

Not Always A Rose Garden

Luke 21:5-24

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This morning, after spending 7 weeks exploring the views Americans have about Christianity, we return to our journey through the Gospel of Luke. We are in Luke 21:5-24. If you have a Bible go ahead and turn there. Otherwise the verses will be on the screen. Our setting is Jerusalem, the spring about 33 A.D. It is Passover week, probably Wednesday. The next eve, Jesus will be betrayed by one of His disciples and arrested. The next day they will watch in horror as Jesus is beaten, then put on Roman cross and executed. These next 48 hours or so would be the darkest these men had ever experienced. So we might expect Jesus to speak words of encouragement and comfort to His friends. And he does that, but in a somewhat disguised way. Let's pause and pray that the Lord would use this portion of His word to encourage and challenge us today.

Jesus has been teaching in the temple that day. In the previous paragraph he told about watching a widow put all the money she had in the offering box. **Luke 21:5,6 – As some were talking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, “These things that you see – the days will come when not one stone will be left on another that will not be thrown down.”** Pretty much all Bible teachers agree that this chapter talks about two events. The first is the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple which occurred in 70 A.D...roughly 37 years after Jesus spoke these words. The second is the return of Jesus Christ which has not yet, happened and we are now in the year 2020. Bible teachers disagree sometimes about which of the verses in this chapter are talking about what happened many years ago and which refer to what has yet to occur. However, there is increasing consensus among Bible schools that it really is not all that complicated. The ESV Study Bible and other versions make a clear division. In verse 5-24, Jesus is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. And in verse 25-38 he is talking about His own return that has yet to occur. So, next week we will focus the last part of the chapter, on Jesus' return. Today our focus is Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, something that would then happen about 40 years later.

Now, the thought of the temple being destroyed, of not one stone being left on top of the other, seemed pretty *outlandish* to folks listening to Jesus that day. If anything in Israel seemed like it would be permanent, it was the temple. In 20 B.C., Herod the Great had begun to remodel and expand the temple building under Zerubbabel. In Jesus' day, 50 some years later, that project was pretty much complete, though the finishing work would continue for another 30 years. The beauty and size of Herod's temple was greater than most of the seven wonders of the Ancient World. The perimeter of the temple wall was just under a mile, making it slightly smaller than the Mega Mall in the Twin Cities. It covered about 1/6 of the city of Jerusalem. Many of the stones used to construct the temple were huge. One that remains weighs about 570 tons. Many of the temple walls were covered with massive gold plates that glimmered so brightly in the sun that peoples' eyes hurt when they looked at it. The temple was an amazing structure. The thought that it would one day be demolished seemed incredible to the folks listening to Jesus that day.

Luke 21:7 – “Teacher,” they asked him, “So when will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” “These things” seem to refer to the destruction of the temple Jesus has just foretold. **Luke 21:8,9 – Then he said, “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Don't follow them. ⁹ When you hear of wars and rebellions, don't be alarmed. Indeed, it is necessary that these things take place first, but the end won't come right away.”** At this point Jesus seems to be talking about the end of the temple and Jerusalem. And His instructions are specifically for the twelve disciples and other 1st Century followers.

Luke 21: 10-19 – Then he told them, “Nation will be raised up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be violent earthquakes, and famines and plagues in various places, and there will be terrifying sights and great signs from heaven. ¹² But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you. They will hand you over to the synagogues and prisons,

and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴Therefore make up your minds not to prepare your defense ahead of time, ¹⁵for I will give you such words and a wisdom that one of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. ¹⁶You will even be betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will kill some of you. ¹⁷You will be hated by everyone because of my name, ¹⁸but not a hair of your head will be lost. ¹⁹By your endurance, gain your lives.

Being a follower of Jesus would not be easy. Persecution and natural catastrophes would be part of life. Between the time when Jesus spoke these words and the destruction of the temple, Mt. Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompey, a huge earthquake devastated Laodicea, and famines hit both Jerusalem and Rome. The Apostles would endure much persecution and all except John would be martyred. Yet, Jesus promised he would enable them to fulfill the ministry He has for them by, first by proving the words and wisdom they needed to be faithful witnesses and He would protect them physically, until they have completed the mission He had for each of them. When Peter and Paul were executed by Nero, they had “finished the race” God had called them to run. Up until that point, not one hair on their head had been lost.

