



Luke 21:5-38

“Get Smart, Get Ready, Stay Alert”
(15th in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 21:5-38 "GET SMART! GET READY! STAY ALERT!"

Section: 19:25-24:53, Last Events In Jerusalem

A. vv.5-6 Jesus Teaching On The Temple's Ultimate Destruction. //Mk. 13, Mt. 24-25

Part A, 19:45-21:38 Jesus Teaches In Temple

5 And as some spoke of the temple, 20:45 Disciples, Discourse Not On Mount Of Olives But In Temple, Public
6 how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, JW. 5.207-208, Admiring Remark Leads To Long Oracle
"As for these things which you see, Prophetic Oracle (Micah 3:12, Jer. 7, 22:5)
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(Future Sayings 7:22, 25; 19:43), Temple Not Final Dwelling, Jesus Is!

B. vv.7-9 Two Questions + Answers: Warnings Against False Messiahs, Timetables.

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1) v.7a Question No. 1: When?.

7 And they asked him, "Teacher, when will this be? If the "days will come," then When? And What Sign?
Address Of Outsiders, Not Disciples

2) v.7b Question No. 2: What Sign? (So We Can Prepare).

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2') vv.8-9a Answer To No. 2: Sign Answered As False Signs. Apocalyptic Speech

8 a And he said, "Take heed that you are not led astray (deceived); (p.v.) Genuine Temptation
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1') v.9b Answer To No. 1: Time Answered As Not Yet.

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11 2 there will be great earthquakes, Earth's Balance Disrupted (2)
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3 and there will be terrors (dreadful portents) //J.W. 6.288-300
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13 2 This will be a time for you to bear testimony. Acts 1:8, Power To Witness: Trust
14 Settle it therefore in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer;
15 3 for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, 12:11-12, Holy Spirit? Ex. 4:15,
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20 "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, 19:43, City's Destruction, Titus
then know that its desolation has come near. It's Desolation, Not A Sign Of The End
21 a Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains,
b and let those who are inside the city depart, Jer. 21:8-9
c and let not those who are out in the country enter it; Judgment On Jerusalem
22 for these are "days of vengeance," to fulfill all that is written. 13:35, 19:44, Jer. 51:6
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2) vv.23-24 Woe Upon Those Who Cannot Easily Flee. J.W. 4:326-333

23 a Alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Vulnerable
b For great distress shall be upon the earth and wrath upon this people;
24 they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations;
c and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles,
until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. Evangelization Of Non-Jews

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25 1 "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, Heavenly Portents (3)
2 and upon the earth distress of nations Political (1)
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26 2' men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; Instability
1' for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Hag. 2:6, 21; Is. 34:4, Principalities/Powers Shaken

B' vv.27-29 Coming Of The True Messiah (ALL 5x). The Only Sign That Counts!

1) vv.27-28 Coming Of The Son Of Man (Dan. 7:13). 9:26, 11:30, 12:8, 40; 17:22-30, 18:8

27 And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Dan.7:13, Credentials
28 Now when these things begin to take place, look up (better, stand up) Welcome Liberation!
and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Acts 1:9, Hope/ Chaos Ends
3 Lessons On The Near Arrival

2a) vv.29-33 Parable Of The Fig Tree: The Ripening Of Events.

29 And he told them a parable: It Will Be This Obvious! WATCH!
"Look at the fig tree, and ALL the trees; (30) as soon as they come out in leaf,
you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near.
31 So also, when you see these things taking place,
you know that the kingdom of God is near. But Not Yet Now Arrives In Fullness
Generation That Welcomes Jesus

2b) vv.32-33 Assurance Of The Truth Of Jesus' Words: Reliability. TRUST!

32 Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till ALL has taken place. Which One?
33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Confidence And Authority
Is. 40:8, Alert Lifestyle

2c) vv.34-35 The Ethical Imperative: How Shall We Live Till Then? PREPARE!

34 "But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down Personal Warning: 14:26-35
with drinking-bouts and drunkenness Distracted By Sensuality/Addictions/Partying!
and cares of this life, Distracted By Necessities, 12:45, 8:14
35 and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; 8:14, Find You Unprepared
for it will come upon ALL who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. Universal Destiny
All Will Render Account To The Cosmic Judge!

