



Give Me an Unconquered Heart

Luke Series #53

Luke 21:5-24

David Sunday

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Luke 21 is our text for our next two sermons. It raises this question: Have you ever been disillusioned? Has something or someone you trusted in let you down? I remember a time as a young adult when I was disillusioned with a leader. It was a painful experience for me, but it was also necessary for my maturity. I had put someone on a pedestal where he didn't really belong, and I hadn't mentally allowed for the weaknesses and failures of his humanity. When this leader disappointed me, I was shaken for a while.

Sometimes we need to be disillusioned. The word in its most basic sense means to be freed from illusions. We need to be freed from incorrect ideas and trusting in things that appear to be true but are false. In this time and in our little part of the world, it's very easy to be living under illusions about the Christian life.

For instance, maybe you think that living under God's favor and blessing means that everything is going to go your way. Maybe you think that persecution, division, conflict, hatred and even death are abnormal Christian experiences. However, if that's how we think, we will be disillusioned by Jesus in Luke 21. With relentless love, He strips us of our naïve expectations and reminds us that being His disciple in this world is going to be fraught with peril. However, it will be worth it. Don't be alarmed or afraid when trouble comes.

An African bishop from the 20th Century, Festo Kivengere, says it well in his book, When God Moves in Revival, when he writes, "Don't imagine you can only be a Christian when everything is smooth. Christians shine better when everything is just the opposite. Your faith was born in blood and sweat in the loneliness of Calvary. You can stand any test."

The setting of our passage is in verses five through seven. Jesus had been teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. He had been there for a few chapters here in Luke, and He was finishing His teaching in the temple. The parallel passages in Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus came out of the temple, and that was when His disciples began commenting on the magnificence of this building. We see this in verse five, which reads, "*And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said [these words]...*"

You can imagine what it was like for these disciples, many who grew up in little villages in Galilee. The first time as a young child, they would have come with their parents to Jerusalem and seen this magnificent structure. The ancient historian, Josephus, said,

“The whole of the outer works of the temple was in the highest degree worthy of admiration, for it was completely covered with gold plates, which, when the sun was shining on them, glittered so dazzlingly that they blinded the eyes of the beholders not less than when one gazed at the sun’s rays themselves. And on the other side where there was no gold, the blocks of marble were of such a pure white that, to strangers who had never previously seen them from a distance, they look like a mountain of snow.”

How breathtaking it must have been the first time they crossed over and saw the city of Jerusalem, and that temple would have stood out as the high point of the city. However, Jesus was not impressed. That which is physically magnificent had become spiritually irrelevant. This city, Jerusalem, repeatedly rejected the prophets and corrupted the worship of God in this temple.

We read back in Luke 19:47 that, when God sent His own Son to teach there, the chief priests, scribes and principle men of the people were seeking to destroy Him. Here was God the Son teaching in the temple, and they were looking for a way to destroy Him. So Jesus told us in the parable in Luke 19 that God is going to destroy these tenants and give His vineyard to others.

This temple was now obsolete as a meeting place between God and His people. It was going to come under judgment, as was the city of Jerusalem. In verse six, Jesus predicted the demise of the temple, and He said these shocking words: *“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.”*

You can imagine if someone were to tell us that in the next three and a half decades a catastrophe will strike America and will be so devastating that the White House, Capital Building and Pentagon will all come crashing down to the ground. What a fearful prediction that would be for us! But it was much more ominous for Jesus’ disciples to hear this about the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus was prophesying a catastrophe of God’s judgment against a sinful people who had rejected His Christ.

Now, we can put too much value in buildings and places of worship. If so, Jesus wants to disillusion us of those false values. To whatever extent His own disciples were enamored with that temple, Jesus wanted them to know God’s judgment was coming. The temple was going to fall to the ground. Along with the judgment, however, great blessing would also come for those who trust in Jesus because He will become the New Temple, the One in Whom all the nations will gather to experience God’s presence and blessings and to offer God praise. We now as living stones are being built up into this Temple in our union with Christ as the head and the Holy Spirit is making us a dwelling place for God. This is better than the temple in Jerusalem.

Notice that, as Jesus spoke these words to the disciples, He was leaving this temple. He was physically walking away from it. It is clear from Matthew and Mark that He moved with His disciples to the Mount of Olives, and that's where He gave this discourse that is recorded in Luke 21. It's called the "Olivet Discourse."

