**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE END TIMES**

**Luke 21:5-38**

**INTRODUCTION**

If you ask your average Christian what their typical spiritual diet consists of in terms of Bible reading, I think a lot of people will give you the three P’s: Paul, the Psalms, and the Proverbs. These three “P’s” are among the most read, studied, memorized, and cherished sections of the Bible. If you find yourself short on time, pick a Psalm. If you have more mental energy to meditate on a few rich truths open up one of Paul’s letters. And if you want to grow in your wisdom and knowledge of how God intends life to function, spend some time in the Proverbs.

These three “P’s” are a regular part of many believers’ lives, but there’s a fourth “P” that remains largely neglected, especially in our time: the prophets.

Many people don’t bother with the prophets because they’re *hard* to read. I’m not just talking about comprehension. Yes, they’re hard to *understand*, but what really makes them hard to read is that they’re hard to *accept*, because the overwhelming theme of the prophetic books of the Bible is something that makes us squirmy and uncomfortable. It’s the theme of judgment.

This is the first year that I’ve done a “read through the Bible in a year” plan, and I can tell you that the one thing that comes up again and again in the prophets is *judgment*. Judgment on sinful Israel. Judgment on idolatrous Judah. Judgment on false prophets. Judgment on corrupt priests. Judgment on negligent shepherds of God’s people. Judgment on *the world*. Have you ever noticed that in the prophets? God doesn’t just judge his covenant people Israel. He judges the surrounding nations. He judges Babylon for its pride. He judges Egypt for putting itself in God’s place. He judges the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Edomites, and the Philistines – none of which had received special revelation from the God of Israel that he was the one, true, living God, and yet he judges them, because he is the judge of the world.

It’s not just how much the prophets speak about judgment that stands out. It’s the *nature* of that judgment. God brings famine so that people starve to death. God brings locusts so that all their farmland is left barren. God brings invading armies so that entire nations are wiped out. And over and over again, the prophets describe God as bringing his justice in wrath, anger, and fury.

That’s why there’s been a move in some Christian circles to move away not only from the prophets, but from the entire Old Testament. These people create a false dichotomy between the Old Testament and the New Testament, saying “The God of the Old Testament is a God of justice, but the God of the New Testament is a God of love. It’s time to move on from the Old Testament and focus only on the New.”

But is this true? Is it true that there is a clean break between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New, and that one is a God of justice, and the other is not? No, it’s not. In his classic book *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer writes the following:

“People…assure us that when we move from the Old Testament to the New, the theme of divine judgment fades into the background. But if we examine the New Testament, even in the most cursory way, we find at once that the Old Testament emphasis on God’s action as Judge, far from being reduced, is actually intensified.” (p. 140)

That’s precisely what we’re going to see in our text today. Jesus himself, who is often characterized by liberal Christians as the epitome of the “Don’t judge. Just love” philosophy, is going to sound very much like an Old Testament prophet as he speaks *extensively* about judgment with the same kind of language and imagery that we’re accustomed to reading in the Old Testament. And as we will see, Jesus doesn’t just pronounce judgment on a few nations. He pronounces judgment on the entire world.

The title of this message is **The End Times.** My aim today is to show you that **Christ’s Return is Meant to Warn and Comfort Christians.**

We’re going to have three points today:

1. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE
2. THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM
3. THE JUDGMENT OF THE WORLD

(1) **THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE** (**verses 6-19)**

Our text today begins in verse 5. It says that some were speaking of the temple. The temple was the heart of the Jewish faith. It symbolized God’s presence among his people, and was the center of the Jewish sacrificial system. It was a beautiful building, the joy and pride of the Jewish people, which is why verse 5 says that these people were admiring how “it was adorned with noble stones and offerings”. It becomes apparent later on in our text that the “some” referred to in verse 5 are Jesus’ disciples.

For a bit of historical background, we should note that this was the Second Temple. The first Temple, which was built by King Solomon, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C when Israel was taken into captivity. The Second Temple was completed around 515 B.C under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra, but it was much smaller and less ornate as the first. Then in 19 B.C., about 400 years after the Second Temple was built, Herod the Great decided to undertake a massive reconstruction of the Second Temple that took over eighty years to complete. The year would be 63 A.D., and seven short years after that in 70 A.D., the Second Temple would be destroyed by the Romans as they warred against the Jews.

The Jewish historian Josephus, who lived during Herod’s great reconstruction project, describes the Second Temple as being built of huge white marble stones that were 67 feet long, 12 feet high, and 18 feet wide. The offerings, or literally “ornaments”, that Jesus describes in verse 5, would have included gold and silver-plated gates and doors. Josephus described these ornamens as flashing in the sun like a “snow-clad mountain”. The entire temple area was 1200 feet by 1500 feet. Picture an area the size of seven football fields. It truly was an extraordinarily beautiful building and one of the great wonders of the ancient world.

