

*Jesus!*

*“Road to the Cross, #8: A Vision of the End of the Age”*

*Part II: Luke 21:20-38*

*Take a first look.*

I. **Pastor Daniel Meyer of Oak Brook, Illinois, reports:** “Rex Humbard tells the story of a woman who was released from the hospital after extensive rounds of therapy failed to turn back the progress of a deadly disease. Confined to her bed at home, the woman received regular visits from her physician, but she could not work up the courage to explain her illness to her six-year-old daughter. One morning, however, the little girl overheard the doctor speaking gravely with her mother and father.

“I’ll be frank with you, Susan,’ the physician said. ‘You don’t have much time. I don’t think you’ll survive the autumn.’ A short while later, the mother glanced out the bedroom window and saw something that nearly broke her heart. She watched as her daughter stooped to pick up the leaves that had begun to fall in the September breeze; and then, as if to foil the force of gravity itself, the little girl worked to scotch-tape each leaf back on a branch.”<sup>1</sup>

II. We all know the obvious reason that such an act will fail: We cannot turn back the seasons of the year or make them stop changing, and we cannot turn back the seasons of life. We cannot turn back the seasons of the world, either. This is the truth that Jesus makes crystal clear in His teaching ministry. This world is moving inexorably toward a final cataclysm that includes the return of Jesus Christ in power and glory as well as the judgment of the living and the dead. There is no way to escape this final end, whether one believes in it or not. Denial of this future reality is like taping leaves back on the trees from which they have fallen.

III. A major strain of Jesus’ teaching was to warn of the changing of the seasons of the world, and to urge His followers (and anyone who would listen) to prepare themselves for the change. In Luke 21, Jesus presents A Vision of the End of the Age. It is startling and, in some ways, difficult, but nevertheless, it reminds us that this present life matters for eternity, not just for the years of our sojourn on earth.

Let’s hear and heed His warning today!

*Take a closer look at Luke 21:20-38.*

**I. A VISION OF THE END OF THE AGE INCLUDES GOD’S TEMPORAL JUDGMENT UPON ISRAEL.  
21:20-24**

1. *Jesus predicted the complete destruction of Jerusalem.* He told of a time that was to come when Jerusalem would be surrounded by enemy armies, and that its desolation was surely ahead. This destruction was the fulfillment of “all that is written” about the downfall of Jerusalem (see v. 22).

This time is certainly foretold in a variety of places in the Old Covenant Scriptures. Take Hosea 9:7, for example:

*“The days of punishment are coming,  
the days of reckoning are at hand.*

*Let Israel know this.*

*Because your sins are so many  
and your hostility so great,  
the prophet is considered a fool,*

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1 Daniel Meyer, pastor of Christ Church of Oak Brook, Oak Brook, Illinois, in sermon “When Gravity Meets Grace” (3-31-02), from Preaching Today.

*the inspired man a maniac*" (NIV).

And again, in Deuteronomy 28:49-52, Israel was warned at the very foundation of their existence as a nation what lay ahead at any point that they would reject God's plan for them:

*"<sup>49</sup> The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand, <sup>50</sup> a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young. <sup>51</sup> They will devour the young of your livestock and the crops of your land until you are destroyed. They will leave you no grain, new wine or oil, nor any calves of your herds or lambs of your flocks until you are ruined. <sup>52</sup> They will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down. They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the LORD your God is giving you."*

2. Jesus urged anyone who would listen to be prepared to "flee to the mountains" to escape the desolation. The only way to escape was to leave everything behind and run for one's life, something that would be "dreadful ... for pregnant women and nursing mothers" (v. 23).

3. Jesus foretold that the Jewish people would "be taken as prisoners to all the nations." This is exactly what happened when the Roman armies marched into the city of Jerusalem in AD 70. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, recounted that 1,100,000 Jewish people perished in the final war between Jerusalem and Rome, and that 97,000 were taken captive and deported to other places. In his *Word Pictures*, A. T. Robertson calls these numbers exaggerated, and yet he still says that the number must have been very great.

4. Jesus also said that Jerusalem would "be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." The "times of the Gentiles" prevailed at least until 1948, when the people of Israel regathered in their land and declared themselves again to be a nation. A case could also be made that "the times of the Gentiles" are the age of the Church, which will not end until Jesus comes again.

Insight: God's judgment is long in coming but inevitable for those who harden their hearts against the truth He has revealed in Jesus Christ.

**I—There is no justification in this teaching or in any other teaching in the New Testament for developing anti-Semitism, which is a hateful attitude toward the Jews.** Such an attitude has erupted in various times and places throughout history, notably recently in Europe. This teaching is not directed just at Israel, either ancient or modern. It serves as a warning against *anyone* who would harden his/her heart against what God has clearly revealed to us through His Son, Jesus Christ, and who then would reject His truth and love. The story of ancient Israel is a case study in truth given and rejected, and of the consequences of such rejection.

