

Your Opportunity to Bear Witness  
Luke 21:5-36  
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## Introduction

When I was a sophomore in college in 1993 at Baylor University, I remember hearing on the national news that there was a cult in Waco, TX that was being investigated by government agents. This was quite surprising, as Baylor is in the middle of Waco, TX, and no one I knew had ever heard of David Koresh or the Branch Davidian group that he led. It turned out that they weren't really in Waco, they were a bit out of town, but it was quite exciting and a little terrifying that there was a dangerous cult stockpiling weapons not too far from our campus.

If you're too young to have heard about the Branch Davidians, I'll fill you in a little: David Koresh led an offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, claiming to be God's final prophet, the Christ of the Last Days and the Lamb in the book of Revelation; he claimed to be the only one able to open the Seven Seals given by God. This allowed him to have the best and true insights in the prophecies in Revelations, particularly since he told everyone that he had visited heaven and been given the ability to truly understand the Bible. His real name was not David Koresh, it was Vernon Howell - he took that name to be linked to King David and King Cyrus, whose Hebrew name was Koresh. He started marrying multiple wives because he taught that he had to produce 24 children who would become the elders in Revelation chapter 4; eventually he claimed all the women in the compound as his own, even the married ones. He was accused of abusing children and the group was suspected of stockpiling weapons at their compound. So the ATF, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, launched a raid on the compound in February of 1993, but the Branch Davidians resisted and fought back, and people were shot and killed on both sides. That led to a 51-day siege that actually played into Koresh's prophecies of the end times. On day 51, the FBI sent tanks into the compound, which caught on fire. David Koresh and 75 of his followers died that day.<sup>1</sup>

In today's passage, Jesus told His followers, "*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.*" David Koresh was the latest in a long line of false Messiahs claiming to be "the one" who would deliver God's people in the end times. If only the Branch Davidian followers had actually read the Scriptures and heeded the True Messiah's warnings, they could have avoided their grisly fate under their delusion leader.

Luke 21 is definitely one of the harder Scripture passages to understand in terms of figuring out what every little detail refers to. One commentator admitted, "The fact is, we have yet to find a scholar who can perfectly unravel the knotty problems of the Olivet Discourse. Study of it requires a proper humility and a willingness to admit that we do not have all the answers."<sup>2</sup> Well, I, for one, am more than willing to admit that I don't have all the answers. So, while we will probably not tease out all of the implications of this chapter, we will identify and look to apply the main ideas of being ready for Christ's return, being willing to suffer for Him, and being faithful to God to the end.

➔ Let's pray for God's help in understanding and applying His word.

For our first point, we will combine two different sections where Jesus told His followers that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdamm.org/articles/koresh-davidians>

<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 729.

## **I. You Can Endure the Destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 5-9, 20-24)**

*<sup>5</sup> And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, <sup>6</sup> "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." <sup>7</sup> And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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."*

*<sup>20</sup> "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.*

*<sup>21</sup> 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, <sup>22</sup> for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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.*

If you remember your Biblical history, the first temple was built by Solomon in the late 900s BC and stood for over 400 years before it was destroyed by Babylon in 586 BC, as recorded in 2 Kings 25. The Babylonians took God's people into exile, and when the Israelites were returned to the land, they rebuilt the temple with much prodding from prophets like Haggai. 400 years later, King Herod the Great, the Herod who tried to kill Jesus in His infancy, undertook renovating and expanding the temple, so much so that it was often called "Herod's temple." It had been under construction for almost fifty years by the time of this text, and it was glorious to behold. The thought of this temple being destroyed was horrific in the Jewish mind, but Jesus knew it was coming. Two weeks ago, I talked at length about Titus' destroying Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, so I'm not going to repeat that now. But you must understand that both the first and second temples were destroyed by foreign powers, yet the true reason they were destroyed was because God was dealing with the wicked rebellion of His people. He was declaring that if they were going to reject Him and kill His prophets and His Son, He would punish them. And since the temple was the place of His presence, its destruction was the best visual to show them His absence.

Jesus didn't directly answer the question in verse 7 about when the temple would be destroyed. In fact, He changed the subject and started warning about the fact that there would be false Messiahs and wars and catastrophes in the future. But the end will still not be upon you. I'm sure that when Jerusalem was attacked by the Romans, it felt like the end times. But that was just a temporary judgment on those who had rejected Jesus. Verse 21 is an important verse, Jesus warning His people that when Jerusalem gets attacked, you need to flee to the mountains. Cities were places of safety and security; normally, the smart thing to do when there was an invading army was to run inside the city for protection. But because Jesus knew the city would fall, He told them to get out. The historian, Eusebius, recorded that before the desolation of Jerusalem in AD 70, a Roman army had come against the city in AD 66, but it was repelled by Jewish forces and withdrew. The Christians in the area remembered Jesus' words about fleeing to the mountains that Jesus spoke here. So they left Jerusalem and went to the mountains of Persia to a town called Pella and were safe. Those who stayed in Jerusalem mostly died; the destruction was devastating: the estimate is of 1.1 million Jews killed and 97,000 carried into captivity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Frank M. Barker, Jr's sermon "Look Up! Your Redemption Draweth Nigh" found in *The Gospel of Luke, Vol. 2* (self-published), p. 6.

