

Sunday, October 6, 2024 | Holy Week

Week 7 | Luke 21:25-38 | "The End Is Near, Pt. 2"

Last week, in the sermon "The End Is Near," we explored the end times as viewed through the lens of Jerusalem's destruction. And while this might seem strange to us, it wasn't to Jesus' audience. You see, from their perspective, Jerusalem's demise would seem so *cataclysmic* as to appear *apocalyptic*. And so, we learned that the *key* to understanding this passage is this: the fall of Jerusalem is the *prototype* for the end of the world!

But in speaking about the destruction of the Temple and his intent on preparing his disciples for that eventuality, Jesus gave five virtues that would only help his followers survive that dreadful season in 70AD, but those five virtues would also help us survive the end of the world. Just as his disciples needed **discernment** to recognize imposters, the **composure** to undergo catastrophes, the **bravery** to suffer persecutions, the **fortitude** to endure heartbreak, and **readiness** to avoid utter destruction, so do those of us who are looking down the barrel of the end times. **If these virtues helped the Apostles prepare for Jerusalem's fall, they will also help Christians prepare for the world's end.**

READ: Luke 21:25-38 (ESV)

²⁵ "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, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming **on the world**. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then **they will see the Son of Man** coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things **begin** to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing **near**."

²⁹ And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that **the summer is already near**. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that **the kingdom of God is near**. ³² Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ "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. ³⁵ For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ 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.”

³⁷ And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. ³⁸ And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.

Today, Jesus will move from talking about the fall of Jerusalem to the end of days. But do not be mistaken; the Lord doesn't give us a very clear picture of what the Apocalypse is going to look like. His words are like having pieces to a puzzle but no picture for reference. Should we try to make *perfect* sense of what he tells us, we'll go mad, or worse, we'll become anxious and fearful of the future.

What's more, it is no secret that eschatology can be controversial. Good and godly people throughout history have disagreed about how to interpret Jesus' words. So, let me be clear: We must come to today's passage with great humility and grace. How we approach this topic will say more about our level of *maturity* than our level of intelligence.

This passage deals with the future, and, lest we forget, the future is *mysterious*, since it has yet to happen! Therefore, our conclusions must be held *tenuously*, so much so that we *must* remain *open to reason* and *resist dogmatism*. We ought to *speak* where the Bible *speaks* and be *silent* where the Bible is *silent*. This is *particularly* applicable when it comes to eschatology. When addressing the end times, we should say what Scripture says and then *resist* the urge to go further.

There are **three** end-time takeaways in this passage:

i. Vs. 25-26 – **Global** and **celestial** disturbances signify **the start** of the Apocalypse.

Jesus says two things will kick off the end times: “**signs**” in the heavens and “**distress**” on the earth. In fact, because of these two things, people will be so filled with “**fear and foreboding**” that they'll “**faint**” across the world.

According to Matt. 24:29, the “**signs**” Luke mentions refer to how the “**sun will be darkened**” and, consequently, “**the moon will not give its light.**” Then, on top of all that, the “**stars will fall from heaven.**” A world without the light of the sun or the moon and that has asteroids falling from the sky would, without a doubt, send the world into chaos (cf. Isa. 13:10).

But the danger is not only from above but also below. Luke tells us that the “**distress**” on earth will be caused by “**the roaring of the sea and the waves.**” Could this refer to tsunamis or the

melting polar ice caps? Maybe. There's no way to tell definitively. But in some way, the waters of the world will churn, thunder, and boom, causing mass panic.

So, what is Jesus' point? Does he mean for us to assume that natural/cosmological disasters are signs of the end times? Yes and No.

Yes, in the sense that such disturbances are signs that signal that the end is near in the same way that false messiahs, wars, and persecutions were signs that signaled that the fall of Jerusalem was near (cf. Lu. 21:8-12).

