

Luke 21:5-9

The Temple's Destruction Foretold

There are two mistakes believers can make when it comes to biblical prophecy. One is to discount it entirely. This group sees biblical prophecy as inscrutable as the God Who gave it. To them it is unknowable, mysterious, and to delve too deeply into its details is to look into things which mere mortals ought not to look. Too much attention to prophecy is futile, unnecessary, and takes the believer away from more pressing uses of his or her Bible study, such as spiritual edification and the development of spiritual gifts.

Members of the second group are at the other extreme. They see prophecy of the end times as something of a cottage industry. Careers are made, and lost, over the details of what will happen in the future. As long as there has been a return of Christ to which to look forward, there have been prophecies of precisely when He will return. For example,

In the 2nd century, Montanists believed that the return of Christ was imminent. Many Christians in the villages of Pepuza and Tymion in Phrygia abandoned their homes to witness the return of Christ which Montanus had predicted would happen in that area. He did not return.

In 1524, the mathematician and astronomer, Johannes Stöffler predicted that a great flood would cover the earth on February 25. So widely held was this fear in the German speaking areas, that Count von Iggleheim built a three-story ark. Though there was some rain that day, the deluge did not occur.

In 1806, a hen in Leeds, England was reputed to lay eggs with the message "Christ is coming" inscribed on them. Many people 'flocked' to see the miracle, but it was later discovered that the hen's owner had been etching the words onto the eggs and then re-inserting them into the unfortunate bird's abdomen.

In 1813, Joanna Southcott announced that she would give birth to a second Messiah who would usher in the last days. Though she was 64 years old at the time (doctors verified that she was a virgin), she gathered about 100,000 followers. The child was never born.

In 1831, William Miller predicted that the end of the world would occur in 1843. Again, more than 100,000 people sold their homes and possessions in expectation of the coming of the Messiah. When Jesus did not appear, Miller recalculated the date to be 1844. Once again, Jesus did not return as predicted.

More recently, author and radio personality Harold Camping used biblical numerology to predict the end of the world no less than twelve times beginning in 1992. His last prediction was that Christ would return in 2011. He did not, and Camping died in 2013.

Finally (actually probably not), the Mayan Long Count calendar was used to predict that the world would end by colliding with the planet Nibiru on December 21, 2012. Though many survival kits were sold throughout the world, the undiscovered planet never appeared, and life went on.

This is not to suggest that Christ will not return. In fact of the more than 300 prophecies regarding Christ, more than two-thirds have yet to be fulfilled. Their fulfillment can only happen when Christ does return, and if we believe the Bible to be true, then Christ must return to validate Scripture. The promises of God demand the return of Christ. The statements of Jesus demand that He return. God's plan for Israel, Satan,

and the Church demand His return. That Christ will return is a certain as that He was born, crucified, and rose again.

And yet a great irony in all of these eager predictions about the return of Christ, is that when Christ does return, He will be returning to judge. In His Incarnation, Jesus came to “seek and save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). When He returns the second time, “all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:32). So, not all who look forward to the return of the Messiah so enthusiastically will be glad when He arrives.

This will not be out of character. Jesus pronounced judgment when He walked the earth. He regularly chastised the religious leaders for their corruption; the ‘woes’ of Luke 11:37-52 are an example. So now, as Jesus was concluding His teaching during Passion Week, a conversation with His disciples about the end times provided one final opportunity to call to mind the judgment of Jews in particular and the world in general for their rejection of the Messiah. The dialogue is sometimes referred to as the Olivet discourse for, as Mark’s account tells us, the bulk of the conversation occurred while Jesus “was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple” (Mark 13:3).

In the days prior to this, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians had all tried to publicly discredit Jesus as He taught in the temple. They had failed miserably. Jesus, instead, had embarrassed them with both His answers and His questions. As they sulked off in silence, Jesus had offered a final warning to His disciples not to be fooled by these religious leaders. Now the day was drawing to a close. Jesus and His followers were making their way out of the temple complex and back to where they were staying that evening. Their destination was probably the home of Simon the leper of Bethany. A conversation began. The narrative is recorded in Luke and is paralleled in the accounts of Matthew and Mark. All three evangelists took note of the remarks that became Jesus’ last public declarations of the final coming of the kingdom of God which He had preached so faithfully during His earthly ministry.

