

Luke 21:20-24

The Destruction of Jerusalem

A quick Google search for “the end is near” results in 85,000,000 hits in less than half a second! I imagine that since time began, people have wondered when time would end. Certainly since Jesus ascended into heaven promising to return, believers the world over have speculated on when He would return. Timetables have been established. Dates have been set and then recalculated. Plans have been made and then changed.

Throughout history certain events have been seen as the ‘sign’ that the end was near. We all remember the Y2K scare. But there was also the Y1K scare in the early Middle Ages. People then thought the end of the first millennium was the end of the age. Throughout history, great earthquakes and plagues, times of famine and disaster, and natural disasters of all sorts have all been seen as the beginning of the end of the world. Most recently, global warming has been placed alongside the threat of nuclear holocaust as having the potential to bring life as we know it to an end.

As believers, we have confidence that Christ will return. Scripture proclaims that fact. Jesus said so Himself. And when Christ returns, He will come unmistakably. The world will know. There will be no doubt. ³¹“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.” (Matthew 25:31-33). These events, to which believers ought to look forward with enthusiasm, will be terrifying to those not found in Christ. But as believers, we rejoice that their coming to pass will validate the truth of Scripture and complete the plan of God.

As said, the credibility of Scripture, and of God Himself, require the return of Christ. While there are many different views on the details of this, Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus Christ will return to this present earth prior to the establishing of His millennial kingdom. Jesus will reign supreme in power and great glory and will be the object of worship for all mankind. This kingdom will be real and tangible. Earth, where the curse of sin has been removed, will be a place where righteousness and peace are universal. Prior to that event, while there are again many different views, I would argue that believers will be raptured prior to the period known as the Tribulation. It is after that period of troubles that Jesus will return to establish His millennial kingdom.

As He continued the teaching recorded in Luke chapter 21 (also found in Matthew 24 and Mark 13), Jesus spoke of the events which would precede His return. While some two thousand years have passed since Jesus spoke these words, their relevance cannot be doubted. The many samples of wars, natural disasters, and human catastrophes that have occurred over the last two millennia are but samples, given by God for two purposes. The first is to remind us and provide an example of what will come ultimately to pass. The second is as a warning for those outside the faith to repent.

Days of Vengeance

In Luke's narrative, he is matter-of-fact in recording the words of Jesus. Matthew and Mark are much more figurative in their language and style. According to Luke, there will come a day, Jesus said, "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies" (v. 20). When that occurs, "then recognize that her desolation is near" (v. 20). But Jerusalem has been attacked many times in its history. Beginning with the establishment of the first settlements in the area some four thousand years ago, history has recorded some 120 battles in and around the city. It has been taken over by force some forty times. It has been completely destroyed at least twice in the interval.

To what event was Jesus referring? For the disciples, the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 would seem to be the fulfillment of these words of Jesus. In describing the attack of the Romans under Titus, the church historian Eusebius wrote,

"But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come thither 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" *Ecclesiastical History*.

The Jewish historian Josephus, who was an eyewitness to the siege, described the fall of the great city more graphically. In summary he wrote,

"It is therefore impossible to go distinctly over every instance of these men's iniquity. I shall therefore speak my mind here at once briefly; that neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries; nor did any age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was from the beginning of the world." *Wars of the Jews*.

Such dramatic events surely would have brought to mind these words of Jesus to those who had heard them and survived the siege. Jesus had continued that "those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city" (v. 21). Notice the three commands. Those in Judea are to flee to the hills. Those in Jerusalem are to leave the city. Those outside Jerusalem are to stay away. Surely, as Eusebius described, people did that. But as "end of the world" as the fall of Jerusalem might have appeared to those who survived it, this was not the event to which Jesus referred.

Jesus described the ultimate fall of Jerusalem as "days of vengeance, so that all things which are written will be fulfilled" (v. 22). The "things which are written" referred to prophecies that went far beyond the siege of the Roman army. It referred to the final, eschatological judgment of God. It referred to the Old Testament prophecies of the final days when God's wrath would be poured out on all flesh.

"And I will execute vengeance in anger and wrath
On the nations which have not obeyed" (Micah 5:15)

“Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued” (Daniel 12:1)

“Alas! for that day is great,
There is none like it;
And it is the time of Jacob’s distress,
But he will be saved from it” (Jeremiah 30:7)

“¹Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?” (Malachi 3:1-2).

“Say to those with anxious heart,
‘Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you’” (Isaiah 35:4).

The Old Testament was permeated with these, and other, prophecies of the days of vengeance. The disciples understood fully what was meant by them. Jesus had predicted these events, but He did not delight in them. Rather, His concern was for the pregnant and young mothers, “those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land and wrath to this people” (v.23). It is wonderful to see the enduring compassion of Jesus. He was concerned about His followers and their families even though the cross was only a day or so away.

Though he warned those around to flee, Jesus affirmed to His listeners that not all would escape, “they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (v. 24). Fulfillment in the near future was the Jewish War, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and became a Gentile city. But the final episode of the fall of Jerusalem has not yet occurred. The times of the Gentiles continues still, despite the restoration of Israel as a nation in 1948.

