

Hardship or Hope

Luke 21:5-38

Let's jump right into our passage today. Take your Bible and turn to Luke 21:5-38. This is a passage that we could literally devote weeks of study to and still have much more to say about it. This passage has been labeled the Olivet Discourse.

At the onset I want to be clear that this passage is a prophecy about the Jews. This is not a passage about Christ's coming for the church because we note from other passages that there are no signs preceding that event whereas here signs are given. It is a message given to the Jews by a Jew about the future of the Jews. It does have application for us, but please keep in mind that this is a prophecy by the Lord for His people. As you will see the focus is on the city of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Jews. It is also a final pronouncement against Israel for rejecting the Messiah. You will see that it speaks about hardship as well as hope. For additional study you can read the parallel passages in Matthew 24-25 and Mark 13 which include more Jewish elements. Bear in mind that they were writing to a Jewish audience where Luke was writing to a Gentile audience who also needed to be mindful of events to come.

Something that you also need to know about this passage is that Jesus will speak about the near future and a more distant future going back and forth at times, but again, it's all about the Jews.

It may be a bit more challenging if you are prone to take notes because I am opting to forgo a formal outline and walk through the passage today.

For centuries the Middle East has been a powder keg as tension between Arab nations and Israel boils in a cauldron of hostility. The recent Iran nuclear deal only further heightens the mistrust and friction. The boldness of ISIS and Al Qaida has created additional and severe strain in the region. Nervous

eyes remain fixed on Israel.

Over 2,000 years ago the Lord had some strong words to say to Israel in hopes that His warning would turn the nation back to seeking God with a true heart.

Several weeks ago we left Jesus sitting in the Temple with His disciples around Him. They were in the Court of the Women where among the columns were 13 collection or offering boxes. Jesus sat observing people as they gave their offerings and made some passing comments regarding their contributions in comparison to the contribution of a poor widow. After He had concluded His comments the disciples had some thoughts of their own. It's possible that their comments were indirectly related to what Jesus had just shared.

Anyone entering the Temple would be overwhelmed by its beauty that's what the disciples were commenting about in these opening verses of our passage. "The Temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God." And why shouldn't the Temple be the most beautiful building around. It was where worshipers met with God. It was His Temple. Even from the beginning days of the nation God expected the best. When the Tabernacle was built in the wilderness, God endowed individuals with the Holy Spirit to make the Tabernacle and its components. When Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem no sound of hammer or saw was to be heard on the Temple site because the place was so sacred. Stones were hewn at the quarry and paneling prepared off site and brought to the location and pieced together. Cedar and gold throughout it was truly magnificent. When the Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and then later rebuilt at the direction of Ezra, remember that while there was great rejoicing, many wept because they remembered the splendor of the first Temple. Then that Temple was destroyed only to be rebuilt by Herod. One stone in the southwest

corner was 36 feet long. Jewish historian Josephus commenting on the beauty of the Temple wrote “Whatever was not overlaid with gold was purest white.”

Herod contributed to the Temple by giving a golden vine as one of its decorations. The grape clusters on this vine were as tall as a man.

The disciples were in awe of the elaborate decorations in and throughout the Temple. Jesus brought them down to reality with a truly shocking prophecy. This Temple would be torn down. He didn't mean that it was going to be torn down because of age or damage due to weather. It was going to be torn down by force and destroyed.

As Robyn and I travel different places she will sometimes look at a barn and comment that it is in bad shape and is about to collapse. Vacant buildings in and around Flint are a blight and in various stages of decay and destruction. Many should be torn down, others are being torn down. There is damage due to neglect, age, weather, bugs and vandals. There is destruction in the Middle East from bombs.

A couple weeks ago I heard a noise outside my study. I looked out the window and there was some big machinery knocking down a building next door.

In A.D. 70 this prophecy was fulfilled. Rome came in and ransacked the Temple and totally destroyed it. They set Jerusalem and the Temple on fire. The heat melted the gold which ran into cracks in the block walls. Soldiers wanting the spoils of war literally tore the blocks down to get at the gold that had seeped into the cracks.

It would have been horrible and unthinkable news and the disciples were curious about when it would happen and what signs they might look for. Scripture states that Jews require a sign. They wanted to know what to look for. Jesus responds by giving them some signs to look

for.

There will be some who claim to be the Messiah.

There will be wars.

There will be natural disasters.

There will be persecution.

The news goes from bad to worse. You can't help but read this and feel the great shadow of despair.