Now, some of you may be thinking, but Pastor Dan these verses sound like they describe things leading up to or during the great tribulation. Yes, they do. Though I think Jesus is describing things that would happen before 70 A.D. I would suggest that this is really a description of what happens throughout history. God's people endure various tribulations leading up to the great and final tribulation. This is similar to **1 John 2:18** that talks about how many Anti-Christ's will come, but one day the Anti-Christ will appear. We will focus more on that next week.

Jesus then moves from the time preceding the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, to the event itself. **Luke 21:20-24** – **“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that its desolation has come near. ²¹Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains. Those inside the city must leave it, and those who are in the country must not enter it, ²²because these are days of vengeance**

to fulfill all the things that are written. ²³Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days, for there will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. ²⁴They will be killed by the sword and be led captive into all the nations, and- Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

There may indeed be a second fulfillment at the time of Jesus' return. Yet, these verses primarily describe what happened when the Roman army destroyed the city in 70 A.D. It is remarkable that Jesus spoke these words 37 years before that happened. Amazing. The main point is that when the Roman army approaches Jerusalem, you want to get out of the city. There will be a siege, the city will be destroyed and those who are in the city will die or be taken away as slaves. People apparently heeded Jesus' warning. As the Roman army approached Jerusalem, Josephus, the Jewish historian, people fled the city “as swimmers deserting a sinking ship.” Yet, the worst part of what happened was the destruction of the temple. That is probably what Jesus means in verse 20 when he uses the word “Desolation.” (The Greek term is Eremosis) for those listening to Jesus this would bring back the events of about 167BC, 200 years earlier, when the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes conquered Jerusalem. He then sacrificed pigs on the temple altar and set up statues of Zeus and himself for people to worship. It was the most horrible event a devout Jew could imagine. And now Jesus says, the same thing will happen again. Incidentally, Titus the Roman general, initially gave orders to preserve the temple when he invaded the city. However, his troops apparently accidentally set it on fire. Once it was gutted, Titus ordered it and the whole city razed to the ground.

One of the more interesting verses in this passage is **Luke 21:24b** where Jesus says – **Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.** What does this mean? The return of Jews to Jerusalem in 1948 or the whole city coming under Jewish rule in 1967 may be part of this. **Romans 11** describes a time of Spiritual Revival for ethnic Israel where Jewish people embrace Jesus as the Messiah, and many believe this is when “The times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” others see the rapture of church and the beginning of the great tribulation as the end of the time of the Gentiles. It seems to be Jesus'

transition as then turn His attention to His return. That will be our topic next week.

Ok...So what does a message Jesus gave to His disciples 1987 years ago, about an event which would happen 1950 years ago have to do with us today? Good question. Here is my answer. This passage reminds us that those who follow Jesus may face opposition, natural catastrophes, military defeat, and the loss of some of the most important things in their lives. Yet, they can be assured of God's faithfulness. The Lord will never leave or forsake those trusting and following Him. No matter how difficult the circumstances, God will, in the end, use those situations for His glory and for the ultimate good of His people.

Some of you remember a song from 1970 by Lynn Anderson, "I Beg Your Pardon, I Never Promised You a Rose Garden." Sometimes I think that is the message the Lord wants 21st Century American Christians to hear. So often people assume, "Hey, if I am a believer in Jesus, my life should be a...Rose Garden. I expect God will bless me with good health, financial prosperity, and children that are all above average." The Lord says, "I beg your pardon. I never promised you a Rose Garden." Well, He doesn't really say that. But He does say things like, **1Peter 4:12, 13 – Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you. ¹³ Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ. Or James 1:2, 3 – Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.** Ordeals, sufferings, trials. Health issues, financial problems and children that are at best "average" is sometimes what life brings.

And that is the way it has been for believers almost 2000 years. Horrible things have happened in the lives of faithful Christians. We do not advertise that a lot. But it is the reality. When a natural disaster strikes, or a famine hits, or a nation is ravaged by war, or there is a plague or pandemic, believers in Jesus do not enjoy immunity. Christians have gotten Covid-19, people in our church have gotten Covid-19. And there is persecution. 1202 Christians in Nigeria were killed by Islamic extremists because of their faith in Jesus in the first six months of this year. 1202. Then there are the individual troubles and tragedies. Mark Janke was my college roommate

for three years, we went to seminary together and were best men at each other's weddings. He has been a great friend for 45 years. He has faithfully served the Lord as a pastor for 35 years. Right now he has Pancreatic cancer. He doesn't know.....it is really tough.