Jesus' warning saved the early church! Think about other great rescues in the Bible: When God destroyed the world in the flood, He saved Noah's family in the ark. When God destroyed Sodom, He saved Lot's family by sending angels to bring them out of the city. When He killed the firstborn sons in Egypt, He passed over the homes of the Israelites who had faithfully put Lamb's blood over their doors. This would be the latest in a line of God simultaneously punishing His enemies and rescuing His people.<sup>4</sup> And it ultimately points to the fact that when God ends the world, He will rescue His people.

But first, we will share in Christ's sufferings. Jesus explained that

## **II. You Can Endure Persecution (vv. 10-19)**

*<sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. <sup>11</sup> There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> This will be your opportunity to bear witness. <sup>14</sup> Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, <sup>15</sup> for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup> You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. <sup>17</sup> You will be hated by all for my name's sake. <sup>18</sup> But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup> By your endurance you will gain your lives.*

How many of us pray for opportunities to share our faith? I certainly do. But usually what we imagine with that prayer is that we have a great conversation with a neighbor, friend, co-worker, someone who may be struggling, and we see the perfect opening to transition to talking about Jesus. And they say, "Huh, I've never thought of Jesus that way, that makes sense! I'd like to come to your church or study the Bible with you." That is a really sweet version of witnessing for Jesus, a dream scenario. But what do these verses tell us is a more likely scenario in which you'll get a chance to witness? When you're hated and persecuted by others. We don't usually pray for that opportunity, but sometimes that's our best witness.

Just in case the disciples thought that their lives would be easy from here on out now that they had spent all this time with Jesus receiving His eternal truths, Jesus knew He had to prepare them for the hard road that they would be walking. The world hated Him and it would hate His followers too. They would be delivered up to both the religious and secular authorities, betrayed by their own friends and relatives. The book of Acts records the hatred, persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom of Jesus' apostles and followers. Church history tells us that eventually all of the apostles, except Judas and John, would be killed for their faith, and that Nero burned Christians in his garden for entertainment and sent many to the arenas to be fed to lions. The disciples would have a platform for declaring their faith, and Jesus would make sure that they would be given the words to speak to convince their enemies. Acts again shows this when Peter and John spoke before the Sanhedrin, Stephen preached before he was stoned, and Paul explained his faith to Agrippa.

Verses 18-19 (that you won't perish and will gain your life) seem contradictory after Jesus has said "*some of you they will put to death.*" But Jesus is, of course, speaking of eternal perishing and eternal life. Losing our physical lives may happen and it will be difficult to endure, but it will not be the end for us. Romans 8:35-37 – "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are*

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke: Vol. 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 428.

*being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”* Jesus was teaching that we will be overcomers, and all the trials and pain of this life will be rewarded for eternity!

Are you ready for persecution? We American Christians don’t really know a lot about persecution because America, for the most part, has been a very tolerant society and Christianity has been the dominant religion here. I know that there are Christians who hate those “Co-Exist” bumper stickers, where each letter is the symbol for a different religion. I’m not about to put one on my car because I think that it communicates that all of those religions are equal. But the sticker doesn’t actually say, “all religions are equal,” it just says that all the different faiths should be able to live around each other peacefully. Which is a good thing; we should not be pulled into the violence of the past where Muslims and Christians killed each other in the Crusades, or Protestants and Catholics killed each other in England and Ireland. Let’s co-exist and love our neighbors, even if we don’t believe that all religions are true. But there is persecution of Christians all around the globe today. The group Open Doors publishes the “World Watch List,” that lists the Top 50 countries where Christians are most persecuted for their faith.<sup>5</sup> Last year’s list said that 309 million Christians lived in areas with “very high” or “extreme” levels of persecution. 5,898 Christians were murdered for their faith last year. America is not on that list, not in the Top 50. It’s mostly African and Asian countries, interestingly often where Christianity is also growing the fastest. Now, our Christian faith does not sync up well with the dominant worldview in America today, and Christians can expect backlash, anger, and at the very least, being mocked online or excluded from many circles and professions. These words from Jesus were prophetic for the apostles’ time, but they still remind us today that we should be ready to endure persecution if it comes.

The last section reminds believers that

### **III. You Can Endure Until Jesus Returns (vv. 25-36)**

*<sup>25</sup> “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, <sup>26</sup> people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” <sup>29</sup> And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. <sup>30</sup> As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. <sup>31</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup> Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. <sup>33</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>34</sup> “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. <sup>35</sup> For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> 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.”*

As my friend, Ricky Jones, has pointed out, we see a theme in many classic works of literature:<sup>6</sup>

Robin Hood – Good King Richard is away fighting the Crusades, bad King John is on the throne taking advantage of the people. They have to turn to Robin Hood, a vigilante outlaw, to give them hope until the King returns.

