

“HARD TIMES, NOT END TIMES”

November 16, 2025 -- Luke 21: 5-19
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Trying to understand the Bible when you don't know its history is like trying to understand a clock when you don't know about time. If a person has no conception of time, a clock will be meaningless. Likewise, if we have no conception of ancient and Roman history, the New Testament will be meaningless.

This is especially true of the passage under consideration this morning. It is long and, let's be honest, kind of rambling. It seems a little scary and it is full of metaphors and paradoxes that, if taken literally, make no sense whatsoever.

The words were, according to Luke, spoken by Jesus in Jerusalem in about 33 CE. Mark first wrote them down in about 70 CE and Luke has added to the story in his version which was written in southern Greece in about 85CE. About 50 years after the first Easter. Jesus was speaking to Aramaic and Hebrew speaking Jews. Luke is writing to Gentile Christians and a smattering of Jewish Christians all of whom speak and read in Greek.

Jesus is speaking about things that are going to happen in the future. But for Luke and his audience, these things have recently occurred. Jesus is giving his followers a warning. Luke is reflecting with his followers, remembering and theologizing about things that have happened about 15-20 years ago and may happen again.

Today, 2000 years later, we have to ask, “What was that thing that had happened?” What occurred in Luke's lifetime that was so profound and so scary, so earth shaking that Luke felt he needed to write something that would reassure and inspire these gentile Christians in Greece. What happened that compelled him to take pen in hand and write this great two-volume work we call Luke/Acts and tell his friends, once again, how their religion came to be and how their church was founded – through trouble, persecution, stoning, shipwreck, crucifixion and resurrection.

What is this something that has happened? What was going on in the world that drove Luke to his writing desk? Well, let's go to the archives and see what was in the headlines in those days, in the time that history has called the Pax Romana – the great Roman Peace:

- 9 The Roman Rhine Legions (Germans) mutiny, 4000 soldiers killed in the battle of Teutoburg Forest
- 14 Augustus Caesar dies – Tiberius becomes Caesar. German Legions mutiny again. 3000 killed.
- 16 Tiberius fears Germanicus Caesar (who put down both of the mutinies) is getting too powerful, has him killed.
- 26 Judea welcomes Pontius Pilate as first Roman Prefect
- 37 Death of Tiberius. Caligula becomes emperor.
- 40 Caligula marches with legions to English Channel under pretext of invading Britain. Collects shells, marches home and declares victory. Makes his horse a senator. Orders a statue of himself erected in the temple at Jerusalem.
- 41 Caligula killed by the Praetorian Guard. Praetorians declare Claudius Emperor.

- 49 Claudius expels all Jews from Rome (among these Jews are Priscilla and Aquila, Jewish Christians who are friends of Paul)
- 61-62 Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, leads revolt to free Britain from Roman oppression. 120,000 Britons killed by 5,000 Roman troops in Battle of Watling Street.
- 62 Parthians invade from east (Persia), defeat and capture a Roman legion
- 62 First eruption of Vesuvius, some small damage. Claudius dies, Nero becomes Emperor.
- 64 Great Fire of Rome. Blame put on Christians, 2500 of whom are executed. Paul and Peter probably killed in this purge.
- 65 19 senators executed for plot to kill Nero. Nero in a rage kicks his wife to death.
- 68 Praetorians, guard force Nero to commit suicide.
- 69 Civil War in Rome – 4 vie for throne - fire destroys Roman archives – Vespasian becomes emperor
- 70 Sensing a weakness in Rome, Jews revolt in Judea – Vespasian sends his son, Titus to put down the revolt with help of the Syrian legions – 1 million Jews killed, 600,000 taken to Rome as slaves. Jewish Temple destroyed by Roman troops. Over 1 million Jewish refugees flee to Syria, Greece and Asia Minor (Turkey)
- 72 Last Jewish strong-hold at Masada falls. 1000 Jewish rebels found dead by suicide.
- 76 Parthians invade Syria are repulsed by same legions who invaded Palestine to put down Jewish revolt
- 79 Eruption of Vesuvius. Pompeii and Herculaneum destroyed. 5000 killed. 10,000 homeless.
- 81 Vespasian dies. Domitian becomes emperor. Begins to enforce emperor worship which will peak from 90-95 in the “Reign of Terror”

Now, having lived through all or part of that, listen to this morning’s passage again.