Jesus begins by talking about deception. For centuries the Jews had been looking for the Messiah. Days earlier He had been hailed as the Messiah by the masses but the religious leaders had an unprovoked animosity toward Him. They had denounced Him as a charlatan. Since the days of Christ there have been many who have claimed to be the Messiah. They have led many down the broad road of destruction by pointing them away from the one and only true Messiah – Jesus.

Jesus' warning to the disciples is to watch out so that they would not be deceived. While written to the Jews this is still a valid warning for us. Be alert. Be watchful. Don't be deceived by every wind of doctrine that floats through the internet. Jesus talks about coming deception.

The next sign that Jesus said would be distress. There will be wars, which, of course, have been going on for centuries, especially in the Middle East. War is a common thread that has woven its way through history. It has been estimated that there were 70 significant wars before Christ, 50 in the first 1,000 years after His coming, 100 between A.D. 1000 and 1500, 200 between 1500 and 1800 and 500 since 1800. Of course there have been other lesser conflicts during that time as well. In this passage Jesus is now going to shift His focus the destruction the Temple that will occur in A.D. 70 under Titus to the tribulation period that is still future. That is when these wars will take place. It will be unprecedented, larger in scale and scope than either WWI or WWII.

Revelation 6:3-4

War is dreadful. Some seek it while others try to avoid it all cost, because of the strain and drain on nations that engage in it. War is one sign Jesus was giving the Jews to look out for during the tribulation of the coming of Christ. There are institutions chartered with determining the cost of war. They measure the economic and social impact of war. They weigh the cost to the country and people affected, the mental anguish left to victims scarred for life. There is the medical cost of ongoing care for many who are injured during war. There is the cost to those who may not have been directly involved in the war. Instead their cost is measured in humanitarian aid sent either by agencies such as the Red Cross or by the government itself.

They could expect deception by imposters, distress by war, and a third sign would be disasters.

Some have said that bad things come in threes and here we see three types of disasters.

Earthquakes. It seems like in recent years there has been an escalation in the number, the frequency, and the magnitude of earthquakes.

Revelation 6:12-20

No wonder that many will call on the rocks to fall on them so that they don't have to face the ongoing wrath that God is pouring out on the nations at that time.

There is yet another sign. There will be famine and disease. These two are often connected. I read recently that there is a virus that is immune to antibiotics. Think about all the various diseases both past and present. Many of us have been directly impacted by cancer either because we have had it or know someone who has. I for one am alongside those who hope for a cure someday for that dreaded disease that affects every part of the body, but I'm not holding my breath. This sin cursed world will always have some disease caused by the fall. Where disease is epidemic, famine is close by. Some sources estimate that there have

been more than 1800 famines in China alone. Britain experienced 85 famines during the Middle Ages.

If that isn't enough, Jesus speaks in general terms of terrors or fearful events that will be signs in heaven. This term is all encompassing term, events that will cause great fear in people. These include wild fires, flooding, hail, tornados, hurricanes, snow storms, and so on. Even meteor showers cause panic today. Doomsdayers are running around like chicken little warning that the sky is falling, stirring up panic.

There is another important sign that Jesus points out to the disciples. We notice it in verse 12. "But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you." Jesus is referring to persecution that the disciples would experience which we read about in Acts, but He is also speaking about the persecution that believers will experience during the tribulation period.

We know from our study of Acts that before his conversion Paul played a significant role in the persecution of believers. They were taken to the synagogue to be tried and then to prison. Synagogues were not only a place for worship, but it also served as the local Jewish court.

This persecution would come from two sources. One source would be from the religious leaders as they are taken to court. The other source of persecution would come from relationships. Family and friends would be involved in persecuting believers in the age the disciples were living and in the tribulation period as well.

But Jesus gives them hope in the midst of persecution that while they would experience this hardship they were not to worry because they would be emboldened with opportunities to witness for Christ. God will give them words to boldly speak. In spite of terrible persecution, the gospel message will not be silenced. From the boldness of the

Apostles and Paul during the beginning of the church age with its subsequent persecution to the bold witness of the two who proclaim the gospel in the tribulation to the 144,000 Jewish witnesses they will not be “ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation.”

(Romans 1:16)

In every age wherever the gospel has been targeted to be silenced, there have been those who have arisen to proclaim its saving power. The Word of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two edged sword that pierces the soul.

In spite of hardship there is hope. That hope is found in the person of Christ and the power of His gospel.

