



## The Signs of the Last Days (Luke 21:5-37)

The Bible is a book of prophecies. Over 25% of the Bible are prophecies. Bible predicts 735 events. 596 events have already come pass exactly, which is over 80% of the prophecies. The rest will come to pass in due time. Jesus told us exactly what will happen in the future. He gave us the most important signposts that we must pay attention to.

### A. How It Started (Luke 21:5-6)

1. Jesus just finished teaching at the temple treasury (21:1-4), and as they left the temple one of the disciples exclaimed, *'Teacher, see what manner of stones and buildings are here!'* (Mk 13:1)

The temple was a magnificent building. They started building it 20 years before Jesus' birth and finished it 34 years after His death. It was built on a huge platform on Mt Moriah. Thirteen large English cathedrals could easily fit on it and still have plenty of room left over. This magnificent temple was built with white sandstones and covered in gold. It glittered in the sun. The soft limestone in the nearby caves was cut in shape with a knife. Once they were taken out, they oxidised and hardened. Each of these stones measured around 12m by 4m by 5m, and weighed over 100 tonnes! How they put them on the platform is a mystery. So, the disciples marvelled, *'Look at the amazing stones and the building, Lord!'*

2. However Jesus' shocking response to them was, *'The days will come in which not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down.'* (v3) The disciples must have tried to digest Jesus' words while they crossed the Kidron Valley. When they sat down on Mt Olive overlooking the temple, they finally asked the Lord privately, *'Teach us when will these things be.'* (v7) In their Jewish mind, the destruction of the temple meant the end of the world, so they asked for the sign of the end, *'Tell us when these things will be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?'* (Matt 24:3) But Jesus separated the two events and gave them the signs pointing to the destruction of the temple (essentially the end of Israel till its recent rebirth) and the end of the age at Jesus' return.

Jesus' prophecy about the temple came to pass. In 70AD the Romans soldiers threw the stones off the temple platform onto the main street and cracked the old road paved with flat stones. Literally, not one stone is left upon another. They were completely gone.

### B. General Trend of the Last Days (Luke 21:7-19)

1. False Messiahs - Jesus said, *'Take heed that you are not deceived for many will come in My name saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time has drawn near.' Therefore, do not go after them.'* (21:8). Israel has a history of false Messiahs, especially in the first century. When the Romans attacked Jerusalem many Jews rose up to lead revolts, 'I am the Messiah! It is time to liberate the city!' Simon Bar Kochba in 135AD claimed to be the Messiah who was to deliver Israel from the Roman oppression. It led to a massive number of Jews being murdered, starved, and sold into slavery. Israel was wiped off the world map until its rebirth in 1948. Jesus warns us of the same danger, who live in the end times - false Christs.<sup>1</sup>
2. International Conflicts – *'wars and commotions (disturbances, disorder)'* (21:9). *'Nation will rise against nation'* (21:10). Escalating tensions - *'ethnic/racial war'* and *'kingdom against kingdom.'* E.g. WWI and WWII. Continuing clash with the economic, political and military warfare around the globe will mark the end of the age.
3. Natural Disasters - *'earthquakes', 'famines' and 'pestilence'* will increase, accompanied by *'fearful sights and great signs from heaven'* (21:11). These will fill the news at the end of the age, but Jesus tells us NOT to be

<sup>1</sup> Josephus mentions several historical figures who would fall into this category. (1) Theudas (44-6ad) summoned the people to the wilderness in Jordan River with the promise that he would divide the Jordan like Joshua, and begin a new conquest of the land; (2) various imposters (52-9ad) who led crowds into the wilderness with promises of signs and wonders; (3) an imposter (60-2ad) who promised deliverance and freedom from the miseries of Roman rule for those who would follow him into the wilderness; (4) Manahem ben Judah alias "the Galilean" (64-6ad) who came to Jerusalem "like a king" and laid siege to the city. These messianic imposters and false prophets repeatedly urged the Jewish people to take up armed resistance against Rome and to stay in Jerusalem to fight. In contrast, Jesus urged his disciples to save themselves by fleeing the city. (v21-2)

terrified by such news. Do not let these things press you into fear, including Covid-19. Do not let fear dominate your life. *'The end will not come immediately.'* In Matt 24:8, Jesus adds, *'All these things are the beginning of sorrows, i.e. the 'birth pangs'.*

