

# When Will These Things Be?

Luke 21:5-9 | August 23, 2020 | Bryce Beale

For we know [writes Paul] that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.<sup>1</sup>

Creation groans—every tree, every rock, every hill and valley, every star and planet. God subjected this world to futility, and enslaved it to corruption. So, creation groans for relief.

And, adds the apostle, you groan for relief too. If you have the Spirit of God within you, you groan for the end of wars and the conclusion of tumults. Like the world you inhabit, you know all is not right.

But, you also know that just around the bend ahead, it will be. You are not suffering aimlessly down into a pit; you know that the painful steps you take are steps upward, in a definite direction toward peace and paradise.

Like Jonah from the gut of the fish you pray,

The waters closed in over me to take my life;  
the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped about my head  
at the roots of the mountains.  
I went down to the land  
whose bars closed upon me forever;  
yet you brought up my life from the pit,  
O LORD my God.<sup>2</sup>

Yet you, O LORD my God, *will bring up my life from the pit!* Yet you. Pain, yes—yet you. Groans, yes—yet you will bring relief.

Pandemic, certainly—yet, Lord, you will redeem the suffering of today and produce out of it a happy outcome, so that your people

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 8:22-23 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Jonah 2:5-6.

will say with the corrected prophet, “Salvation belongs to the LORD.”<sup>3</sup>

These are good words, aren’t they? You groan inwardly because of the pain of this world’s brokenness, but the promise is that this world will not always be broken, and therefore you will not always feel pain, and therefore your groans will give way to sighs of relief.

The one question this raises for us all, of course, is this: when? How long, O Lord? The sun will break over the horizon—but how far are we into the night, and how far away is the morning?

Two millennia have passed since the clouds received our Savior, and still we are waiting to see him come just as he departed. When will we see him? When is the restoration of all things?

That is actually the question Jesus is asked in our text today, and the question he begins to answer.

Jesus has silenced his opponents in the temple on this the final week of his life, and this day he is walking out of the temple eastward, toward the Mount of Olives. As he does so, the following incident occurs:

#### **LUKE 21:5-9**

We know from the other gospel accounts that Jesus’ disciples point out the temple to him on their way out of the temple and that, afterward, it is specifically Peter, James, John, and Andrew who ask when. And these four ask “when” while they are alone with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, a hill just east of Jerusalem from where the temple would be in view.

Therefore we call the long answer Jesus gives the “Olivet Discourse.” This discourse or speech occurs here in Luke 21, as well as in Mark 13 and Matthew 24 and 25, and it is one of the most important passages we have concerning the return of Jesus.

In each of the Synoptic Gospels the discourse begins the same way—as Jesus leaves the temple, he foretells its destruction. So let’s begin in our passage with this incident, which is the reason

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<sup>3</sup> v. 9.

that the disciples ask “when,” which is the question that launches us into the Olivet Discourse itself.

## The question

We begin then with the situation which gave rise to the question.

See the situation again in verses 5 and 6:

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

The first temple was built in Jerusalem by Solomon, the son of David. He was a rich king and it was a glorious temple. But, that temple was destroyed by the Babylonians about six hundred years before the time of Jesus.

Not long afterward the temple was rebuilt, but it was far less impressive than Solomon’s. It continued in this smaller version for several hundred years until Herod the Great, around 20 B.C., began to renovate it. The temple renovation would take more than eighty years—when Jesus looked at it, the renovation was still underway—but in the end Herod’s temple would outdo Solomon’s in grandeur and splendor.

The disciples who are speaking in our text point out the “noble stones and offerings.” The Jewish historian Josephus claims that the immense white stones used to build the temple were about twice the height of a man and twice as long as a bus.

The offerings were of various kinds and decorated the temple. For example, parts of the temple were plated in gold so that, when struck by the sun, the building looked like the tip of a snowy mountain. Everything in this temple—its stones, its decorations, its buildings—cried glory!

Well, not everything.

When Jesus sees the temple, he sees the same thing he sees when he looks at the religious leaders in the temple: beautiful on the outside, but corrupt on the inside. And so like the great prophets of old, he pronounces judgment on the Holy City: “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not

be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Man looks at the outward appearance, the stones and decorations and buildings, and thinks all is well. But Jesus looks at the heart. And Jerusalem’s heart was far from him.

And so he foretells what will take place forty years after his death. In A.D. 70 the Romans will come to quell a Jewish revolt. They will succeed, sack the city, and burn the temple. Not one stone of the temple proper will remain upon another; only one outer wall, today known as the Wailing Wall, will remain.

This then is the occasion that produces the question that begins the Olivet Discourse. The question appears in verse 7: “And they asked him, ‘Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?’”

You or I might assume that the disciples only wanted to know the date of the temple’s fall—the answer in that case would be A.D. 70. But Mark makes clear that the disciples are thinking about more than just the temple. In Mark 24:3 the question is worded like this: “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

That is not more than they are asking in Luke—at least, Jesus takes their question to mean at least this much. Look at what he says at the end of verse 9 in our text: “but the end will not be at once.” That word “end,” *telos* in Greek, refers not to the end of the temple but to the end of the world. The “end of the age,” as the disciples state it in Mark.