1') v.36 The Coming Of The Son Of Man.

36 But watch at ALL times, Stay Alert, Eph. 6:18
praying that you may have strength to escape ALL these things that will take place, Pray For Strength
and to stand before the Son of man." Goal = Final Judgment Before Risen Lord
To Stand = Remain Faithful, Lk. 12:8-12

A' vv.37-38 Jesus' Public Teaching In The Temple, Summary Statement//19:47-48..

37 And every day he was teaching in the temple, //19:47, Continues Of Jewish Life
but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. Camped Out
38 And early in the morning ALL the people came to him in the temple to hear him. Popularity With People

“GET SMART! GET READY! STAY ALERT!”

“And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

The end of history and the beginning of a new creation where Jesus rules.

LUKE 12:27

Two decades ago a Sunday School teacher went to a Christian bookstore to get a book on *the rapture*- which was a hot topic among TV preachers at the time. His students wanted to know more about the end times, and he was a bit curious himself, but he couldn’t remember the precise title that was recommended. After hearing his explanation, the clerk said, “Oh, you must mean, *Eighty-Eight Reasons Why the Rapture Will Definitely Come in 1992.*”

“Yea, that’s it,” the teacher said.

“It also came out in a 1993 edition,” the clerk replied, “We sent back our unsold copies last spring.”¹

By the way, the rapture, the supposed escape of the church before things get really bad- what some of us call *the-go-up-before-the-blow-up!* is not found in Scripture. It wasn’t even dreamed up till the 1820's, and is basically a form of modern escapism.² True believers vanish into the heavens leaving all the poor

¹ Gerard Fuller, *Stories for All Seasons* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-third Publications, 1999), 91.

² See James M. Eford, *End Times: Rapture, Anti-Christ, Millennium* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1986) for a brief account of the rise of Darbyism in England. Also his *Revelation for Today* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1989) for more on the supposed rapture. Also Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), Chapter 2, “The Invention of the Rapture,” 19-46; Arthur Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1993), “The New Futurism,” 81ff. Craig Hill, *In God’s Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), Appendix, “No One Left Behind,” 199-209.

unsaved schmucks behind to face whatever horrors come with all the Christians now gone. It rests on the misreading of a text in 1 Thessalonians and one in Revelation,³ and its popularity is due to the fact that it offers Christians the false comfort of avoiding suffering. That it is presented by TV preachers with charts and seemingly endless cross-references between the Bible and current events- particularly in the Middle East- makes it convincing to some. After all, if it's on TV and the preacher seems sincere, it must be true. These so called prophetic preachers claim to have *secret knowledge* denied the rest of us, and if only we will buy into their patchwork of Bible passages and send in an offering for *Tape Offer Number 666*, we too can be *in the know* for what's ahead, maybe even run off to Idaho and set up an end-times, barbed wire, machine gun protected, food storage, live in a burrow in the ground Christian compound that shoots intruders. Sounds just like Jesus, doesn't it?

What it does to churches is even worse, because if we're all going to be rescued from the coming world crisis, why bother with much of anything in this life? Why work for love and justice? Why care for the environment? Why seek to bring God's kingdom to bear on the here and now? Why not just sing songs about heaven and leave the world to rot while you fly off to spiritual Disney Land and watch the chaos unfold from the grand stands above? Ideas matter; doctrine has consequences. Good teaching has good effects; bad teaching has bad effects, and rapture teaching is toxic.

The church has always affirmed that Jesus is the end of history and that at his sudden appearing the world we have known- a magnificent world twisted by sin and infected by evil, running with the gore of violence and the ugliness of death- will come to an abrupt end. "Like a thief in the night" is a common scriptural image for being utterly surprised.⁴ At some point, God says, "That's enough!" And when that

³ In 1Thess. 4:16-17 the metaphor is that of the Emperor's entry into a city, a *parousia*. The city goes out to meet him to form a parade for his victorious entry. It's not that we go to meet the Lord in the air and then return with him to heaven (the rapture) in a great escape but that we are allowed to go meet him as part of his return to earth. The raised meet him and form his retinue of return. In Rev. 4:1 John begins a heavenly journey, which is one way of receiving divine revelation. The other is for a divine figure to come down, which is the pattern in Rev. 1-3. To receive revelation, a figure must come down to us, or we must go into the heavenly world. This is not the rapture of the church but a conventional means of speaking about the two means revelation in Jewish apocalyptic literature. That we no longer write in this genre blinds us to its forms.