King Arthur – England is in shambles, we need the true king to pull Excalibur out of the stone and make things right again.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/>

<sup>6</sup> Ricky Jones’ sermon “Be The Donkey” from April 14, 2019, found at [riveroakstulsa.com](http://riveroakstulsa.com)

The Lord of the Rings – Aragorn is the rightful heir to the throne, but is in exile living as a ranger. The evil forces of Sauron are taking over Middle Earth until the Return of the King.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe – the true King of Narnia, Aslan, is gone and the evil White Witch rules Narnia with fear, turning people into stone who defy her. Until the King returns and makes all things right, as the prophecy had predicted.

We all know that the King is missing and we want Him back. When He returns, everything will be as it should be. He will make everything right.

And so Jesus gave a glimpse of what it will be like when He returns, when our redemption draws near. When Jesus came to earth the first time, He snuck in, being born in an obscure town in a barn to peasants. When He comes the second time, He will come in power and great glory, all who dwell on earth will know He has come. There will be some time in the future when many of these signs converge. Just as the signs of spring, the budding of the trees, tell you that summer is coming soon, so the signs will tip you off that the end is coming, that the kingdom of God is near. This has to be one of the most misinterpreted and twisted ideas in all of Scriptures. If you remember another infamous cult, Heaven’s Gate, they took the fact that there was a vernal equinox, a partial lunar eclipse, and the Hale-Bopp comet all on Holy Week as proof that the world was ending.<sup>7</sup> So they all committed suicide in order to reach the next plane of existence. Twist Scripture to your own peril!

When wars break out all over the globe, should we assume God is preparing to end human history? Every time we hear about a terrible natural disaster, an earthquake or hurricane that kills thousands of people, should we assume that the end is coming? Not necessarily, but we should be reminded that it could be. We should let the reminders of the end prepare us spiritually. Jesus emphasized that you don’t want to get weighed down by this life, you don’t want to be drunk or spiritually asleep so that you aren’t ready for His return. 2 Peter 3:10-12a says similarly, *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.”* Knowing that Jesus will come back again should not make us hedonistic and careless, it should motivate us to pursue godliness and a good witness on this earth.

What does verse 32 mean, that *“this generation will not pass away until all has taken place”*? If it means that Jesus thought He would return in His second coming before the people who were listening to Him all died, then surely He was mistaken. That is the view of critical scholars who say that Jesus and the Bible are both fallible, that Jesus was just wrong. There are three other interpretations that respect Christ’s deity and truthfulness to explain what that verse might mean:

1) Calvin’s view was that Jesus wasn’t referring to His second coming, but His somehow being present around the destruction of Jerusalem, since some in that generation would still be alive forty years later.

2) That the “this generation” does not refer to the people who were alive necessarily, but to the Jewish people - a generation meaning a people group.

3) That the generation that will see all these things is the generation that is alive when the beginning of the end occurs. In other words, “once the events of the final act commence, they will take place rather quickly.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hughes, p. 732, citing Time Magazine’s April 7, 1997 issue, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 538-39.

This is one of those areas where we must humbly admit that we're not sure, but regardless which view is correct, we know that Jesus' words will come to pass and that He will come again someday to judge the living and the dead.

### **Conclusion**

Paul Brand was a surgeon who practiced medicine in both India and America; he pioneered surgical procedures for leprosy patients. After spending some time among the suffering in India, he observed this about our country: "In the United States... I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it."<sup>9</sup> That was over thirty years ago, imagine what he would say now. Pain is a fact of life. We'd much rather avoid it, but if we know that we can endure it and that there is reward and benefit on the other side, we will be ready. Jesus was days away from dying a painful death on a cross at the hands of Romans executioners when He gave all of this advice. He was preparing His disciples for life without His physical presence, but reminding them that He would always be spiritually present with them.

For the believer in Christ, our ultimate fears of death and judgment have been taken away from us. Yes, we fear bad things happening to us, we fear rejection, we fear our children being hurt or losing their way in life. But, ultimately, we know that all things are in God's hands, that Jesus is with us when we go through trials, and that in the end, we will be spending eternity with Him with nothing to fear. As one of the verses of "Amazing Grace" says: "*Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come; tis grace that's brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*" The grace of Jesus on the cross atones for your sins, there is no condemnation once you are saved by Him. Jesus was hated and persecuted, ultimately He was put to death by the wrath of men and the plan of God. But He was not destroyed, He endured beyond death, rising from the dead to take His rightful place at the right hand of God the Father. And He will come again in power and great glory.

The fall of Jerusalem was terrible, but it is nothing compared to the judgment still to come, in which God will separate the sheep from the goats, the faithful and the unfaithful, and He will punish His enemies forever. If you want to avoid that, put your trust in Christ and follow Him in the obedience that comes from faith. Then, no matter what happens in your life and in the world, you will endure. 1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10 says, "*you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*" Can we really trust that? "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*" All He said is true and will endure forever. Amen.

### **Benediction**

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 - "*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.*"

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Brand, Philip Yancey, *The Gift of Pain* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).