But as it’s being admired, Jesus soberly delivers the first of his three prophecies of judgment in verse 6: “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” The Temple would be so utterly destroyed that even these massive marble slabs that were so beautifully white would be broken into pieces.

This isn’t the first time Jesus has spoken about the Temple’s destruction, but it is the clearest. It doesn’t matter how magnificent and beautiful it is. The days are coming when it will be completely and utterly destroyed.

Those who were admiring the Temple understandably want to know when all this is going to happen, and what signs will signal that the time of the Temple’s destruction is approaching. Jesus begins by telling them what *isn’t* a sign in verse 8. He says the Temple’s destruction won’t be preceded by a second Messiah, someone who says he comes in Jesus’ name and pronounces that the time is at hand. Jesus says don’t listen to them. Don’t be led astray by them. Jesus hasn’t sent them.

Jesus then tells them what *is* a sign in verse 9. War. War is coming, and they must not be afraid when it comes, because it *must* come before the Temple is destroyed. The Jews may have thought that this was a sign that the end-times had arrived, and it was, but Jesus says at the end of verse 9 that “the end will not be at once.” Other events would take place besides the destruction of the Temple before the end of history arrived.

Jesus adds other signs in verses 11-16. There will be signs on the earth in the form of great earthquakes, famines, and pestilences. There will be cosmological signs in the heavens. All of this would come before the Temple was destroyed. But before all that happened, there would be persecution.

The followers of Christ would be persecuted for their faith. They would be delivered up to synagogues and prisons and brought before kings and governors (verse 12). They would be betrayed even by “parents and brothers and relatives and friends” (verse 16). Some of them would even be put to death. They would be hated by all (verse 17). Why? Jesus says it would be for one reason, stated twice, in verses 12 and 17: he says it would be “for my name’s sake.”

Christ-followers will suffer for Christ’s sake. They will be imprisoned, hated, and executed not because they did anything wrong, but because they’re *Christians*. They would suffer at the hands of the state and their own families for bearing Christ’s name as people who had devoted their lives to worship him. Jesus says all this would come before the Temple was destroyed.

That’s exactly what happened. We already know about the biblical accounts of Christian persecution. The book of Acts tells us that Peter and John were brought before the Jewish Council where they made a defence of the Christian faith. Stephen and James were murdered. Paul was arrested and brought before the Roman governors Felix and Festus, then King Agrippa, before he was brought to the household of Caesar himself. But beyond the biblical accounts, we have other historical documents that tell us about the early persecution of the church. All the apostles were executed for their faith except for John. In 64 A.D., Roman Emperor Nero mounted Christians on wooden poles and burned them alive so that they could be used as human torches at night after he falsely accused them of starting a fire in Rome that he was responsible for. All of this took place before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., just as Jesus foretold.

But in the midst of all this persecution, Jesus promises that there would be provision. In verses 13-15 Jesus says that this persecution would open up an opportunity for them to bear witness, to testify to the world of what they had seen Jesus do and what they had heard Jesus say. And in those moments, Jesus promises that he would give them “a mouth and wisdom, which none of [their] adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.” Many of Jesus’ disciples were simple folk. They didn’t have much of an education. They weren’t scholars of the Scriptures. But when they appeared before kings and governors for Jesus’ sake, Jesus himself would give them words so compelling and powerful that everyone would listen in awe.

That doesn’t mean that everyone would believe. Jesus says in verse 16 that some of them would be put to death. The power of their speech wouldn’t guarantee their deliverance from persecution. But even if they were killed, Jesus says in verse 18 that “not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.” Jesus of course is speaking from an eternal perspective. Persecutors may kill believers in this lifetime, mutilating their bodies on crosses and burning them to death, but that will have no lasting effect in the life to come. They kill the body, but they cannot kill the souls of those who hold fast to their faith in Christ to the end. And one day, these precious martyrs will receive new bodies, glorified bodies, so that everything they lost will be more than fully restored.

**(2) THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM (verses 20-24)**

Jesus pronounces judgment on the Temple. Once all these things take place – war, earthquakes, signs in the heavens, and a great persecution of Christians – then the Temple will be destroyed. Now he escalates the scope of the judgment and expands to the city itself in verses 20-24.

Jesus says in verse 20 that Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies, and when that happens, its ruin is near. The destruction of the city will be so thorough, and so certain, that he essentially tells the Jews to not even put up a fight. Those who are in Judea, in the surrounding countryside, shouldn’t return to their capital city to defend it. Instead, they should run as far away as possible and hide in the mountains. For those who are inside the city when war breaks out, they aren’t to take up their arms and man the ramparts to defend themselves. They are to depart.

