

## I. Set Up

A. Welcome. Introduction. Hope you've been enjoying the playoffs, keeping your resolutions and growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and the other qualities that flow from a life with God.

B. Today we take up the first of two sermons on The Olivet Discourse – which is Jesus's comments about how the world ends. He was walking out of the Temple when one of his disciples commented on what an impressive building it was. He said, "Not really. It's certainly not going to last." That led to lots of questions on their part, which were followed by his answer – which is recorded in Matthew 23, Mark 13 and Luke 21. What Jesus said has been a topic of endless fascination. We will be turning there today. It is part of our study of the Final Chapters of Luke.

C. Right now....

## II. Intro

A. I was up in Wisconsin for most of the week, at a cabin writing. And while it wasn't a spiritual retreat per se, I pretty much uncoupled from life and most media. And so, as I was driving back down I turned on the news and, after a few days off, it struck me how negative so much of it was.

B. Both because of how we are wired, and the nature of journalism, it's the things going wrong that get reported. And we hear that at various levels: local, state, national and international.

C. You know the drill: it's economic and political. We hear about crime and debt and tornados and murders.

D. And we do not have to look to the media for troubling reports. Many of you are living them out right now. Cancer. Unemployment. Betrayal. Loneliness. Marital strife. Divorce. Some of you are feeling pushed down, and every effort to climb up seems to fail.

E. Where is God in all of this? How long before things get better? To put a finer point on this, if Jesus is Lord and King, and he showed up 2,000 years ago, when can we expect a bit of the love, grace, justice and human flourishing that he talked about? How long before we see a world in which His will is done?

F. These are the questions behind the questions that Jesus is asked today in a famous passage called: The Olivet Discourse.

## III. Here is the setting:

A. It's Wednesday on the last week of Christ's life. We are in the final hours before His arrest. On Thursday night his disciples will gather for the Last Supper. That is followed by Judas's betrayal, the prayer in the Garden, Christ's arrest, the charade of a trial and, very quickly, his crucifixion.

B. Tensions are high. When Jesus paraded into town just a few days earlier, He did it in a way that made the Roman leaders hyperventilate. He generated a frenzy among a crowd and put them on notice – I can launch a massive riot at any moment. Then, just to keep everyone guessing, His first stop was the Temple – where he has returned every day – and what he has done and said there has put the Jewish leaders on edge. He dresses them down. He makes them look like idiots. He is on record saying that they have got it wrong.

C. The disciples are still a bit clueless. Jesus has just noted how a desperately poor widow was giving more sacrificially to the rebuilding of the Temple than the Jewish leaders were. He had commended her for that, but there is a bit of an edge in his voice because he is not a fan of the temple.

1. Remember, what we are talking about here is massive and massively important to the Jewish identity. The Temple was ground zero for the Jews' relationship with God. It was their claim to fame. It was what they pointed to as proof that they were God's people.

2. After leading them out of slavery in Egypt, God had demonstrated his commitment to them by manifesting his presence in a special way at the tabernacle. This was a traveling temple. Made of tents. It was where the altar was stationed. It was where the holy items – such as the rod of Aaron and the Ark of the Covenant – the Ten Commandments were kept. And God was there. God was everywhere, but he was especially there.

3. David wanted to build God a permanent house but was not allowed to. But he assembled all of the materials and after he died Solomon built a glorious Temple. That lasted for hundreds of years. The fires in the altar never went out. But when Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed.

4. Under Nehemiah, the Jews start to rebuilt Jerusalem, and eventually, before the Old Testament ends, they get around to rebuilding the temple. But it's child's play. It's kids' stuff compared to what Solomon had built.

5. Then Herod the Great comes along. Caesar appoints him King of the Jews even though he is not one. In an effort to ingratiate himself with them, he sets out to rebuild the Temple. And he has 10,000 men work for eighty-three years to build this massive, massive building.<sup>1</sup> PICTURE.

6. The courtyard has foundation stones that were up to 60' long – the size of railroad box cars. And it could hold up to 400,000 people.

D. Jesus is not a fan of this building for a few reasons: Chiefly because He is the new temple. He is now the place where God manifests his presence on earth in a unique way. He is the one you go to if you want to be reconciled to God. The disciples appear to be a bit slow in noting this point. have not clued in on this – which we see as the passage opens, because they have good things to say about it.

E. He talks about its destruction. They start asking questions about its destruction.

IV. Let me pause before we dive in to issue a little warning. This is a dark passage – there is good news here if you dig for it, and we will. But it's dark and it's difficult to interpret. There are a number of reasons for this:

A. First, it's prophecy, and that's not a genre we do very well with. We do not have a lot of experience with it today. We understand narrative and poetry and reporting and editorials and cartoons – there are lots of genres we know how to deal with. But this is not one of them.

B. In particular, we do not have much experience with what is called “prophetic foreshortening,” which the Bible uses a fair bit. It's when events in the present and events longer term are talked about at the same time – almost in code.

1. The disciples conflate the destruction of the Temple with the end of the world, because for them, it was unthinkable that the Temple would be destroyed without the world ending.