- Verse 6 Concerning the temple, “not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”
- Verse 9 “You will hear of wars and insurrections.”
- Verse 10 “Nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom.”
- Verse 11 “Earthquakes, famine and plagues.”

While those listening to Jesus may have seen this as a prophesy or a prediction, those reading Luke’s words saw it as a trip down memory lane.

They had been there. They had seen or heard eyewitness accounts of Vesuvius. They had read the news of the Germanic mutinies, the Parthian invasion and the Iceni revolt in Britain. They had witnessed the Jewish revolt and seen the prisoners being led back to Rome in chains and received the thousands of refugees who had fled Judea, many of them Christians, but Jewish Christians, not gentiles like themselves.

And they had seen the hopelessness and despair etched on the faces of those who came, dragging, stumbling, falling into their churches and so deeply in need of help and aid.

IN SYNAGOGUES AND PRISONS

If all this wasn't enough, they also now find themselves under threat of persecution from two different directions. Until now, Christianity has been considered a sect of Judaism. But the Christians did not participate in the Jewish war against Rome. The first Christians were, like Jesus, pacifists. They did not believe in taking up arms against their fellow human beings and they refused military service.

So, the Jews are angry with them and feel that the Jewish Christians betrayed their fellow Jews.

On the other hand, the Romans did not differentiate between Jews and Jewish Christians. They were all Jews to them and all subject to prosecution and punishment for either being part of or sympathetic to the Jewish revolutionaries.

Jewish Christians were under threat from Jews and Romans. And, when they fled as refugees to Greece and sought sanctuary in the gentile churches there, they brought that threat with them. As gentile Christians, did Luke's church really want to open themselves to the accusation that they were aiding and abetting revolutionaries? But, could they just turn their backs on their fellow Christians in need?

It was a dilemma and a serious one at that. Luke offers the passage we have read this morning as a sort of reassurance, but not a simple or easy one. It is like what C.S. Lewis called, "a severe mercy."

HARD TIMES NOT END TIMES

These are hard times, he says. But they are not end times. Hard times come and go, they affect us, but they do not destroy or define us. Listen again...

Jesus and his disciples are walking around the temple in Jerusalem. It was probably the largest and most impressive building most of them had ever seen or would ever see in their lifetime. It was 144,000 square feet with walls over 90 feet high. Precious stones and metals had been built into the walls so that they glimmered in the sun. The marble that was used in the construction was so flawless that, from a distance, it looked like snow.

People whose prayers were answered in ways that they liked often brought gifts of gratitude and hung them on the walls of the temple where they would be left until the priests needed funds and then they would be sold

The stones of the building were huge even by modern standards, the largest measuring 90 feet by 10 feet by 12 feet. And, to top it all off, God lived there. Not in some metaphorical way but really lived there. It was his house.

So, Jesus shocks everyone when he rather offhandedly tells them that it's just a building. Even God's house is not immune from the ravages of time and human perversity. One way or another, from time or by misadventure, even this beautiful temple will fall down.

The disciples can't believe their ears. If such a thing can happen it would surely mark the beginning of the end of all things. If the temple goes everything must be going. The world will surely be coming to an end. So, they ask him if he knows when this is going to happen. Jesus answers but not by answering their question.

The destruction of the temple – which most of Luke's readers have witnessed firsthand or heard about from eyewitnesses – is not a sign of the end times, just hard times. Wars, insurrections, earthquakes, volcanoes and the famines and plagues that follow them are all signs of hard times, not end times.

What we Christians need to be thinking about, he says, is not about how we will face the end times but how we will face the hard times. And to instruct them, he offers some warnings.

