

King in the End

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- [0 : 00] And so let's ask for his help now. Let's pray. Father, as we come to this passage today, I just ask once again for your help. Please open our minds so that we can understand.
- And more importantly, open our hearts so that we can receive what you have to say. And we can live in light of it. And we can grow our trust in you.
- And so I just commit this whole time into your hands and ask that your spirit work. All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen. Wouldn't it be nice to have a crystal ball?
- Something that shows us every twist and turn in our future. Now some of you might be thinking, not me. I'm a modern 21st century person.
- I don't believe in that kind of superstition. But let's be honest. Don't we still seek out people who seem to know what's coming?
- [1 : 00] We follow financial gurus who can predict the stock market. Trust election posters who can get the results right. And hang on every word of football pundits whose analysis always seems spot on.
- We may not believe in literal crystal balls. But deep down, we all want a glimpse of the future. Especially when life feels uncertain.
- Because when things are unstable, knowing what is ahead seems like it will give us security. Today, Jesus will give us a glimpse of the future.
- He does so to prepare us for times of upheaval and difficulty. But he doesn't do this by giving us a thorough roadmap of future events.
- Instead, what he does is to unveil all of history from age to age so that he might show us how to live faithfully and courageously no matter what lies ahead.
- [2 : 08] Now, that might surprise you. Isn't Luke 21 verse 5 to 38 a detailed breakdown of the end times? Something we can use to match today's news to Bible prophecy?
- Or even pinpoint the day and hour of Christ's return? As I hope to show you today, that's not quite right. Yes, Luke 21 verse 5 to 38 does have a prophetic edge to it.
- But if we interpret it in such a way that it only gives rise to all sorts of speculative theories and ultimately fear, we have missed Jesus' point entirely.
- His goal isn't to frighten us. It is to help us stay focused and faithful whatever the future brings. And so let us turn to Luke 21 verse 5 to 38 and hear Jesus' words for ourselves.
- As we do so, let me acknowledge first of all that yes, some parts of this passage are tricky. Even after much study and prayer, I can't claim to understand every phrase with complete certainty.
- [3 : 29] There are complexities involved, and it is no surprise that even mature, thoughtful Christians don't have 100% agreement about what it all means.
- But I do think that while not all details can be understood with equal clarity, many details can.

And certainly the big picture is clear. As long as we handle the text responsibly, by considering its genre, its literary and historical context, and allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture rather than imposing our own ideas, we can come to grips with the main message.

And what Jesus wants to offer us today is really four pieces of counsel to help us navigate the future with confidence. Let's look at each of them in turn.

Firstly, be calm and discerning even when life is turbulent. Be calm and discerning even when life is turbulent.

[4 : 41] Last week, we left Jesus at the temple watching and marvelling as a widow placed her little gift in the treasury. And this week, as we rejoin him and his disciples, they are still in the vicinity.

But this time, it is the disciples who are watching and marvelling. Not so much at a widow's faithfulness, verse 5, but at the temple's greatness.

What beautiful stones, they said. How grand it is. And it was. If you were there, you would have noticed the towering 40-foot columns holding up a sadder-paneled ceiling.

You would have been in awe at some of the stone blocks stretching 60 feet long. You would have been struck by the gleaming golden gate or the veil that was woven from the finest threads.

It was a sight to behold. No wonder the Roman historian, Tacitus, called this temple immensely opulent. And of course, the temple wasn't just grand.

[5 : 57] To the Jews, it was their very pride and joy. For it was also the place where God said, I will meet with you. What other nation could boast such a privilege?

So just imagine the disciples' shock when Jesus turns to them in verse 6 and says, it's all coming down. Every last stone.

Let that sink in for a moment. It's hard to find a modern parallel. I could ask you to picture Jesus saying that the dune building and Fort Margherita will be reduced to rubble or that the twin towers will crumble before our very eyes.

But even those fall short. Because the temple wasn't just a landmark, it lay at the heart of Jewish identity, society, and religion.