2. Part of the challenge we get into here – and the challenge grows when we turn to Matthew, because he records a bit more than Luke does – is that it's not always exactly clear what questions the disciples are asking and what question Jesus is answering. (Are we talking about the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD or the end of the world?)

C. Part of our confusion comes from the fact that people embrace different interpretive grids for this passage. Our understanding of end times and Jesus return is shaped by other passages besides this – things written in Daniel and Ezekiel and Revelation. And when you look at all of these together you end up making certain decisions about issues such as:

1. Whether the promises made to the Jews will be fulfilled exclusively to the Jews – and whether that means the modern nation of Israel – or by the church? Is there any way in which Christ-followers become God's people.

2. Another is the nature of the Millennium. In Revelation 20:1,

- a) And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.”

3. Among the questions arising from Revelation 20 are a bunch about this 1,000 years.

4. One school – called Post-Millennialists – say, over time things will get better and better. As the Gospel spreads and people become more Christ-like, the world will work better and better until soon it is as if Jesus is in charge. His values are in place.<sup>2</sup>

5. There is a second camp that reads Revelation 20 differently – and believes that Jesus will return in power to set up his kingdom on earth for 1,000 years. This position is called Premillennialism – Jesus returns before the 1,000 years mentioned in Revelation 20.

- a) This is the majority view among evangelicals today. For instance, it is the position of all of the Trinity Divinity School faculty.

- b) There are a few different views within this camp. They break out according to whether Christians will go through the Great Tribulation or be removed (raptured) in advance.

6. There is a third camp – called Amillennialism – which reads Revelation 20 more symbolically.<sup>3</sup> Those in this camp argue that the one-thousand-year reign of Christ is not a literal number – it is referencing a long time – and it is talking about the reign of Christ is heaven right now.<sup>4</sup>

D. There is lots of debate here. And that makes it hard to sort things out. No doubt part of our confusion arises from the fact that Jesus doesn't answer the questions we want him to answer. We want to know: when and what and how. And we want specifics.

E. This is hard passage to interpret, but there is gold here if we look for it.

**V. Luke 21:5: Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God.**

A. Every year when they come back to Jerusalem everyone was anxious to see what new work had been done. One of the disciples comments on how well things are coming along.

**VI. But Jesus said, V6 “As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.”**

A. Woah! This is a conversation stopper. Everything about the Temple said, “Stability. Durability. Lasting power.” The idea that it was going to come tumbling down was unthinkable.

B. Now it did happen. Three years after it was completed it was destroyed. Here is what is left today. There is a 187' section left – and that's it.

**VII. V7: “Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”**

A. When will this happen and what kind of advance warning will we get?

**VIII. V7: “Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” He replied: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”**

A. Note to self: do not think every prediction of the end of the world is valid.

**IX. V10 Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.**

A. Again: Expect chaos and storm clouds, and remember that, just because you see them does not mean the end is near.

**X. V12 “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. (This will be really hard). 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 Stand firm, and you will win life.**

A. Please note that the statement about “not a hair on our head will perish” is symbolic language about our spiritual reality. The line immediately above it notes that some will be put to death. The statements Jesus is making here are all shaped by the understanding that we are going to live after we die. Death is not something that we need to fear.

B. The passage continues – and it doesn’t get any cheerier.

**XI. 20 “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies,**

A. Which happened in 70 AD – not that long after Jesus was speaking.

B. The Jews were a perennial problem to the Romans. They kept revolting. After a rebellion in the late 60s, Rome sent in an army and destroyed it all. They demolished the Temple, plowed up the city, scattered the people and renamed the area Palestine.

C. Between that point – 70 AD – and the vote by the UN in 1948, there was no Israel.

**XII. 20 “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city.**

A. This is counter cultural advice. When you saw trouble you wanted to get inside the city gates where you were safe. But Rome is on its way to lay siege to Jerusalem – which means, they are going to surround the city, set up camp and not let anyone out. The effect will be starvation and mass death.

B. The Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historian Tacitus will write about what happened. It’s horrible. By some estimates, one million Jews will starve to death. Disease spreads. As does cannibalism. It’s horrific. So the advice to flee from the city was brilliant advice.

**XIII. V20 “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.**

A. By the way, this “time of punishment” is not something coming from Rome. It is punishment from God for rebellion and disobedience. The prophets kept saying, “If you keep turning from God you will face the consequences.

**XIV. V23 How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.**

A. By the way, they burned what they could of the temple, which melted the gold, which led people to pulled the rocks apart looking for it.

**XV. V 25 “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man (a term for Jesus) coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”**

**XVI. V 29 He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.**

**XVII. 34 “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap.**

A. Work to shine your headlights beyond the grave of you might get so bogged down that you will falter spiritually.

**XVIII. 35 For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”**

A. Whoever made the comment about the stones that set Jesus off, they were probably thinking, “All I said was, ‘Nice building.’”

**XIX. V 37 Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives, and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple.**

**XX.** So, Jesus and the disciples have been at the Temple. At some point someone commented on it. That led Jesus to note that it is coming down.

