



EXPECTATIONS AFTER GRADUATION

SERIES: *THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Luke 21:5–19

72nd Message

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In 1994 I went to Israel on a sabbatical with three close friends and Dr. Bruce Waltke in search of the cave of Adullam, where David gave voice to the abandonment he felt by God in Psalm 142. In similar manner, I asked each of the brothers to come prepared to give voice to tensions they may be experiencing in their life or ministry in a psalm of lament or praise. We would share one each night at dinner. Our first night of sharing took place in a very inviting and intimate French restaurant in downtown Jerusalem. After an exquisite meal and joyous fellowship, Jackson took out his poem and read it. Suddenly the atmosphere turned quiet, serious and holy. His poem was entitled, “Someone Lied.” In it he vividly described the pain of disillusionment he experienced after he graduated from our intern program and was launched into full time ministry as a pastor. No one told him how difficult it would be, how much opposition he would face, especially within the church, and how much failure he would go through. Ultimately his failure exposed his sinful heart and left him “bleeding and naked” before a “burning love” and a “relentless, painful grace” that embraced him at the cross. Jackson’s naked honesty took us to a deeper place and opened the door to a night of joyous evangelism, worship and praise that continued well past midnight.

We have come to the conclusion of five rounds of heated controversy played out between Israel’s leaders and Jesus, after he cleansed the Temple, claiming to be its rightful king. Every challenger and opponent has been silenced and shamed, and Jesus emerges victoriously as the son of God (the true Israel); Isaiah’s suffering Servant; David’s greater Son; and Malachi’s Lord of the Temple who is going to destroy the existing temple and build a new one in its place. These are amazing claims, and outright blasphemous were they not true. As this high court drama concludes, Jesus gives his graduation speech to his disciples, and spells out for them exactly what they can expect for the next forty years. Though the text contains apocalyptic language and is filled with many Old Testament prophetic allusions, its major thrust is pastoral—to prepare the disciples for the events that are about to take place and to securely anchor them in their role as they wait patiently through dangerous and testing times. The text has five divisions:

1. The announcement of the destruction of Jerusalem (5–7)
2. The beginning of labor pains (8–19)
3. The sign to flee the city (20–24)
4. The coming and vindication of the Son of Man (25–28)
5. Exhortations to stay alert (29–36)

We will examine the first two sections this week, and conclude with the last three next week.

I. The Terrible Announcement (Luke 21:5–6)

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, “As for these

things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” (Luke 21:5–6 ESV)

As Jesus and his band of disciples leave the temple area, his disciples are caught by the grandeur of the temple with its massive foundation stones and surrounding buildings. Josephus tells us that some of these stones were quite large, twenty-five cubits long, eight cubits high, and twelve cubits wide.¹ It is difficult for us to comprehend what an architectural wonder this sight would have been in the ancient world. But despite the beauty of these buildings and the massive weight of their foundation stones, Jesus says their permanence is an illusion, for this “mountain” will be “cast into the sea” (Mark 11:23). It will be a complete and thorough destruction, for he adds, “there will not be left here one stone upon another” (Micah 3:12; Jer 7:14). Jesus’ pronouncement must have shocked the disciples and provoked quite a discussion as they made the steep hike up to the Mount of Olives.

II. The Beginning of Birth Pains (Luke 21:7–11)

A. The Question

And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” (v. 7)

When they get to the summit and the glory of the city is in full view, the disciples take Jesus aside to ask him about the timing of the event? N. T. Wright explains the significance of the disciples’ request for a sign:

In Jesus’ day dramatic and unexpected happenings in the night sky were often thought to signify more than just physical disaster as large objects crashed to the earth. People looked at them carefully because they believed they would tell them about the imminent rise and fall of kings and empires. And when Jesus’ disciples asked him how they would know when the frightening events he was talking about would take place, that’s probably the sort of thing they had in mind.²

The discourse opens with the question “when will these things be,” and Jesus concludes with the statement, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all [this] has taken place” (v. 32). Jesus stakes his entire credibility on the fact that everything he says between verses 8 and 32 will happen within the generation of the disciples. They will see it while they live, but it will not be soon. Therefore they are not to be misled, for many things must still take place before it happens, and they have much work to accomplish before that day. With supreme pastoral care Jesus carefully leads them through the next forty years, so that there will be no surprises as to what they are to expect, or what they are to do in the midst of the stress. The metaphor that holds “all these things” together is the image of the “birth pains” of childbirth. D. A. Carson notes,

“Birth pains’ stems from such Old Testament passages as Isaiah 13:8; 26:17; Jeremiah 4:31; 6:24; Micah 4:9-10. By this time this metaphor became a special term for the ‘birth pangs of the Messiah,’ the period of distress preceding the Messianic Age.”³