But also no. The **scope** Jesus suggests is of such magnitude that it has never been seen before in the history of the world (cf. Mat. 24:21). The sort of cosmological phenomena and the kind of planetary catastrophes that are described in this passage are so widespread that they encompass the entirety of the created order. Notice that the "distress" that comes upon the earth does not come upon a nation, *singular*, but "nations," *plural*. In vs. 35, Jesus says, "For it will come upon all who dwell **on the face of the whole earth.**" And the "signs in sun and moon and stars" are to such a degree that Jesus says the very "powers of the heavens will be shaken." The verb "to shake" is used to describe the shaking of a reed (cf. Lu. 7:24) or the tremors of an earthquake (cf. Psa. 82:5).¹ Or, for example, when the Lord descended on the day of Pentecost, we're told the house where the believers were meeting "shook" (Ac. 4:31). **This means the entire universe will shake on the day of the Lord.**

Thus, while we are to keep an eye on natural disasters and the universe around us, **we should not automatically assume** that **every** natural disaster and starry spectacle indicates that Judgement Day has come. **Doubtless, if we do, we'll be led astray by many false prophets and messiahs.** Rest assured, though specificity alludes us, when the end of the world arrives, there will be no denying it. Given Jesus' words here, we can assume that **reality itself will break**, putting the world into disarray. **The whole of creation itself will sway, ushering in the last days to cries of all people.**

ii. Vs. 27-32 – The **visual** appearance of Christ signifies **the end** of the Apocalypse.

Vs. 27 – Anyone even a little bit familiar with the gospels will know Jesus is referring to himself when he talks about the "Son of Man." Interestingly, Jesus never referred to himself as "Jesus"

anywhere in the Scriptures; his favorite self-designation was “Son of Man” (cf. Mat. 8:20; 11:19; Mar. 2:10, 28; Lu. 12:40; 19:10; Jn. 3:14; 8:28).

Thus, after this reality-breaking disaster, the “Son of Man,” aka Jesus Christ, will be seen “coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” Jesus means two things by this:

1. First, this appearance will be unambiguous and unmistakable. Or, as Jesus said in Lu. 17:24, “For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.” (cf. Lu. 17:24). Though many missed his first coming, no one will miss his second coming. Everyone will literally see the Son of Man when he comes.
2. Second, that Jesus comes riding a “cloud” bursting at the seams “with power and great glory” indicates that Jesus is God (cf. Ex. 34:5; Num. 10:34; esp. Psa. 104:3). In other words, the Son of Man is a figure of equal status to God (cf. Ac. 1:9-11). The Lord will return with all his divine glory, grandeur, and regalia in the second coming. And then, utilizing all the authority and power at his disposal, Jesus Christ will humble the nations, silencing the beasts forever (cf. Rev. 1:13; 14:14). Afterwards, the King of King will give his Kingdom over to his followers (cf. Dan. 7:27)

Vs. 28 – In contrast to the rest of the world, who were “fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world” (vs. 26), Jesus instructs believers to “straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” They are to lift their heads joyfully and not sorrowfully hang them low. Why will there be two very different responses? Because Jesus’ return will rescue believers from this fallen world and its fate. This is not the sort of redemption for our souls that has already taken place. This is the sort of redemption wherein all the promises of God are fulfilled (cf. Ac. 3:19-21).

Like “begin to take place,” the term “near” is a temporal word, but by definition, such a term is imprecise—i.e., soon, close, maybe, early, most, etc. So, when Jesus says their “redemption is drawing near [emphasis added],” he is not referring to a specific time, per se, but to a particular position in history; in other words, it has *less* to do with an occurrence in time and *more* to do with a sequence in a timetable.

Jesus admitted in Matt. 24:36, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” So, it would be odd for Jesus to speak about a specific “day and hour” when he had already admitted he had no knowledge of such a thing! Thus, his point here is for us to take note of the changing seasons, even though we will

not know the exact date until that day comes. Once the signs in heaven take place and the world is thrown into disarray, look for the coming Son of Man.

Vs. 29-32 – To *explain* what he means by the word “near,” Jesus gives a “parable.” And this parable is about a “fig tree.” Actually, it’s not just about a fig tree, but it applies to “all the trees;” since most trees share a common characteristic: in the winter, they shed their leaves, and in the spring, trees become green again.¹ And just as we know that “the summer is already near” by noticing when the trees are in bloom, “So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” Since they are the closest antecedent, the phrase “these things” seems to refer to those “things” just listed in vs. 25-28. But as we’ll see in our discussion of the phrase “this generation” in vs. 33, “these things” could refer to a variety of things, including everything mentioned since vs. 5.