The Abomination of Desolation

Further confirmation that the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 was not the event to which Jesus referred is given by the account in Matthew. There Jesus referred to “the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (Matthew 24:15).

The word translated ‘abomination’ is frequent in the Old Testament and always means the most revolting and reprehensible immoral practices and attitudes. One example will suffice, “²²you shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination. ²³Also you shall not have intercourse with any

animal to be defiled with it, nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it; it is a perversion” (Leviticus 18:22-23).

The prophet Daniel was the most expressive prophet of this apocalyptic abomination of desolation.

“²⁴Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place. ²⁵So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. ²⁶Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end will come with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. ²⁷And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate . . . ¹¹From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. ¹²How blessed is he who keeps waiting and attains to the 1,335 days!” (Daniel 9:26-27, 12:11-12).

This prophecy refers to a time of sixty-nine weeks (seven years each) extending from when Daniel made the prophecy until the Incarnation of Christ and His crucifixion. The final week of seven years is yet to come. That is the tribulation, at the midpoint of which the Antichrist will establish the abomination of desolation. This ultimate abomination to which Jesus referred is described in Revelation.

“³And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality, ⁵and on her forehead a name was written, a mystery, ‘BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.’ ⁶And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (Revelation 17:3-6).

Interestingly, this final abomination has been foreshadowed in history. Like the wars, earthquakes, famines, and plagues that are but shadows of what is to come, so the acts of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV were but a dim illustration of this future abomination of desolation. Antiochus IV took upon himself the title ‘Epiphanes’ meaning “splendid one.” He waged war through Egypt in 160 BC but was ordered by Rome to refrain from destroying the empire of the Ptolemies who ruled there. Unwilling to challenge Rome, but still thirsting for conquest, he took out his frustrations on Jerusalem as he returned to his homeland in Syria. The book of 1 Maccabees described the effects.

“⁴¹Moreover king Antiochus wrote to his whole kingdom, that all should be one people, ⁴²and everyone should leave his laws: so all the heathen agreed according to the commandment of the king. ⁴³Yea, many also of the Israelites consented to his religion, and sacrificed unto idols, and profaned the sabbath. ⁴⁴For the king had sent letters by messengers unto Jerusalem and the cities of Judah that they should follow the strange laws of the land, ⁴⁵and forbid burnt offerings,

and sacrifice, and drink offerings, in the temple; and that they should profane the sabbath and festival days: ⁴⁶and pollute the sanctuary and holy people: ⁴⁷set up altars, and groves, and chapels of idols, and sacrifice swine's flesh, and unclean beasts: ⁴⁸that they should also leave their children uncircumcised, and make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation: ⁴⁹to the end they might forget the law, and change all the ordinances. ⁵⁰And whosoever would not do according to the commandment of the king, he said, he should die” (1 Maccabees 1:41-50).

But as we have mentioned, this is only a mere shadow of what will come. The final abomination of desolation will be established by the Antichrist as He brings his vast armies, sixty miles wide, into Jerusalem. There will be a siege and judgment, but also the salvation of the nation of Israel.

Takeaways

So what then does all this mean for us? What should we do with these words of Jesus, spoken to His disciples about future events that have not yet happened?

One element we can appreciate is that Jesus fully understood the future. He was God in the flesh, and He had perfect knowledge. In light of the crucifixion to come, it is important to remember that God ordains all things that come to pass.

“I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.
I say, ‘My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please” (Isaiah 46:10).

Second, we can be reminded that God’s vengeance is real and will come to pass. Experience affirms that “when the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people’s hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong” (Ecclesiastes 8:11). That can tempt those trying to honor God to feelings of frustration, or perhaps even to take judgment into our own hands. But Scripture is clear. God is loving but God is righteous. As David wrote

“³⁵I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
flourishing like a luxuriant native tree,
³⁶but he soon passed away and was no more;
though I looked for him, he could not be found” (Psalm 37:35-36).

Third, we ought to realize the ultimate end of the world and this should give us endurance in times of trial. We ought not to live in expectation of an easy life. We ought not to forget that we are strangers here and the world we live in is doomed to destruction. But our ultimate end is glory, and that should encourage us when things do not go as we think they should.

“³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be

revealed in the last time. ⁶In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:3-6).

Fourth, it should make us passionate evangelists. Knowing what we know about the destiny of those outside the faith, we ought to be vigorous in our pursuit of family, friends, and others whom God puts in our path. The terrors of the “day of vengeance” are real and will be experienced by many. God will call those whom He wishes, but our obligation is clear in Scripture to be witnesses for the faith. It is why these final days have not yet come to pass.

³Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, ⁴and saying, ‘where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.’ ⁵For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, ⁶through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. ⁷But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. ⁸But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. ⁹The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:3-9).

Fifth, we ought to be grateful people. As children of God, we will be spared the worst of what is to come in the future. We will reign with Christ. We have an eternity of glory ahead of us. And it is all because He chose to save us.

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Lastly, all of this ought to spur us on to godly living.

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. ¹¹Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, ¹²looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! ¹³But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. ¹⁴Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, ¹⁶as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. ¹⁷You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, ¹⁸but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:11-18).