B. False Messiahs

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.” (v. 8)

Jesus begins by issuing a warning to the disciples to not be deceived. The coming decades will be dominated by power-hungry terrorist groups who would put forth many Messianic pretenders promising liberation from Rome. Josephus in his writings records some of these pretenders. They include John of Gischala, from Galilee, the leader of the Zealots; Simon bar Giora, the most serious contender for King of the Jews, whose movement lasted nearly two years; Judas the Egyptian who claimed to restore Israel; and Menahem, descendent of Judas the Galilean, who emerged from a group of professionally trained dagger-carrying assassins called the Sicarii.⁴ The Sicarii would mix in among large festival crowds and murder their victims with curved daggers concealed under their garments, and then slip away undetected. It was this last cadre of rebels that banded together and stormed the fortress of Masada, putting to death the Roman garrison. Jesus warns that these pretenders to the Messianic throne will mislead many, but their appearance should come as no surprise to the disciples.

The second sign of the beginning of birth pangs will be “earth-shaking” events, both in the political and in the natural realm.

C. Earth shaking events

“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.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven.” (vv. 9-11)

Jesus tells the disciples that the coming decades will be dominated by fear, constant uprisings and violence, when wars and rumors of wars will dominate the headlines. As Josephus writes ...

[The brigand-like elements]...urged many to revolt, spurring them on toward freedom and threatening with death those who submitted to Roman rule...Splitting up into armed groups, they ranged over the countryside, killing the powerful rich, plundering their houses, and setting fire to the villages.⁵

These revolutionary movements, coupled with the upsurge of guerrilla activity, kept everyone, especially the ruling classes, in a state of constant fear, as Josephus dramatically describes:

The fear of attack was worse than the crimes themselves, just as in war when one expects death at any moment. Men watched their enemies from a distance, and not even approaching friends were trusted. But despite their suspicions and precautions they were laid waste, so suddenly did the conspirators strike and skillfully avoid detection.⁶

Together with these political upheavals, Jesus also predicts natural disasters like earthquakes and famine. In the late 40’s A.D. there was a prolonged drought and severe famine. The resulting deteriorating economic situation left poor townships prey to brigand bands of looters. Such unstable conditions would give rise to tremendous fear, but Jesus tells his disciples they need not fear political upheaval

or natural disasters. According to Jesus, these things are just the beginning, not the end. Notice that Jesus is giving precise information to alleviate their fears. “Do not fear!” he says. These “earth shaking” events are not to shake the faith of the disciples. Rather, like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt, they will be instruments to give birth to the kingdom of God upon Earth. What a contrast this is with the teaching of most modern prophecy gurus, who exploit these images to create fear and panic concerning the end.

Now that Jesus has painted a clear picture as to the conditions the disciples will experience following his death and resurrection, he goes on to describe what their exact role will be during that period. Explicitly, the reception they can expect to receive from the world. As we might imagine, it will be the same reaction their master received.

III. The Role of the Apostles (Luke 21:12-19)

A. Closed hearts create open doors

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. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. 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. (vv. 12-15)

Jesus now warns his disciples that the betrayal, trial and persecution he is about to endure will be their destiny as well. A disciple is not above his master; Jesus’ way will be their way. Jesus was not spared betrayal, arrest or flogging by the Jewish and Roman authorities, and neither will his disciples. What they are to apprehend by faith is that political persecution and severe suffering will actually be the doorway to worldwide evangelism. Jesus saw that the powerful, sovereign hand of God had placed him in the hands of the authorities to give testimony to kings and to accomplish redemption for the world. A few days after Pentecost, Peter and John found themselves in Jesus’ shoes, doing exactly as he did (Acts 3-4). The apostle Paul viewed his own trials in the same light. He gave glory to God for each of his imprisonments, knowing these were holy instruments to bear witness to kings and all who were in authority (Acts 9:15; 1 Tim 2:1-2), as well as encourage free Christians to give bold testimony for Jesus (Phil 1:12-14). Jesus says it will go on this way until the apostles have preached the gospel to the whole known world. And indeed this was the apostolic claim by A.D. 70 (Micah 3-4; Isa 66:19-20; Rom 15:19; Col 1:6; 1 Tim 3:16).

So Jesus states that the tool for worldwide evangelism, strangely enough, is persecution. He continues with even more paradoxical sayings, declaring that these terrible times of persecution will be the sweetest of times for the souls of the disciples. Their darkest nights will explode into the most glorious dawn, for in that hour the same Holy Spirit who spoke through Jesus at his trial will boldly speak through them before their accusers. Once more he tells them they need not fear the day, or even prepare what they will say. The Holy Spirit will strengthen them and speak through them with the courage of a prophet. Their greatest trial will turn out to be their finest hour.