Actually, rather than being hateful toward Israel, the heart of God toward the Jewish people of the first century (and beyond) is presented in Jesus' actions upon returning to the city of Jerusalem and seeing it again for the first time in many months. He knew what lay ahead for Him: rejection, suffering, death.

Luke described this scene in chapter 19:41-44 (NIV): "<sup>41</sup> As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it <sup>42</sup> and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup> The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. <sup>44</sup> They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.'"

Paul also expressed his heartbreak over Israel's failure to recognize God incarnate in the Person of Jesus Christ:

Romans 9:1-5 (NIV): "<sup>1</sup> I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—<sup>2</sup> I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup> For I could wish that I myself were

*cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, <sup>4</sup> the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. <sup>5</sup> Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.”*

The heart of God breaks over those, whether Jewish or Gentile, who have access to His truth and love but who then turn away from it. He longs for them to return and repent and receive His grace, forgiveness, and restoration. He longs in this way for Israel and for every human being who has not turned to Him by putting his/her faith in Jesus Christ. *He is weeping over us, my friends, if we haven't turned from sin and self-will and turned to Christ.*

## **II. A VISION OF THE END OF THE AGE INCLUDES THE SECOND COMING OF THE “SON OF MAN,” OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. 21:25-28**

1. *Jesus foretold that prior to His coming there would be great disturbances in the natural order.* Verses 25-26 describe such events in the world of nature: “signs in the sun, moon and stars,” “the roaring and tossing of the sea,” and “the heavenly bodies” being “shaken.” He says that “men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world.” And then, “they will see the Son of Man” in His coming.

2. *Jesus foretold that His coming would be with “power and great glory.”* The time reference is very vague. The NIV has taken an interpretive position with the translation of one word in the Greek text. The first three words of verse 27 are “At that time....” This phrase translates one word that simply means “then.” It denotes the next event in the sequence, but it does not necessarily mean “at the same time.” The time of His return simply follows all these other signs. They point to the season, the age of His coming, but they do not fasten down the exact time reference.

I mention this, because a number of skeptics in the last century and a half have argued that Jesus was mistaken in His predictions of the end of the world, that He taught that everything was going to come to an end in that generation, and that something went horribly wrong. Instead, such conclusions are horribly wrong. Much that had been foretold was fulfilled in the first coming of the Son of Man. All will be fulfilled in God's time.

3. *Jesus told His followers that when they observed these nature-shaking events to “stand up and lift up” their heads, because their “redemption” was “drawing near.”* Rather than fainting from terror with the rest of humanity, the followers of Jesus should look ahead with eager anticipation of His return.

Insight: When the heavens and the earth are shaken to their foundations, those who belong to Christ can prepare to witness His return in glory.

**I—It is easy to attach our security to something that is not really all that secure, isn't it?** We have learned over the past few years that some of the things you take for granted can dissolve before your eyes in the course of a morning. What can we cling to at such times? Where does our true hope really lie? What can we hold on to when every handle and grip that we can see is beyond reach? Our ultimate viewpoint makes all the difference in the world.

Professor and journalist Terry Mattingly writes:

“[In his talks, author Phillip Johnson quotes] the Gospel of John, which states: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.’

“After reading this, Johnson asks: ‘Is that true or false?’

“Then he turns this Scripture inside out and creates a credo for use in sanctuaries aligned with the National Center for Science Education. It sounds like this: ‘In the beginning were the particles and the particles somehow became complex, living stuff. And the stuff imagined God.’

“After reading this, Johnson again asks: ‘Is that true or false?’

“Johnson argues that today’s debates over science, creation and morality are, literally, clashes between people who believe there is scientific evidence that God created man and those who believe there is scientific evidence that man created God.

“If there is no Creator who has a purpose for your life, then there is no such thing as sin,’ he said. ‘Sin would mean that you are in a wrong relationship to your Creator. Well, you can’t be in the wrong relationship with the particles. They don’t care. So you don’t need a Savior to save you from the consequences of your wrong relationship with the particles....

“When you give away creation, you have given away everything.”<sup>2</sup>

The doctrine of creation is the foundational teaching on which the doctrine of last things rests. Ultimately, it is the *Creator* Who will call all things to His own planned conclusion.

### III. A VISION OF THE END OF THE AGE INCLUDES A CALLING TO BECOME READY. 21:29-38

1. *Jesus foretold that the shaking of the natural order should serve to warn His followers that “the kingdom of God is near.”* The ultimate development of these events serves as the sign of a changing season in the history of the world.

2. *Jesus assured His followers that His word would “never pass away,” even though the heavens and the earth does.* This was meant to be reassuring to His followers, that despite the disintegration of so much that the people of the world hold to as their source of security, His very word is all the security that His followers will need.

