

Standing Firm to the End (Part 2)

Luke 21:20-28

January 18, 2015

Intro.

- The Pew Research Center did a study of Americans and asked them what new technology did they most hope to see in their lifetime.
 - Any idea what the number 1 answer was? Time travel.
 - While most people expressed a desire to go back in time, I would love to go forward in time to see how the events of biblical prophecy work out.
- In Luke 21:6, Jesus foretold the destruction of the temple.
 - Because, many people in Jesus' day thought that the temple was indestructible, any thought that it might be destroyed naturally raised questions about the end of the world.
- As we saw last week, the unifying purpose of Jesus' message here is to equip his disciples to stand firm to the end.
 - Jesus' word to them is the same word he gives to every generation of disciples that are waiting for his return.
 - You must stand firm in your faith until you stand before Jesus face-to-face.
- Today we will look at the next section of Jesus' sermon and the timeline of events that Jesus talks about.
 - Understanding prophecy is one of the challenging aspects of studying the Bible.
 - There are many different interpretations, and it is good to remember this exhortation from theologian George Ladd in his book *The Blessed Hope*:

While assaults...are being directed against the fundamental doctrine of the personal return of the Lord, it is almost a fantastic thing that men who love His appearing and recognize its indispensable place in Christian doctrine are off in a corner disputing among themselves about the details which will attend Christ's return, when they ought to be standing shoulder to shoulder in defense of the doctrine of the second coming of Christ itself. (*The Blessed Hope*, 139)

- Very simply, when it comes to this subject every one of us should hold our opinions with humility and remember that other Christians are trying their best to approach God's Word with faith as well.
- Because these are the words of Jesus, they are the very word of God and are worth the effort to understand.
- As we look at verses 20-28, we are working to put together a story.
 - This story has two scenes and an intermission.

- Scene 1 is verses 20-24.
 - Scene 2 is verses 25-28.
 - The intermission is part of the story but isn't fully explained in this text.
- As we put this story together we have to pay attention to the context.
 - Jesus has just declared judgment on the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.
 - His disciples responded by asking when it will take place, and Jesus' answer includes a whole lot of "you's", meaning that it sure seems like he intends what he says to apply to them.
- As we sit in 2015 and look at Jesus' intent in this sermon (and Luke's intent in writing to Christians after Jesus ascended into heaven), here is the conclusion:
- The accuracy of Jesus' past judgment assures the certainty of his future redemption.
 - In other words, as we learn more about the judgment on Jerusalem and see the accuracy of Jesus' teaching we should become even more certain that Jesus will really return one day to receive us to himself, and he will reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
 - We should become convinced that there is an unbreakable bond between the past destruction of Jerusalem and the future redemption of God's people.
- As we look closer at these verses and the story they tell, they should shape three expectations.
 - A right expectation of history
 - A right expectation of time
 - A right expectation of the future.
- 1. A right expectation of history (vs. 20-24)
 - a. Scene 1 prepares us to have a right expectation of history.
 - b. Jesus has just foretold the inevitable fall of Jerusalem.
 - c. After giving 3 non-signs of the end, he gives the first clear sign to look for (v. 20).
 - i. Jesus declares that the desolation of Jerusalem is coming.
 - ii. Desolation refers to facing God's judgment and being deserted by him.
 - d. The evidence of this is that the city would be surrounded by armies.
 - i. Which armies is Jesus referring to?
 - ii. Jesus gives this sign for the purpose of giving a warning to escape the city (v. 21).

- iii. If these armies are the Roman armies, then by the time they encamped around the city, it would be too late to flee.
- iv. In A.D. 66, a revolutionary group called the Zealots launched a revolt against the Roman occupation.
- v. The next year they moved their headquarters to the Temple.
- vi. Josephus, a Jewish historian in that day, said that they allowed criminals to roam freely about the Temple including the Holy of Holies.
- vii. They even committed murder in the Temple.
- viii. The Zealots installed their own high priest—a man named Phanni.
 - 1. In Josephus' words this was "the appalling sacrilege, usurping a position which is not his."
- ix. In A.D. 68, Judean forces came to support the Zealot cause and camped outside the city of Jerusalem.
- x. So the armies that Jesus refers to here are likely *not* Roman armies but Judean armies.
- e. Early Christians saw these events take place and recalled Jesus' warning.
 - i. Eusebius, an early church historian wrote :

But before the war, the people of the Church of Jerusalem were bidden in an oracle given by revelation to men worthy of it to depart from the city and to dwell in a city of Perea called Pella. To it those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem. Once the holy men had completely left the Jews and all Judea, the justice of God at last overtook them, since they had committed such transgressions against Christ and his apostles. Divine justice completely blotted out that impious generation from among men. (*Ecclesiastical History III.v.3*)

- f. This is the reason Jesus gave to his disciples to flee (v. 22).
 - i. Jerusalem had been surrounded before in their history and had been delivered by God.
 - ii. However, this time, Jesus announced that this attack would be God's judgment.
 - iii. Throughout the Old Testament, God warned his people of the consequences for failing to listen to him.
- g. In A.D. 70, Jesus' word came true (vs. 23-24).
 - i. Josephus wrote that during this siege, even children were cooked for food.
 - ii. He went on to estimate that 1.1 million people were slaughtered, and an additional 97,000 were taken captive.