It embodied the solidity, the reliability, even the permanence of their covenant with God. Its destruction was simply inconceivable.

[7 : 12] So if it were truly to be brought down, it would have felt like their world was ending. And that is key to grasp.

To the Jews, the temple's end would signal the end of this age. How could it not? The two felt inseparable.

And that is why in verse 7 they ask, when will these things happen? What will be the sign they are about to take place? What exactly are they asking?

Are they asking about what will happen in the very final period of history? Just before Jesus comes back? Which is what we often assume they mean?

Answer, not quite. Because the context clearly shows they are focused on the temple they can see and when that will fall, not some distant future.

[8 : 18] They are not thinking about Russia or China or 21st century Middle Eastern geopolitics. We have to be careful not to read our modern questions into their question.

But at the same time, remember, although they are not picturing events thousands of years beyond their lifetimes, they do assume the temple's destruction means God is wrapping up this age.

age. So in that sense, they are concerned with the end. But this is where things get interesting. How does Jesus answer?

Now, if you've been following Jesus over the last three weeks, you know that he specializes in answers that are not straightforward yet profound. Every time he gets asked a question, he often says, well, actually, let us check whether your assumptions are even right in the first place.

And we will find that he will slowly but surely do the same thing in his teaching here. So let's listen in. Jesus begins by saying, guys, I know you are anxious.

[9 : 38] After all, I just told you that the temple is going down. So it must feel like your world is collapsing. And you know what? In your lifetime, many events will make it feel like impending doom is just around the corner.

Forced teachers and prophets, verse 8. wars and uprisings, earthquakes, famines, pandemics, verses 9 to 11. Perhaps it's best sum up in that little phrase Jesus uses in verse 11.

Fearful events. Your world will be filled with fearful events. But here is Jesus' key point.

Don't worry. All these things might feel like it is going to be the end, but it is not the end.

These are not the signs that the temple is coming to an end. Verse 9. And therefore, neither are these the signs the world is coming to an end.

[10 : 52] Yes, these things must happen first, but the end will not come straight away. In other words, these events are inevitable, but don't try to develop some sort of precise timetable from it.

After all, remember what Jesus taught earlier in Luke 17, verse 20? You can't calculate the coming of the kingdom of God. So, what are these events then, if they are not signs the temple or the age is about to end?

Simple. They are simply part and parcel of life between Jesus' resurrection and his return. Take false messiahs, for instance.

In the first century, before the temple fell, the Jewish historian Josephus notes that false prophets were arrested daily under Nero, while the Roman historian Eusebius highlights a rash of self-proclaimed saviors during the same period.

And it is a pattern that repeats in every age. Whenever uncertainty strikes, people crave firm leadership and hope.

[12 : 15] So, there is always opportunity for false spiritual leaders to rise and say, I'm the messiah. Follow me. Think of Sabbatai Zevi and Moses banned Abraham in the 11th century, Jewish mystiques who drew huge followings in Turkey and Morocco, or Anne Lee in the 17th century claiming to be the female embodiment of Christ with the shakers.

Even today, we've got Apollo Kiboloi in the Philippines claiming himself to be the appointed son of God and winning followers even right here in Kuching.

Same goes with wars. If we read the Roman historian Tacitus, we'll see that wars and rumors of wars were common even during the apostles' lifetime.

And history has been no different since. As Cambridge historian Michael Grant puts it, war has been raging almost continuously throughout the centuries.

Think of the Mongol conquest under Genghis Khan in the 13th century, or the Napoleonic wars in Europe in the 17th century. A mathematician at the University of Colorado looked at the period between 1823 and 2003 to see how common wars were and found that over those 181 years, there were 95 recorded wars, roughly one every two years.

[13 : 58] And of course, I don't have to tell you about the wars that are happening right this minute. And what about famines and earthquakes? We see them already in the book of Acts.

I've listed some references on your outline, and history confirms they have always been a constant reality. These are all simply part and parcel of life between Jesus' resurrection and his return.