⁴ 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Pet. 3:3, Rev. 16:15.

is, nobody knows. It's a divine secret, and that's why all who seek to know more than God has revealed end up looking foolish and getting written up in church history as the lunatic fringe. But every once in a while, particularly when life is chaotic and catastrophic, another one appears to mislead a gullible audience.

History is dotted with such events, one of the most famous in our country being the events surrounding a certain William Miller. In 1828, after an extensive study of the Book of Daniel, he predicted Christ would return "about 1843." Mistake number one! He kept his belief to himself till he told some friends three years later. Mistake number two! Miller published his theories in 1836. Mistake number three! The financial panic of 1837 created a good climate for end-time fervor (as with Y2K and 9/11!), and Miller was soon lecturing all over the country. Finally, in January 1843 Miller got specific. Mistake number four! The return of Jesus Christ would take place between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. More than 50,000 believed Miller; more than a million were curious and expectant. The date came and passed. Conveniently- as always- Miller discovered a miscalculation and reset the date for October 22, 1844. Oops! Bad math. Mistake number five. Five years later he died a discredited, nearly forgotten man.⁵ Sincerity did not matter; he was wrong and deceived many. He embarrassed the church and distracted people from true service.

When someone with an earnest look asks, "Pastor Phil, do you believe Jesus is coming soon?" I look serious and say with great authority, "We're closer than we've ever been." An alternative is, "I'm ready right now; how about you?" then look up and lift your hands for effect. But the best answer is Dr. Tony Campolo's, "I have no idea. I'm on the Welcoming, not the Planning Committee."⁶ That Jesus will suddenly appear at the end of the age to usher in God's kingdom is core Christian teaching in the New Testament and the Creeds; the *when* no one knows. He will step from behind the veil of invisibility, "And then they will *see* the Son of man," says Luke. At that moment our job is to lift our heads from whatever good work we are doing, jump to our feet, and start singing with Julia Ward Howe, "Mine eyes have

⁵ C. Douglas Weaver, *A Cloud of Witnesses* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 128-129; Bruce Shelley, "William Miller's Great Disappointment," *Christian History*, Issue 61.

⁶ Gaukroger and Mercer, *A-Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 114.

seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”⁷ Beyond that, it’s all speculation and prognostication that plays on human fears and biblical ignorance for the sake of the teacher’s ego and reputation. *That* Jesus returns is clear, *when* is not.

The second article of the Apostles’ Creed makes the fact of the end clear, “He-meaning Jesus- *shall come again* to judge the living and the dead,” to which the Nicene Creed adds, “and his kingdom shall have no end.”⁸ Now he reigns above, then he comes to reclaim his world and enforce his rights. It’s what his resurrection finally means; Jesus is the world’s rightful ruler, its Lord- to use a title the ancient world applied to Caesar. Our broken world is radically healed and reconstituted at the end of this age by the appearing of the world’s rightful ruler as a whole cascade of consequences ensue, including bodily resurrection, the judgment of truth-telling and release of final forgiveness, entry with our new monarch back into a healed world, also called *the kingdom of God*, the *new heavens and new earth*, the *descent of heavenly Jerusalem*, and the *marriage supper of the Lamb*. Life begins anew.

