

Part 75: Case Studies for Hope

Tyler Velin | Luke 21:20-38

November 12, 2023

In 1932, a reporter named Joe Williams crafted a headline which still looms large in sports history:
"RUTH CALLS SHOT AS HE PUTS HOME RUN NO. 2 IN SIDE POCKET."

It was game three of the World Series and Babe Ruth's Yankees were playing the Chicago Cubs. Ruth was up to bat, with the score tied at 4-4. Already with two strikes on him, Ruth was being harassed by the Cubs dugout. The iconic Lou Gehrig described it this way on the radio: "So what does he do? He stands up there and tells the world that he's going to sock that next one. And not only that, but he tells the world right where he's going to sock it, into the center-field stands. A few seconds later, the ball was just where he pointed, in the center-field stands. He called his shot and then made it. I ask you: What can you do with a guy like that?"

If you've grown up around sports you've probably seen some little leaguer emulate Ruth by pointing his bat to the center field fence. Today, in the book of Luke, Jesus calls his shot. He points to the horizon of eternity and tells us the glory that is to come. And the same question Gehrig asks is the same question we will wrestle with today: "What can you do with a guy like that?"

This is our last sermon in the book of Luke for this year as we take a brief break from our study for the holidays. Our text today takes us right up to Luke's crucifixion narrative, and we will begin the story of Jesus' passion in January.

Our passage today finishes a sequence that Luke began for us back in chapter 19 which records Jesus' teaching in the temple upon his entrance into the city of Jerusalem. If you remember the events of Luke 20, we saw a literally murderer's row of challenges for Jesus. So it seems fitting that Luke 21 is a murderer's row of challenges to the modern preacher.

For the skeptic, you might scoff that Jesus could have predicted anything except by random chance, and the idea that he's coming back as he said might seem outlandish to you. For the Christian, you might feel like your life seems so far removed from the plan of God, but Jesus would have you see your own role in it. And for many of us we may only want to squabble over the potential range of interpretations of Jesus' apocalyptic language here, but what Jesus wants to make clear, is clear. And more than knowing anything about what's going on in the world—Jesus wants you to focus on what's going on in your heart.

What can you do with a guy like that? You listen to him, you believe in him, and you trust him. **Christ will return, and we must be ready.** You may be paying attention to what's going on in the world and wondering if there's any hope? But here is your hope, Christ is coming.

We are going to see this in two parts today. First in verses 20-33 Jesus gives us **Two Case Studies of Hope and Judgement**. Then in verses 34-35 he gives us **Two Commands for Faithful Endurance**.

Last week Jesus predicted two things: the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem and the indestructible nature of the Lord's church. This week Jesus speaks more broadly about the destruction

of Jerusalem as a whole and how it's a sort of trailer for the greater judgement that will one day come on the whole earth.

This is our first point today: **Two Case Studies of Hope and Judgement.**

For the disciples both of these case studies were future—Jerusalem will be destroyed, and Jesus will come back.

For us, the first case study is history to us as we look back on Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD and the second case study is still future, even to us. But it's actually the perspective we have on case study one that gives us a unique hope and profound weight regarding case study two.

First let's examine Jesus' words regarding *the desolation of Jerusalem: (Luke 21:20)* "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near."

So here we see Jesus' consistent approach in the book of Luke: "When you know, you'll know." He doesn't spend much time explaining to his disciples when this is going to happen. He simply says, "When you are surrounded, know it's about to go down."

It's recorded for us that when the Commander Titus pulled up to the walls of Jerusalem he did so with more than 76,000 military personnel. To put that into modern context that's more than the standing military of nations like Canada and Australia—a huge force considering the population in Jerusalem was at most several hundred thousand residents.

Rome had brought gun to a knife fight, but Jesus prepared his disciples for this: **(Luke 21:21)** "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."

Jesus' care for us is consistent in two ways, he generally never tells us all that we would want to know, but he always tells us what we need to know. For the Christian the way of obedience is always more parts faith in Jesus than it is faith in the details. Here, when they probably would have like to know more—he gives them exactly what they need: Flee, don't go back, don't stand and fight.

Josephus tells us that those who stayed in the city started dying even before the official siege began. He remarks that Titus so tightly sealed off the city to starve out the residents that the streets were full of the dead, and those who were still alive "wandered about the marketplaces like shadows."

But sure enough history records that a large number of Jews obeyed of Jesus' command and fled to the city of Pella and were safe. For the Christian, the words of Jesus are always our safest place of escape.

Jesus makes it clear how they are to escape, but he also makes it clear why this is happening: **Luke 21:22-24**, "for these are the days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. 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."

Notice how Jesus ties all these future events, to past revelation. This is to fulfill God's word in the Old Testament. Regarding this judgement Paul quotes a passage in the book of Isaiah where the prophet says, "destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness" (Isaiah 10:22, Romans 9:27).

This judgement was God's vindication of his justice. He saved Israel by his grace and called them into fellowship with him—but they rejected him. They had all the external marks of faith—the law, the temple and Jerusalem—but they missed the heart of God's salvation.

