

The Coming Judgment

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning again, church. Our sermon passage today is Luke chapter 21, starting in verse 5.

That's page 827 in the Pew Bible. Let me invite you to turn there with me. Luke 21, page 827. This winter and spring, we're walking passage by passage through the last third of the Gospel of Luke. And in our text today, Jesus is going to teach us about the future. Now, if you think about it, we spend a lot of time living now in light of what's to come, don't we?

You know, for example, we go to school now because in the future we want to get a job. Or we maybe save and invest our income now because in the future we want to retire.

Or we draft a will. Or we do the hard work of repairing broken relationships now because in the future we want our loved ones to remember us well. But what if there was a way to live now in light of our ultimate future?

[1 : 20] In other words, how should we live now spiritually in light of God's future, our ultimate horizon? That's what Jesus is going to teach us in Luke 21.

So let me pray and then I'll read this passage for us. Let's pray together. Father, it's right for us to pause before coming to your word and to pray for illumination.

To pray that you by your spirit would give light to our finite minds, to our weak minds. Father, help us above all to know you better through your son Jesus and your unending love as we consider this text.

It's in his name, the name above all names that we pray. Amen. All right. Luke 21, verses 5 through 38. Let me read this long text for us.

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he, that is Jesus 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.

[2 : 36] 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, 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 namesake.

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 namesake, but not a hair of your head will perish.

[3 : 46] 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, that will fall by the edge of the sword

and be like 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, moon, and stars, and on the earth distress of nations and 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.

[5 : 11] 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.

Well, it's easy in a long and intricate passage like this to lose the forest for the trees, to major on the minors, and to miss the main things that Jesus wants us to know.

So, in order to try to keep our focus on the main things, I want us to see that Jesus here talks about two events, one encouragement, and one warning.

[6 : 22] He gives us two events, one encouragement, and one warning as we seek to live now in light of God's future. So, first, what's the first event? Well, the first event that Jesus talks about here is right in the opening of the passage.

The destruction of Jerusalem in the temple. Look again at verses five and six. And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, Jesus 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.

Now, when Jesus spoke those words around 33 AD, they may have struck some of his listeners as hard to believe. You see, the temple complex in Jerusalem in Jesus' day was massive.

For the past 50 years, beginning with Herod the Great, the temple complex had been under constant construction and enlargement and beautification. The whole structure, the temple itself and all the courts surrounding it, was about 35 acres.

That's the size of about 12 football fields. Imagine going to church in a space that's the size of 12 football fields. It's giant. Some of the stones used in the walls around the complex, archaeologists have discovered, are 42 feet long, 11 feet high, and 14 feet deep.

[7 : 37] That's like the size of one of our children's ministry classrooms next door. Just like one stone. The whole thing. Some of the columns in the portico, this sort of entryway, were so thick that according to the Jewish historian Josephus, it took three men with outstretched arms to reach around one of the columns.

And the sanctuary, the temple itself, in the center of all this, was 165 feet high and it was covered in such an array of gold and silver, crimson and purple, that people said it looked like a snow-clad mountain radiating the morning sun.

The Roman historian, Tacitus, would later call the Jerusalem temple immensely opulent. In fact, the magnitude of the temple mount and the stones used to construct it exceed in size any other known temple in the ancient world.

And yet, Jesus says, not one stone will be left upon another. And what we know is that in 70 AD, what Jesus said would come to pass.

War broke out with the Romans in about 66 AD and four years later, Titus, the son of the emperor of Aspatian, would finally topple Jerusalem and burn it along with the temple to the ground.

[8 : 57] In verses 20 through 24, Jesus describes that coming event of AD 70, Jerusalem surrounded by armies, people falling by the edge of the sword, being led captive among all nations.

And today, you can actually go to Rome and you can still see what's called the Arch of Titus, a giant monument erected by the Romans to recall the triumphal procession of Titus into Rome. and what's depicted there are prisoners captured from the fall of Jerusalem being led back to Rome in chains. So what are we to learn from this event that Jesus spoke of and that came to pass just as he said?

Well, the first thing we learn about is the reliability of Jesus. Of course, it's been tempting for some to believe that the gospel writers simply put these words into the mouth of Jesus after the fact. But you know, when we compare Jesus' words with the words of the Old Testament prophets, we see that Jesus was predicting the downfall of Jerusalem in language very much like those prophets of old.

[10:08] And given the fact that many scholars date the gospel of Mark before 70 A.D., that is before the fall of Jerusalem, the picture that we get is not one of later writers sort of putting words into the mouth of Jesus, but later writers unpacking the words that Jesus taught.

Jesus, knowing how God had dealt with his people in previous times, knew that the Jerusalem of his time was headed for a similar fate. And so the words of Jesus are reliable.

Look down at verses 29 through 33. And Jesus told them a parable, look at the fig tree and all the trees. 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.