But in light of our thoughts about biblical prophecy, how ought we to study these passages? May I suggest that the first option of simply discounting them as too difficult, irrelevant, or somethings God does not want us to know does not align with views of Scripture such as “¹⁶all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17), or “blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heeds the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Revelation 1:3).

But while we attend to these words, we ought also to refrain for being too dogmatic in their precise interpretation. That is, “for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). And, we ought also to consider these passages as we would any others in Scripture. That is we must look at the historical and cultural context in which the words were spoken. We must recall that the audience was largely uneducated and untrained followers of Jesus, not the religious elite trained at the feet of wise rabbis.

Jesus obviously wanted His disciples to understand what He was saying, so we must hear the words as they did to begin to understand their full meaning.

These disciples believed the established Jewish eschatology that the Messiah would come and inaugurate the new kingdom of God in which Israel would once again have its rightful place among the nations of the world. But as this movement reached its climax, here in Jerusalem during Passover, certainly these disciples must have experienced some confusion. Jesus had not addressed Himself to either the Roman leaders or their surrogates, the Herodians. Instead He had attacked the religious proceedings in the temple and continued to predict His imminent death. And here, He made some confusing comments about the end times.

The Temple

The parallel accounts are found in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. Both of these authors indicate that Jesus had left the temple complex and was returning home when the conversation began. Luke more tersely wrote that “while some were talking about the temple” they admired “that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts” (v. 5). The temple was often a subject of adoration, even veneration in Jewish minds. It represented the heart of the nation and was the place where Yahweh Himself appeared to the high priest.

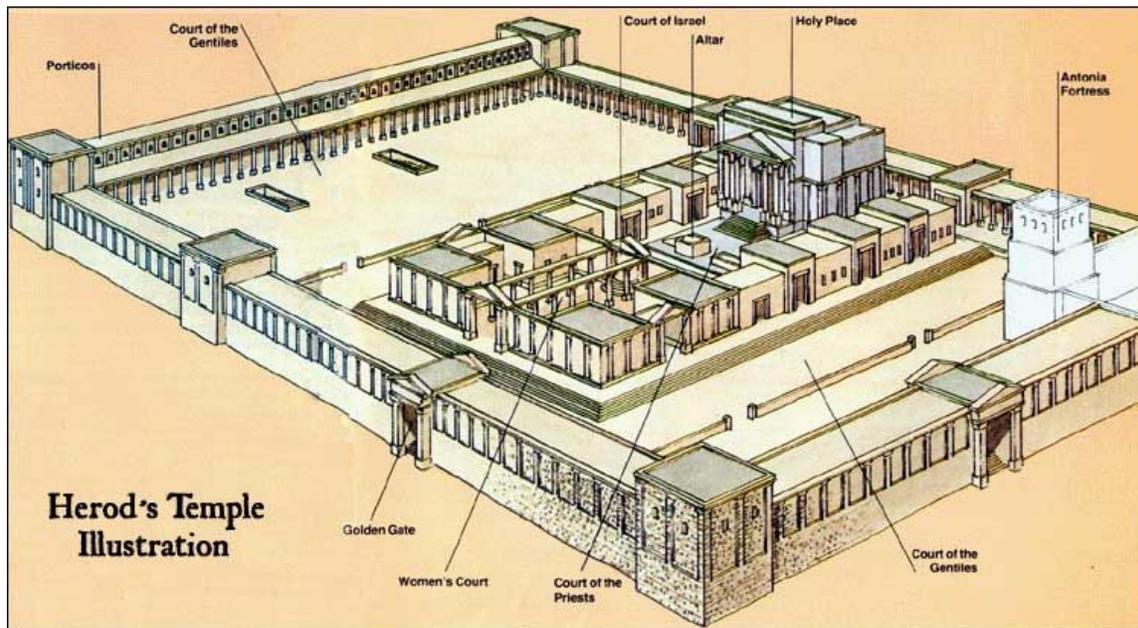
This temple and its surrounding structures had been through several editions. Solomon began to build the original temple in about 969 BC and completed it in 962 BC. It was framed in cedar and cypress from Lebanon and constructed of hard, resilient white limestone. Beautifully decorated and elaborately furnished, it was dedicated by Solomon in one of the great celebrations in Israel’s history (1 Kings 6-8). The nation of Israel refused to follow the God Whom it represented, however, and it was pillaged and plundered throughout the years, until it was finally destroyed in 586 BC by the invading Chaldeans.