This is what our hope is; this is what gives life now and all its struggles such intense significance. What we do here that is aligned with Jesus carries into the kingdom of God;⁹ what is not aligned with him is left outside. No alloys allowed, only the pure stuff passes through the fire.¹⁰ So love God, love your neighbor, follow Jesus with others, stand against evil and oppression, take up the battle against sin and sorry living in your life, show mercy and forgive, absorb rather than inflict suffering, be filled with the Holy Spirit and his marvelous gifts, pray and fast and suffer and serve, worship and cry and laugh and learn and study and grow wise; spend yourself for others and end life with the sweet name of Jesus on your lips. Why? Because how you live counts for eternity. Your labors are not in vain. Jesus Christ is literally the world’s only future. You want to live now in line with the deepest grain of the universe, which means living cross-grained with many current arrangements, and that’s literally *where the rub is*; it’s where discomfort and suffering come in. Living

⁷ *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 717.

⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 880.

⁹ Revelation 14:13, “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.’ ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, *for their deeds follow them!*’”

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 3:10-17.

by faith and hope and love now is a sign that Jesus is at work among his people. We are the great alternative. We invite people to leave the other kingdom and come under Jesus' benevolent rule now, to align with him by trust and obedience.¹¹ It's a major shift of loyalties. We call it *conversion* and baptism.

What some call *the second coming* or *the return of Christ*, what the early Christians called simply *his appearing*,¹² is the unfulfilled part of what his resurrection means. Jesus has been personally vindicated, stamped approved by the highest authority; at history's end he will be vindicated before everyone who ever lived, all who have died and those alive at the time of the great interruption. Everyone faces him personally and hears the truth about their life, and that is where life permanently divides with no higher appeal.¹³ Beyond those two closely related events, the solitary resurrection of Jesus in the past and the signal it sends us about the world's future, the church- at least in its saner moments- refuses to speculate on details and time lines, which Jesus clearly said was none of our business, and here are his words to his closest friends from Acts 1:7, "*It is not for you to know times or seasons the Father has fixed by his own authority.*" Bad teaching on the end spreads fear; good teaching builds faith and courage and sticking power and a commitment to witness.

I believe with the church in the present ascendancy and final ultimacy of Jesus Christ. I believe all history has a purpose, that time is not an endless repetitious circle as in Hinduism with its reincarnations or a meaningless series of one thing after another going nowhere as in modern secularism. Like a train on the tracks, history is a time line headed for a destination, and we know who stands at the end of the line. Jesus Christ, who in his first appearing intersected time, is the climax of all history, and of that we have a sneak peak in his resurrection from the dead, a preview of coming attractions. Death does not win. Christians are, in a sense then, people who are ahead of their time. We are in tune with the future that is to be, and thus always live in tension with present arrangements. Our privilege as Christian disciples is that

¹¹ On the shift of kingdoms and lordship, see Don Williams, *Start Here* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2006), Chapter 1, "What's Happened To Me," 7-14.

¹² Greek *parousia* (coming/being near), referring to the Emperor's arrival in a city.

¹³ The U.M. Confession of Faith, Article XII: The Judgment and the Future State: "We believe all men (and women) stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. *We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation*" (*Book of Discipline* 2012: 74).

we are invited to side with Jesus and his people and his cause *ahead of time* and to represent him in the here and now by lives well-lived and words well-spoken. We have a powerful hope that organizes life around a new center. And because we know where the big story of all history is headed, our smaller stories can find meaning nestled within his. We are part of a grand, cosmic drama of creation and fall, revelation and re-creation, and until you find your place in that story you are ignorant of the deepest meaning of your own life. Be part of something big. Be a Christian disciple! So I am not concerned- as in some recent movies- about the collision of this world with a comet, meteor or asteroid, but with something much bigger, our coming collision with the kingdom of God which is moving in our direction. Of the seven thousand hymns written by Charles Wesley, five thousand refer to the Second Coming of Christ. Early Methodists kept their eyes on the prize by singing it. And do you know what the Archbishop of Canterbury whispered to a young queen Elizabeth when she was crowned on June 2, 1533? “I give thee, O sovereign Lady, this crown to wear *until He who deserves the right to wear it shall return.*”¹⁴

Therefore all human arrangements- of government, education, business, religion, culture and family- are provisional and temporary. We live with them and are thankful for the ways they order life, but none deserve ultimate loyalty. For the Christian that belongs to the Triune God alone, which has an interesting effect on how we use our lives now. C.S. Lewis once observed:

“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.”¹⁵

According to Lewis, we have to be heavenly-minded and kingdom-oriented to be much earthly good. Else we think this world is all there is and offer it ultimate loyalty, which is what the Bible means by *idolatry*, loading something with more meaning than it was designed to carry. Take a walk in a cemetery; you too will die. Imagine what it will be like when Jesus appears; you will see him and he you. It will sober you.