Paul tells us why in **Romans 9:32-33**, "Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, "Behold I am laying in Zion a stumbling stone, and a rock of offense and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

If you recall a few weeks ago, Jesus used this same prophecy with the religious people in Luke 20 to show that he was the rock rejected by the Jews. The law, the temple, and the throne of David all pointed to Jesus but they were blinded. Remember the first time Jesus predicted the judgement of Jerusalem in **Luke 19:44** saying, "And they will not leave one stone upon another in you because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Josephus describes the ferocity with which the Romans did this: "...the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited."

He went on to describe how the Romans left a section of the wall and some towers, "to demonstrate to posterity what kind of city it was, and how well fortified, which the Roman valor had subdued...This was the end which Jerusalem came to by the madness of those that were for innovations; a city otherwise of great magnificence, and of mighty fame among all mankind." Visitors to Rome today can visit the massive Arch of Titus constructed in memory of the power of Rome.

But Jesus shows us here that this Gentile nation was nothing but God's tool. The destruction in 70 AD was a display of God's power not man's—God's kingdom not Caesars. But this trampling of the Jerusalem and the subsequent captivity among the nations introduces a new era in redemptive history that Jesus calls "the times of the Gentiles."

The current war in Gaza reminds us that we are still in this time—Jerusalem is trampled underfoot. The geopolitical history of national Israel is always fraught with resistance. But in this era of decentralized physical strength—God is redeeming a people of centralized spiritual strength. Jerusalem might be taken captive by the nations—but the nations are being taken captive by the gospel.

Paul says it this way: (**Romans 11:25**) "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." The Greek word (ethne) for nations is the same word for Gentiles—it simply represents those who are not Jews by blood.

God's plan is that in this church age, a people from the nations will be added to the promise of Israel not by blood or physical circumcision—but by the blood of Christ and a circumcised heart of faith in Jesus. Paul says that as the end nears, many ethnic Jews will be saved. But it won't be because they came back to Jerusalem. It will be because they come back to God through faith in Jesus Christ, Paul says, **Romans 11:23**, "And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power

to graft them in again.” In this way, as both Jews and Gentiles are united to God by faith in Jesus, Paul says—all Israel will be saved.

So how should we pray for Israel today? We should pray as we pray for Hamas and for Holland, Palestine and for Peru. We should pray that all would come to saving knowledge in Jesus. But we should also pray knowing that our hope in Jesus Christ has come to us through Israel and the promise given to them. We are grafted into their promise by faith, and we pray that they might be grafted back in by faith as well.

But it’s this prediction of judgement and salvation that leads us to greater sobriety and hope when we turn to the future ***Return of Jesus***. That’s our second case study.

Notice how the language shifts from being centered on “this people” to all people, and from Jerusalem, to the world. **(Luke 21:25-28)** "And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near."

Here Jesus draws for us the distinctions between the localized wars and rumors of war which typify our age and the sign of the end of the age. How obvious will it be? There will be signs in the celestial bodies over the earth: the sun the moon and the stars. There will be distress on land. There will be geo-political stress among the nations because even the sea and the waves will be churned up. Not only nationally, but individually people will be fainting with fear because of what is coming on the world itself. The very powers of heaven will be shaken.

To quote one philosopher, in this day you'll look out and say, "We got no food, we got no job, and our pets heads are falling off." Everything will be shaken. Why? Because out of the clouds, Jesus is returning.

And how is he returning? With power and great glory.

And here's the beautiful picture Luke just painted. In Luke 19, Jesus enters into the city of Jerusalem by descending the Mount of Olives humble and mounted on a donkey wherein he is opposed by Jerusalem, the temple and the scribes. But beginning in chapter 20 Jesus inverts the script. He predicts the condemnation of the scribes, the destruction of the temple and the desolation of Jerusalem and where does he end? With the Son of Man coming in power and in glory. No one will miss it. No one will misunderstand. One day the donkey is traded out for a war horse, and the earth will yield her praise.

What do you do with a guy like that? Whatever your view of Jesus is, it will be too small when Jesus comes back. Athanasius writing in the 4th Century reminds us today: “You will also know of his second glorious and truly divine manifestation to us, when he comes no longer in lowliness but in his own glory, no longer with humility but in his own magnificence, no longer to suffer but to bestow thenceforth the fruit of his own cross...no longer judged, but judging all according to what each one has done in the body, whether good or evil..."

He’s coming back with even more firepower than Rome. But he also comes with a greater offer of deliverance. When these things begin to happen, straighten up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. How often it is for us to look at our moment in history and faint with fear—to spend our times researching rumors that are more likely to result in well stocked bunkers instead of

bearing witness. But here is how the Christian stays straight—they fix their eyes on the sky—because that’s where our hope is. Our redemption is drawing near.

Jesus explains this tension with a short parable: **Luke 21:29-33**, "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Now the finer details of Jesus’ words here depend on what you think he means when he says “these things” and “this generation.” By these things does he mean those who are about to see Rome’s armies, is he talking about those who will witness this second coming? Or is he talking about “this generation” as a broader generation of those who live between these two events.