Some fifty years later, a remnant began to return to Israel, and a new temple was begun (Ezra 3). This new construction took about twenty years to complete, but it was nowhere near as imposing and magnificent as the original. So insignificant did it seem when compared with the memory of the great temple of Solomon that for some of the older survivors, it served only as a reminder of what had been lost, for “many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes” (Ezra 3:12).

Though humble, this temple too was destined for troubled times. Antiochus Epiphanes plundered and desecrated the temple during his conquest of Palestine in 168 BC. Three years later it was cleansed and restored by Judas Maccabaeus. But when the Romans fought for power in the area, the Roman general Pompey defiled the temple by entering into it. Yet, he neither destroyed nor plundered it. His successor, Crassus, however, did plunder it when he came to power in the area in 54 BC.

During the reign of Herod the Great, the temple complex had been enlarged and beautified. This was the great temple at the time of Jesus. Herod’s improvements began in 19 BC and were not completed until after his death some twenty years later. At the time of Jesus, this magnificent temple complex was about 1000 feet in each direction and was protected by a massive wall. Many elaborately decorated gates

marked the entrances from each direction. Large pillars of white marble adorned the colonnades. It had dozens of rooms, plazas, porches, and patios. It contained many gifts and offerings, including a six foot tall golden grapevine laden with golden grapes given by Herod the Great, himself. The temple towered hundreds of feet above the Kidron Valley. The eastern wall of the main structure was gold plated and reflected brilliantly the morning sun as it rose over Mount Olivet. It remains one of the great architectural wonders of the ancient world.



The Prophecy

However Jesus, the creator of the universe, was not as impressed as His disciples with this man-made wonder. When He heard their comments, He remarked, “as for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down” (v. 6). How strange this prophecy must have sounded to the ears of His disciples. The temple contained the ark of the covenant. Within its boundary was the Holy of Holies. This was the very dwelling place of God. How could it possibly be destroyed? Especially if Jesus was the Messiah here to inaugurate the new Kingdom of God. To destroy it would be to destroy God Himself.

But this temple would be destroyed. Jesus’ words would come to pass as He predicted. The immediate and literal fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy came in AD 70. Approximately one million Jews were killed and the rest driven into exile. And Israel, as a political entity ceased to exist until 1948.

“So Titus retired into the tower of Antonia, and resolved to storm the temple the next day, early in the morning, with his whole army, and to encamp round about the holy house. But as for that house, God had, for certain, long ago doomed it to the fire; and now that fatal day was come, according to the revolution of ages . . . these Romans put the Jews to flight, and proceeded as far as the holy house itself. At which time one of the soldiers, without staying for any orders, and without any concern or dread upon him at so great an undertaking, and being hurried on by a certain divine fury, snatched somewhat out of the materials that were on fire, and being lifted up by another soldier, he set fire to a golden window, through which there was a passage to the

rooms that were round about the holy house, on the north side of it. As the flames went upward, the Jews made a great clamor, such as so mighty an affliction required, and ran together to prevent it; and now they spared not their lives any longer, nor suffered any thing to restrain their force, since that holy house was perishing.” Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 6. 249-253.