¹⁴ Quoted in Calvin Miller, *The Book of Jesus* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 606-607. You may see this magnificent church ceremony of coronation at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGLN1kREJ2Q>.

¹⁵ James Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1988), 175.

TEMPLE AND TIME TABLE (vv.5-11)

If I stood before the Capital or White House and announced, “One day every brick and beam of these buildings, and all they stand for, will be nothing,” you would- at a minimum- think me unpatriotic. You might think me subversive and alert the authorities. That’s because these are more than buildings; they are symbols for a whole way of life and an entire web of loyalties. To challenge their permanence is to challenge assumptions about what matters and what lasts. America is not forever; neither was any other Empire that’s risen and fallen. But all such talk makes us nervous because it exposes where our trust lies. So it was when Jesus spoke about the temple’s end and Jerusalem’s fall. He touched the deepest nerve of Jewish identity.

The pillars of the porches of the Jerusalem temple were each carved from a single hunk of white marble, forty feet high. A grape vine of solid gold encircled the molding, each clusters as tall as a man. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that so much gold faced the temple that when the sun hit it each morning it was blinding. What was not gold was so white that from a distance it looked like a snow-capped mountain.¹⁶ When Jesus spoke, the temple was in the middle of an over eighty-year rebuilding process that was completed in 64AD, only six years before the Roman armies under Titus burned it, then took it apart block by block. For Jews it was *the* critical national and religious symbol; for it to be destroyed was for their world to end.

Jesus hearers were impressed with the huge, dressed stones and decorative offerings. They admired it; Jesus judged it: verse 5, “As for these things which you see, the days will come when there shall not be one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” They thought God lived here. How could such a thing happen? But Jesus the prophet had spoken, and they would learn soon enough that God dwelt supremely *in him*, not in a building made with hands, not even this one at the corner of Main and Cambridge. So let’s keep it in good shape, but let’s not let it become too emotionally entangled with our faith.

The temple destroyed? It was a disturbing idea; they were all Jews and wanted to know, “Teacher, *when* will this be, and *what* will be the sign this is about to take place?” That’s two questions, and in a sense Jesus answers neither and both. The answer to the *When* question is, “Not at once,” which puts an indeterminate amount

¹⁶ William Barclay, *Luke* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, n.d.), 258-259; Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.207-208.

of time between the destruction of the temple and the end of the age. For Luke the destruction of the temple was history since he wrote after 70AD, but that Jesus accurately predicted it enhances his status as a prophet. But horrible as it was for the Jewish people- being the end of their national identity, it was not the end of the world.

There is, in fact, no issue within history, the destruction of no city- however great, or the end of any nation or Empire- however powerful, including our own, that means the end is near. Such losses are just part of the long pain-filled haul of history. Wars and rumors of wars never cease; earthquakes and famines and plagues are standard fare; Empires rise and fall, and on history goes towards its end, “but the end,” said Jesus, will not be at once.” No human or natural catastrophe, however much fear and panic it causes, is a sure sign the end is near. And should we in some future be surpassed and dethroned as the greatest nation- as surely we will, the kingdom of God will not be effected. My highly-valued U.S. citizenship is temporary; like marriage it ends at death. My true citizenship is above, and it is a mark of loyalty I share with other disciples of whatever nation and tribe.

Their request for a single great sign is not answered as requested but met with a warning against the hype of self-appointed Messiahs. There will be *many*, Jesus said, so it will be a chronic problem. They will all come *in my name* so you will have to discern the difference between false and true prophets. They point to themselves, “I am he,” and claim special revelation on the divine timetable, “The time is at hand.” Do not believe them, said Jesus; do not follow them, and do not be afraid. Jewish and church history is littered with their corpses and the foolish who followed such pretenders. Think of Jim Jones and David Koresh in our day. When I turn on TV and see a preacher with charts, I cut it off. When I find someone matching up headlines with passages from Daniel and Revelation, I wonder, “When did God invite them onto the Planning Committee?”