Now, just to be clear, verses 8 to 11 are not the only things that characterize life now. If we go back to Luke 17, we see plenty of ordinary life happening too.

People getting married, running businesses, enjoying makan time with friends. In other words, life isn't just upheaval and turbulence, there is also peace and prosperity.

But here is Jesus' counsel for us. When unstable times come, don't be alarmed. This isn't unexpected.

[15 : 08] That's just what life is like. So if someone influential, like a religious teacher or a secular commentator, points to a war, an earthquake, or some other crisis, and declares, this is it.

This is the end. Remember Jesus' words. No, it isn't. Climate change isn't the end.

The decline of democracy isn't the end. That is not to downplay the seriousness of war and natural disasters or climate change. Not at all.

We should care about them. But we don't need to fear them. Jesus has already told us this is simply part of life in a broken world.

Yet, isn't it tempting to react in two ways whenever we hear disturbing news or see troubling trends. It's tempting, number one, to speculate.

[16 : 16] That's what plenty of books and YouTube videos are doing, trying to decode some end-time scenario from current events. But the irony is that in verses 8 to 11, Jesus brings this up precisely to discourage such speculation.

So don't go chasing those obsessed with such things. And it is tempting, number two, to panic. Maybe we throw up our hands and we go, oh no, everyone is legalizing same-sex marriage.

Oh, that just proves that the liberal agenda is taking over. Everything is getting worse and worse. We're heading to a point of no return. But Jesus reminds us there has never been a utopia.

And since he's not panicking, neither should we. Instead, we should respond with calm confidence. And we should be discerning.

Don't be deceived, Jesus warns in verse 8. Plenty of false teachers prey on fear and uncertainty, and sadly many pass through Sarawak.

[17 : 33] walk. Don't be taken in by them. So, Jesus' first counsel is clear. Be calm and discerning even in turbulent times.

Here's the next one. Secondly, be prepared and take courage when opposition comes. Jesus' Now, Jesus has just clarified what are not the signs of the end, be that the temple's end or this world's end.

But now he tells the disciples what is ahead for them. You want to know the future, he asks? Well, let me give it to you straight. This is your immediate future, verse 12.

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.

You're going to be the object of persecution. Oh, dear, it doesn't sound encouraging, does it? But the thing is, Jesus turned out to be absolutely right.

[18 : 53] Before the temple eventually fell in AD 70, the disciples found themselves experiencing all this. All you have to do is to read through Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, being handed over to synagogues.

Check. Just read Acts 13, verse 42 to 46, 14, verse 1 to 2, and 18, verse 5 to 7. Being put in prison? Check.

Just read Acts 5, verse 18, 8, verse 3, 16, verse 23 to 24, and 26, verse 10. Being brought before kings and governors? Check.

Just read Acts 9, verse 15, and 26, verse 27 to 30. And all of this being on account of his name? Check.

interestingly, that is a phrase that occurs all throughout Acts, 17 times in total. And Jesus lets them know beforehand not to scare them, but to prepare them.

[20 : 06] Verse 13. You see, he says, facing opposition doesn't mean it is necessarily the end of the road for you. Rather, as you go before these kings and governors, this is your opportunity to bear testimony.

Now, that is not how we naturally view persecution, is it? But Jesus says, think about it. When you are in court, and they are questioning you, you are being presented with a chance to declare your faith.

they have to listen to you. And again, in the book of Acts, that is exactly what happened. And though Jesus says these words first to the apostles, we too can take them to heart, because we know the New Testament as a whole says we too will face the same thing.

We might not all face prisons or kings, but opposition comes in many forms today. Maybe a friend mocking your faith, a boss challenging your values, or a culture dismissing Jesus' relevance.

And so Jesus' words still apply. And every time our faith is spotlighted at work, or with friends, or even online, even if it is in a negative context, it becomes an opportunity to speak about Jesus and for Jesus.

[21 : 44] So be prepared for opposition, Jesus says. It's not just something confined to the past, in fact, it appears in every age. Whatever the future holds, expect push back.