Now, verse 32 is a tricky verse. What does Jesus mean when he says this generation will not pass away until all has taken place? Well, I think the best way to understand it is that Jesus is referring here to the fall of Jerusalem.

[11:28] And that becomes clear when you compare Luke 21 to Mark 13. Mark 13 is Mark's account of that same speech of Jesus, which Luke probably drew upon in his own research and writing of his gospel.

And in Mark 13, if you go back and read that, you see that all these things that will take place in Jesus' generation is a reference to the fall of Jerusalem. And so Jesus is telling his disciples that Jerusalem will fall.

All of that is going to happen within their lifetime. And it does. But then Jesus goes on to say, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Now that's an astounding statement, is it not? Sometimes I think we get so caught up with verse 32, we miss what Jesus says in verse 33. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Jesus says his words are more permanent, more lasting than the creation itself. Now there's only one person who ought to say such a thing.

[12:38] And that person is God himself. So do you see what Jesus is claiming for himself here? A claim to be identical with the one true God of Israel, the creator and sustainer of all things.

whose words will not pass away. So the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 is one more piece of evidence that Jesus is who he says he is and his words can be trusted, they can be relied upon, even if heaven and earth pass away.

But the fall of Jerusalem points us not just to the reliability of Jesus, but also to the reality of judgment. Notice in verses 20 through 24 that the fall of Jerusalem is described not just as a day of distress and desolation, but also, Jesus says, a day of vengeance to fulfill all that is written and as a day of wrath.

Those are phrases that are used for God's just judgment. you see, what God is looking for from us humans, from us image bearers, isn't large stones and opulent buildings.

What God is looking for isn't massive, outward religious show. If that's what God is looking for, then Herod's extravagant temple project should be what we all strive for.

[14:03] And yet, when Jesus entered the temple, he said it had been made a den of robbers. You see, the prophets of Israel again and again warned the people that it's not outward show that God desires, but a contrite and humble heart.

God looks at the heart. And the great tragedy of the first century is that God's own people had become heart of heart, even to the point of rejecting their own Messiah in the person of Jesus.

So the fall of Jerusalem, this unique event in history that we've seen fulfilled when God disciplined his own people, this event presses to us a question as well.

What are you relying on? Is it the work of your hands? Vast religious, spiritual works? But friends, our piety can be as massively opulent as the Jerusalem temple.

God looks at the heart. And what God looks for is humility before his word and trust in his son. And this brings us to the second event that Jesus describes.

[15:30] In verses 25 through 28, Jesus speaks about the coming of the son of man in glory. Now having just described the terrible judgment that will fall on Jerusalem within a generation's time, Jesus lifts our gaze to an even greater reckoning to come further off.

And on that coming day, Jesus says, it won't be stones that fall, but the sun, moon, and stars. And it won't be a single city in distress, but the whole world.

The language here is what biblical scholars call apocalyptic language. That is, it's heavily figurative language to describe the indescribable.

After all, when the creator enters creation to bring his world to account, what language would you use? When heaven comes to earth in fullness, when the glory of God covers the earth like the waters cover the sea, when every human heart is laid bare before the one who made us, how shall we describe it?

Words are hard to find. I think verses 25 and 26 do a pretty good job. But even though we have a hard time putting it in words, is this not what our hearts long for?

[16:58] Deep down, isn't there something in our gut that longs for this? After all, the world is not how it's supposed to be, is it? There's evil and injustice and suffering and death.

And if there is a God, shouldn't God come and put it to an end? Shouldn't God come and make things right? And the Bible's answer to that longing, that question, is yes.

the good and holy creator will not allow his creation to suffer under sin and evil and injustice forever, but God will come and will make things right.

There is hope for the world. But at the same time, doesn't that provoke another question?

if there is hope for the world, if God will come and put an end to evil and wrong, what hope is there for me?

[18:03] Because in my heart, I see evil and wrong. I see selfishness and greed and lust and impatience, all the things that are wrong with the world, I see in myself.

So how could I stand when God comes? There might be hope for the world, but what hope is there for me? What hope is there for you?

Our only hope when God comes to make the world right is that he will come in the person of his son. Jesus calls himself the son of man here.

It's a reference to Daniel chapter 7. In Daniel 7, Daniel describes the triumph of God over evil in the world and the rescue of his people and God does that in and through one Daniel calls a son of man, which Jewish interpreters for ages identified as the coming Messiah, the one who would represent God's people and the one who would rescue God's people.

When God comes, he comes in the person of his son. Now, the return of Jesus is a bit hard to wrap our minds around.

[19:22] If you're here and you're exploring Christianity for the first time, that idea probably seems a little weird. I get it. But I want us to see that the bodily return of Jesus means this.

The bodily return of Jesus means that the one who took flesh and who lived the life that we should have lived in perfect obedience and the one who died the death that we deserve to die because of our sin.