If you think back in your Bible to the book of Ezekiel, there was a point when God's Old Covenant people also experienced His judgment. In chapters 10 and 11, in a very elaborate scene, the glory of the Lord departed from the temple. By the end of chapter 11 of Ezekiel's prophecy, the glory of the Lord had moved to the mount on the east side of the city, which is the Mount of Olives. Just as the glory of the Lord departed from the temple in Ezekiel, the glory of the Lord departed from this temple in Luke and moved to the Mount of Olives.

It would be natural for the disciples to equate the end of the temple with the end of the world—to see God's judgment on Jerusalem as a sign of His judgment on the whole earth, to think that these two things were going to happen simultaneously. So, in verse seven, they asked the big question, "*Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign these things are about to take place?*"

I'm going to spend the next two sermons unpacking the rest of this chapter. Before we go into the pastoral application for today, I want to take a step back and think a little bit about the chapter as a whole. There are some challenging interpretative questions that face us as we come to the Olivet Discourse, whether we're in Matthew, Mark or Luke. Pick any commentator on this discourse and they're probably going to say something similar to what Earle Ellis said: "This discourse has been the subject of more scholarly debate than perhaps any other passage in the Gospels."

They all say something like that so if you have any questions about it, you're not the only one. Part of the challenge in interpreting this chapter lies in the fact that it appears Jesus spoke about both the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in 70 AD (verses 20-24), and His powerful and glorious Second Coming, which we are still eagerly awaiting (verses 25 ff). On a surface reading of this passage, it appears Jesus was talking about both of these things. But then we go to verse 32 where we have this statement that is puzzling and somewhat difficult to interpret. It says, "*Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.*"

Some liberal people who do not hold to the inerrancy and authority of God's Word have argued that Jesus was simply mistaken. He didn't return in the first century. That generation passed away, as have many others, and was still waiting for the day to come when Christ will return. So they say Jesus just got that wrong. But that is not an acceptable option for believers.

Jesus is never mistaken. We trust in His authority. In fact, the thrust of this chapter should lead us to increased confidence in the words of our Savior because His prophetic insight into the future proved to be extremely accurate.

Some believers look at verse 32 and agree Jesus was not mistaken. However, they conclude that everything written in this chapter must have taken place in 70 AD, because it says, “... [T]his generation will not pass away until all has taken place.” They then conclude that the words about the coming of the Son of Man in great power and glory (verses 25 ff) need to be read more figuratively.

There are others who would say that the phrase “this generation” in verse 32 needs to be interpreted to mean something other than the generation to whom Jesus first spoke these words. We’re not going to spend a lot of time on this, but for those of you who are interested, I’m going to make a commitment now to write a Life Together article. It won’t be a term paper or a scholarly treatise. It will be a simple pastoral word on some ways that I’ve been helped to understand this verse in light of the broader context of this chapter. I’m thinking that might help some of us understand the next sermon better. I don’t want to spend a lot of time in the pulpit going over all the different options, so if you’re interested in learning more about that, read the newsletter article that, Lord willing, will come out this week.

Three Convictions about the Olivet Discourse

There are three convictions that have guided me in my study of this chapter and the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark. These are convictions that should guide all of us when we think about eschatology, the teaching about end times or last things.

1. The first conviction is that you must not be overly dogmatic.

There is room for disagreement amongst godly believers who hold to the trustworthiness of God’s Word and believe that Jesus was not in any way mistaken. Getting the interpretation of every detail in this discourse absolutely right is not a matter of primary importance; it’s a matter of secondary importance. I believe it’s possible for a godly, Bible-believing Christian who wholeheartedly believes in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and is looking forward to His return to look at this passage and come to difference conclusions than the convictions I presently hold.

2. God means for His Word to be understandable to us.

When we face a passage in God’s Word that is more difficult, we need to press in, be prayerful and thoughtful, engage our minds, study and not give up when it appears to be a little

more difficult. We need to have confidence that God wants us to understand vital truth from every portion of His Word.

I'm going to confidently tell you what I believe this passage is teaching, but, at the same time, there's no room for arrogance or divisiveness when it comes to how we hold our interpretations. I can think of few things more shameful than for believers to be arrogant and divisive with one another over arguments about our blessed hope. This teaching should be inspiring us to pursue holiness and filling us with zeal and love as we wait for the coming of our Lord. To take these truths and use them as a sword to wound, a club to beat or a pedestal to exalt us over another believer is shameful. We will not do that in this church. As we think about the glorious doctrines of the last days, we will hold to our convictions with confidence, but we will do so with charity and love for other believers who may have different interpretations. I trust that we are loving one another even with our differences.