But here is the encouragement. I'll be with you, Jesus promises in verse 15. I'll give you the words to say. So don't worry, Jesus has you covered.

Take Peter, for instance. Picture him in Luke 22, unable to even face a servant girl without stumbling all over his words.

And then picture him in Acts 4, preaching boldly before rulers. That's because Jesus was at work in him. In his hands, the word of God rings out.

Now, that doesn't mean we should never engage in study. After all, Peter himself tells us in 1 Peter 3, verse 15, to always be ready to explain the hope we have.

[22 : 56] But when thrown into unexpected situations, where we have no time to prepare, take courage, and don't shrink back from speaking up.

Don't worry that you'll somehow drag down God's good name. Don't end up not saying anything at all, simply because you're afraid you will say the wrong thing. Jesus will give you the words.

And if things get worse, verse 16, don't lose heart. The deepest wounds may come from those closest to you, your own family and friends might turn against you.

Jesus knew that pain firsthand. His family thought he was mad, his hometown rejected him, and one of his closest friends betrayed him.

Now, thankfully, not all of us will experience this, but we must be prepared. there's a gut-wrenching story told to the commentator Grant Osborne by a missionary in Pakistan.

[24 : 05] One man had accepted Christ, so his wife put ground glass in his evening meal. As a result, his insides were all torn out, and the village called her a hero for killing an infidel.

Sobering, isn't it? But take courage and stand firm, verse 19, because Jesus promises in verse 18, not a hair on your head will perish.

Now, hang on a minute, Jesus. Didn't you just say we might die? And death sounds pretty harmful to my hair. What do you mean? Well, here's what Jesus means.

Even if you die, you will be safe with him forever. Life beyond death is yours. Nothing can touch you.

So stand firm, Jesus says. Be prepared and take courage when opposition comes. For even if death comes, Jesus will carry you through.

[25 : 19] And that brings us to our third piece of counsel Jesus will offer us today. Thirdly, stay sober yet confident because Jesus has it all in his hands.

After warning of personal hostility, Jesus now turns your eyes to something even worse. The fate of first century Jerusalem.

What else lies ahead for the apostles? More heartbreak, he says in verse 20. There is going to be a day when you will see Jerusalem surrounded by armies.

That siege, Jesus warns, is the sign the temple's end is near. Remember, that is the literary context. he is finally answering their question from verse 7.

When will the temple fall? But is that the end of everything? Well, it will certainly feel like the end is going to be a time of great distress, verse 23.

[26 : 34] There will be great slaughter, there will be prisoners of war, there will be defilement of the city, verse 24. Why? Because, verse 22, this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.

Jerusalem has repeatedly ignored God, it has rejected God's messengers, we learned that a few weeks ago, it has ultimately rejected Jesus, and so it will suffer the consequences, just like when it was exiled and punished with covenant curses back in the Old Testament.

Its time is over, it certainly feels like the end, but it isn't, Jesus says. You see, what are they to do when they see all this taking place?

Stay and fight? No. Give up and die? No. They are to flee for their lives, they are to flee like Lot, fleeing from the destruction that is to come.

Verse 21, 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. They are to flee from the wrath, because the wrath that will fall upon Jerusalem will be grim indeed.

[28 : 03] The physical Jerusalem is no longer associated with redemption, but with God's judgment. It is no longer the place of security. So, flee.

And you know what? It happened exactly as Jesus foretold. In AD 70, the Roman general Titus arrived, besieged Jerusalem for five grueling months, and then broke through, leaving it in ruins.

It was the darkest hour Jerusalem has ever known. Even worse than when the Babylonians came and conquered them in 597 BC, or when the Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes came and desecrated their temple in 163 BC.

And historians tell us that Christians also did exactly what the Lord had told them to do. They fled. But, okay, you say, that was future for them, but it's history for us.

Do these verses have relevance for us still? Absolutely. Yes, it is true that the destruction of Jerusalem was a real historical judgment.

[29 : 26] But it also points forward to God's final judgment. it shows he takes sin seriously and that rejecting him has consequences.