4. Persecution of Christians – *'But before all these things, they will lay hands on you and persecute you...for My name's sake' (21:12-19)*. Up to 300AD, this was especially true. (a) Religious persecution: Christian persecution will start from the 'synagogues' with the Jews; (b) Political persecution: *'...brought before the kings and rulers'* – it will lead to gentile persecution, *'but it will turn out to be your testimony ('marturion')*. Do not premeditate on your self-defence for God will give you the words to speak; (c) Domestic persecution: *'You will be betrayed even by your parents, brothers, relatives, and friends; and they will put some of you to death.'*; (d) Universal persecution: *'And you will be hated by all for My name's sake.'*

Your mind will be tested by the false prophets, your heart will be tested by the wars and natural disasters, and your will will be tested by the fierce persecution. But do not let it weigh you down, because not one hair of your head will be lost! How? By resurrection! *'By your patience possess your souls.'* Remember your end will not be bitter but glorious. All of Jesus' predictions came true for His apostles in the book of Acts which covers the early church history up to the time of the destruction of the temple.

### C. The Signs for Two Main Events (Luke 21:20-28)

1. Biblical prophecy is like looking into the future through a telescope.

You may see two mountain peaks in the distance, but often you can't see the distance between the two peaks. That was the difficulty in understanding the Old Testament prophecies. The two mountain peaks are the first coming and the second coming of Christ. Often the language of the Old Testament prophecies made the two distinct comings of the Lord seem like one single event.

Here Jesus is separating the disciples' question into two separate events. (1) The end of the Jerusalem temple which was fulfilled 40 years later in 70AD; (2) The end of the world at the return of the Lord.

Jesus doesn't tell His disciples when, but describes the signs that point to the two events. If we put together Matt 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 as three different camera angles looking at the same discourse, we can see there are parallels between the two events - the end of the temple in 70AD and the end of the world. Studying the destruction of the temple will help us to discern the last days before Jesus' return.

2. The Sign of the Fall of Jerusalem (70AD) (21:20-24): *'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by the armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance...'* (21:20-22). In 66-67AD General Vespasian brought his armies and surrounded Jerusalem to capture it. But the siege was temporarily lifted when Vespasian was recalled to Rome to succeed Nero as the next emperor after Nero's suicide (69AD), and the Christians who lived in Jerusalem took off from Jerusalem by the thousands. They went to the east side of Jordan, a town called 'Pella' and saved themselves (Pella, Eusebius H.E. iii.5.3). On the other hand, the Jews who lived in the surrounding rural towns flocked to Jerusalem, thinking they would be safer in the city. When General Titus came in 70AD and surrounded the city the second time, everyone in the city was trapped. The whole city was razed to the ground until not one stone was left upon another. When Jerusalem fell, not a single Christian who listened to Jesus' prophecies died.

Jesus said, *'These are the days of vengeance.'* (21:22) We can't pray this away. It was the appointed time of judgment. Remember, Jesus wept over Jerusalem? What happened to the Jews in the city? 1.1 million Jews perished. They either died by the sword or by starvation. They were reduced to eating sewage, cooking their shoes, and even their own children. And 97,000 Jews were taken as slaves to Rome (v24). They were scattered in the nations just as Jesus predicted. Jesus said Jerusalem will be trampled down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. (21:24) In 1948 and 1967 Jerusalem partially came back into Jewish control, but not fully. East Jerusalem with the old city and the temple mount, is still under Arab control.

3. Christ's Second Coming (21:25-28) - *'There will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars, and on the earth distress of the nations, with perplexity, the seas and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming upon the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the cloud with power and great glory.'* (21:25-26)

The final sign of the end of the age is the shaking of the heavenly bodies, the oceans and the nations of the world. The people of the nations will be terrified of what is to come upon the earth, and *the whole world will know God controls the universe*: (a) When Jesus was born, a star led the wise men; (b) When Jesus died on the cross the sun didn't shine for three hours. (c) When the heavenly bodies are shaken, we know the Son of man is on His way back to the planet earth. *'Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift your heads, because your redemption (completion of salvation) draws near.'* (21:27-28) *'Then we will meet the Lord in the air!'* (1 Thess. 4:15-18)