Viewed in this light it is little wonder that the most moving and courageous sermons in Acts were those uttered spontaneously while these men were on trial for their very lives: Peter before the Sanhedrin, Stephen before the elders, Paul before Felix and Agrippa. During this entire period, therefore, the disciples could expect official persecution to be the tool to open doors for worldwide witness.

B. Betrayal breeds steadfast loyalty

You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives. (vv. 16–19)

Jesus moves from the official, political arena to the more intimate spheres of their homes and village communities. What can the disciples expect in those arenas? Jesus quotes Micah 7:5–6, where the prophet predicted a total social breakdown in which the most intimate bonds of society would be severed. One dare not even trust his neighbor or closest friend, or most painfully, one's wife, or parents, or children! For Micah says, "your enemies are the members of your own household" (Micah 7:6 TNIV). This is the hatred the gospel will provoke. If these images were not bad enough, Jesus goes on to say that there will be no safe refuge on Earth where they will be free from ridicule for the name of Christ. As Paul would later confess,

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death... We are fools for Christ's sake ... we have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things (1 Cor 4:9–10, 13).

But again, lest the disciples be overcome with dread, Jesus hints that these deplorable conditions of betrayal will have a twofold effect. Betrayal will weed out the unfaithful who infiltrate the ranks of the holy (1 John 2:18–19), and simultaneously forge unbreakable bonds of loyalty among the faithful, who will endure until the end. The result will be a steadfast endurance and a loyal love that stares death in the face. This is what will flood the hearts of these disciples. The love of Christ will so grip their souls (2 Cor 5:14; Ps 63:3, 8), that they will be utterly unaffected by the threats of evil men and therefore persevere to the end, knowing "not a hair of their head will perish." In this way a universal betrayal by the world will birth an enduring loyalty to Christ. The account of Stephen's bold, yet loving face toward his accusers at his death has always filled me with awe (Acts 7:56–60).

What a gift Jesus gives to his disciples! He reveals to them the exact conditions they will endure during this entire period, their identity in the midst of it, what their role will be, and the ultimate outcome. In short, he has placed them center-stage on the new horizon of history. It is they, not the current leadership in Jerusalem, who will be the movers and shakers of the new universe. Jesus could hardly have painted the future for the disciples with a broader brush. What then are the implications of this text for us today?

IV. How Do We Face our Future?

A. A holy respect for the apostles and their gospel

Reflecting on these verses should give us a great appreciation for the unique role Jesus gave to the apostles. As the text opens they are captivated by the beauty and permanence of Israel's temple. And then Jesus astounds them by saying that it will be utterly destroyed and a new one built in its place. That birthing process will throw the whole known world into a "severe labor" of turmoil and disaster of every kind. But, just as the ten plagues of Egypt shook Pharaoh's idolatrous world to give birth to Israel, so these worldwide labors will shake powers and kingdoms (especially Jerusalem) to give birth to the church. By the end of that generation, twelve beautiful foundation stones, flawless and perfectly cut, will be permanently

laid for the new "living temple." So the disciples who once were in awe of Herod's temple will find themselves at the center of the new temple.

Notice the meticulous care that goes into laying these precious foundation stones. The apostles' way of life will follow that of Jesus in every detail—arrest, betrayal, death, and resurrection. Therefore, once this foundation is laid, there will be no question as to the purity of their gospel, nor will there ever be need to lay another foundation. So Paul will write to the Galatians,

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8–9).

We ought to be overcome with humility and awe when we recall that the Scriptures we possess were purchased with the blood of Christ and sealed by the blood of the apostles. The blood of Christ purchased our redemption; the blood of the apostles produced the New Testament. What a sharp contrast with the cults, whose founders have questionable backgrounds; who lead by manipulation and control instead of sacrificial service; and who fleece the flock for riches, instead of becoming poor in order that others might become rich. Let us treasure and obey what they preached, and guard against any who would seek to usurp their place, remembering Paul's command to Timothy, "By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Tim 1:14).

B. Realistic expectations for our future

One of the best graduation speeches I ever heard was the one given by Steve Jobs to Stanford graduates in 2005. In contrast to the typical speeches that applaud the graduates for their accomplishments and paint their future as a bright and glorious road of untapped potential and unlimited possibilities, Jobs told them the truth—they are going to die. He said, "No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share."⁷ Like Qohelet, the author of Ecclesiastes, he said death is not only inevitable; it also forces you to make your life count. Unfortunately Jobs' wisdom couldn't take the graduates beyond the grave, but Jesus' does. This text ought to shape our expectations about our future. The apostles saw that what God uniquely did with Israel during their generation (30–70 AD), would become the pattern for the history of the world, as the gospel would be proclaimed to all the nations. Paul warns Timothy, as an elder in the church in Ephesus,

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. (2 Tim 3:1–5)

The "last days"—the time period between Pentecost and Christ's return—will be an age dominated by stress, suffering and betrayal, to such a degree that no one will be exempt. As Paul says, "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). As followers of Jesus we are given realistic expectations for our lives, and a redefinition of the "good life."