You see, what happens if we keep pushing Jesus aside, saying, oh, we're in charge, we get to do what we want? We will invite upon ourselves a greater day of distress, verses 25 and 26.

On that day, the heavens and the earth will be shaken, nations will be in anguish, people will faint from terror. For this is a day, notice, not for Jerusalem, but for the whole world.

Verse 26 again, something he repeats in verse 35. It will be a global day of judgment. And that is the lesson we need to draw from this historical event.

You see, contrary to the disciples' assumption, the end of the temple is not quite the end of the world yet. There is going to be a delay.

[30 : 44] The kingdom of God is not going to all come at once. Remember? Jesus already taught that back in Luke 19.

20. But one day the master will return. Verse 27. The son of man will come back in the same way he went up to heaven, through the clouds, visible and unmistakable.

And that will truly be the end. And that's why I think Jesus transitions from history in verses 20 to 24 to eschatology in verses 25 onwards.

Because the historical event is really a preview of the eschatological event. Now some of you listening today might not be a Christian and you cringe at all this judgment talk.

It's hard to swallow. I get it. But let me ask you, is Jesus speaking the truth? Can we trust his words?

[31 : 59] After all, was he not right about the destruction of Jerusalem? Remember Jesus spoke these words in AD 33, nearly 40 years before Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

And Luke wrote down his words roughly 20 years after Jesus first spoke these words. And Jesus got every detail right.

So shouldn't we take his words about the coming judgment just as seriously? Shouldn't it sober us up?

But here is the good news. Yes, we should be sobered, but on that final day, we can be confident as well. How?

Let's come back to the text. Do you remember what Jesus said as they saw the calamity approaching? Flee! But flee where, you might ask.

[33 : 09] I mean, to the mountains as he instructed them? But we are no longer in first century Jerusalem with armies surrounding us. So how do we take his words to heart now?

We are clearly not going to flee to Mount Santubong or somewhere. The clue comes at the end of verse 24, where Jesus mentions the time of the Gentiles.

It is a phrase that we can't fully unpack today, but in brief, it is about the season we're in right now, a time when the gospel is going out across the world, and that day of judgment is still yet to come.

And just as Jesus showed his disciples a way out back then, he is showing us a way out today. Only today it is not about running to a hillside, it is about trusting Jesus with your life.

It's not about finding refuge in a place like a mountain, or a temple, or even Jerusalem itself, but in a person, Christ himself.

[34 : 24] And if you come to him, you can have full confidence Jesus has it all in his hands. After all, what he said came true. And so that gives us confidence that the rest of what Jesus says will happen will also come true.

He will be our place of refuge when he comes again. He has already promised that. If he was able to preserve the church in the past, he will preserve the church in the future.

Whatever the future brings, you are in safe hands. And that brings us to the fourth and final piece of counsel Jesus wants to offer today.

Fourthly, stay watchful and prayerful as your redemption draws near. Stay watchful and prayerful as your redemption draws near.

Jesus has just foretold the destruction of first century Jerusalem and its temple and used that as a way to foreshadow the day of judgment at the end of history.

[35 : 37] He then tells a parable about a fig tree, verse 29. And just as a side note, notice that Luke tells us Jesus didn't actually single out this fig tree, but says instead, the point that he is about to make can be learned from any tree.

That's in verse 29. I just point that out because you might have heard some interpretation say that this fig tree and its budding refers to the birth of the modern nation-state of Israel in 1948.

Now that is partly because these people interpret Luke 21 verse 20 to 24 as a future event, rather than as the past event of AD 70, and also probably because in the Old Testament, the fig tree is sometimes a symbol for biblical Israel.

But in context, that interpretation just doesn't make any sense. Jesus is simply drawing a lesson from nature, and he could have used any tree to make his point.

need to be in the tree. When leaves appear on a fig tree, summer is at hand.

[36 : 57] In the same way, when the disciples see the cosmic signs of verses 25 and 26, they know the day of the Lord is drawing near. And so as they wait, they need to stay ready.