Why would Jesus say this? Why would he tell them to run and not fight? After all, wasn’t this the City of God? Wasn’t this about protecting the Temple of God? Wasn’t this the seat of David’s throne and the locus of God’s promises? Yes it was. But if God decided to wipe out his temple and his city, that was his sovereign choice.

That’s what Jesus says in verse 22. Jerusalem would be destroyed, because “these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written”. Whose vengeance? God’s. The days of vengeance are the days of God’s judgment on his people, because his people had been unfaithful. This was “to fulfill all that is written.” God warned that he would curse Israel for its disobedience in Deuteronomy 28. God told Solomon that if his descendants turned away from him, then the temple would become a heap of rubble in 1 Kings 9. Hosea 9 says that God’s day of reckoning was coming on Israel because they called God’s prophets fools. Micah 3 says that Jerusalem would become a heap of rubble because its leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money, and *none* of them thought that God would do anything about it.

But God would do something about it. The day of reckoning had come, and Jesus is here to tell them that it’s arrived.

As Jesus pronounces judgment, we should see that it doesn’t bring him any personal satisfaction. He doesn’t say, “Finally, you’ll get what you deserve!” Jesus isn’t vindictive. He doesn’t delight in being proven right. Yes, he will vindicate his name, but he does not rejoice over the destruction of the wicked. That’s why he laments in verse 23. He laments for the pregnant women and for those who are nursing infants in those days, because judgment is coming, even for them, and it will be devastating.

Verse 24 says that they will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations. Josephus would record that over one million Jews would be killed in the destruction of Jerusalem and the sacking of the Temple, and almost 100,000 Jews would be taken captive. The Jews were God’s chosen people, appointed to be blessed by God and to be a blessing among the nations as they excelled in righteousness, justice, power, and wealth. But for now, at least, God was sending the Gentiles to trample Jerusalem under their feet, “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

**(3) THE JUDGMENT OF THE WORLD (verses 25-28).**

Jesus has pronounced judgment on the Temple and on Jerusalem, and now his judgment expands one last time to extend to the entire world, leading us to verses 25-28.

At first glance it appears that Jesus is still talking about either the destruction of the Temple or of Jerusalem, but if we look closely, we see that Jesus is now speaking about something far greater. He’s not just speaking about the Jews any more. He’s speaking about the entire world. He says in verse 25 that there will be “distress of *nations*”, plural, not singular. And in verse 26 he says thatthere will be “people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on *the world*.” This fits the progression of the passage. Jesus started locally with the Temple, where he had observed the poor widow and where he was teaching daily, then he expands to the city of Jerusalem itself, and now he expands once more to the rest of the world.

Notice what kinds of signs accompany the final judgment. They’re the same types of signs that came before the destruction of the Temple! What accompanied the destruction of the Temple would be seen once more at the judgment of the world. Verse 25 says that “there will be signs in sun and moon and stars”, and verse 26 says that “the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” There will be natural disasters with the “roaring of the sea and the waves” in verse 25 that will cause people everywhere to tremble with terror. This explains why Jesus treats all three judgments together. These first judgments on the Temple and Jerusalem were meant to foreshadow the last judgment of the world. The destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem may have seemed to some to be local events that were only relevant to the Jews, but they had much greater significance. They signalled the beginning of the end of time itself, as history began its slow march to God’s final judgment.

Once these signs are seen again, Jesus describes what will happen next in verse 27: the Son of Man will come in a cloud with power and great glory. Jesus is speaking about his return. He is the Son of Man who will return in a cloud with power and great glory. This might seem like strange imagery to us as we picture Jesus riding on clouds and returning to the earth, but what Jesus is doing here is using prophetic imagery. He’s describing his coming in the same way that the prophet Daniel described the Messiah’s coming in Daniel 7:13-14:

“I saw in the night visions,

and behold, with the clouds of heaven

there came one like a son of man,

and he came to the Ancient of Days

and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion

and glory and a kingdom,

that all peoples, nations, and languages

should serve him;

his dominion is an everlasting dominion,

which shall not pass away,

and his kingdom one

that shall not be destroyed.”

When Jesus returns, the world as we know it will come to an end. He will come in the fullness of the glory of God to reign forever over a kingdom which shall not pass away and that shall not be destroyed, as people from every nation and language serve him in reverent submission and worship.

Those who do not know him, who do not call him Lord, who do not trust in him as Saviour, will hide their faces and faint with fear because of his glorious second coming. But for those who *do* know him, those who have received the sweetness of his grace and felt the kindness of his mercy, Jesus says in verse 28 that you will “straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The coming of Christ will be a terrifying event, but those who are united to him by faith have nothing to fear, because he doesn’t bring judgment to you. He brings redemption. The one who causes others to look away in dread will cause believers to look up with eager anticipation and joy, because *Christ is our redemption*. He redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. He redeemed us from the sin sickness that so painfully plagues our lives when he took the penalty of our sin upon himself. He redeemed us from our alienation from God when he willingly chose to be abandoned by God on the cross. And when he comes again, this redemption will finally be consummated, as what we now enjoy in part will then be fully known.