In other words, the one who took hold of us in and through his incarnation and death and resurrection, that one has not let us go. He will return in the same body in glory to show us that his love for us is still the same.

He hasn't left our humanity behind but he holds it still. When God comes, he comes in the person of his son and that means there's hope not just for the world but also for sinners like me and like you. You see, at the end of the day, when we meet God, we can meet God clothed in our own works or we can meet God clothed in the works of his son.

[20:41] And if we choose to meet God relying on our own works, then like the stones of the temple long ago, we will not stand. But if we choose to meet God relying on his son and depending solely on him and not ourselves, trusting that his death paid the price for my sins and that his

resurrection means the renewing of my life, if we depend solely on the son, then that day will be, as verse 28 says, a day of redemption.

That is a day of liberation, of freedom, a day of release and joy. So where will you stand?

C.S. Lewis puts it this way talking about the second coming. He says, when the author walks onto the stage, the play is over. God is going to invade, all right, but what is the good of saying you're on his side then when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else, something that never entered your head to conceive comes crashing in.

Something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. For this time, it will be God without disguise.

Something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side.

[22 : 13] There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing. It will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not.

Now, today, this moment is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever.

We must take it or leave it. now, today, this moment. All this talk about the future is meant to teach us how to live now.

In great love, God has provided a way for us to experience mercy in the face of His just judgment, mercy in the person of His Son, freely offered to all who believe.

You see, even the fall of Jerusalem wasn't actually the end. There was still mercy. There was still time. Did you notice the end of verse 24? Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

[23 : 29] The times of the Gentiles. That's the time we live in now. Between the fall of Jerusalem and the return of Christ, when all nations are being invited to enter into Israel's salvation.

Israel's salvation which was purchased through Israel's Messiah, Jesus, the forgiveness of sins and the newness of eternal life to enter into God's covenant favor.

Now is the time when the nations, when the Gentiles are being invited to come in to what God has promised His people. You see, God hasn't given up on His people.

His promises stand firm. The nations are streaming in and we can take hold of those promises now and have assurance of God's mercy when God comes in glory. And in light of that day, Jesus gives His disciples an encouragement and a warning.

As we live now, in light of His coming again, Jesus wants to encourage us and He wants to give us a warning. The encouragement is found in verses 8 through 19. And that encouragement is, don't be afraid.

[24 : 44] When many people come in my name, Jesus says in verse 8, saying that the end is at hand, don't be afraid. And don't run after them. Predictions about the end times are foolishness, Jesus says.

In Mark 13, He says, listen, only the Father knows when I'm coming back, not even me. If Jesus doesn't know when the Father is going to send Him to come back, trust me, nobody else knows. That's how this works. So don't be afraid. Don't chase after. Don't freak out. When you hear about wars and tumults, political turmoil, natural disasters, even cosmological oddities, which is what are described in verses 9 through 11, Jesus says, don't be afraid.

These things are going to happen between His first and second coming. Don't lose your mind.

They're not a sign that the world is ending all at once. Don't be afraid.

Then in verses 12 through 15, Jesus says that there will be persecution that comes. That as His followers, we will be at times handed over both to religious and political authorities for Jesus' sake.

[25 : 53] Jesus doesn't promise His disciples an easy road of discipleship. And in the book of Acts, we see that this was true from the very beginning of the church being brought before religious and political authorities.

In Acts, we see Peter and John and Stephen before the Sanhedrin. We see James before Herod Agrippa I. We see Paul before Galio and Felix and Agrippa and Festus. And this is true not just in the generation before the fall of Jerusalem, but in every generation since.

And yet here too, Jesus encourages us, don't be afraid. Don't anxiously meditate on how you'll respond if you find yourself put on trial.

No, Jesus says, in that moment, I will give you words and wisdom. I'll give you a mouth and a mind. What a wonderful promise that Jesus Himself will be near to us when we face persecution or trial or questioning.

Now this isn't an excuse to be totally unprepared. Peter will write in his first letter, in your hearts, honor Christ, the Lord is holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

[27 : 10] So it's a good thing to think about every once in a while how you might articulate the hope that we have in Christ. But what Jesus is saying here is that in the moment of our defense, when your co-worker puts you on the spot, when your neighbor asks a question, when your roommate cracks a joke about your faith, or something more serious happens, in that moment, don't be afraid because Jesus is with you through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, Jesus says in verse 13 that this is your opportunity, your opportunity to bear witness, your opportunity to bear witness to the gospel.

What is the gospel? The good news that there is a God who made us and who loves us and who is holy, just, and good. But that rather than loving and worshiping God, we've put ourselves in the center and have done things our own way and we've made a mess of the world and we deserve God's judgment.