The stones crumbled from the intense heat. Later, the gold was sifted from the wreckage, melted down, and taken away. The rubble was tossed into the Kidron Valley. This was within forty years of the time Jesus spoke, so certainly the memory of His teaching remained alive to those who had heard it.

The Caution

But was this destruction of the temple the only event to which Jesus referred? Has this prophecy of Jesus already been fulfilled in its entirety. The remainder of the conversation recorded by Luke demonstrates that it was not. “⁷They questioned Him, saying, ‘Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?’ ⁸And He said, ‘see to it that you are not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He,’ and, ‘the time is near.’ Do not go after them’” (v. 7-8).

Mark identified Peter, James, John, and Andrew as the questioners, though undoubtedly they spoke for everyone. Their question reflected an understanding of Old Testament prophecy. It showed a deep concern of the Jews for the details surrounding the coming of the Messiah. And in the answer recorded by Luke in the next two dozen verses, Jesus gave the most complete answer to their question recorded in Scripture. He talked about why He would return, what the signs would be, and who believers should prepare?

But He prefaced all those details with a warning. Jesus warned His disciples against being deceived. This was sensible, for even before the completion of the canon, false teachers have arisen to deceive the followers of Christ by claiming to be the risen Messiah. A very partial list includes the following:

Simon Magnus (1st century) - early church writings claim he presented himself as the “Standing One.”

Ann Lee (1736-1784) - a central figure in the Shaker movement claimed to “embody all the perfections of God” and declared herself Christ’s female counterpart.

Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817-1864) - claimed to be the promised one of all religions and founded the Bahá’í faith.

Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012) - founder of the Unification Church and considered himself to be the second Incarnation of Christ.

David Koresh (1959-1993) - founder of the Branch Davidians.

How can believers, who truly seek to understand Scripture, not be taken advantage of by such charlatans, as millions have around the world? One answer is to have perspective. Jesus continued with words as instructive for His disciples as for use today, “when you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately” (v. 9). Jesus knew that to the disciples the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem would seem to be a sign of the end of

the world. He wanted His disciples to understand that there are general characteristics of a fallen world. They should not be shocked or misinterpreted by over emphasizing such things.

Jesus talked of wars. He spoke truly. Historians disagree on exactly what constitutes a war, but generally they can point to about fifty significant wars from the time of Christ to about the year 1000. Over the next five hundred years, about another one hundred wars occurred. There were two hundred and fifty wars in the years from 1500-1800, and about 500 since then. And wars have become more savage as well. While perhaps tens of thousands were killed in ancient conflicts, more than 50,000,000 were killed in World War 2 alone. Clearly the aggressiveness of man is increasing. Technology, greed, and general depravity have combined to make the world as dangerous a place as it has ever been. Yet that does not mean that Christ must return tomorrow.

During World War 2, the allies engaged in Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa on November 8, 1942. It was the first time the allies had successfully struck back against Hitler's Germany since the fall of France in June, 1940. After the invasion had proved successful, Britain's Prime Minister reported to the world in a radio address. He wanted his listeners to appreciate what had been accomplished, but also to recognize that there was still much work left to be done to defeat the Third Reich. He said, "this is not the end. This is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

Jesus understood that His disciples would be confused, to say the least, after His death. His resurrection would assure them of the truth of His claim to be the Messiah, but His ascension would only raise the question of when He would return. The Olivet discourse offered an outline of events in the meantime. As we wait in that time between now and not yet, let us read these words with eagerness, but balance. Let us anticipate without presuming upon God's perfect timing. Let us joyfully await that return.

Takeaways

As we consider the words of Jesus, I can think of at least three responses. First, let us rejoice in the assurance that they will be fulfilled in God's perfect timing. ¹²"He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet" (Hebrews 10:12-13).

Second, let us be diligent in preparing ourselves for Christ's return by leading Godly lives and being good stewards of the work He gives us to do in the meantime. ⁴³"Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. ⁴⁴Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions" (Luke 12:43-44).

And finally, let us further the kingdom of God through evangelism so that many others will rejoice as well when the King of Kings chooses to return. "The 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 3:9).