I'm going to tell you one of my convictions about this passage and not everyone would agree with me. I believe it is incorrect to interpret this passage in such a way that all of it is fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. There are some very godly gospel teachers through whom I've learned much who do not deny the truth of the glorious return of Christ in the future; they just don't believe that Jesus was teaching that in this chapter. If any of them showed up in our church, I'd gladly let them preach the Word to you and even share their interpretation with you, and you would thank me for it.

However, as I read verses 25 and following, I find it unconvincing to hold that verse 27 — *“...the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory...”*—has already taken place. The same with verse 34 which says the day that will come *“...suddenly like a trap.”* Then we read about this day in verse 35, which says, *“For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth.”* This, I believe, is pointing us to the Second Coming of our Lord.

3. My third conviction is that I believe it is also incorrect to interpret this passage as if none of these events were fulfilled in 70 AD and are still awaiting future fulfillment.

As I read verses 20 through 24, it's clear to me that Jesus was prophesying events that took place in history in Jerusalem in the years around 68-70 AD. This was when Jerusalem was laid under siege by the Roman army under the command of Titus, the son of Emperor Vespasian. At the end of that siege, they torched the city of Jerusalem, tore the temple down stone by stone and caused a horrific slaughter. It's all a matter of historical record.

As I read this and see that Jesus prophesied it three and a half decades before it happened, I say, “Behold our God in His power to know the future!” He knows what no one else knows and He is the perfect, true Prophet.

So what's going on here in this chapter? Jesus had two horizons in view at the same time. It's like when you're driving out West and have made your way through the Great Plains. You're in that eastern part of Colorado and finally, on the horizon the Rocky Mountains appear. You're looking ahead and can see the first views of them. From a distance, you see these towering peaks. On the ground, those peaks are separated by maybe 70 or 100 miles, but from far off they look like they're right next to each other. As you get closer and closer, one of those peaks starts to loom larger and larger in your vision, and the ones in the background start to recede. But then as you finally make your way up to the top of those peaks, you look out and see the other peaks towering even higher. However, they're separated by a great distance.

Now, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was like that first mountain peak. It was closely related to the coming of Christ in judgment in the future. It was a picture of the end of the age and the beginning of the end. Both times in 70 AD and at the end of the age, God the King comes to judge the earth. The first time, 70 AD, marked the end of an age; the second time will mark the end of all ages. The disciples were inclined to think these two events were so closely related. That's why in Acts 1:6, before Jesus ascended, they asked Him, "*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*" And Jesus said, "*It's not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by His own authority*" (Acts 1:7). But Jesus promised they would see Him return.

There's a distance between those two peaks. Jesus did not expect to return in this first generation. As He built His teaching in this passage, Jesus was concerned that we learn, as His disciples did, how to live in this present age—how to live in this world—before His coming and judgment. We should not be under any false illusions about what we should be expecting. Jesus doesn't want us to lose nerve, to be frightened, confused or thrown off mission. He doesn't want us to be disillusioned in our faith. He wants us to hold fast to our hope in Him, so He told us clearly in the verses leading up to verse 20 what the signs of this age are and what we should expect as disciples living in this world. If our expectations are not grounded in biblical reality, Jesus wants us to adjust those expectations so that we're not disillusioned in our faith.

What Should We Expect When We're Not Expecting the Return of Jesus?

In the minutes that remain, I want to ask this question: What should we expect when we're expecting the return of Jesus? What should we be looking for?

1. We should expect phonies but should not be surprised by them.

Don't be led astray. There will be phonies. There will be pretenders. In verse eight, Jesus 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.*"

Some of them are just eccentrics. I graduated from high school in 1988, and one of the most popular books that year was Edgar Whisenant's 88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988. I can still picture it. Jesus' return was supposedly going to be in the second week in September. I was a little shaken, wondering if it would really happen. September passed and there was a revision: 89 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1989. There have always been people like this. Jesus says, "Do not go after them." Anyone who thinks he knows when Jesus is returning, immediately dismiss that person; at best, he's an eccentric, not a reliable teacher.