WARNING: HARD TIMES AHEAD

The first warning is against demagogues.

HL Mencken said, "Demagogues are people who say things they know aren't true to people they know are idiots." That's a little simplistic and maybe a bit too harsh. I prefer the definition of a demagogue as "a person in a position of influence or power who exploits emotions, prejudices, and simplistic solutions to gain popularity and undermine democratic norms."

There will be those, says Jesus, who try to feed on your fears so they can gain power for themselves. They will say to you, be afraid. And they will say, I can save you. And they will say, trust in me.

Do not go after them, Jesus says. Our hope is not in human beings no matter how attractive or powerful or charismatic they are and how much they promise or offer to us. Our hope is in the Lord God, and our trust is in him.

The second warning he offers is against things.

God does not really live in the temple, or in anything built or made by human hands. Our salvation is not centered in the things we own no matter how beautiful they are or how good they make us feel. In fact, our salvation is not to be found in anything we make or do. Not in our possessions or in our behavior, not in our good deeds or in our good intentions, not even in our proper theology or in our appropriate liturgy.

Our salvation is in the Lord God as he comes to us in Jesus Christ.

The third warning he offers has to do with persecution and this is a tough one. Are you ready?

First, he says that if you are doing your faith right, if you are bearing witness to Jesus Christ in your words and your deeds, if you are being visibly and identifiably Christian you are probably going to make somebody mad.

Several years ago, journalist Juan Williams was fired from his job with NPR because he made some statements about being afraid of Moslems who dress in traditional garb. What most people didn't hear was the interview he gave the next day where he added that he didn't really trust *anyone* who "wears their religion on their sleeve."

So, apparently, he doesn't trust priests, nuns, Hasidic Jews, any Jews who wear yarmulkes, the Amish, Christians who wear crosses or those Jesus t-shirts we buy from the youth group. In fact, I guess, if you are giving any kind of evidence that you are a Christian person – what the Bible calls witnessing – Juan Williams doesn't trust you.

Well, Juan ain't alone. The fact is, our culture tends to be distrustful of anyone who takes their religion so seriously that you can actually tell that they have one.

And Jesus says we are to expect that. That's the way it is. If we aren't being persecuted for our faith, why aren't we? Is it possible that no one can tell that we have one?

People who have a visible, identifiable Christian faith are probably going to, from time to time, make other people mad. How are we supposed to prepare for that?

Well, we aren't. There is no defense for being a faithful Christian. The only explanation for Christian behavior is that we are Christians. The way to meet hard times, says Luke, is to celebrate them as a great opportunity to testify. It's not when you make the touchdown that your witness has power, it's when you don't. It's not when you win the award that your witness is profound, it's when you don't. It's not when your life is successful and comfortable and easy that your faith makes a statement, it's when you are struggling in the midst of failure and heartache and difficulty.

And then he ends with a paradox. A paradox is a statement that looks like a contradiction but is, in fact, a profound truth.

Verse 16 – "and they will put some of you to death."

Verse 18 – "but not a hair of your head will perish."

How can both of these be true?

Some scholars tell us that slaves taken in war – male and female – had their heads shaved in order to humiliate and identify them. Christians who did not participate in the Jewish revolution would avoid this humiliation. They might be killed for being Christians, but they would not be slaves. They would retain their dignity.

Others say, and I tend to agree with this group, that this paradox was just Luke's way of saying that even death does not worry us. Even if hard times become so hard that we die, it's okay. We may like our lives, but we do not love them. And we certainly don't love our lives to the point that we would betray our integrity and our religious faith to save them.

If we die, we die...and we go and live with Jesus.

It is not, he concludes, by violent resistance that our lives are made pure. It is not by our cleverness or our glib rhetoric that our lives are made authentic. It is not by our possessions, our achievements, our theological correctness or even our moral/ethical superiority that our souls are saved.

No, it is by God's grace and our endurance in hard times, and the witness that endurance offers to the world, that our lives are blessed and our souls made rich.

AMEN