This leads us to a principle that must govern us as we move into the Olivet Discourse itself. Without this principle, the discourse will be almost incomprehensible. Here is the principle: because the fall of the temple in A.D. 70 foreshadows the end of the world, Jesus in the Olivet Discourse will be talking both about the shadow—the fall of the temple—and the substance which casts the shadow—the end of the world and his own return. Jesus will not always come out and tell us which of these events he is talking about, which has led to quite a bit of confusion. But if we are careful we can distinguish between the two.

## The answer

With that principle in mind, let us now move to the way in which Jesus begins to answer his disciples' question. They want to know when—when will the temple fall, and when will the end of the age be?

Jesus will get to answering this question more directly, but he begins by answering it negatively. He begins by telling us when the end *will not* come.

## Do not be deceived

Verse 8: “And he said, ‘See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, “I am he!” and, “The time is at hand!” Do not go after them.’”

We first must ask ourselves, “Is this warning about the end of the temple, or about the end of the world.” We have no clear record of an individual rising up and claiming to be the Christ between the death of Jesus and the fall of the temple. There were false prophets who led the people astray, and perhaps they did so by means of messianic expectation. A certain Theudas came claiming that he could part the Jordan River—he could not, and he was slain with his followers. Then an Egyptian arose and claimed he could make the walls of Jerusalem fall down. He could not and, though he escaped, his followers were slain. Jesus could be warning about these false prophets who would precede the fall of the temple.

But it seems more likely in this case, since there are “many” who will come in Jesus' name and claim to be the Christ, and since they will also say “the time” is at hand—that is, the time of Christ's return and the end of all things—that Jesus is mainly speaking to us. To you, and to me, who live before the end of the world.

You who hear this, *you* must “see that you are not led astray” by those who come claiming to be the Christ, or those who claim to know the date of the world's end.

The last two thousand years have proven Jesus' prediction amply true. Many have come claiming to speak for God, and asserting that the end was near, even in their lifetime.

One recent example still fresh in our minds is Harold Camping, who passed away only seven years ago. He predicted that the Day of Judgment would occur on September 6, 1994. When it did not,

he moved the date to September 29 and then to October 2. A decade later he claimed Jesus would return May 21, 2011, which was afterward moved to October 21.

We know that Christ will return like a thief in the night—this means both that he can return at any time, and that none of us will know precisely the date of his return. These twin facts help to keep us vigilant as disciples, always ready for his return whenever it may occur. We must not get distracted by the many who believe they can, on the basis of cultural events, pinpoint the time of the world’s end. This has happened and will go on happening until Jesus really does return, and we would do better to busy ourselves with good deeds, with prayer, with Bible study, and with evangelism than to give our minds and hearts to end-time mathematical speculations.

So Jesus’ first command, in answer to the question “when,” is this: do not be deceived by those who claim to know exactly when.

#### Do not be terrified

He follows with a second command, in verse 9.

“And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.”

Again we ask, “Is this for them, or for us?” And here we must return to our principle before: it seems to be for them insofar as they foreshadow us. Wars and tumults have always been. In fact, the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was itself part of a war and tumult, when the Jews rebelled against Rome and Rome struck back.

But the fact that Jesus concludes with “the end will not be at once” means this certainly includes us, here before the end of the age, the *telos*.

What then is Jesus second command for us? “Do not be terrified.”

And this is not at all an easy command. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, of tumults and unrest, what is your first reaction? When you watch the news today and see the unrest domestically, combined with international threats from abroad, how do you feel? Terrified?

I cannot tell you whether the unique unrest and trouble we feel today is a mark that the end is just around the corner—there has always been unrest, and the end has always been just around the corner. But I can say this much: it is necessary, so do not be terrified by it.

Jesus says that those tumultuous events which precede the end “must first take place.” I dare not say COVID is a clear mark that Jesus will return tomorrow—but I can say at least this much, that Jesus would not return until COVID occurred. It, along with all the wars and tumults thus far felt by the world, “must first take place.”

Notice then the logic of Jesus’ command. Do not be terrified—why? “For [or ‘because’] these things must first take place.”

We have things quite backward today. We are terrified because these things are taking place; Jesus’ logic is just the opposite. Do *not* be terrified, because these things must happen before the end and consummation of all things.

Our world must groan before it sighs relief, before our adoption as sons.

You choose whatever tumult is troubling you now—in your life, in the world, anywhere—and you as a disciple of Jesus must obey his logic in this passage. You must cease to be terrified by it. Why? Because it is one more necessary stepping stone leading to paradise. It has to be, not fatalistically but because God has a purpose in what is transpiring.

This is no cliché.

Brothers and sisters, lift your head. You go through no fire that the Lord has not set, through no flood that God has not sent and that God does not control by his sea-parting power.

Go on groaning with creation, these are not easy times. But do not be tricked, and do not be afraid.

Just as surely as the temple fell in A.D. 70, so the world will fall with the gavel of the Judge of all the earth, and then the day will break for all of us who have been waiting through the night.