

Luke's Gospel: Chapter 21

Jesus warns of Jerusalem's destruction and his return

Introduction to Luke 21 and Matthew 24

Luke 21 is one of the most important prophetic passages in the New Testament, and also one of the most widely misunderstood. Many people assume that verses 1 to 24 are simply Luke's version of the 'Olivet Discourse' of Matthew 24 v 1 to 28 (and its parallel passage in Mark 13 v 1 to 27), but there are some notable differences between the Luke and Matthew/Mark passages.

Firstly, they represent two different addresses, given in different settings, to different audiences. Luke 21 v 37 tells us "And every day [Jesus] was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet." Luke 21 records a *public address* given in the temple grounds during the day time. But Mark 13 v 1 to 4 tells us that "as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!' And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.' And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then follows the 'Olivet Discourse', which was a *private briefing* given to an 'inner group' of four disciples (Peter, James, John, Andrew) on the Mount of Olives, at night.

Secondly, the four disciples ask Jesus two questions (Matthew 24 v 3): Jesus says the temple will be completely destroyed, so the disciples want to know when this is going to happen, and what will be the sign of his coming and of the end of the age. Matthew does not record Jesus' answer to the first question, but Luke effectively does so in verses 5 to 24 of Luke 21. Jesus then answers the second question by describing a group of signs including: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences" (Luke 21 v 10, 11), and Matthew adds, "All these are but the beginning of the birth pains" (Matthew 24 v 8).

But then in Luke 21 v 12, Jesus says, "but *before* all this", and he goes on to describe what happens *before* these signs occur, whereas in Matthew's (and Mark's) account Jesus says, "*then* they will deliver you up to tribulation" (Matthew 24 v 9), and thus describes what happens *after* these signs. So Luke focuses on the *near-future* destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70 and warns his *mainly Gentile* readers (Luke 21 v 24), whereas Matthew's focus is on the *distant-future* rise of Antichrist and Jesus' warnings specifically to *Jews* (Matthew 24 v 20) during the 'great tribulation' (Matthew 24 v 21).

Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem (Luke 21 v 1 to 24)

"Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them" (v 3) – Jesus' principle shows us that before God, the spirit of giving determines the value of the gift more than the amount. God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9 v 7).

- In verses 1 to 4, what does Jesus look for in those who give for his work? See 2 Corinthians 8 v 12.
- What are the 'signs' described in verses 8 to 11? Is there evidence that such events have occurred throughout history, and are taking place today? Do you think there is a link with the 'four horsemen' in Revelation 6 v 1 to 8?
- What dangers and problems will confront Christ-followers during these troubled times (verses 12 to 19)?
- Jesus speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem as "days of vengeance" (verse 22). So what was its cause? See Luke 13 v 34, 35; and Luke 19 v 41 to 44.

[MORE OVER...]

The temple was originally rebuilt by Zerubbabel and Ezra (Ezra 6 v 15), but greatly expanded and improved by Herod. It was the centre of Jewish life – it was customary to swear by the temple (Matthew 23 v 16), and speaking against the temple could be considered blasphemy (Acts 6 v 13).

“There will not be left here one stone upon another” (v 6) – some 40 years after Jesus said these words, there was a widespread Jewish revolt against the Romans in Palestine, but Rome crushed the rebels. In 70 AD the city of Jerusalem, including the temple, was destroyed by the surrounding Roman armies. When Jerusalem fell, the surviving Jews fled to the temple because it was the most secure building in the city, but Christians fled to the mountains, as Jesus had instructed (v 21) and so escaped. Roman soldiers surrounded the temple, and it is said that one drunken soldier started a fire that soon engulfed the whole building. Ornate gold detail work in the roof melted down into the cracks between the stone walls of the temple, and in order to retrieve the gold the Roman commander ordered that the temple be dismantled stone by stone...

“But before all this they will... persecute you” (v 12) – this is true both of the time preceding the destruction of Jerusalem and the time preceding the ultimate return of Jesus in glory. Disciples will be persecuted, but they must not regard any season of such suffering, no matter how severe, as a specific sign of the end.

“Delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons” – this indicates persecution from both religious and secular sources: disciples of Jesus must expect both. “This will be your opportunity to bear witness” (v 13) – from the Book of Acts onwards, there have been countless times when persecution has given Christians the opportunity to preach and give testimony to those they could otherwise never reach with the gospel message, such as “kings and governors”. “I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand” (v 15) – Jesus promises special help to his people in such circumstances.

“For these are days of vengeance” (v 22) – the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 AD was complete. History records that 1.1 million Jews were killed and another 97,000 were taken captive in one of the worst calamities ever to strike the Jewish people. The Romans eventually renamed the city Aelia Capitolina.

The coming of the Son of Man (Luke 21 v 25 to 28)

“Signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations” (v 25) – Jesus talks about aspects of his ultimate return and the end of the age. This total chaos and calamity is described in Revelation Chapters 6, 8, 9, and 15 to 18. All this will culminate in the return of Jesus, coming with his church to the earth.

“When these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (v 28) – Jesus assures believers on the earth at that time to be ready, because the time of ‘great tribulation’ they experience will not last forever, but Jesus will return in glory soon.

The lesson of the fig tree (Luke 21 v 29 to 33)

The fig tree was a common fruit tree in Israel. It is mentioned many times in the Old Testament, as a description of the abundance of the land. In passages such as Jeremiah 24 v 4 to 7 and Hosea 9 v 10, fig trees are specifically used as a representation of Israel, and Jesus may be alluding to this. However, in verse 29 Jesus says “look at the fig tree, and *all the trees*” – indicating that in this public address to a more general audience, Jesus’ emphasis is on the way the fig tree follows reliable growth cycles related to the seasons.

Watch yourselves (Luke 21 v 34 to 38)

“But watch yourselves” (v 34) – we must watch, because there are certain things that will make us unprepared for the day of Jesus’ return – “dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life”. They make our hearts “weighed down”. “Praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place” (v 36) – Jesus told his followers to pray. The good news is that we don’t have to go through the calamity that is coming: Jesus will take as many as are ready, before the ‘great tribulation’ begins...

- In what practical ways can we be alert for Jesus’ return? See 2 Peter 3 v 10 to 14.