

When You See Jerusalem

Luke 21:20-24 | September 5, 2020 | Bryce Beale

We are all familiar with that facet of God's brilliance in the Old Testament displayed in prophetic words.

"I am God," he says through Isaiah, "and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'"¹

God long ago spoke to our fathers through the prophets, and all that he predicted he fulfilled.

But God's brilliance goes further.

For not only did God predict by word and then fulfill what he had said but, being sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, to show his wisdom and majesty he also predicted by deed, or by event, or by thing, and then fulfilled. There is such a thing as a prophetic event or prophetic thing which, like a prophetic word, is always fulfilled by God to the fullest.

We call these prophetic events or things *types*.

You already know many of them from the Old Testament. Think of that Jewish celebration of the Passover, a reminder of God's liberation of the Jewish nation from Egypt, accompanied each year by the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb. That lamb, its blood at first smeared over the wooden beams of the Jews' doorframe, was a type. It was not a word—it was a thing, a lamb. And it was part of an event, the Passover, the atonement of Israel's sins by its sacrifice.

Yet hear that prophet, that man even more than a prophet, John the Baptist cry in the wilderness with his finger pointed at Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"²

See that Lamb hung upon the beams of the cross, his blood smeared across them to atone for the sins of his people. Was he fulfilling prophecy? Yes. But not just prophetic words from the Old Testament. He was fulfilling also a thing, and an event—the

¹ Is. 46:9-10 (ESV).

² John 1:29.

Paschal lamb and the Passover. That lamb was a type of Christ, fulfilled by him.

Because God not only speaks in our world but controls every element of it, he in his creativity has chosen to predict the future not only by what he says, but also by what he does, by things he has created and events he has brought to pass. The Old Testament is full of such types to show the glory of the one who painted them on the canvas of history.

As we continue through the Olivet Discourse, Jesus tells us about another of these types that predicts the future. The type in this case is the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which Jesus predicts by his words, but which itself is a prediction of the end of the world, a type of end of the age.

Let's see the creativity of God as he prepares for us a glimpse into the future by means of an extraordinary event in the past.

LUKE 21:20-24

We said when we began chapter 21 of Luke, this Olivet Discourse, spoken from the Mount of Olives just east of Jerusalem and overlooking the temple, that an important principle would guide us through this chapter: some of what Jesus says in this chapter applies to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and some applies to the end of the world—and sometimes Jesus speaks of A.D. 70 as a picture or shadow of the end of the world. This whole chapter, after all, is Jesus' answer to his disciples' question about "when"—when will the temple be destroyed, and when will the world be destroyed.

So far we have heard Jesus speak mostly of the present age leading up to the end of the world. But now his focus shifts more directly onto A.D. 70. But he is not interested only in the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple of that time; no, he fixes our gaze on the destruction of Jerusalem *as a type* of the end of the world. A.D. 70 is a picture, a foreshadowing of the great events which conclude this age, the judgment which purges the earth of all wrong and concludes with the universal and physical reign of Christ.

What is more, when Jesus talks about the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 in our passage, he moves from what will happen just before

the fall, to what will happen when the fall takes place: before and during the fall of the city.

So we will consider this picture of judgment under those same headings—what precedes the judgment, and what the judgment looks like when it takes place. And as we observe the Jerusalem of 2000 years ago, we will see in that picture, in that type, the Jerusalem to come and the end of this age.

Before

We begin then with what will take place before Jerusalem's fall in A.D. 70.

See once more verses 20-22:

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 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, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written.

End of Jerusalem

Since this desolation of Jerusalem is a picture of the end time, we need first to look at the picture. What is Jesus saying, first, about what preceded Jerusalem's fall in the first century?

He says that before Jerusalem was destroyed, the city would be "surrounded by armies."

This is of course what took place. In the days of Jesus, the superpower Rome had ruled over Palestine for about one hundred years, extracting taxes from the people and in many ways making difficult the lives of the Jews. As Americans we know of course how frustrating taxation without representation is, as our own history attests.

A few decades after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the Jews therefore rebelled against their Roman overlords. They were successful at first, but no one could defy Rome at her height with impunity. She returned and under General Titus besieged the Holy City. The Roman armies of Titus surrounded the city so that none could escape.

The Jewish historian Josephus, who was himself involved in the revolt on the Jewish side, later claimed that when the Romans finally took the city, they slaughtered one million Jews and took 100,000 away to captivity. These may be exaggerated numbers, but they show something of the bloodshed and “desolation” that overtook Jerusalem. As our text says, “these are days of vengeance.” It is hard to imagine human slaughter on this level, accompanied by the massive ruin of property and the destruction of Israel’s greatest structure, the temple.

Yet this ancient event was not an accidental oversight on the part of God. It occurred, verse 22, “to fulfill all that is written.” God himself had come to his people in his Son, Jesus Christ, and they rejected him. The Old Testament term for turning away from the living God to other pleasures and desires and sources of help is idolatry. Jesus’ generation chose the idols of their prestige and comforts over God himself and, by the end of the passion week, they cast God out and kill him, saying in their hearts, “We will not have this man to rule over us.”

God had predicted by word at many places in the Old Testament what the result of idolatry would be. Take, for example, this prediction in Leviticus 26:

But in spite of this you will not listen to me, but walk contrary to me, then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and I myself will discipline you sevenfold for your sins. You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters [something that, according to Josephus, happened during the siege of Jerusalem]. And I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars and cast your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols, and my soul will abhor you. And I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas. And I myself will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it. And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.³

³ Vv. 27-33.