#### 4. Two Parallel Events (c.f. Matt 24, Mark 13)

- a. Jerusalem will be in Conflict Again! - Matthew and Mark tell us that what marks the 'Great Tribulation' will be a repeat of 70AD, only more intense. The 'trigger event' will be 'abomination of desolation' standing in the 'holy place' (Matt 24:15; Mark 14:13 c.f. Dan 9:27). During the days of 'Judas Maccabeus' (167BC), the Greeks desecrated the temple by placing the statue of Zeus there and pouring out pig's blood on the altar. Zech 12-14 predicts an international army (UN?) will camp around Jerusalem again. Jesus adds that we ought to pray this day will not be in winter or on Sabbath day. Why? So that more people can escape. *God will shorten this day for the sake of the elect* (Matt 24:20-22).
- b. But in the midst of the two events, the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in power to all nations - Matt 24:9-14 (c.f. Mark 13:10) has additional information. (a) Christian persecution will return. What was true in for the first-century church will be true for the last days' church. But in the midst of the trouble, the gospel will go forth in power. (b) So we must not let these things overwhelm our hearts, but make up our mind to press on with the job, because the end will not come until 'the gospel of the kingdom is preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations'. (c) Jesus warns us not to let God's love grow cold because of increasing lawlessness and offense among Christians. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Jesus will not come back until the Great Commission is fulfilled. According to the Wycliffe statistics, there are 7,353 active languages in the world, including sign languages. 3,384 languages have some portions of the Bible, and 3,969 languages (covering 252 million people) have not a single verse. Nearly 1.5 billion people do not have the Bible in the language they understand best. That's one in five of the global population.

#### D. Further Instruction to Overcome (Luke 21:25-28)

1. The Parable of the Trees – Jesus tells us that the nature teaches us how to discern the signs of the times. In winter, the fig tree looks very barren, but it blossoms first before all other trees. So, when the fig trees blossom in the holy land, it is the earliest sign that the summer is near. Many interpreters see the fig tree as the symbol of Israel<sup>2</sup>, and the budding of the fig tree as Israel's reestablishment as a nation in 1948 and 1967. The budding of 'all the trees' refers to the collapse of 'colonialism' and the growth of 'nationalism' in the nations of the world from the 1950s onwards, following Israel's pattern. In the last half-century, we have seen a tremendous increase in the number of nations gaining their independence. When such a trend appears on the international scene, then we are to know that the Kingdom of God is also very near. *'This generation will by no means pass away until all these things happen.'* The 'generation' here can mean 'a single generation', or the 'Jewish race.' *'Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.'* Rolled up like a cloth, heaven and earth will pass away, so we shouldn't get too wrapped up in it. The one thing that will not pass away is Jesus' word. They are still totally up-to-date, current and relevant today and at all times.
2. How to Overcome in the Last Days - We are to take heed to ourselves, i.e. take individual responsibility for ourselves. (a) *Don't get drunk with 'dissipation.'* This is the world's response to sorrow, and they get trapped in intoxication and addiction. (b) Or let 'anxieties of life' to trap your soul in the things of this world. Jesus has already said, *'Don't be terrified.'* (21:9); *'not a hair of your head will be lost.'* (21:18); *'look up and lift your heads because your redemption draws near.'* (21:28); (c) What is the antidote against these destructive reactions? 'Watch and pray.' Watch what is happening, watch the signs and 'pray'. *'Pray that you may be able*

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<sup>2</sup> In the OT, Israel was often compared to the fig tree and the vine (Ho 9:10). In the NT, Jesus and his disciples are compared to the vine (Jn 15:5) and Jesus speaks of the vineyard being taken away from the Jews. (Mt 21:41-3; Mk 12:9; Lk 20:16) Incidentally, the fig tree is the official symbol of the modern state of Israel.

*to escape all these things that are about to come as a trap.* God will show us everything we need to know and we need to do if we will watch and pray. Don't turn to intoxication and addiction to numb your sorrows and stresses, nor let the anxieties to tie your soul to this world and 'dull your spiritual senses'. But get plugged into with God in prayer and you will be 'counted worthy to escape all these things' (lit. 'have the strength to escape').

3. Jesus' Last Teaching - Each morning Jesus taught in the temple and each evening He went to the mountain to spend the night there. Jesus now only has days to live. He spent His last days teaching about the last days. Anyone's last words are important, and Jesus' last words are of utmost importance. *Why did Jesus teach His disciples about the end of the temple and the end of the world?* (a) The more impressed we are with what man builds on earth, the more we are tempted to forget that it is all going away one day. We need to remember all the skyscrapers in our cities will be gone one day. (b) The world is not just drifting to anywhere, but it is moving towards one climactic event – the glorious appearing of our Lord. Jesus told His disciples that there will be the end of the temple, and there will be the end of the world. Jesus finished His teaching by telling everyone, 'Watch and pray.' Half of Jesus' words in this chapter have already come to pass. The rest will follow, climaxing with the new heaven and the new earth. Jesus told us to expect all these things. *It is extraordinary that we Christians know enough about the future to prepare for it.*

## E. Reflection

1. All nations are accountable to God and none can escape His judgment when it finally comes. Does your understanding of God include this facet?
2. From your reading of Luke 21, how far into the End do you think we are?
3. Are you aware of the signs of the End that are appearing in the world? Or are your spiritual senses so blunted by the pleasures or the pressures of life, that Jesus' warnings mean little to you?