But God, in great mercy, sent his Son in the flesh to live and to die in our place so that we might be reconciled to him. God poured out his immense love for his Son for all who believe and now everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved, our sins forgiven, our relationship with God restored, our lives empowered through the Holy Spirit for service and purpose and mission and love.

Don't be afraid. This is your opportunity. In verses 16 through 18, Jesus says, concluding his encouragement, he says that not just will there be trial and persecution with authorities, but even closer to home, he says, there'll be betrayal and hatred and even for some of you, death.

[29 : 04] And yet, even in that most painful situation, we need not be afraid. Not a hair of your head will perish.

You see, the one who knows what it's like to be betrayed by a friend and the one who knows what it's like to be hated by his own people and the one who was put to death, Jesus, promises us that because he was betrayed and because he was hated, and because he was put to death.

Now, none of those things can destroy us. Betrayal cannot separate us from the love of God, can it? Hatred cannot separate us from the love of God.

Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. So hold on and don't be afraid. What awaits you as you endure, Jesus says in verse 19, is life.

Eternal, abundant life. That is your end, brother and sister. Life. So don't be afraid. There's the encouragement.

[30 : 21] But Jesus also gives us a warning. He ends in verses 34 through 36, warning us to stay awake. Watch yourselves.

You see, if there's a danger that we will face many fears, there's the equal danger that we will give in to many distractions. Watch yourselves, Jesus says in verse 34, lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness in the cares of this life.

There are two kinds of distractions that Jesus points to. Two distractions that can weigh down our hearts and cause us to be unprepared for the king's return. The first is dissipation and drunkenness. Simply losing ourselves in the temporary pleasures of the world.

Even abusing the pleasures of this world. Taking good things like sex and drink and giving ourselves over to them. Wake up, Jesus says. Don't let the temporary pleasures of this life capture your heart and make you unprepared for what's to come.

After all, what's to come is more thrilling, more enlivening, more joy-giving than any pleasure this world holds.

[31 : 35] The pleasures of this life are simply echoes, simply signposts to the joy that awaits us when God comes again to make things right. So stay awake.

But there's a less obvious distraction. There's sort of a respectable distraction. And that's what Jesus calls the cares of this life. That is the everyday responsibilities like work and family and marriage and running errands and paying bills and finishing reports.

We can get so caught up in the flow of responsibilities that we forget the larger story that we're a part of. Your life is more than the abundance of your possessions, Jesus once said. Your life is more than the sum of daily activities. Don't let the grind of life distract you from the fact that you are a player in the great drama of God's redemption.

Stay awake. The diapers you change, the projects you manage, the hours you clock in from nine to five, these things, if you are in Christ, don't define you.

[32 : 52] Don't let them weigh you down and distract you. Stay awake. You're a child of the King and the King is coming to make this world His home again and you will reign with Him forever.

Don't let that day come upon you like a trap, Jesus says. But how do we do that? How do we stay awake amidst distractions that weigh us down?

Did you see the answer in verse 36? Prayer. Now you might be thinking, I usually fall asleep when I pray. How is that the answer to stay awake?

What a small view of prayer we have as a people of God. Prayer is the gift God gives us to recenter our hearts and lives on Him and on what really matters and on who we really are and on where this story is really going.

Prayer is the future come crashing into the present because prayer is communion with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. That's where you're headed, church. Communion with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit and when you are in prayer it comes crashing into the now.

[34 : 12] Prayer is pouring out our hearts to God. Prayer is asking God for all we need. Prayer is resting silently in the presence of God. Prayer is wrestling with God through trial.

Prayer is staying awake so that we might stand before the Son of Man. And then that day won't come upon us like a trap.

But as verse 29 says, it will come upon us like the turning of the seasons, the welcome bursting forth of summer when the cold of sin and death are put away and creation is released from its bondage to decay and God is all in all.

May we meet that day like the dawning of the summer. Brothers and sisters, stay awake and don't be afraid. Live now in light of God's future because the kingdom is near and the King is coming. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for telling us the truth about where history is headed.

[35 : 31] Thank you for telling us about your own return. God, some of us here may not feel like we're ready for that day. I pray that even now in the quiet of these few moments we would not let distractions point us away from the ultimate truth of where we stand with you.

God, and if we are standing in our own efforts in our own works even in our own helplessness, God, I pray that today would be the day when we move our hearts from relying on ourselves to relying on Jesus our loving Savior who says come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

Jesus, you're the good shepherd and no one can pluck us out of your hand. So would our hearts be renewed in faith this morning by your Spirit to not be afraid and to not fall asleep.

Keep us awake to the mission that you have for us, God. Keep us alert to the movements of your Spirit throughout this week. Keep us attentive to the way in which you are calling us to be your ambassadors and your people in the world to be salt and light.

O God, send us out with a fresh filling of your Spirit we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[37 : 11] Well, friends, let's stand and let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.