

**Luke 21:5-36****When the Earth Shakes****4/18/21**

We are going to Luke 21 today, starting in verse 5.

We are hopefully in the last months of the pandemic, and this has been a year of tremendous upheaval. So much of what was steady and normal and seemed permanent to us shook or collapsed, and while the future looks brighter for us than it has all year, it is still very uncertain.

And in these times of shaking and uncertainty, we've had a unique window into the responses that people are having to it all through social media. So while the events of the pandemic are not that unprecedented (there have been plagues and problems with the government and shutdowns and masks before in history), never before have so many had a platform to express what's in their hearts as they go through it all.

And there have been many Christians who have been more gracious and kind and servant-hearted toward others than they ever have before, the fire has refined them and somehow even strengthened them. And there have been others for whom the collapse and the shaking and the uncertainty of it all has brought about panic and fear and anger.

And Jesus has a word for Christians who live through times of quaking and collapse and uncertainty in today's passage - He calls us to a specific way of living and thinking in times like these and worse than these. And if we, by His grace, live out what He has called us to here, we will find (as you'll see in this passage) unprecedented opportunity for the spread of the good news of Jesus, and without our having to deny reality at all, we can be people of joy and peace in it all.

So in today's section of scripture, Jesus is leaving his disciples with important words to guide them through some chaos that was going to come. Jesus said these things during the week before He went to the cross, these are among the last words Jesus left with His

disciples, He spoke them to prepare them for the collapse of their world that they would soon see, to prepare believers through the ages for times of collapse and despair, and ultimately to prepare those who live to see the return of Christ for what they will go through.

This is probably the most difficult section to understand in Luke's Gospel, a section that teachers throughout the ages have disagreed about.

And one of the difficulties in this text is that Jesus is looking into the future and predicting not just one but two major future events (they were both future at the time.) One was a near future event: Jerusalem would be destroyed and the temple would be razed to the ground, which happened in the year 70 AD (about 40 years after he spoke these things). And the other event He talks about is something that is still future for us, the end of days culminating in the return of Jesus.

And teachers have disagreed about which events go in the near bucket and which go in the far bucket, which things were totally fulfilled in 70 AD and which things are yet to come. Some are very clearly 70 AD events like the destruction of the temple, some are clearly final end events like the coming of Jesus. But there are a number of events in between that are difficult to sort or that could go in both buckets as there are similarities between the collapse of their society that was soon to take place and the greater shaking that occurs at the return of Jesus.

And the goal today will not be to give the definitive answer and sort all of these questions out. We won't be able to write out a perfect order of events, and we certainly won't be setting any dates for the return of Jesus. As one teacher said, we are on the welcoming committee not the planning committee when it comes to the return of Jesus. We don't set dates and predict the timing of the end. As Mark Twain said, "Fewer than half of the predictions of the end of the World have ever worked out."

And, more authoritatively, Jesus said in **Acts 1:7**, "**It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority.**" We aren't told about end times events so we can put them in the google calendar and plan our lives around them.

We also aren't told about them so we can change them. Sometimes people read these end times passages and turn them into sci-fi action movies where the world is about to end, sinister characters are trying to inject us with microchips, and it's up to us to stop it. Jesus doesn't speak of the end and say, "You gotta stop that from happening."

Jesus didn't prophecy the end so we would be earthly 'preppers', stocking up on our resources for impending tribulation. But He tells us about these things to make us a unique kind of people in times of upheaval.

So let's walk through the text.

**Luke 21:5 And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, 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."**

So they're at the temple in Jerusalem, and from accounts of historians, this place was huge and mighty and opulent in its decorations. The retaining wall that it was built on rose to 15 stories above the ground at the southeast corner (that's just the foundation!), the gate and the surrounding wall were overlaid with gold, there was a carved bunch of grapes hanging over the gate that was as tall as a person and overlaid with gold, there were doors that were 70 feet tall. This was a building like no other, and you couldn't be there without talking about how amazing it was. Believing and unbelieving historians wrote about the magnificence of this place. (And it wasn't even done yet. This project started in 19BC and they didn't get it done till 63AD - 82 years.)

So Jesus overhears people talking about what everybody talked about when they went there, how amazing the whole thing was. And Jesus says, "It's getting torn down."

A shocking thing to say. Because it was so huge and mighty and seemed so permanent, for it to fall would be such a cataclysm. There were individual stones in this thing over 60 feet long according to Josephus - what would it take for those to be torn down?

It was also such an important building, it was the center of their religion, and it was the center of their nation. So to say that it was coming down would have been like saying the White House would be coming down - it represented the fall of a nation.

And that was the opposite of what everybody hoped the Messiah would bring - they wanted Rome to be overthrown, but in predicting the fall of the temple, Jesus was saying that Rome would overthrow them - it would mean a return to captivity like in Egypt and Babylon, it would mean going backwards for the Jews. Without their main city, they'd be scattered again in a diaspora like before.