But, regardless of what *exactly* “these things” refer to, when “signs” appear in the sky and there’s “distress” on the earth, that is the beginning of the end. In other words, *spring on the eschatological calendar has begun.* Metaphorically speaking, “all the trees” have started to blossom—i.e., the Apocalypse is underway. And just as the flowering trees signal that the summer is close at hand, so the “kingdom of God” (and the redemption of the saints) draws “near.” Soon, the “Son of Man” will come, and he will not delay (cf. Heb. 10:37-38). Jesus will arrive riding “a cloud with power and great glory” to usher in the end of the world and *bring his Kingdom into full bloom.*

Vs. 33 – “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.

While there are many interpretations of the phrase “this generation,” for the sake of time, I’m only going to give you four: one *improbable* interpretation and three *probable* interpretations.

The most *improbable* interpretation is that “this generation” refers to **the first century.** This means that Jesus predicted his second coming within the lifetime of the apostles. In this view, while the Lord was spot on regarding the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, he was totally off base about the end of the world since, as we know, he did not return “in a cloud with power and great glory” two thousand years ago. The problem with this view is that if this is what first-century Christians believed Jesus meant (and there needs to be proof that that was the case), *why did they preserve, copy, and redistribute this*

¹ Bock (1996), p. 1688.

prediction after 70 AD? If, as some claim, that Jesus got this wrong, then why didn't people abandon the Scriptures entirely or at least edit this part out? The fact that this prediction has been preserved for thousands of years, at the very least, suggests **there's another way** of understanding the phrase "this generation."

The first **probable** interpretation is that, due to the way language works, "this generation" could refer to a **specific ethnicity, namely, the Jews**. The point is that Israel may diminish, it may be dispersed throughout the nations, but it will never entirely "pass away." **The problem with this view is two-fold**. First, there is **considerable debate** as to whether the Greek term for "generation" can even be used to describe a particular nationality; almost always (with very few exceptions) it refers to a populace "living at a given time."² Second, vs. 25-31 lacks any specifically Jewish nationalistic terminology. It is quite a leap to say "generation" equals "ethnicity," but it is an even greater leap to say that "ethnicity" equals "Israel." The evidence for such a conclusion is not in the context. However, though this interpretation is unlikely, it is not unreasonable. Many (but not all) dispensational interpreters favor this view and have credible explanations for the criticism above.

The second **probable** interpretation is that "this generation" refers to the generation at the end times. The point is that once the "signs" and "distress[es]" of vs. 25 begin, they will not continue for generations, *plural*. The events of the end times will occur within **a single generation**. This interpretation makes best sense in the context and grammar, but it still has its challenges. Like the one before it, from a linguistic standpoint, it is hard to imagine that "this generation" refers to a **future** generation when the phrase usually refers to a **present** generation. If Jesus was referring to the end-time generation only, would not a phrase like "that generation" be better?

The third **probable** interpretation is that "this generation" refers to an **era** that began with Jesus' arrival in the first century and will end with the Lord's second coming sometime in the future. This is called the "already-not yet" approach, but I like to call it the "Christmas to Consummation" view as it spans the timeframe between Christ's birth in Bethlehem and his return on Mount Olivet (cf. Zech. 14:4). Whatever you call it, this explanation sees all the events in Luke 21 as being inseparably link. However, this view has some problems. First and foremost, it requires that the phrase "these things" in vs. 33 be understood to refer to everything since vs. 5, even though there seems to be a shift in vs. 25. This is possible, but, as with the other two probable interpretations,

² Bock (1996), p. 1690.

linguistically, it's clunky. What's more, while there is evidence that the term "generation" could refer to many generations, this use is exceedingly rare.³

Of the three probable interpretations, I lean toward the third option for three reasons. **Though I reserve the right to change by view in the future.** First, the phrase "all has taken place" seems, at least to me, to encompass the entire chapter. Second, Jesus has already said that the "kingdom of God" was already in the "midst" of his generation (cf. Lu. 17:21). And without a doubt, all the end-time passages (*including this one*) have some note somewhere about being ready. It seems to me that the generation of the end-times was inaugurated with the advent of Christ and will be consummated with his return. Third, when Peter used a similar phrase ("those days") in Ac. 2, it included everything that happened during the time of Pentecost and everything that will occur during the end times.⁴ While it is not 100% clear that when Jesus used the phrase "this generation" that he was using it in this way, but it is nevertheless possible.