- iii. This was not simply retribution for a failed rebellion but divine judgment for rejecting Christ.
- h. The destruction of Jerusalem functions as a pattern of God's judgment.
 - i. This pattern will culminate in a final judgment—not simply of one city or nation but of the whole earth.
 - ii. This stands as a warning to our generation.

Hebrews 2:2-3a For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³ how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?

- iii. The reality of Jerusalem's destruction is a warning cry to every generation.
- iv. Do not reject Christ; the consequences are devastating.
- i. For those who are believers, having the right expectations of history will equip you to stand firm to the end.
- j. Scene 1 concludes with this phrase: "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."
 - i. This sets up the intermission and the second expectation.
- 2. A right expectation of time
 - a. Jesus appears to move seamlessly from v. 24 to v. 25.
 - i. However, this phrase "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" introduces a gap that has lasted from A.D. 70 until today.
 - ii. Is it really legitimate to read a 2000+ year gap here?
 - iii. When I lived in Nepal, I used to ride my motorcycle up one particular road and had a spectacular view of the Himalayas.
 - 1. As I looked at them off in the distance, they looked like a single chain of peaks knifing up into the sky.
 - 2. The peak over on my left looked like the tallest peak in the chain, but one day I saw a poster that had the elevations of each of the peaks printed above them.
 - 3. What I learned was that the peak I thought was the tallest was actually the shortest.
 - 4. What appeared to be a seamless chain of mountain peaks were, in reality, separate peaks separated by miles.
 - iv. The same effect plays out in biblical prophecy; it's called prophetic foreshortening.
 - b. As the prophet looked into the future, he saw a series of events that were related but were also separated by gaps in time.

- i. However, as he wrote them, they were woven together like a mountain range to form a single statement.
- ii. We see an example of this in Isaiah.

Isaiah 61:1-2 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God,

- 1. In Luke 4, Jesus read this prophecy but he stopped the reading right before the last phrase.
- 2. He then sat down and said the Scripture was fulfilled that day.
- iii. Isaiah spoke of the coming of Christ as a single event, yet there is a gap in time between his first and second comings.
- c. Seeing an intermission between vs. 24 and 25 creates space for the times of the Gentiles to be fulfilled.
 - i. This phrase is unique to Luke.
 - ii. However, in Matthew and Mark's versions of this sermon, they both have something that Luke doesn't.

Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

- iii. So, it is likely that when Luke speaks of the times of the Gentiles being fulfilled, he is saying the same thing as Matthew and Mark.
- d. What this means is that when we think of Jesus' return, there is something more crucial than events in Israel.
 - i. It is the evangelization of all nations.
- e. Having this right expectation of time will help you to stand firm to the end.
- f. This is what sets the stage for Scene 2.
- 3. A right expectation of the future (vs. 25-28)
 - a. Jesus indicates that there will be an intensification of trouble and unrest prior to his return.
 - b. When he says there will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, it's possible that Jesus is referring to literal astronomical events.
 - i. It's also possible he is using figurative language.
 - ii. If I said, "It's raining cats and dogs," you would not expect to go outside and be pelted with furry four-footed animals.
 - iii. We know that heavenly realms can also refer to unseen spiritual realities.

- iv. Either way, the convulsing of world powers is under God's control and will not thwart Jesus' plans.
- c. The churning of the sea is probably figurative and refers to the rising of various powers.
 - i. In Daniel 7, he has a vision of four beasts; each beast comes up out of the sea that is being churned up by the winds of heaven.
 - ii. The beast in Revelation 13 arises out of the sea.
- d. This tumult is the prelude to Jesus' return.
 - i. Jesus specifically says that at that time "they" will see him.
 - ii. Those who were fearful about the powers of this world will be in for a greater surprise—the arrival of the Son of Man.
 - iii. Jesus uses the language here of Daniel 7.

Daniel 7:13-14 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

- iv. Jesus' return will not only mean the defeat of all other world powers, but it will be the vindication of God's people.

Daniel 7:21-22 As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them, ²² until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

- e. Jesus tells us what the right response is to these events.
 - i. When the rest of the world is cowering in fear, his disciples can stand tall.
 - ii. In v. 20, the presence of armies were a false hope for the Jews that in reality spelled God's judgment of his enemies.
 - iii. Now in v. 28, the presence of chaos that will result in terror in reality spells God's redemption of his people.
- f. How does the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the return of Jesus not yet accomplished lead to an expectation of our redemption?
 - i. The fall of Jerusalem set in motion an unalterable series of events that will conclude with the return of Christ.
 - ii. Matthew referred to it as birth pains.
 - iii. This is a fitting description.
 - iv. When a woman goes into labor, you don't know how long it will take, but you can be sure a baby is coming.

Conclusion

- When you look to the future, what are you looking for?
- As we go through life, make plans, and encounter trials, most of us have some version of this statement going on in our minds: “Everything will be OK if...”
 - How do you finish that statement?
 - Those who are prepared to stand firm to the end say, “It’s not ‘if’ but ‘when.’”
 - “Everything will be OK when Jesus returns.”
- The accuracy of Jesus’ past judgment assures the certainty of his future redemption.