And sure enough, just as Jesus predicted, in 70 AD, the temple was destroyed by Emperor Titus, the city was destroyed, and the little freedom that Israel had as a Roman state was gone.

We saw last week one of the reasons this was coming - they turned a place that was supposed to be a light to the nations into a place that robbed the poor and left widows destitute. And **Proverbs 15:25** says **“The LORD tears down the house of the proud but maintains the widow’s boundaries.”**

So there’s judgement coming for what they made the temple. And the primary reason this destruction happened was that this temple was built to point the nations to God. But now God shows up in the flesh in Jesus. And the temple authorities are opposing Him at every turn. So the Temple is now working against its God-given purposes.

Remember on Palm Sunday what Jesus said when He was entering the city and He started to weep:

**Luke 19:41-44 “41 And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”**

Because their nation and their temple were now existing contrary to their purposes, they would be put to an end.

So Jesus announces this cataclysmic end of their age, and the people ask the first thing we would ask:

**Luke 21:7 And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?"**

So they ask “When will all these events happen, what sign will we see that tells us they’re right around the corner?”

And Jesus responds first by telling them things that will take place and must take place, but that are not signs that the end is here:

**Luke 21:8 And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. 9 And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."**

So Jesus first tells them that the age they're entering in to will have false teachers and false Messiahs galore, and many who will predict the end is here. But these are not the signs that the end is here - "the end will not be at once."

He also says there will be wars and conflicts, but again, the fact that there are lots of wars and conflicts is NOT the indicator that the end of Jerusalem or that the end of the world is at hand.

Which is the opposite of how we often interpret major global upheaval - we see a war breaks out and assume it is a sign of the end. Jesus says, "There will be wars, but it isn't the end of the world."

And notice the first thing Jesus calls them to do in response to all of this:

### **1. Do not be terrified.**

He's describing terrifying things: the city and the temple getting wrecked, people believing lies left and right, wars and rumors of wars, the fall of their nation. And yet he says: do not be terrified.

He repeats here one of the most frequently repeated commands in the Bible: Do not be afraid.

He wants his disciples in their day and us in ours to not be terrified, even when terrifying things are happening.

And he says the reason not to be afraid is (verse 9) these things must take place. In other words, events are unfolding according to God's plan and under God's sovereignty.

God is over all things, in control of all things, and again and again Jesus reminds us of the sovereignty of God as the grounds for our courage and fearlessness:

**Luke 12:6-7 “6 Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. 7 Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.”**

If God is in control of events, and God cares for his children, then God’s children don’t panic over events.

And I don’t think the events that have surrounded COVID are signs that the end of the world is at hand - plagues have happened, global chaos has happened, government over-reach has happened in lots of countries, widescale change has happened in cultures, and the world didn’t end. It’s certainly a time of significant upheaval, and nobody would say this is all good. But I don’t see these things as necessary signs of the end.

But even if these things were end-times events, the call of the Lord is for us to not be terrified. Which makes so much of the Christian panic that we’ve seen in these days completely unjustified. Because when Jesus is describing really cataclysmic end-of-their world and end-of-the-world events, He says still don’t panic.

It’s not that we don’t feel the loss when good things get ruined, Jesus certainly wept over what this fall would mean for His city. But we are commanded not to freak out, knowing that even when we don’t understand and can’t control things, the One who does understand them is still very much in control.

Listen to Habakkuk 3. Habakkuk was a prophet who also looked ahead and saw a day of judgment coming:

**Habakkuk 3:16-19 “I hear, and my body trembles;  
my lips quiver at the sound;  
rottenness enters into my bones;  
my legs tremble beneath me.  
Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble  
to come upon people who invade us.  
17Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail**

**and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
18yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.  
19GOD, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the deer's;  
he makes me tread on my high places.**

You can hear his resolve: OK, things are bad, there's a lot to be afraid of. "YET I WILL REJOICE IN THE LORD!"

There's reason to tremble, but even still I'll find joy in God.

People who study persuasion say that one of the most powerful motivators, if not the most powerful motivator for people to act is fear. Politicians know this and so they stoke fear to get us to vote for them. And so because it persuades and sells, we all live in a media environment that stokes fear. It makes threats seem bigger than they are, it makes decisions seem more urgent than they are, messages that we hear are often designed to make us panic so that we act.

So we are constantly being sold fear and told to fear.

And as Christians, we need to recognize that, and resolve like Habakkuk: "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord." "Do not be terrified of these things - they must take place."

We are called to be steady, rejoicing people in a world of fear and chaos - whether the chaos is end-times chaos or not. Even if the worst is true about everything we read in the news, do not be terrified.