A. It’s clear, they think he has some supernatural insight into all of this. And it’s clear that He thinks He knows.

B. They ask, “when?” The conversation continues as they walk over to the Mount of Olives – which is why this is called the Olivet Discourse. As they are walking, Jesus keeps talking. The answer he ends up giving is long.

- C. Among the things he notes is that:
1. People will predict the end of the world long before it ends
  2. Many will claim to be the Messiah when they are not.
  3. Of course, both of these things has proven true. Lots of people have announced the end of the world – and keep announcing it. And there have been lots of people claiming to be the new Jesus: Joseph Smith, Sun Yung Moon, David Koresh – and hundreds more.

XXI. What do we do with this?

- A. I want to assure you, what we need to know is clear.
- B. We are headed towards the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. One of the aspects of the Reformation was that we need to get everyone we can to read the Bible because it has power. This is God’s book and we don’t read it as much as it reads us.
- C. The specific doctrine that I am referring to is called the “perspicuity of Scripture.” It means the main points are clear.
1. There is a God who made us. We are sideways with him. Lots of things have gone wrong because of it. But He sent His Son and He is loving, gracious and wants us back.
- D. And when it comes to Christ’s return, there are things that are clear:
1. Jesus will return. The one who came as a baby will return as King.
  2. We do not know when – and those who claim otherwise are wrong
    - a) I understand the fascination and the legitimate focus on this.
      - (1) Jesus said he was going to return and we need to be ready. His return would be like a thief in the night. Of course we want as much heads up as we can get.
      - (2) We look forward to his return because things will be better then! What Christ-follower doesn’t want a world where Jesus is in charge? Where His will is done? Where justice and righteousness are established!
      - (3) And it’s natural to fill in the gaps and try to solve the mystery.
    - b) I understand the attention. I am occasionally surprised by the lack of humility by those who think they have it figured out.
    - c) We need to hear that when it comes to his return we are on the welcoming committee not the planning committee.
    - d) When people say they have this figured out, slowly back out of the room.
  3. Then, number three: we need to be ready.

XXII. Men and women, there are a lot of big ideas introduced in Luke 21

- A. And we are going to pick some of them back up next week.
1. We should expect to suffer
  2. Jesus knows the future
  3. Before the end comes, the Gospel is preached around the world
  4. Not all religions are the same.
  5. Jesus fulfills Judaism.
  6. The end is glorious for those who know Christ and are forgiven – and it's very scary and bad for those who do not.
- B. We are going to pick this back up next week, but I want to put a soft close on it for now with this bid idea: Jesus Wins. Jesus wins and this changes everything.
- C. You know what we need to know. Jesus Wins.
- D. Plan on it.
1. Biblical truth is often very hard to capture straight up. Most movies about the end are bad, and if they are not bad when they come out, they are dreadful five years later.
  2. So people will try to smuggle the truth in under the radar. That is what Tolkien and Lewis tried to do with *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *the Lord of the Rings*.
    - a) In TLOTR, the offices of Christ are divided into three parts
      - (1) Frodo plays the Priest
      - (2) Aragorn plays the King
      - (3) Gandolf plays the Prophet
    - b) When we meet him he is called Gandolf the Grey. But at a certain point he sacrifices his life and dies. But then he returns – and he does so as Gandolf the White.
    - c) And here – in the second movie – we see him returning in power. And there is a great scene where he shows up at a moment when it appears as though all is lost. And he has an army with him. Let's watch a few seconds.
- E. Men and women, Jesus wins! Jesus wins! This truth – this promise – changes everything. And we can live with confidence.
1. If you are a Cubs Fan you can re-watch Game 7
  2. If you are a Clemson fan you re-watch the National Championship
  3. In *Back to the Future Two*, Biff gets a book that reports all kinds of sports events. He knows their outcome.
- F. Men and women, we have the book.
1. It's not as exact as we might like. But it tell us what we need to know. Jesus Wins! Jesus Wins!
  2. Knowing this is more valuable than being told to buy Starbucks back in the 80s or Google in the 90s. It shapes eternity.
- G. Between now and his return we are told to expect things to be hard. But we are told that this ends well.

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<sup>1</sup> Building was conducted between 20 BC and 63 AD, which means it was completed for just a few years before it was destroyed.

<sup>2</sup> This view was popular early on. And there were some who pointed to this for largely secular reasons. Back at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many scientists and various utopians were promising that everything was going to get better and better. Those in this camp either held a very high view of mankind – they think we are actually quite good and sin is not that big of deal – or it held a very high view of how quickly the Spirit of God reshapes our heart. Suffice it to say, there are not that many in this camp today. World War I put an end to most who held to this view. (Just to be clear, there are postmillennialists around today and they would not like my very quick, very crass description of their view).

<sup>3</sup> R.C. Sproul and other Reformed theologians embrace this view.

<sup>4</sup> Many in this camp hold to what is called the Preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse, which argues that the statements made by Jesus in Luke 21 are all fulfilled in 70 AD when the Romans lay siege to Jerusalem and destroy it. Preterist comes from two Latin terms: praeter – beyond, and ire – to go. Some Preterists hold that everything promises – including the return of Christ – happened at 70 AD. Most hold that some of the promises made were fulfilled but not all.