“When is it?” they asked. “Not yet,” said Jesus, perhaps with a smile. The sign he gave is that the church will be forever resisting the deception that comes from a steady stream of self-appointed looney-tunes who gather followers and breed fear instead of steadfast, enduring faith. Anyone who says “The time is at hand!” is a liar. We simply don’t know. Only when it occurs will you know.

The pain and sorrow of the world will not end till the end. Life this side of God’s kingdom has no golden age. It’s a mixed bag till the moment it stops. What will be different about the time immediately preceding the end is the intensity of events as

they are compressed by the impending pressures of the arrival of God’s kingdom.

I remember my first experience with *the tube* in London. I think it was *Kensington Station*. There I stood on the ramp, and before I heard the approach I felt the wind blowing out the tunnel in my direction. The train was compressing a horizontal column of air ahead of itself, and I was feeling the effects ahead of arrival. As the rule of God presses in upon us from the future, all that is out of order in this beautiful but tragically fallen world will intensify its resistance. So when Luke and other biblical writers speak about the standard signs of political chaos, the disruption of the predictable habits of earth and sea and signs in the heavens, what they are saying is that the whole creation at every level will be put under great pressure as the Day of the Lord approaches. Old habits are challenged by a pressing new reality. Think of the fear of it, like a new mother’s first labor pain. Something has gripped her that must be lived into with a logic all its own. This world is to be reborn by passing through a process of death and resurrection. Everything is to be brought into line with the love of God. DNA that led to disease will be rearranged; lions and lambs give up predator and prey and lie down together; all secrets are exposed; all effects of sin and evil and death are purged, and what will not cooperate with the divine make-over will be trashed as unfit for the new world. C.S. Lewis wrote:

“At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of the morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all of the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.”¹⁷

WITNESS AND ENDURANCE (vv.12-19)

Because of the way Luke arranges his material, alternating from statements about the present to statements about the near and distant future, setting up a sequence is difficult. We must, then, pay close attention when Luke offers us a time signature, as in v.12, “But *before all this....*” It helps us get our bearings.

Before the final events, whenever that is, Christians live in a fundamentally hostile environment. Always have. And where there is little tension, it means we have not offered much resistance but capitulated to the culture and become invisible. In

¹⁷ Hewett, *Illustrations*, 173.

those days Jews saw believers as fellow Jews who need to be disciplined in synagogue courts for heresy; Romans saw them as threats to the order of the state. Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is. That’s a bumper sticker that leads to arrest. Jesus warns that church and state will put them under scrutiny and sometimes in chains. Family members will join them, and some will die. And in a profound sense both religion and government were right about these Christians. These people are a threat, not in the usual sense of power-plays, but in the deeper and more subversive sense that their loyalties are not to present structures. They are *in* the world but not *of* it. They are *Jesus-people* first, Jews or Gentiles or Americans or Russians second. They are *Jesus-people* first, Roman citizens second. They are *Jesus-people* first, family and clan and village members second. They are, in fact, a new race of a new kind of person.

The church does not exist for the support of lesser loyalties but for loyalty to Jesus and his agenda over all others. And for a world that majors in lesser-loyalties, this is a threat. This is why it disturbs me so when I see people giving real devotion to lesser loyalties, whether it be investing great emotion in the wins or losses of a sports teams, in a regional heritage with its symbols, in a political party of the left or right, in an overdone patriotism, or sometimes even their own families. First of all, these things can’t bear the weight of meaning we give them, and secondly, they will not survive. All will pass away. But if you dare to challenge them, people get mad! No one likes having their idols exposed. *In the name of Jesus* we the church dare to critique all lesser loyalties and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to call people to the only loyalty that will survive this world. Jesus promises his immediate help and inspiration to this never-ending evangelism project: verse 13, “This will be a time for *you to bear testimony*. Settle it before hand in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer; for I will give you a mouth and witness which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.” When you speak as a witness, he is there!

