still applies. Not a hair of your head will perish. God has you in his hands. So too the challenge of verse 19 still applies.

Stand firm and you will win life. See, for Jesus, preparing his disciples to live in light of the end means preparing them to live in this current age, which means preparing them to endure persecution, which means giving them the confidence that they will live even though they die.

Verse 20, verse 20 then provides a slightly more direct answer to the question from back in verse 7. They ask, when will these things happen?

What will be the sign that they're about to take place? Verse 20, when you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. This is how you will know that the destruction of the temple is coming.

[21 : 46] You will see Jerusalem surrounded by armies. And it would have been easy for the Jews, would have been easy for God's people watching these armies gather. It would have been easy for them to feel safe and secure despite these forces arrayed against them because every good Jew knows God is in control.

God is for them and therefore Jerusalem will not fall. The Jews are back to this view despite Jerusalem having fallen to the Babylonians a few hundred years earlier.

They're still back to this understanding that God is in control and therefore Jerusalem is safe. And therefore, confident that God is going to preserve Jerusalem, well, what's the natural thing to do when you see the armies come?

When you read the historical novels, what do the peasants do when the armies gather? The peasants flee into the city for safety. You gather into the city because the city has the walls.

For precisely this reason, the walls are there to keep the enemy out, so you go inside because the city is the place of safety. It's the defensible location. But Jesus says no. No, do the opposite of what you'd normally expect because when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you who have listened and believe what I'm saying to you, you get out while the getting's good because when that encirclement is complete, the opportunity will have passed.

[23 : 12] You who know how to read the signs, you're going to know how to respond. Get out because the destruction is going to be dreadful. There will be great distress in the land, a wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and be taken as prisoners.

Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot. The temple will be torn down stone by stone. See, for Jesus' followers, they now have a loyalty that trumps their loyalty to this nation.

They're not under an obligation to go down with the ship. And they shouldn't have a false confidence that God's going to preserve this city. So they get out while they can.

And again, this is exactly what happened. Jerusalem was surrounded by the Roman armies. And there turned out to be a delay due to Roman politics back in Italy.

And therefore, many Christians did indeed flee during that time of grace. And then the city and temple were destroyed. Now, verse 25 and following, this is where it gets a little bit less clear what's going on.

[24 : 27] Verse 27 talks about the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory, which sure sounds a lot like what you and I have been led to expect at the end of days. But the problem comes in verse 32.

Because verse 32 tells us, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. So, either we conclude, well, this generation is literal.

This is all still talking about the fall of Jerusalem, which did happen during that generation. People listening to Jesus were still alive. But that means we have to conclude that the fulfillment of verse 27, the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory, that that was either a lot less dramatic than it sounds, or a lot less well documented than we would expect something like that to be, or it's hard to put together, isn't it?

The alternative is, maybe something else is going on with the word generation. And I'm inclined to opt for that latter understanding. We have definite evidence of the term generation being used in a sense other than a 40-year period.

One commentator points to some of the Qumran scrolls, the Dead Sea Scrolls, they're better known as. And these scrolls, they use the term last generation in a way that clearly includes several lifetimes.

[25 : 57] They are using generation in a way that doesn't mean, you know, father to son to grandchild. Generation, in fact, here is being used to refer almost to an attitude rather than a time period, to refer to a group of people who share a particular characteristic.

Dale Ralph Davis says, briefly, this generation carries a pejorative twist and refers not just to people within a 30 to 40-year time block, but to those who have been, are, and will be light-rejecting, kingdom-opposing, Messiah-spurning people.

The phrase refers to a type of people, not primarily to their time. For my money, this is the best way to reconcile how we can talk about the Messiah coming in clouds with glory in this generation, that the generation is this characteristic of the people, that up until that day, there will continue to be people who reject Jesus, who oppose his kingdom, who choose to rebel against him.

So just as the fig tree sprouting, it points to the coming of summer, to anyone who's bothering to pay attention to it. Well, Jesus says, so too, there will be signs that do show that the kingdom of God is near.

There will be signs that can be seen. As those watching the fig tree can know what's coming, so too, watching for these signs, you can know what's coming. And verse 28, the right response to knowing that this is coming is rejoicing.

[27 : 41] Folks, we do not need to fear the coming of that day. Instead, Jesus says we should lift up our heads because redemption is drawing near. Now, redemption, of course, in one sense has been fully accomplished on the cross, but in another sense, the unfolding of the full implications of redemption awaits that day.

So for those who are paying attention, these signs will be a wonderful promise of redemption. But for those who are not alert, verse 34, it will close on you suddenly like a trap.

So what do we do with this then? Well, we've seen already the reassurance that Jesus prophesied the future. He knows what's coming. Nothing takes him by surprise. We've considered the promise that though this age is going to be marked by persecution of God's people, yet he will give us the words to say and he will preserve us from ultimate harm.

We have those reassurances, but the most important takeaway, I think, is here in verse 34. Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap.

If you are not ready for that day, it will catch you by surprise. If you're not living in light of it, you will experience it not as a blessing towards which to lift your face, but as a trap, as something to be feared.

[29 : 10] So be careful that your hearts are not weighed down with carousing or drunkenness. Be careful. Jesus is speaking to people with at least some level of interest in following him.

The initial question comes from one counted among the disciples. J.C. Ryle says, the exhortation before us should teach us the immense importance of humility.

There is no sin so great, but a great saint may fall into it. There is no saint so great, but that he may fall into a great sin. Noah escaped the pollutions of the world before the flood, and yet was afterwards overtaken by drunkenness.

Abraham was the father of the faithful, and yet in his unbelief he claimed Sarah was his sister. Lot took no part in the wickedness of Sodom, but afterwards he fell into foul sin in the cave.

Moses was the meekest man on earth, and yet he so lost his self-control that he spoke angrily and unadvisedly, and lost his inheritance in the land. David was a man after God's own heart, and yet plunged into heinous adultery.

[30 : 20] These examples are deeply instructive. They show us the wisdom of God's warning in the passage before us. They teach us to be clothed with humility.

Let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. My friends, be careful that your hearts are not weighed down with carousing or drunkenness.

Be careful. But you know what's even scarier? To me at least. It's what follows on after the drunkenness in this warning.

The anxieties of life. Be careful or your hearts will be weighed down with the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. It's probably not something we're instinctively inclined to guard against, is it?

The cares, the anxieties of this life. It's a lot more subtle than drunkenness, isn't it? It's much less likely to be noticed by other people. It's probably not going to produce a dramatic crisis, and yet Jesus says it is no less dangerous.

[31 : 34] It is all too easy to be unprepared simply because we're distracted. Maybe focused on good and lawful things.

Focused on family. Spending time with friends. Providing for the practicalities of life. These things do need care and attention. They're not wicked in and of themselves in the way that drunkenness is.

And yet when they weigh down our hearts, the anxieties of this life, they may make a shipwreck of our faith. So be always on the watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

Lord Jesus, give us these watchful hearts. Give us attentiveness to the direction that we are walking. Give us the ability to see the danger of the obvious and dramatic sins.

Take away the attraction that they hold for us. And give us the careful attention to our hearts and our lives that sees when we are weighed down by anxieties, when even good things have distracted us away from you.

[32 : 55] Help us to live in light of the coming of the end. As we live in these last days, as we live in this present evil age, as we see the reminders of the fallenness of this world around us from the dramatic to the mundane.

Help us to live knowing that you have all of it in your hands, that you have ordained the end before the beginning. That you promise to preserve those who are sold out for you.

So guard us, we pray. Amen.