We follow a God who takes the worst of events, and even the worst evil that people can devise, and turns it for His glory and for the eternal happiness of His church. (Look at the cross - there was the worst sin ever committed, the greatest injustice ever perpetuated, a TRUE conspiracy, a bad thing happening to the one good person - it was all bad. And God turned it into great good for whoever would believe in Him.

Don't be terrified.

Jesus goes on:

**Luke 21: 10 Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. 13 This will be your opportunity to bear witness.**

**16 You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. 17 You will be hated by all for my name's sake. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your lives.**

There is so much here. On the one hand, for the near-term bucket for events, remember that Luke actually wrote a two-volume history: the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. And they are meant to be read together. Luke/Acts comprise volume 1 and volume 2 of Luke's history, and much of what Jesus spoke here in Luke is fulfilled in Acts: Peter and John are brought before the council (Acts 4:5-7), they're imprisoned (Acts 4:3), They're beaten (Acts 16:23), brought before kings and governors in Acts 24 and 25. And some are put to death.

So you can read about these things happening in Luke's second book.

But they're written for us as well - look at the expectation that disciples should have and how they should react.

## **2. Expect Rejection**

This early group of Christians grew and spread until after a few hundred years half the Roman Empire was Christian. But they were persecuted, at times fiercely. They were kicked out of synagogues (verse 12), they were imprisoned, even parents and family members had them arrested and put to death (verse 16).

Jesus goes as far as (verse 17) to say that his followers will be hated by all.

Remember, they were expecting Jesus the Messiah to rule and reign on earth right then, to make them the most powerful. But Jesus says they'll be hated and persecuted. Which meant that part of their preparation for what they were about to go through was to give

up the dream of everything being fixed in their lifetime and of Christians being the well-loved powerful ones.

We had a few decades here in the US when we worked hard as churches to make Christianity cool. (We caught the end of that era I think when we were the local hipster church for about 6 or 7 years for some reason. That may have been the last cool form of Christianity for awhile.) And now, there really isn't a cool, widely accepted, and faithful form.

Now I'm not saying we're being persecuted like they were - a lot of what we call persecution in our day seems to be an exaggeration. But it does seem that, at least here in the northeast, faithful forms of Christianity are not widely accepted anymore, they just aren't cool.

So as much as we would love it if the world around us loved the Christian message, we can expect that faithfulness to Jesus and broad cultural acceptance usually don't go hand in hand. Regardless of the PR moves we might try to make, we can expect the Christian message not to be loved.

"Don't you know how the Christian message sounds to the world?" is not our reason to change the Christian message. We certainly as the church have plenty of sins to repent of.

But the teachings of the scriptures are not the sins we need to repent of, even though they are rejected and mocked and even called evil by the world around us. We will repent of real sins but not of faith in Christ. And we do feel the constant pressure on social media to change the message, change the standards, change the teachings that could caused us to be rejected. But Jesus told his followers they could expect rejection.

**1 Corinthians 1:18 - "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."**

We believe a message that seems utterly foolish to those who reject it. So we can expect hatred and opposition.

God at times brings great revival, and we are certainly praying that He would do that in our day in our community. But we do have hope while we wait for that.

### **3. Expect the Care of God**

Look at two of these verses side by side:

**Luke 21:16 You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death.**

And

**Luke 21:18 But not a hair of your head will perish.**

So he tells these people that some of them will die. And then says, “But not a hair of your head will perish.”

He says, “They might kill you, but you’ll be fine.”

And remember who’s saying this. Jesus is days away from going to the cross where He will be hated by all, to the nth degree, He will die, and on Sunday, He will be fine.

And Christians are people who follow in His footsteps. This is God’s plan for us:

**Romans 8:29 “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”**

His story is our story. So while we feel the losses and the pain like Jesus did, while we certainly don’t want things to be hard for Christians, the worst-case scenario for us is not as bad as it could be. Jesus rose, and we will rise too.

And again in here Jesus says that things all go according to plan, and even terrible situations can be unbelievable opportunities:

#### **4. Expect Great Opportunities for Gospel Proclamation**

**Luke 21:13 This will be your opportunity to bear witness.**

For them this was fulfilled as they used every opportunity at their trials to proclaim Jesus (all throughout the book of Acts.) Just like Jesus promised, He gave them the words to say in a pinch so that Jesus could be made much of. And through losses, imprisonments,

and trials, these people who were there on Mt. Olivet when Jesus spoke the words in Luke 21, experienced all of them coming true.

And we can have the same confidence - that whatever we might lose in a world that rejects us, whenever we might have to explain the things we believe that are rejected by the culture, those are God given opportunities to bear witness, to make much of Jesus.

The losses and the suffering we endure in times of chaos are orchestrated by God as a platform for showcasing and demonstrating and speaking of Jesus.