What expectations do you have about your future? What would you have told Armenian Christians living in Aleppo five years ago? Would you have prepared them for their nation being caught in an ugly war that would ravage their city, cut off their water supply and electricity, leave millions displaced and homeless, and reduce major portions of the historic city to rubble? Could you have foreseen what would happen to their most sacred site? September 21 is Armenia's Independence Day when thousands of people gather at the Armenian Saint Martyrs Church to commemorate the 1.5 million Armenians that fell victim to the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire in 1915. This year on September 21, ISIS terrorists destroyed the church along with the museum housing the remains of some of the genocide victims. Given the horror of what is happening in Syria, can you imagine how ill equipped Jesus' disciples would have been to endure the terrors they would face had he not faithfully told them the reality of what was going to take place?

Terrible times will indeed come, but we need not be intimidated by the fear and panic that grips the world. Jesus was emphatic that the apostles would face persecution, but in Christ they can trust that persecution will serve to strengthen their deepest bonds of affection and loyalty for Christ and one another. How different this is from the rapturous hope of some who say the church will be taken away. As I read the New Testament I find no clear text that says Christians will escape suffering, but rather that we shall be preserved through suffering. We do not need to be tossed and turned by the waves of idealism that come with every four-year election period, or be plagued by the despair that grips the world in the midst of wars or natural disasters. Followers of Jesus are to be the ultimate realists, prepared and ready to face any and all forms of evil and natural disaster. The fact that so many Christians become disillusioned with their faith is a terrible indictment on pastors and leaders, who have failed to preach and teach the "full gospel," the gospel of the cross and the absolute necessity for suffering.

C. Eyes of faith, grounded in hope

But being realists shouldn't make us cynical or fatalistic, so that we survive by detaching ourselves from the world and its perpetual pain. For our text leaves us great hope. Just as the apostles saw that persecution and world-shaking events would become the doorway to evangelism, so they exhorted their disciples with the same hope. When the idols of the world—consumerism, wealth, power, and sexual exploitation—come crashing down, people's hearts become open to the gospel in ways they never were before. When Paul and Silas were severely flogged and thrown into prison in Philippi, they didn't give in to despair, but instead sang hymns of praise filling the other prisoners with hope and grace well into the night. At midnight a violent earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, the doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose. At this point the jailer's world collapsed, and he was ready to take his life for fear that his prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" At that point the jailer rushed in and asked, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:28, 30) The jailer came to faith and brought the apostles to his home, where he washed their wounds and he and his family were baptized. Can you imagine the joy in that home?

The apostles approached natural disasters with the same spirit of faith and hope. When a prophet prophesied that there was going to

be famine among the predominantly Jewish population of Judea, the apostles didn't exhort their followers to flee to more fertile ground. No, they saw the famine as a rare opportunity to bridge the chasm between Jew and Gentile through famine relief. Rather than running from disaster, the saints in Macedonia caught the larger vision and urgently pleaded with the apostles "for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people." They poured themselves into the relief effort and gave "beyond their ability," imitating the love of Christ, who for our sake became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich (2 Cor 8:3–9).

The story continues unabated throughout the Book of Acts. Luke carefully documents Satan's relentless attacks on the church. But after each and every attack, the result is always the same: God's people are strengthened with more courage and boldness to proclaim the word, their numbers multiply, and the gospel is further spread throughout the known world (Acts 4:4, 33; 5:14; 6:7; 8:4; 9:31). There are no boundaries to this gospel and nothing can thwart its advance. This is why Paul exhorts Timothy to pray for all men, especially those in authority (1 Tim 2:1–2). He understood that through our suffering for the gospel, would be called upon to give courageous testimony before kings, rulers, congressmen, senators, CEO's and managers. Therefore he wanted us to be prepared and to use these opportunities to lead those in authority over us to Christ. This is our calling, and if we have eyes of faith, we will live with tremendous hope, undaunted by fear.

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb 12:28–29)

1. Josephus, *Antiq.* XV, xi. 3.
2. N. T. Wright, *Luke: 26 Studies for Individuals and Groups* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2011), 120.
3. D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC 8; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 498.
4. Taken from Rikki Watts' outline "Lecture 20: The Trial and Demise of Jerusalem and the Trial and Vindication of the Son of Man," Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.
5. Richard A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 207.
6. Quoted in Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, 208.
7. Steve Jobs, "Commencement Address June 12, 2005," *Stanford News: Stanford Report*, June 14, 2005. Online: <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>.

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