Others will be more wicked. Cult leaders, like Jim Jones or David Koresh, will claim to be Messiah, gain a following and lead them like sheep to the slaughter. In the years between Jesus' resurrection and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, there were many false messiahs. Even as late as the time of Origen in 254, there were phonies making claims like Jesus predicted would happen here in Luke 21. Whenever you're dealing with eschatology, you need to be careful not to let the craziness come out. Be careful of contracting an airborne disease when you're talking about eschatology—diseases like eschatomania or eschatophobia. Watch out for these things. Do not be led astray.

What was Jesus doing here? Just a few days before His death on the cross, He was not thinking about what was ahead for Him personally. He was teaching God's Word until the very end and He was laying an example for us. There is not a day in our lives when we can afford to ignore teaching from God's Word. We need to be in the Bible. We need to be pushing ourselves to learn more of the Scriptures. When we encounter passages that are a little more difficult, we need to press in, dig deeper and sharpen our thinking, because that's what strengthens us to not be led astray in an age when there will be many seeking to lead us astray. Expect phonies.

2. We should expect calamities but should not be alarmed by them.

Verses nine and ten speak of wars and tumults among nations. Verse 11 speaks of earthquakes, famines, pestilences, terrors and great signs from heaven. What do these things tell us? They tell us that Jesus is coming, but they don't tell us when Jesus is coming. In fact, Jesus Himself tells us that when these things take place, we must not be terrified, because—look at the end of verse nine—"*the end will not be at once.*"

According to historian Will Durant, the truth is that war is one of the constants of history and has not diminished with civilization and democracy. In the last 3,421 years of recorded history, only 268 have seen no war. Don't naïvely imagine that this world is going to get better

and better. Jesus tells us these things are going to be characteristic of this age until the end. The world is in havoc and turmoil, and your mission in life is not to just make the world a better place than it was before you came. That's not your mission. Don't be naïve. Don't be so innocuous as to think that's why you exist. We can't make this world a better place.

Our mission as God's people is to proclaim the gospel whereby God will be gathering people into His Kingdom. When Jesus returns—when the King comes again—His Kingdom will cover the earth as the water covers the sea. This world will not just be made a better place, but it will be perfected by one Man—our King, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our mission is to preach His gospel that gathers people into that Kingdom. The gospel's going to keep going forward, even in a world where there is all this trouble and turmoil. Jesus said, "Don't be alarmed by these things."

3. We should expect hostilities but should not give up.

Look at verse 12, which says, "*But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.*"

Those things happened. We can even read about those things in the book of Acts. They have continued to happen throughout church history. Jesus is saying, "Don't think that everyone's going to love you and want to be your friend."

Here we are, the church in America in the 21st Century, and the world is not nearly as amenable and friendly to Bible-believing Christians as I think it was 50-60 years ago. We can be oversentimental about those days as well, but I think we're living in an era when, if you're going to follow Jesus and believe the faith He has once for all delivered to the saints, there is going to be a stark difference. There's a separation going on between the prevailing view of the world and biblical Christianity. It's not possible to blend in. I don't think it's sensational at all to expect that, as believers, we will face increasing hostility and even persecution if we are going to be faithful and loyal to Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "Do not give up in the face of that."

In verse 13, Jesus said to embrace this opportunity. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Don't shrink back. Don't think these are terrible times in which to live as the church of Jesus Christ. Rather, fill yourself up with the Word of God; be filled with the Holy Spirit; hold fast to the faith of the gospel; and recognize God is giving His church an opportunity to bear witness in our day.

I've been encouraged the last couple of days and even this morning after receiving an email from Steve and Darcy Palmer about our brothers and sisters in Ukraine. You've heard about the turmoil there, the revolution, the uprising and all the upheaval that's taking place. I

just read this morning of Valery and Andrew out in the public square proclaiming the gospel, handing out Bibles. This is their opportunity to bear witness. So don't give up in the face of hostility. Press on and be bold.

Note what Jesus said in verses 14 and 15. Don't worry about how you're going to answer everything. Yes, be prepared, Peter says, to give an answer (1 Peter 3:15). But when you're thrown into the crucible, Jesus says, "*Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.*"

Some preachers have tried to apply those verses to their folly, not preparing in advance what they're going to say, and thinking, "I'll just get into the pulpit without any study; the Holy Spirit will fill my mouth." Very quickly, most of them, including myself, would be proven to be foolish. It's not what Jesus said here.

