

## THE END BEFORE THE END

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Luke 21:5-19

There are a lot of people in this world who reject our Bible as being too outlandish, too ludicrous, even ridiculous at times. They point to certain passages with disbelief. The Bible, they say, makes claims that any reasonable, rational person would instantly recognize as being preposterous.

For example, in our reading today, Jesus makes a prediction about the temple being destroyed. The people ask him, *Teacher, when will this be, and what signs should we look for?* To them, Jesus offers three signs. But these events are completely unimaginable. Today, they seem beyond the realm of credulity.

The first sign is that false leaders will emerge. Don't be led astray by these, Jesus warns, they will come. They will come in Jesus' name saying, *I am he* and *The time is near* and will promise the answers and solutions to all their problems.

Second, Jesus warns that the people will hear of wars and insurrections. On top of this, third will be natural calamities—earthquakes, famines, and plagues—*dreadful portents and great signs from heaven*.

Come on. Who today would fall for all that? False leaders, endless wars, natural disasters. That's just crazy talk, right?

We are now at the end before the end. This is the final passage in Luke before we come to the Passion Story. The next chapter, chapter 22, announces the celebration of Passover, which marks the final days of Jesus' life—the Last Supper, arrest, trial, execution, resurrection, and ascension. We have a lot to cover in the next eight weeks.

Luke's chronology of Holy Week is slightly different than Matthew and Mark's account. Jesus enters Jerusalem on the donkey and then spends an indeterminate period of time teaching in the temple. One scholar argues that Jesus spent several months teaching in Jerusalem.

In today's reading, Jesus is again teaching in the temple. Someone near him is admiring the great structure, both its magnificent construction and its beautiful adornments.

Jesus responds to this comment saying, *As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another*. Upon hearing this people ask when, when will these things take place, what signs will warn us? And he tells

them. There will be false leaders, and wars, and natural calamities, and *dreadful portents and great signs from heaven*.

There is more in the passage following this one (which I did not read), he goes on to predict the fall of Jerusalem, her inhabitants fleeing to the mountains, others taken captive. These are the signs of the end.

What we must remember about this particular gospel is that it is a teaching tool. Luke has compiled this book as a way to teach his congregation about Jesus and about how they can be followers of Jesus. For example, Luke uses these three chapters of Jesus teaching in the temple to explain why the authorities had him killed. And when someone comments on the magnificence of the temple, Jesus predicts its destruction.

However, for Luke's congregation, 50 years later, this is not a prediction. It is a fact. The temple had been destroyed by the Romans during the Jewish rebellion in 70 AD. As Jesus predicted, no stone had been left upon another. The unspeakable events of Jesus day had come to pass. The signs were fulfilled, false Messiahs calling *I am he* and declaring *the time is near*, insurrections and wars, kingdoms rising against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. For Luke's congregation, the destruction of the temple wasn't a prediction or prophecy. It was fact, a defining fact.

Last Sunday was the 15th anniversary of September 11th, 2001. Imagine if the preacher had said there would be a sign—that enemies of this nation will attack our cities and our places of government and reduce great buildings into dust. We wouldn't wonder about that sign. We would understand it. We would understand its power and urgency. We would know how that event makes us feel. When Luke reports Jesus' words about signs, his people understand.

And then we come to the heart of this passage. Jesus says, *Before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name*. Again, this is not just Jesus' prediction, it is fact for Luke's congregation. Christians had been persecuted and arrested and put in prison. The apostles had experienced this. Paul had experienced this. Some of Luke's people may have experienced this. They know what it is like to be persecuted and excluded, to maybe even suffer violence. Some will be "handed over" just as Jesus was "handed over." They know what it was like to be betrayed by parents and siblings, by relatives and friends, to be scorned because of their allegiance to Jesus, maybe even killed. They know and understand this.

Despite the pain, Jesus says, persecution will provide you an opportunity to testify. This is the core of Luke's message to his people—this persecution will offer you the opportunity to testify about Jesus.

For any believers who face persecution or violence, who exist on the fringe, who endure suffering, then this becomes a message of hope. The pain they face can be transformed into something beautiful and strong and enduring. The great temple has been lost; God's throne on earth has been destroyed. But their testimony can become the new temple. Their testimony can be the new place where God touches the earth.

About this testimony, Jesus says something interesting. He says, *make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.*

On the one hand, it sounds like one can take a Pentecostal view of testimony—don't plan on what to say, just rely on the Holy Spirit to speak for you, to work within you, to move you. This approach is certainly legitimate. You can do this. But I would like to suggest that there is another way to consider Jesus' words. As Jesus and Luke say, *make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance.* In other words, don't rely on your words, instead, testify with your actions. I believe most of you do this already. You let your actions speak your testimony. How do we do this? Luke told us back in chapter 6—words I have referred to time and time again:

Love your enemies,  
do good to those who hate you,  
bless those who curse you,  
pray for those who abuse you.  
Give to everyone who begs from you;  
and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.  
Do to others as you would have them do to you.  
Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.  
Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

These are the actions of testimony. You can use your words but your actions may be louder. These actions testify to the love and grace of God through Jesus. They are world changing actions.

Furthermore, we don't necessarily need to be persecuted in order to testify. We may not know hunger, but we can feed those who are hungry. We may not know homelessness, but we can shelter those who have no place. We may not know war, but we can offer refuge to those who do. These are the acts of a kingdom people.

That is my prayer—that people don't look at our church and say, "They sure talk a lot about what they believe," but instead they say, "The people in that church do wonderful acts of charity and kindness. They help people. This community is better because of them."

Finally, I want to take a moment to look at the last two verses of this section before we head into Passion Story. After this long passage on the destruction of the

temple and the fall of Jerusalem and the persecution of the faithful, it may seem that the end is near, that the only future is destruction. Luke, however, offers two simple sentences of hope. He writes, *Every day [Jesus] was teaching in the temple, and at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives. And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple.* Do you hear the wonderful reassurance of life in those words? Despite the dire predictions, Luke brings us back to the reassurance of day following day. Every day Jesus taught in the temple. At night he would sleep. The next day people would get up early to hear him. There is a comfort in this gentle rhythm of life—of waking and sleeping and hearing the word of our Lord. It is a recipe for Christian living. Each day it is good to ask ourselves, did I listen to the Lord? Will I listen tomorrow? Our lives are ordered by the cycles of the sun and the moon. Despite the ever-present threats of war and calamity, of disease and destruction, there is the joy of tomorrow.