I personally favor that possibility because it seems to fit with what Jesus is saying. The main point he’s making is clear: the world will pass away, God’s people are held tightly inside God’s plan, and God’s word is the stable hope until everything comes to pass.

In other words we stand in a long line of people who say, “The end is near.” Peter himself says this in Acts 2 when he describes the events of Pentecost as inaugurating “the last days” of Joel chapter 2. And we speak of these times in this way because Jesus wants us to always be reminded of that.

It’s as if the church has been on a long road trip, and every time we pass a billboard of interest we say, “Are we there yet.” And Jesus says, “Almost. We’re almost there.” He tells us this so that we do not mistakenly think we’ve arrived, but he also tells us this so that we might not despair as we wait. We are almost there—and 70 AD reminds us that God always keeps his word. If your hope is in this world, it’s going to pass away, but if your hope is in Jesus who is coming back—that day will be everything you ever hoped for, even though the earth itself will tremble in fear.

Jesus prepares us for what will come so that we might better respond to the present. This is our closing point today: **Two Commands for Faithful Endurance.**

It’s natural for many of us to constantly examine the news because we don’t want to be duped. We don’t want to be lead astray—we want to be informed. But Jesus concluding commands here show us that if we don’t want to be mislead, then we should be more away of where those false witnesses typically arise: our own hearts.

While clarity on timelines might be difficult to discern, Jesus’ commands to us are not. First, **Luke 21:34-35**, “Be watchful of yourself lest your hearts be weighed down by drunkenness or dissipation and the cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the earth.”

Dissipation is the first century word for "hangover"—it’s how you feel when you’ve drunk too much. Jesus knows that even for Christians we might encounter the difficulties of “almost there,” and take pleasure and peace into our own hands. But this is a false peace that if left unaddressed will reveal the true hope of your soul when Jesus returns. But notice how Jesus describes a heart that pursues worldly pleasure in this way—he says it’s weighed down. The world promises levity but sin only reinforces gravity. This waiting period will weigh on you, but slavery to the world’s pleasures won’t help.

While my hope is that many of us don't struggle as frequently with drunkenness notice how Jesus places "the cares of this life" on the same level. While many of us do not turn to things which are overtly dangerous like drunkenness, how many of us are lead to inordinate anxiety about losing the things of this world, or inordinate affection in the things of this world.

It's easier to discern when we cross the line with alcohol, but often it's a lot harder to discern when we cross the line of false hope and heavy heartedness with things like family, romance, adventure, money, and hobbies.

This is really hard to discern, but praise God for us has given us the church to help us see what this looks like. I want to speak specifically to those in here who are in the last quarter of their life—model for us what it looks like to not let the nearness of death dull our duty as Christians. Set us an example that all of us live under the immediacy of Christ's return and that such awareness creates a zeal for holiness and a concern to not die before you die.

Church let us look to one another, and look to God's words and spend our time and our affections on things which cheer the heart and fuel our hope. Consider **2 Peter 3:11-13**

Having examined our hearts, what do we do? We stay awake in prayer: **Luke 21:36**, "But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

When we look at our world, we are going to see things we'd rather not see. When we look into our own hearts, we will see things that we'd rather not see. So when we pray, we should pray that we might endure to see what we want to see—salvation safe and sound before Jesus himself.

How often do you pray like this? Notice how Jesus is not just praying for our actions (that we may have strength to escape) but for our affections (and to stand before the Son of Man). Jesus wants us to pray for strength so that we can get where we've always wanted—to the feet of Jesus. The desires of the world will always seem big, unless Christ seems bigger. The end of the Christian motivates the endurance of the Christian and Jesus is assuming you might wrestle at times to see either of those in great clarity.

So what do you do? You pray. You ask God to give you a vision of Jesus worth escaping to. Theologians have often called this idea of standing before Jesus in glory as the beatific vision. When we stand before Jesus all the fears of the world will melt away. There will be no earthquakes, no famines, no tremors, terrors or trials. We will have the final and full rest that we tried to find under every rock and tree in this world.

John reminds us of this in **(1 John 3:2-3)** "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." That will be some day, church.

John Owen says it this way, "...the beholding of Christ is one of the greatest privileges and advancements that believers are capable of in this world, or that which is to come." But he goes on to say, "No man shall ever behold the glory of Christ by sight hereafter, who do[es] not in some measure behold it by faith here in this world."

In other words, Owen captures the thrust of our prayers and our watchfulness. If we want to endure, if we want to not be caught off guard, if we want to stand before the Son of Man and experience anything other than his judgement, if we want to see him with eyes of happiness instead of horror, we must see him by faith here.

That's our prayer. May nothing distract us from that truth. Jerusalem reminds us that judgement comes, but so does the path to Pella. Jesus is coming, and so is judgement. If Israel was judged for unbelief, so will the nations. But Jesus makes a way. Jesus is the temple in which we take refuge. He is the strong tower which cannot be toppled. He is the arc of true salvation and all who come to him will reach the golden shore and stand before him in his righteousness alone.

Jesus is coming, and now is the time to prepare. One day it will be too late, but today—we can flee together.

Dear church, let us endure well to the end. Let us straighten up, raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.

Hebrews 12:25-29.