However, what Jesus is saying is that when you're thrown into times of hostility and turmoil, never doubt that the Holy Spirit will be there with you. God's Word will be sufficient for you. You'll never lack knowing what to say.

As I read the book of Acts and see the church in turmoil, it's amazing that they were never at a loss for words. They were always ready to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. Look at Luke 21:16-18 and notice this wonderful paradox here. Verse 16 says, "*You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death.*"

Think about our brothers and sisters in Christ in Muslim lands right now. What happens when they follow Jesus? Many of them are even delivered up by brothers, parents, relatives and friends. Right now in the world today, some of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being put to death for their testimony for Jesus. They're not giving up.

Verse 17 says, "*You will be hated by all for my name's sake, but [verse 18, here's the paradox] not a hair of your head will perish.*" How's that? Some of you will be put to death, but not a hair of your head will perish. Why? Because your life is hidden with Christ in God.

The body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still.
His Kingdom is forever.

(A Mighty Fortress is Our God by Martin Luther, 1529)

So for you, believer in Jesus, it is not death to die. Death is your entrance into life and immortality forever. "Fear not!" Jesus is saying. "Yes, they will put some of you to death, but not a hair of your head will perish. That will just be the gateway to eternal joy for you."

Verse 19 says, *“By your endurance you will gain your lives.”* Whoever loses his life for the sake of Christ will find it and preserve it. Expect hostilities. Don’t imagine you can be a Christian only when everything is smooth. Christians shine better when everything is just the opposite. Your faith was born in blood and sweat in the loneliness of Calvary. You can stand any test. That’s what Jesus is saying.

4. Finally, we should anticipate strategic retreats but don’t be foolhardy.

Yes, you must be bold in the face of persecution. Yes, you must not give up but there will be times when, for the sake of the gospel, it will be God’s will for a strategic retreat. God does not demand His disciples to court danger—to walk straight into the face of death—if there is another path that would bring more gospel light into the world. Sometimes, Jesus says, “Flee!” Sometimes, Jesus says, “Head to the hills!” It’s strategic retreat.

That’s what Jesus says here in verses 20 through 24 to those who follow Him in Jerusalem. He says,

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.

Jesus was protecting His fledgling church from annihilation, so that, through them, the gospel can advance to all the nations. The early Christians in Jerusalem heeded their Savior’s warning. They were like Lot fleeing from Sodom. When they saw the advance of the Roman army, they knew the city’s desolation was near, so they fled across the Jordan River to find refuge in the city of Pella.

Phil Ryken writes,

Therefore, nearly all of the Christians who lived in Jerusalem escaped before the city fell. In the providence of God, their lives were spared so that they could carry on with the work of global evangelism. In fact, some of them later returned to Jerusalem with the gospel. This was all because they believed what Jesus said about the day of destruction.

It was strategic retreat so that the gospel of the Kingdom could advance into all the world.

A few centuries ago, there were some Reformed Protestant believers in Holland who fled from persecution in Holland to a city in Iowa that they named Pella, where they could worship God in freedom. Think of that whenever you see a Pella window. That city became a haven, a refuge, for believers who were fleeing persecution.

We're going to begin here next week looking more closely at the signs of the end, but this week's lesson is vital for us. We need to understand the times in which we live so that we won't be disillusioned by deceivers, calamities or persecution or thrown off mission.

Jesus, Who guides the future as He has the past, told us to expect these things. We can, therefore, say,

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.

(Be Still, My Soul by Katharina A. van Schlegel, 1752)

He will remain faithful just as He was in the first century. Do not be dismayed or alarmed by hostilities, persecutions or deception. Hold fast. As our elder, Ross Stern, puts at the bottom of his emails, "Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end."

I've been reading and meditating this week on a prayer by Thomas Aquinas. It's helped me a whole lot, especially this phrase, "Give me an unconquered heart, which no tribulation can wear out." I want us to pray this together as a response to Jesus' teaching to His disciples. We need courage; we need resolve. This comes from Him, so let's pray together.

"Give me, O Lord, a steadfast heart which no unworthy thought can drag downward; an unconquered heart which no tribulation can wear out; an upright heart which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Bestow upon me also, O Lord my God, understanding to know Thee, diligence to seek Thee, wisdom to find Thee and a faithfulness that may finally embrace Thee; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

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