For the believer, Jesus’ return will be a moment of great joy. Though his coming will bring judgment and eternal death for some, it will bring eternal life for those who believe in his name. This is why Jesus chooses the analogy he does in verses 29-33. He could have compared his coming to something that focuses on the darkness of judgment, but that’s not what he does. Instead, he compares his coming to the blossoming of a fig tree. He chooses to focus on the life that his second coming will bring, not the death.

In the winter, fig trees are completely bare. But when it begins to show shoots and leaves, everyone knows that summer is coming. The same is true for Jesus’ return. When the signs of his return start appearing, those who know what to look for know that he’s near. Or as Jesus says in verse 31, they know that “the kingdom of God is near.” Redemption is on its way. Eternal life is on its way, and believers can look to Christ’s coming with great anticipation and joy.

Jesus ends his prophecy about the coming judgment with a word about its timing and its certainty. In verse 32, he says, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.” Liberal scholars have tried to exploit this verse and use it as an example of how Jesus said something that was false. They interpret “this generation” as the generation that lived during Jesus’ lifetime, which would mean that Jesus was saying that his second coming would take place before the current generation died out. If that were true, then Jesus’ prediction was wrong. But if that were the case, one would have expected the early church to try to bury this embarrassing saying, but there is zero evidence that they tried to do this.

For our purposes today, I’m only going to say that there are several other plausible interpretations of this verse. The best one I came across was that “this generation” refers not to the current generation, but to the future generation that would observe the signs of Jesus’ coming. Jesus is saying that he would return before that generation passed away. In other words, verse 32 isn’t saying something about when Jesus’ second coming will be, but rather *how* quickly it will come when the signs appear. The generation that sees the signs will see the fulfillment of those signs in Christ’s coming.

Jesus closes in verse 33 with this word of certainty: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” The truth of these prophetic words will be more enduring than creation itself. Creation is less permanent than the truth of these prophetic words of judgment. The Temple *will* be thrown down. Jerusalem *will* be destroyed. Jesus *will* return in power and great glory, bringing judgment to those who have rejected him, and redemption to those who have received him.

**CONCLUSION**

So where does this leave us? Our text today has given us a lot of interesting historical information, and it’s told us about some big things that will happen sometime in the future, but how does a text like this change our lives today? Let me give you three categories.

First, it reminds us that we cannot create an artificial distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament and say one is about judgment and the other is about love. They are both about judgment, and they are both about love, because the God who inspired their writing is a God of judgment and a God of love. Yes, God’s love is most fully revealed in the New Testament through the giving of his Son for sinners, but that love is only fully understood and celebrated under the dark backdrop of God’s judgment. Our text today reminds us that this is true. Jesus himself had a lot to say about judgment, so if we ever feel tempted to abandon the Old Testament because we don’t like what it says about judgment, then we need to realize that we would be abandoning Jesus as well. There are two testaments, but only one God, and he has written one story of judgment and redemption from that judgment through his Son.

Second, our text today comforts believers in reminding us that life won’t always be what it is now. There is still much suffering for believers to face in this lifetime. Jesus made that clear when he described the persecution of his followers. People will hate you because of your faith. Family will abandon you because your allegiance to Jesus is greater than your ties to them. This was the reality that believers faced in the first century, and it remains our reality today. Christians must suffer for Christ’s sake. But that is all going to change when Jesus returns. We live in the already and not-yet era of salvation. We are already redeemed, but our redemption has not yet arrived. The Kingdom is already here, but it is not yet here in its fullness. Everyone who knows God and Jesus Christ whom he sent already has eternal life, and yet life is not yet what it should be. Life is not yet what it *will* be. Our redemption must still draw near with the second coming of Christ. We hope for that day. We long for that day. Or as Paul put it in Titus 2:13-14:

“(We are) waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

Lastly, I close with Jesus’ own application in verses 34-36: “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

That’s what true hope does. True hope in future events changes the way we live today, and the future event we hope for today is Jesus’ Second Coming. That’s meant to make us watch ourselves to examine our hearts and see if we are trusting him and obeying him. That’s meant to make us stay awake, looking for the signs of his coming and not being distracted by the cares of this world or by careless living. That’s meant to make us pray for strength, knowing that we don’t have the power to endure all that’s coming to us by ourselves. We’re not strong enough to suffer well through the wars, the signs in the heavens, the great earthquakes and the roaring of the seas and the persecution of believers. But God is faithful to make us strong, so that on the Last Day, we can stand before the Son of Man, not with the fear of judgment, but with the confident assurance that he has redeemed us.