In a world of chaos and loss, even when it seems worst-case scenario for us, Christians can manifest God's beauty, truth, and goodness.

It's so faith-empowering to see a Christian who is suffering speak of God's sustaining goodness through it all.

John Newton, who wrote the song Amazing Grace, said, *"Some Christians are called to endure a disproportionate amount of suffering. Such Christians are a spectacle of grace to the church, like flaming bushes unconsumed, and cause us to ask, like Moses: 'Why is this bush not burned up?' The strength and stability of these believers can be explained only by the miracle of God's sustaining grace. The God who sustains Christians in unceasing pain is the same God -- with the same grace -- who sustains me in my smaller sufferings. We marvel at God's persevering grace and grow in our confidence in Him as He governs our lives."*<sup>1</sup>

Jesus warns us of hard times, but tells us we will have opportunities because of them to speak of Jesus.

So Jesus says next in Luke 21:19

**Luke 21:19 By your endurance you will gain your lives.**

And that word for endurance is a combination of steadfastness and patience. In the New Testament, it is someone who is loyal to Christ and faithful and obedient even through huge sufferings and trials. It's patient perseverance through a storm.

And it is a characteristic of a Christian. By your endurance you will gain your lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Spectacle of Glory: God's Light Shining through Me*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016). 7.

We'll quickly survey this next part:

### **Jesus Foretells Destruction of Jerusalem**

**20 "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, 22 for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. 23 Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. 24 They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.**

So here, Jesus predicts what happened in 70AD - Titus laid siege to Jerusalem, surrounded it with his army. And Jesus told them, "When that happens, get out." Those who believed the words of Jesus in 70 AD got out, and those who didn't saw the fall of the city, the temple, and by some estimates over a million died in that war for the city.

And Jesus said it would bring in the "times of the Gentiles," the time described in Romans 11, the time we are living in. It's a time when many Gentiles come to the faith, which will be followed at the end by many Jews accepting Christ.

And at the end of the times of the Gentiles:

### **The Coming of the Son of Man**

**25 "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, 26 people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."**

Again, Jesus says that even as these things happen: perplexity, roaring of the sea and waves, people becoming afraid, raise your head. Because for you it means redemption.

### **The Lesson of the Fig Tree**

**29 And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. 30 As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already**

near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

### **Watch Yourselfs**

34 "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. 35 For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. 36 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." 37 And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. 38 And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.

## **5. Watch your life**

In the beginning of this passage we were instructed not to panic about the end, not to be terrified, to expect the care of God. We started by saying we don't set dates and obsess over timelines.

But that doesn't mean we are careless about this end-times stuff. It does matter. And the right response to the fact that Jesus is returning, that God does judge, is to keep our hearts awake to the glory of God.

We can so easily fix our eyes just on the cares of this life, we can be lured in by drunkenness and dissipation, or self-indulgence. We can look at the crazy people who obsess over end times calendars and live in panic and say, "None of that for me," and then allow the pendulum to swing to the other side of not caring at all.

But He says, in light of these things - watch ourselves. Don't let our hearts become burdened with the weight of caring the most for the things of this world.

And we pray.

## **6. Pray**

We pray specifically that we would have the strength to stand when we are persecuted, mocked, or questioned. That we would experience the strength of God in our lives to

endure hardship and not throw in the towel. Pray for strength, and pray for one another, that we would persevere.

Because the temptation to throw in the towel will be a real one.

Let's not take our eyes off of the Gospel - which is the story of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus for our sins.

Because that story is our story.

## Sermon Discussion Guide for Small Groups

### When the Earth Shakes

#### Luke 21:5-36

Whether the calamities we walk through are ordinary or apocalyptic, the Lord has called us to follow in His footsteps when the world around us falls apart. His word to those who would experience the end of Israel and to those who will experience the end of the world is relevant to all Christians.

#### I. **Do Not Be Terrified (Luke 21:1-9)**

Why do you suppose “do not be afraid,” is such an often-repeated command in scripture?

What does Jesus say here that shrinks our fears?

#### II. **Expect Rejection (Luke 21:10-18)**

What Christian beliefs do you think are the most rejected by our world right now?

What should we do about it?

#### III. **Expect God’s Care (Luke 21:16,18)**

How is it possible that some will be killed, *and* that not a hair of their heads will perish?

#### IV. **Expect Opportunities for Gospel Proclamation (Luke 21:13)**

How might we have opportunities to speak of Christ or demonstrate God’s truth, beauty, and goodness while we suffer? While we are persecuted?

#### V. **Watch Your Life (Luke 21:34-35)**

Why do you suppose drunkenness is mentioned here?

**VI. Pray (Luke 21:36-38)**

Do you pray for strength to resist temptation and endure opposition?

Do you pray for this for others? For your church?

Consider praying as a group for these things.