**\*\*SPECIAL NOTE on “This generation”:** Most of the dispute regarding this teaching hinges on one sentence. It is our verse 32. As the NIV translates, “*I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.*” There are two phrases in that sentence that are controversial. The first is “this generation.” Which generation? And second, what does “generation” mean? There are three distinct interpretations of this phrase. First, if generation means a period of approximately 40-60 years in which one group of people grow up and then die, then we have the first two options. (1) “This generation” could refer to the generation in which Jesus lived and taught. If it did, then His references in the passage are completely about the end of that age and not about the end of the *world*. “This generation” would refer to “the generation in which God considered Israel His covenant people.” A very good case can be made for this view, as has been done by R. C. Sproul in his book, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (published by Baker Books). Sproul reviews what is called a “modified preterist” viewpoint, which essentially argues that all the teachings of Jesus about “the end of the age” come to their fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

(2) “This generation” can also be taken to mean the generation in which the heavens are shaken and the Son of Man returns, which would be the Final Generation of the earth’s history. If so, then “all these things” that are yet to be fulfilled will happen in the final generation of the earth, culminating in the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though I have great respect for the argument made by R. C. Sproul and others for the “modified preterist” viewpoint, since it takes seriously the events that have transpired since Jesus gave this teaching, I hold this latter viewpoint. It appears that Luke has made a distinction in his inspired presentation between what has been fulfilled in the first century (Luke 21:5-19) and what will be fulfilled at the End of Time (Luke 21:20-38). This makes better sense of the balance of New Testament teaching on Last Things. The final generation of humanity will witness the shaking of the heavens and the earth and the parousia (the appearance in power and glory) of Christ.

(3) A final way of interpreting “this generation” is to take an alternative understanding for the word used by Jesus than how it is translated, “generation.” The first meaning in the Greek lexicon (dictionary) is the meaning “family” or “descent.” If translated by this first sense, the meaning of the sentence would be, “This *race* of people, the Israelis, will not cease to exist until the world comes to an end.” If you look down through history at how many times and in how many ways various groups of people have tried to exterminate the Jews, it is quite remarkable that they have a cultural identity at all! This is a cogent and

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2 Terry Mattingly, senior fellow for journalism at the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, from his column “Phillip E. Johnson, Rabbi,” Washington Bureau (4-17-02).

weighty argument, because it is based on the literal meaning of *genea*, the word used in the inspired Scriptures, which the NIV (and most other translations) translates “generation.”

So what does all of this mean for us today?

3. *Jesus called His followers to be morally and spiritually prepared in light of His certain return.*

Verses 34-36 call for moral uprightness, spiritual alertness, and a life of prayer.

Insight: We must not allow our “hearts” to “be weighed down” with ethical lapses, but rather we must “watch and pray” as the time draws ever closer for the fulfillment of the promise of Christ.

**I—Here is where the contrast of worldviews is the keenest.** If “particles” are all there are in the universe, then the moral and spiritual conclusion is simple: As has been stated for centuries, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die.”

If however, God exists—the Creator and Consummator of all outside of Himself—then the entire picture is different. We have a moral and spiritual beginning, a moral and spiritual nature. We will give account of our lives and choices to Someone (with a capital “S”).

We believe that the second option makes the most sense of the world as we know it. It makes the most sense in the story of Jesus Christ, which in all its dimensions from miraculous conception to resurrection can hardly adequately be explained by alternative interpretations.

Here is the difference.

Scenario 1: What if a set of parents left their four older children at home when they left for a trip. Before leaving, they said, “We are leaving. There is enough food in storage here to last you until you are old enough to get jobs. If you want money, just use this little credit card, and you can get all you ever want. We won’t be back, so have a good life. Goodbye.” How would the children behave? Would they be likely to take care or to destroy the home, to be careful how they spend money or to go wild?

Scenario 2: The same parents leave for a trip, knowing that they can’t take their four older children with them. They sit down with them and say, “We have stored up some food for you. If you use it carefully, it will last you until we return. Here are phone numbers of people you can call in case of an emergency. Also, we will be calling at 9:00 PM every evening until we come home. We aren’t sure how long our trip will be, so keep the house clean and behave yourselves until we get back. Here are the names of two people who will be dropping by from time to time to check up on you. Take care, and we will see you soon.” How likely, compared to scenario 1, are these children to go wild and tear the house up? Not very. Why? Because they know they are going to give account when their parents come home. They also know that they are being watched by others who represent their parents in the meantime.

*Take it home (applications).*

I. This is the truth about our world. We are not here without any standards or accountability. We will surely give account of ourselves to God, and we do have others who are watching out for our souls in the meantime (I am one of those, by the way).

II. Then how should we live? We should live with eager expectation of Christ’s return, with the knowledge that our labor for Him is worth all the sacrifice and pain, because He will reward us for it for all eternity.

III. Are we ready?

1. Have we turned away from sin and self-centeredness and turned to Christ?

2. Are we making choices and keeping relationships with the realization that we will answer to our Creator for them?

3. Do we need to bring our lives morally or spiritually up to date today?