



# THE TRAUMA OF LABOR

SERIES: *THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

Luke 21:20–38

73rd Message

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This month we are embarking on the holy season of Advent when we celebrate our Lord's birth and sing such wondrous carols as *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, *Joy to the World* and *Silent Night*. Sometimes however, I think we miss the complexity of emotions that accompanied the first advent. For the air was not only filled with joy, birth and new life, but also danger, sorrow, flight and death. We rejoice over the one child born in Bethlehem, but we must never forget the countless little ones massacred in Bethlehem that same year. Sacred birth happens in the context of deplorable death.

Thus says the LORD:

“A voice is heard in Ramah,

lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children;

she refuses to be comforted for her children,

because they are no more.”

Jeremiah 31:15 ESV

I remember coming closest to these feelings when the wife of one our fellow pastors went into labor and on the way to hospital her two-year old son started choking on an almond, which had gotten stuck below his vocal cords. They stopped at a fire station, but the paramedics were not authorized to do a tracheotomy, and rushed him to the hospital in an ambulance. As her son gave his last breath, she delivered a little girl. November 4, 1976 became a sacred day to remember life and death. A month later we would be placing a new daughter in the grave, and in two weeks time receive another miraculously by adoption. Sorrow increased our capacity for joy.

Those same emotions are present in the imagery Jesus uses to describe the establishment of his kingdom on earth. The forty years following his death and resurrection were going to throw the ancient world into severe labor pains that would give birth to a new world order. Last week we examined the beginning of labor, which involved the rise of false messiahs promising liberation from Rome; natural disasters—earthquakes and famine; wars and rumors of wars; and persecution for the disciples. We come now to the end of that labor process, which will climax in a tribulation so severe that in Mark's gospel Jesus describes it “as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be” (Mark 13:19). This trauma will simultaneously bring about two things, the death of the old order and the birth of the new. What we learn from this text is that God's most precious gifts come at the greatest price.

## I. The Sharp Pain: The Tribulation (Luke 21:20-24)

### A. The sign to flee

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written.” (vv. 21:20–22 ESV)

Until now Jesus had told the disciples that they had to be patient and endure times of severe stress and persecution, for the end would not come at once. These things were just the beginnings of labor. But now he identifies the sign that is the prelude to the desolation of Jerusalem and its temple, which Mark cryptically called the “abomination that causes desolation” (Mark 13:14). The expression was well known to the Jews from the book of Daniel (8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11), and evoked painful memories of when Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C. “erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of burned offering, sacrificed a swine on it, and made the practice of Judaism a capital offense.”<sup>1</sup> With that background in mind Jesus explains that when they see the Roman armies surrounding the city, they are to know that the “desolation” is right at the door and they must flee the city immediately. Tom Wright notes,

His followers were not to imagine out of false national loyalty that they had a duty to stay in Jerusalem and go down with the ship. Just as the Israelites were commanded to leave Babylon in a hurry before God's judgment fell on her (Isa 48:20; Jer 50:8; 51:6, 45), so Jesus' followers are to leave Jerusalem while there is still time.<sup>2</sup>

For God's wrath is about to be unleashed on the city and it will engulf guilty and innocent alike. David Garland explains,

Those who remain will be subject to carnage and captivity as the walls crumble under the force of the Roman war machine... there will be no divine intervention, and it is not the end of the world... During the war with Rome, many from the countryside entered the city hoping to find refuge from the invading army in this walled citadel. Jesus warns that it is no longer a place of refuge (Jer 4:6). Its doom is sealed. Walls, fortifications, and weapons are useless if God is not on their side (Jer 21:8–10; 38:2).<sup>3</sup>

### B. Warn the weak and vulnerable

“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.” (vv. 23–24)

Such evacuation would be especially dreadful for pregnant women and nursing mothers. Jesus warns that those who are planning on starting a family should reconsider or relocate prior to the event. In Mark Jesus tells them to pray that it might not happen in winter when rain-swollen wadis would flood roads making a quick escape nearly impossible. Such an exhortation gives great dignity to prayer, which can move an Almighty God.