Jesus said that men would hate them on account of Him. But they were not to despair. “Not a hair of your head would perish.” Did God’s word fail here since we know that all the Apostles except John were martyred for their faith? Not at all. This is not speaking in physical terms but in spiritual terms. Nothing would be able to sever them from the promise of eternal life that was given them through faith in Christ. Nothing would be able to pluck them from the hand of the Father who securely holds those who belong to Him.

The admonition Jesus gives the disciples and to those in the tribulation period and yes even to us, is to stand firm. Hold on.

That is something that we can be praying about right now for those who are living in countries where they are persecuted for their faith. Pray that they will sense God’s presence. Pray that they will be strengthened in their faith. Pray that they will have opportunity to share the gospel with those persecuting them. Pray that they will hold on.

During a severe time of persecution in the early

church Christian apologist Tertullian wrote “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”

While all the events listed in verses 8-18 are present in this age, there will be an escalation in them in the end of the age. War, natural disasters and disease in the tribulation period will be beyond measure in terms of loss. When the second seal is broken ¼ of the world’s population at that time will die.

Beginning in verse 20 Jesus gives a grave warning regarding the tribulation period. In its history, Jerusalem has been under siege and changed hands through war dozens of times. Jesus is speaking again about the time of the Tribulation when nations will rise up against Jerusalem. When they hear of armies coming to surround Jerusalem it is at that time they are to flee the city because desolation is near. If they linger in the city, it will be too late. Jesus warns that this is the time of God’s justice being poured out for faithlessness. This section is once again speaking of divine judgment.

This is the time referred to as the abomination of desolation. Daniel writes about it three times (9:27; 11:31; 12:11). The Anti-Christ will make a peace treaty with Israel allowing them to build a new Temple and resume animal sacrifices. 3 ½ years into this agreement he will break the treaty with Israel and stop their sacrifices. He will set himself up in the Temple as the god to be worshiped.

It will be similar to Antiochus Epiphenes who rode into Jerusalem, slaughtered a pig on the altar which was an abomination to Jews and set himself up as god. This was a foreshadowing of the Anti-Christ and the abomination that will result under him. Luke 21:23-27

With what has just been described it is a time of utter hopelessness due to national and natural destruction, despair, and persecution against Jews and believers during the tribulation period. There

will be hardship of every kind. If we think the world is in bad shape today, it will be much worse then. Jesus has just described the kinds of signs that will be evident at His return. Yet in the midst of all this hardship He gives them hope, something to cling onto, something to look forward to. We find it in verse 28.

“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

No matter how bad it is going to get, Christ offers hope to those who trust in Him. It’s the same for us today.

Psalm 42:5 “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him my Savior, and my God.”

Israel was living in a time of hopelessness during the Roman rule and along came the Savior whose birth we just celebrated. Hope has come. His coming, death and resurrection give us hope through faith in Him.

This passage confirms for me that there will be people saved in the Tribulation period because Jesus says their redemption is near. If there was no eternal hope in the Savior for them, then there would only be retribution and punishment as God’s wrath is poured out on everyone.

To confirm this Jesus told a short parable about a fig tree. When the tree begins to sprout leaves they know that summer is near. In the same way when they see all these signs He just spoke about, they know that His coming is near. The generation that sees these signs will be the generation who will see His return and He gave them the promise of His faithfulness, that His words are true.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

We have the assurance of the truthfulness of God’s

Word that what will happen will be just as it is described for us in Scripture. His Word is permanent. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His unchanging character means that the truth of His Word will not change.

With such hope in times of hardship Jesus warns them not to let their hearts become discouraged. He is saying that for those who weren’t careful and watchful their hearts would become anxious and the day of His return would come on them unexpectedly. The consequence would be that they wouldn’t escape the judgment that will come. For those who were watching, they would be able to stand before the Lord and receive what was promised by Him upon His return.

Luke concludes the public ministry of Jesus by noting that each day He would go to the Temple to preach and in the evening He would go to the Mount of Olives just outside the city where He would spend the night. We can only presume that He spent that time praying. These are two important ministries in Jesus’ life – preaching and praying. They are reminders to us of our need to be out proclaiming the gospel and to spend time in prayer. Jesus said that men should always pray so that they don’t lose heart.

This was a final warning of the impending judgment on the nation for their failure to receive the Messiah. But it was also a reminder of the hope that was still possible through Him.

Regardless of what age we live in, take heed to the words of Jesus. Lift up your heads because your redemption is near. In the mean time we must watch, we must stand firm, we must be careful, we must pray, and we must boldly proclaim the gospel. He gives hope in the midst of hardship.