Yes, the end of the temple doesn't signal that we are at the end of history, but that delay is not forever. The kingdom of God is coming in its fullness.

So get ready. Or to use the language of verse 36 later on, be watchful. You see, until that day, we are going to have to deal with resistance to the kingdom.

That is how I currently understand verse 32, which is a very difficult verse, so let me try to explain. What is Jesus referring to when he says, this generation will certainly not pass away?

It's a verse that is debated by just about everyone, and many options have been put forward. For example, the study notes in our home fellowship group, Bible Studies, suggest that this refers to the final generation before Jesus comes again, which is certainly one possible option.

[38 : 23] But let me suggest something different, although I don't hold to this interpretation firmly. But here's what I think makes some sense. In Luke's Gospel, every time the phrase this generation or some variant of it is used, it always refers to people who are resistant to Jesus, who oppose him and his purposes, who have stubbornly turned their backs on him.

And so Jesus is saying, verse 32, that such God haters will be with us all the way until he comes back. But be reassured, verse 33, Jesus' words remain true.

They will outlast even the present creation order, so they will certainly outlast his enemies. So stand up and lift up your heads, verse 28, and hold on to God's word as that day draws near.

His word is forever, so it can see you through any present and future challenges. And be careful, verse 34, 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.

You see, Jesus knows that we could, in theory, affirm everything he has just said. We know the day is coming, we agree we should follow him, but sometimes we just get sidetracked.

[40 : 13] We lose sense of what is truly urgent and what we should really prioritize. And in verse 34, Jesus identifies three common things that can sidetrack us.

There is carousing, anything that simply means let's have fun, let's seek pleasure, let's just lose ourselves in trying out the latest hot restaurant or in endless travel or in karaoke, anything that takes our eyes off the big picture of the kingdom.

Could that be you? And then there is drunkenness. Let's try to numb the effects of our boredom or our sadness with alcohol.

And then there is the anxieties of life. This, I think, is the one we have to watch out for the most of all. That is when you are consumed with just this week's activities.

All we think about is getting our work done for the day or getting the kids to where they need to be. And we just can't lift our heads and see beyond that immediate horizon.

[41 : 26] We're just too busy with what's happening right now to consider what's really going on spiritually inside of us or around us. But Jesus says, watch out.

Be careful. Be watchful. Only think about today and your tomorrow might slip away.

So let's make sure we do that. And let's help by watching out for each other as well. Do you notice a brother or sister in Christ reaching for the alcohol a little more than usual?

Maybe you need to have a word with them. As young parents, do you recognize when either one of you have become so preoccupied with family activities that you've actually pushed Jesus aside or the family of God aside?

Maybe you need to speak up as well. Be watchful and be prayerful, verse 36, so that you may escape the final judgment.

[42 : 37] And as someone once observed, prayer is looking up. It is lifting up your heads because your redemption is drawing near.

And so that is Jesus' counsel to us this morning. Do you want to know how to navigate the future with confidence?

Well, rather than getting caught up in those YouTube videos that try to map out speculative prophetic timelines, let us hold fast and focus on what Jesus calls us to, a calm trust, a bold witness, and unwavering confidence.

Because at the end of the day, Jesus has got it all in his hands. So lift up your heads as you and I wait for our redemption.

let's pray. Heavenly Father, this has been a difficult passage, not always easy to understand, and certainly quite challenging in places as well.

[43 : 55] But Father, I just pray that your spirit has indeed been at work this morning, even in the last 40 minutes or so, and that you're using your word as the sword of your spirit to convict us where we haven't been as watchful as we should be, we haven't been as prayerful as we should be.

Help us to keep in mind, Lord, that that day of the Lord is coming, and not lose sight of that reality. But at the same time, Lord, help us also not to be fearful, because even though there are many fearful events, we have so much confidence that the Lord Jesus holds onto us firmly, that he knows the future, and he has our future in his hands.

So we commit ourselves to you, in the name of Christ we pray. Amen.