Jesus makes clear, just as he did in chapter 19 when he entered Jerusalem, that this city which would not have her king would suffer divine punishment.

And this punishment would be so severe that any who feared God and respected the word of Jesus, like those Egyptians of old who listened to Moses and brought in their animals before the plague of hail came, should run away quickly. Verse 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.”

The early church historian Eusebius claims that the early church actually obeyed this injunction, fleeing just before the fall of Jerusalem northward to a city called Pella.

This then is the picture of what preceded Jerusalem’s fall.

End of the world

But how does this picture point us to the end of the world? How is it a type, a shadow of the judgment that we are still today awaiting?

Well, it is clear that it must be a shadow of things to come because, for one thing, in the parallel account in Mark Jesus adds, “For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved.”⁴ Jerusalem’s fall was great, but not that great.

Even earlier in Luke, Jesus gave the same commands to flee but clearly in reference to the end of the world. He said in chapter 17, “On that day [when the Son of Man is revealed], let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back.”⁵

So what Jesus said must precede Jerusalem’s fall was only a type of what must precede the end of the world. We know that at the end of this age, after God’s people are taken up to be with him, seven years of tribulation follow, apparently concluding once

⁴ Mark 13:19-20; see also Matt. 24:21-22.

⁵ V. 31.

again with Jerusalem being surrounded by her enemies. What happened in A.D. 70 points forward to the time when Jerusalem is surrounded again at the end of the age by those armies led out to war by the devil and the Antichrist.

The details of that day are not all known to us, but Zechariah seems to be speaking of them when he, in chapter 14, writes,

For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east...⁶

How this battle relates to Armageddon is hard to know—it is possible that the battles take place at the very same time as part of a larger battle or campaign under the leadership of the Antichrist.

So then, as Jerusalem was besieged in A.D. 70, so the city will be besieged again at the end of this age.

During

This moves us now beyond what precedes the fall of Jerusalem to the fall of Jerusalem itself. See this described in the remainder of our text, verses 23 and 24:

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. 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.

End of Jerusalem

Let us start again with the shadow, the fall of Jerusalem in history.

Jesus pronounces, in the Greek, a “woe” on pregnant women and new mothers at the time of the siege of Jerusalem. This is not at

⁶ Vv. 2-4.

all to disparage the honorable role of motherhood—it simply points out what any mother knows: it is difficult to protect young ones in times of trouble and it is difficult to see them suffer.

The distress upon the land of Israel I have already described, as well as the wrath against the people. Jesus elaborates with these words: “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.”

Think a moment on your own fears as we draw near another presidential election. If you watch news media especially, you are probably quite concerned that people who do not share your worldview and do not fear God may take the reins of the country and do harm to God’s people.

Now multiply the fear you feel by many thousands of times, and you will have the dread which must have fallen on the Jews in A.D. 70. Rome, a nation that did not fear God and that had upon its hands the blood of millions of innocent men and women, broke through the walls of the city and devastated it. Those who were not put to the sword were taken away to a foreign land with strange gods. There was very little silver lining to be found in this judgment of God.

[The end of the world](#)

But we who believe in Christ, we see the silver lining when we remember that the judgment of Jerusalem, terrible as it was, God intended to be only a picture, a shadow, a type of the coming judgment and renewal of all things.

Our attention is pointed forward in this way by the text itself, actually, for see how it ends: “and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

When are the times of the Gentiles? They are right now. We are living in them. For so many years as chronicled in your Old Testament God’s dealings with mankind were centered on Israel, his chosen nation. But when Israel rejected her Messiah, God used that rejection to open the door for the non-Jewish Gentiles to be saved through that Jewish Messiah, and grafted into the family of God.

Paul in Romans 11:25 puts it in this way: “Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”

A partial hardening has happened to Israel *until* God saves all those non-Jewish persons he intends to save—us!

You and I deserve no better than those who dwelt in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. We too have traded the glory of the immortal God for images, for idols, for our own pleasures and desires, natural or unnatural. All of us have gone our own way.

And though some today may trick themselves into the thought that God will not judge them for turning away from him, the picture of Jerusalem’s fall stands in history as a never-ending reminder of the judgment yet to come. No doubt the Jewish people thought they were safe after they had crucified Jesus. They saved their positions, they preserved their inner idols against his onslaught of them.

But in killing their Messiah, they only sealed their own judgment.

Where will you flee? To the mountains? Where will you hide from the wrath of God that is coming upon this earth for its sins? Will you call out for the rocks to cover you, to hide you from the wrath of the Lamb enraged?

There is only one place for you to flee, any here who see the picture of God’s judgment and who respect the words of his Son. Flee to the Lamb. If you run from him, you will not escape him; but if you run to him, he will take you in.

His blood still stands smeared across the doorframe of the cross. Every judgment reserved for this world, which will certainly come and will not delay, every horror will pass you over, if you have taken refuge in the Lamb, and have a claim to his blood.

Do not wait. God has patiently waited for two thousand years, holding forward the fall of Jerusalem as a warning to all the Gentiles not to reject this Messiah, not to suffer this same fate.

If you feel your sin and fear God’s wrath, to you the word of God points its finger at the one Savior of mankind and says, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”