The reason for such solemn warnings was that the tribulation which was about to be unleashed upon Jerusalem was going to be catastrophic. Mark explains that it would be so severe that the Lord had to set a limit to its length to preserve the elect (Mark 13:20). Josephus tells us that there were about three million Jews in

Jerusalem at the time of Passover. Out of those three million, 1.1 million were either killed or enslaved. The majority of whom did not live in Jerusalem, but came for the feast and now suddenly found themselves shut in by the Roman army. The holy city had suddenly become a prison. With all food and water supplies cut off they endured a fierce famine and a raging pestilence. The dead were everywhere, in the upper rooms, the lanes and the alleys with no place to be buried. Lamentations and groaning filled the night air while treacherous looters stripped the dead of their remaining dignity. The silent city became a sealed tomb. Conditions became so severe that many hoped the Romans would break through the walls and put an end to their misery. The most horrific scene that left even the hardest of men reeling and gasping for air was that of a young mother roasting her infant son. Josephus tells that when several starving men smelled the cooking of meat, they rushed upon the woman and demanded to see the food she was hiding. She replied,

“This is mine own son, and what has been done was mine own doing! Come, eat of this food; for I have eaten of it myself! Do not you pretend to be either more tender than a woman, or more compassionate than a mother; but if you be so scrupulous, and do abominate this my sacrifice, as I have eaten the one half, let the rest be reserved for me also.”<sup>4</sup>

The starving men were stabbed with horror and staggered out trembling by what they had just witnessed. The complete accounts of Josephus are too horrible to recount, but give weight to Jesus’ terrible words of a tribulation so severe that had the Lord not shortened those days, no one would have survived.

Now Jesus describes the climactic event everything has been leading up to. The end of this severe labor will simultaneously bring about a complete destruction of the old Jerusalem and the New Creation of the people of God under the Son of Man.

## II. The End and the Beginning (Luke 21:25–28)

### A. The end of Jerusalem

“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, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” (vv. 25–26)

At this point we would expect Luke to say, “After the tribulation Jerusalem will be destroyed,” but instead he uses apocalyptic imagery of signs in the heavens above and terrors in the sea below. Mark uses similar imagery—“the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven.” This is the kind of language used by Israel’s prophets when they wanted to describe the “earth-shattering” consequences that would result from the overthrow of world powers, whether it was a ruler as proud as Pharaoh (Ezek 32:7–8), a city as great as Babylon (Isa 13:10), or a nation as secure as Edom (Isa 34:4–6; Joel 2:10,31; 3:15). Tom Wright explains that “end-of-the-world language is the only set of metaphors adequate to express the significance of what will happen.”<sup>5</sup> The foreboding and fear that Jesus describes engulfed the Roman Empire in the decade preceding ad 70, especially the last two or three years. Wright explains,

After Nero’s suicide in 68, four emperors followed in quick succession, each one at the head of an army. The much vaunted ‘Roman peace’ that Augustus and his successors claimed to have

brought to the world was shattered from the inside. A convulsive shudder went through the whole known world.<sup>6</sup>

### B. The enthronement of the new King and his people

“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a 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.” (vv. 27–28)

With the final destruction of Jerusalem the disciples will see what Daniel described as the vindication of the Son of Man enthroned in the heavens. Daniel’s prophecies held great fascination for the Jews as they looked for the coming kingdom. Daniel portrays Israel’s enemies as ferocious wild beasts looming on the horizon. But the terror is put to rest by a man-like figure who is brought on a cloud to share the throne of God himself. Jesus adopts this imagery for the destruction of the temple, as *Israel and her rulers* have become like *one of the beasts* opposing the rule of God. The destruction of the city, coupled with the rescue of God’s people, “will be the vindication of Jesus and his people, the sign that he has been indeed enthroned at the Father’s side in heaven.”<sup>7</sup>

So “the coming of the Son of Man” is language describing Christ’s everlasting rule from heaven that will dethrone “every rule and every authority and power...until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor 15:24–26). Here we see his vindication manifest in the destruction of the city, an event that at his trial Jesus told the high priest he would see in his lifetime (Mark 14:62).