Vs. 34 – Whichever view is the correct one, one this is for certain: Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." The irony here, at least for me, is that right after giving a phrase that has been debated for centuries, we're assured that that phrase, including the rest of Jesus' teaching, will not disappear. **God's word will outlive this world; it is the only lifeboat we have.**

iii. Vs. 34-36 – We can **escape** the Apocalypse by being **watchful** and **prayerful**.

Jesus leaves behind all the cryptic end-time discussion and moves to more practical applications. He admonishes us to "watch" ourselves. While we are to keep a weathered eye on the horizon, expectantly looking for Christ's return, we mustn't be so focused on the future that we forget to live in the present. The verb "watch" means to guard yourself, beware, or be careful (cf. Matt. 7:15; Lu. 17:3; 1 Tim. 1:4).

Specifically, we're supposed to beware that we're not "weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life..."

³ Morris (1988), p. 318, In one of the Qumran scrolls (the Habbakuk peshet) the phrase "this generation" clearly encompasses many generations (1QpHab 2:7; 72).

⁴ Garland (2011), p. 836.

The term “**dissipation**” refers to debauchery, iniquity, or “unbridled indulgence.”⁵ If we’re not careful, we’ll live a life of self-indulgence, spending the precious time God has given us on ourselves. Rather than trying to glorify God, we gratify ourselves (e.g., the prodigal son). **Dissipation is one of two things: either it is taking a good thing at the wrong time (e.g., sex), or it is taking a good thing to such an extent that it becomes a bad thing (e.g., money).**

The term “**drunkenness**” is, as you no doubt know, refers to alcoholism, intoxication, going on a bender, etc. Alistair Begg said it best: **“When we reject a bondage that Scripture doesn't teach, we dare not embrace a freedom that Scripture does not afford.”** While it is true that taking a drink is not a sin (cf. Deut. 14:26; Judg. 9:13; Psa. 104:14-15; Pro. 31:4-7; Eccl. 9:7; Amos 9:14; Isa. 55:1) drunkenness is (cf. Pro. 23:29-35; Eph. 5:18). And when we abuse alcohol, something good becomes evil. Or as Epictetus put it, “If one oversteps the bounds of moderation, the greatest pleasures cease to please.” This is **not** to say one must drink at all. Paul said in 1 Cor. 6:12, **“All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.”** We should not be bound by any substance that inhibits our mental faculties. Alcohol is a power too strong for many to try and wield. So, if moderation is **untenable**, then total abstinence is **preferable**. As Augustine put it, **“Complete abstinence is easier than perfect moderation.”** **It is *always* better to forgo a personal liberty for the sake of one’s piety.**

The phrase “**cares of this life**” refers to the typical daily worries we all experience. We can be so focused on this life, worried about how things will shake out, that we're drawn away from God. Matthew 6:33 states, **“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”** The phrase “all these things” refers to food and clothing. **If we struggle with worry, nervousness, and anxiety, it is symptomatic of a *lack* of faith and focus.** This is not to say that worry, nervousness, and anxieties are automatically sinful. All of us experience those feelings at some point or another. But left unchecked, fear can run away with our hearts. And it is at that point that depression becomes a sin. If we believe God will take care of us and if we’ve given our lives to pursue the furtherance of his kingdom, we will not be weighed down by the cares of this life. **In fact, being *fearful* can be used to make us more *faithful*.** “Anxiety is freedom’s possibility; this anxiety alone is, through faith, absolutely formative, since it consumes all finite ends, discovers all their deceptions.” — Søren Kierkegaard

⁵ Edwards (2015), p. 611.

Jesus warns that if we allow ourselves to become self-indulgent, inebriated, and/or anxious, then "**that day** come upon you suddenly like a trap." And no one will escape since "it will come upon all who dwell **on the face of the whole earth.**"

Okay, so what's the solution? The Lord says, "Stay awake at all times, praying that you may have the strength **to escape** all these things that are going to take place, and **to stand** before the Son of Man." **A thriving prayer life secures our escape in the last days.** It provides "strength to escape...and to stand" confidently "before the Son of Man" because we already have a relationship with him. Praying always keeps a dialogue going until the Lord returns.

Video Description:

Holy Week | Week 7 | “The End Is Near, Pt. 2” (Luke 21:25-38)

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3BrbkAz>

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