So, how does all this fit with God's purpose and plan for this world and our lives? First, none of these things, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the deaths of 1202 Nigerian Christians, or my friends battle with cancer, surprise God. Jesus predicted the Fall of Jerusalem 37 years before it happened. But a billion years before that, God knew each of these events would occur. Despite what open Theists claim, he has always had exhaustive knowledge of everything in the future. Second, God has the ability, the power, to do whatever he chooses. **Psalm 115:3 – Our God is in the heavens, He does whatever He pleases.** He could have stopped the Roman army from ever getting within a hundred miles of Jerusalem. He could have protected everyone of those 1202 Nigerians from the people that killed them. He could have kept that tumor from ever starting to grow on Mark's pancreas. But He chose not to do those things. Why? I am not sure. But He has His reasons.

Now, in most cases the sufferings we experience is not a punishment from God. Yes, sometimes the Lord does actively discipline us, causes us pain, because **Hebrews 12:6 – The Lord disciplines those whom He loves.** But for the most part the Lord simply allows us to experience the impacts of a sinful and fallen world. That includes horrible things people do to each other, and cancer cells that attack vital organs in our bodies. Yet, the amazing thing is that in the midst of this sin tainted world, God *promises* to use our troubles and tragedies, our misfortunes and mistakes, for *our ultimate good*. **Romans 8:28 – And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

Understanding the implications of this truth is a huge part of growing in our faith and growing in our joy We need to realize that the difficult things in our lives **are not** in the way of God accomplishing His good plan in our lives. Rather He is employing the difficults of your life as a tool of grace to produce a more Godly character in you. As Paul Tripp says, *No, God's not exercising his power to make your life easy. No, he's not at work*

trying to deliver your particular definition of happiness. He's giving you much more than that—eternally faithful, forgiving, and transforming grace. So, don't become discouraged and give up. Don't listen to the lies of the enemy. Don't forsake your good habits of faith. Don't question God's goodness. Look at your trials and see grace. Behind those difficulties an ever-present Redeemer who is completing his work.

Now, the question in my mind and may be yours: Could not God do this in a different way? Couldn't the Lord have helped a woman in Nigeria be more Godly in some other way than becoming a widow when her husband was killed by an Islamic extremist? Couldn't the Lord find some other way to cause my friend Mark to grow in his faith then pancreatic cancer? I do not know. And that is the bottom line. *I do not know.* But, God does. And I am really not in any position to say that there is a better, less extreme way, for God accomplish His purposes in our lives. I might *think* I can come up with a better way, but that reflects a lot of arrogance, believing that somehow I see things more clearly than God does.

Realizing God is sovereign, in control, and sees things more clearly than I do is important not just when thinking about individual situations, but looking at the broader picture as well. Our text today has big implications for what is happening in our country this week. I remember a time, not that many years ago, when friends told me, "Dan, it doesn't matter who wins the election, because both parties are basically the same. They are all just politicians." Well, I am sure there are still folks who believe that, but not nearly as many. One survey found that 60% of Americans say this is the most important election of their lifetime. I have friends that say the election of one candidate will destroy democracy, and other friends who tell me that the election of the other candidate will mean the end of the American republic. I suspect those are probably both sight exaggerations. Now, I happened to think this is a very important election and I have strong beliefs about the candidates, and in other contexts I might be willing to share those with you. But, today I want to remind you of an important truth evident in our text today. It is this: If the wrong candidate wins, if things quickly become very grim in our nation, *God will still know what he is doing.* He does. He will still be sovereign. He will still be working out His purposes.

Since I have been in Chisholm, four different men have served as president of the United States. Bill Clinton, G.W. Bush, Barak Obama, and Donald Trump. I voted for two of those men and voted against two of them. But, the Lord used each of the four to accomplish His purposes. Those purposes may involve blessings, and it may involve discipline or punishment, but God uses every single president, actually single human ruler to accomplish His purposes. Thus, the one thing that we as Christians *should not do*, no matter who wins the election on Tuesday, is panic. There is no reason to *ever* panic. No matter who sits in the oval office, God is still on His throne. That can not be changed.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. Was the most horrible thing that had happened in Israel in at least 200 years, probably in 600 years, when Babylon captured the city. Yet, God used it to accomplish good things. The Jews who fled the city included Christian Jews, believers in Jesus the Messiah. As they become refugees they brought their faith in Jesus with them where ever they went. As a result the prediction Jesus made in **Acts 1:8b – And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.** Came true, especially "to the ends of the earth part." So was that the reason God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed by the Romans. I do not know. Maybe part of it. Often I do not know why God chooses to do something or allow something, but I do know He has a reason. And I believe that reason always includes His glory, and as believers in Jesus, our ultimate good. That is reason to express praise and gratitude to Him every single day!