When Jesus’ followers witness this event, they are to stand up straight and lift up their downcast heads, for the powers in the heavens are shaken and a new cosmic order has begun. No longer will Jerusalem and its temple be the spiritual center of the world, but rather it will be Jesus and his apostles who have been placed as cornerstone and foundation stones of God’s new temple (Rev 21:14; 1 Pet 2:4–7). Perhaps the most moving example of such faith is Stephen at his martyrdom. As his enemies begin to vent their rage and stone him, he sees his vindication as the heavens are parted:

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:55–58)

Jesus concludes this discourse with three words about the timing of that day and responsibility of the disciples to “watch”.

## III. Watching the Timetable (Luke 21:29–36)

### A. The day is near

“And he told them a parable: “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.” (vv. 29–31)

Jesus concludes with a parable that highlights the fact that, just as the signs of summer are obvious with the budding of the fig tree, which is the first tree to bud in spring, so there is no excuse for not being informed about the coming kingdom. Every peasant farmer knows when summer is near. Similarly, no one will need a PhD in

Biblical prophecy or special revelatory knowledge, like many modern day prophecy gurus claim, to discern the times. The day is near and signs will be obvious.

#### B. The time is bound, but the hour unknown

**“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.” (vv. 32–33)**

Though they will have to wait, it won't be forever, for “this generation will not pass away until all [this] has taken place.” “This generation” has been interpreted various ways. Some take it to mean the Jews as a race, but that adds no significance to the apostles' responsibility “to watch.” Others propose that it refers to “the generation at the end time.” This interpretation was championed by Hal Lindsey in his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, published in 1970. The New York Times called it the “no. 1 non-fiction bestseller of the decade.”<sup>8</sup> And yet, what sense would this interpretation make for the apostles? And how does a generation know if, indeed, they are the last generation? Many have assumed such and been proved wrong.

The most plausible interpretation is that it refers to the current generation to whom Jesus is speaking. These things will *all* take place within *this* generation, about forty years. So sure is he of this fact, he stakes his entire credibility on this statement. “Heaven and earth may pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Tom Wright highlights the significance of his claim:

If, then, the Temple remained forever, and his movement fizzled out (as Gamaliel thought it might), he would be shown to be a charlatan, a false prophet, maybe even a blasphemer. But if the Temple was to be destroyed and the sacrifices stopped; if the pagan hordes were to tear it down stone by stone; and if the followers did escape from the conflagration unharmed, in a re-enactment of Israel's escape from their exile in doomed Babylon—why, then he would be vindicated, not only as a prophet, but as Israel's representative, as the ‘son of man.’<sup>9</sup>

This fits well within the historical context, as the destruction of Jerusalem occurred approximately forty years after Jesus' death. This waiting period, though difficult for Jesus' followers to endure, was a supreme act of God's grace, allowing the generation that rejected the Lord forty years to repent. Proving as Peter says,

**The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)**

#### C. The responsibility to “watch”

**“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. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. 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.” (vv. 34–36)**

Though the day is imminent and the time is bound, the disciples won't know the exact hour. As Jesus says in Mark's gospel, “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Like the birth pangs of childbirth, an expectant mother knows when her labor is close and that it is bound by about 40 weeks, but no doctor I know can predict the day or hour of delivery. The mystery of unknowing

heightens responsibility. Therefore the disciples must never lose their focus, for there will not be a second chance to escape.

It is a credit to all the apostles that they took these words seriously and labored wholeheartedly and faithfully throughout their entire generation. They were not sleeping in 70 A.D. when the destruction came, but were using their gifts to the full as faithful doorkeepers to the new temple.

How do we respond to such a text?

### IV. Sorrow and Love Commingling Flow

#### A. The crushing weight of judgment

First, we find that judgment is the strange work of God. He takes no delight in it, for his delight is salvation, and therefore carries judgment out with extreme reluctance. By the time faithless Israel fell under its curse most of them were in their 70's or 80's. They were given up to their very final days to repent. But sadly, most did not repent, and when judgment came it came with a severe finality. I believe Jesus emphasizes the severity of this tribulation because he wanted every generation to feel the weight of their choices as exemplary of what is in store for those who refuse the gospel. Hell will be like being captive in a city under siege, shut up in a sealed tomb inside a community that devours one another. Surrounded by people, yet totally alone.

This tells us that because we are made in the image of God, we have tremendous dignity, and our choices count. This is probably more dignity than we want. But God will not remove that dignity, and if we resist him for a lifetime, our choices will seal us in hell forever. And so this event of the great tribulation becomes typological of the final judgment.

**“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.” (2 Pet 3:10 NASB)**

#### B. The grandeur of the new creation

If we are a bit reluctant to feel the weight of judgment, I also think we are bit shy at entering into the grandeur of this new creation. Once again, the use of apocalyptic imagery to describe this new birth means that the significance of these historical events is incalculable. Peter used similar imagery on the day of Pentecost to capture the significance that the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the disciples would have in the history of the modern world. It was nothing less than a new creation (Acts 2:19-20). The new creation so outshines the old this it cannot be measured in space-time language. Do we really believe that? Does the installation of the Son of Man on his heavenly throne, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the completion of the New Testament, and the establishment of the new temple, his church really change the structure of the universe? Jesus says it does. And I believe him.

In his second volume, Luke documents over and over again how the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost shook the powers of the universe. I'll never forget John Stott's classic summary of Acts 12 during his lectures on the book of Acts at Regent College in 1979. He said, “The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod on the rampage. But after earnest prayer was made on Peter's behalf, the chapter concludes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the Holy Spirit on the rampage.”

### C. Are you open to renewal?

And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him. (vv. 37-39)

In the epilogue of our text we find Jesus daily proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and at night retreating for rest on the Mount of Olives, safely out of reach of his enemies. I find it interesting that Jesus never loses his focus and relentlessly maintains his spiritual disciplines right to very last hour. Going from darkness, silence and contemplation with the Father to full engagement of proclamation and personal encounters with people. The fruit of his disciplined life is evident by the fact that the people begin to imitate their master, arriving first thing in the morning to listen and retiring to their homes in the evening. The Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr writes,

I believe that the combination of human action from a contemplative center is the greatest art form...When action and contemplation are united, we always have beauty, symmetry, and transformation—lives and actions that inherently sparkle and heal, even with dark images.<sup>10</sup>

So often we are eager for renewal, to hear the voice of Jesus afresh, but the problem is that our lives are so noisy and cluttered, he can't be heard in the midst of the chaos. We are like overgrown gardens that need to be plowed under and go fallow in order for any new growth to appear. If you have any doubt that this is the starting point of renewal, ask yourself, "Why was it necessary that Jerusalem be utterly destroyed with not one stone upon another that was not thrown down?" Why couldn't the kingdom of God come alongside, in addition to, the existing order? The answer is that you can't put new wine in old wineskins.

As we prepare ourselves to embark on the busiest time of the year, I would like to give everyone here a Christmas gift. I would like everyone to take one day during the month of December and do absolutely nothing. Make your life fallow for 24 hours. Get away and leave all your electronics at home. Go with no expectations, don't even try and pray. Just go away, alone with God. Be still, hike, walk, breathe, laugh, cry, whatever. Then on December 28 I will ask those who were able to do the impossible to report back to the congregation of their experience. May God grant us renewal, one by one, little by little, this new year.

1. D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in *Matthew, Mark Luke* (EBC 8; ed. Frank E. Gaebel; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 500.
2. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 255.
3. David E. Garland, *Luke* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 832.
4. Preterist Perspectives On *Josephus' Wars of the Jews - Another Description of the Terrible Famine That Was in the City - Book VI, Chap III, Sec. 4*, [http://www.preteristarchive.com/JewishWars/timeline\\_theological.html#Book\\_V,\\_Chapter\\_X,\\_Section\\_2\\_](http://www.preteristarchive.com/JewishWars/timeline_theological.html#Book_V,_Chapter_X,_Section_2_)
5. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 208.
6. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 255.
7. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 256.
8. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), back cover page.
9. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 362.
10. Richard Rohr, *Dancing Standing Still: Healing the World from a Place of Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 1.

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