For too long we have allowed the church to be taken hostage to support all kinds of cultural projects. We were the keepers of manners and decency, the religious support for manifest destiny, and often turned Jesus into a modern democratic capitalist to give legitimacy to our economic aspirations. It is time to recognize we have been seduced. We are the *Jesus-people first*, and all lesser loyalties which make up the webs of our lives must be subservient to that one. And that will mean the end of some of our most treasured habits of mind and heart. It is the death of racism and all its subtle cultural paraphernalia. It is the death of unreflective patriotism. It is the death of basing worth on what is owned or known or controlled. It is the death of the kind of rugged individualism that isolates men, and now even women, as supposedly

self-sufficient units. It is the death of the feel-good Christianity that caters to *what people want* rather than what Scripture says God has to say. It is the death of happiness as defined by a culture that demands good feelings at any cost and is drowning itself in intoxicants and mindless entertainment. In some places around the world it means real persecution. In our setting it means the hard intellectual and practical work of disengaging ourselves from cultural captivity and reacquainting ourselves with the person and work of Jesus. You don't get persecuted for being a member of the Rotary Club or the college alumni association or the VFW or the United Methodist Church. Going along to get along and fitting in to avoid sticking out are not gospel virtues. It is in being distinctively Christian that we have the *most to offer* and the *most to lose* and the *most to suffer* and the *most to gain*. This one loyalty, Jesus Christ, rearranges life in a way that raises both attention and resistance.

And sometimes, frankly, it just plain hurts. Lose a friend, a job, a raise, even a spouse over an issue of Christian substance, and it hurts. I am coming to a new sobriety about the bumps and bruises of life. They hurt, but they cannot ultimately harm us. Jesus' promise that "Not a hair of your head will perish" does not mean you might not lose your head. So we can both be honest about the agony and hopeful about the future at the same time. I'm sorry if you've had a stroke and can't speak or are dying from cancer. I'm sorry life has become difficult. We are with you. I will pray for your healing; I will also remind you that no matter what happens to any part of your body or to any of your stuff, it cannot separate you from God's love in Christ and that you need to continue to *endure in the faith with a kind of holy toughness* until God gives you the release of death and you gain phase one of your new life in heaven.

Two things Luke says we need to be particularly good at as we live in patience with an eye to the end: 1) Making our witness when it's more convenient not to, and 2) Enduring to the end. Holy boldness and holy toughness are two marks of the genuine church. Speak up for Jesus Christ when you have something to lose and then be willing to take the heat. The American church that has fallen asleep in the arms of a seductive, consumeristic, me-first, pleasure-first culture. This kind of witness will continue, as Luke says, "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled," meaning until the job of world evangelism is done. My guess is it's going to be a while yet.

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN (vv.27-36)

Then comes the end, verse 27, "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, look

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up (better, *stand up*) and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”
When? That’s when! When you see him, you will know *this is the end*.

With the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Son was the co-creator of all that is, and so was there at the beginning and before it. He then came in the middle of time, joined to creation by the Father’s will and the Spirit’s power in Mary’s virginal womb. He left time one Friday as he expired on a cross of wood to re-enter the Father’s presence through resurrection. And one day at the ending edge of time, the one who made time and entered time shall rupture time with his return and prick it like a bubble. It will pop, and history as we have known it will be over. For those who know him it will be joyous; for those who have rejected him a horrible realization that life has been frittered away to nothing. At the end of history stands a man with a gash in his side, holes in feet and hands, and glory shining out every pore. His name is Jesus, and all that you are and are not will be measured by an audience of one. Only then will you understand the meaning of your own life and the worth God places on acts of kindness and charity and truth-telling. Only those who trust him are prepared.

A desert monk asked his Abbot, “Father, what has God’s wisdom taught you? Did you become divine?”

“Not at all.”

“Did you become a saint?”

“No, as you can clearly see.”

“What then, O Abbot?”

“I became awake!”¹⁸

This is what living daily in the light of his coming will make you: awake and alert and aware. You will not be satisfied burying your anxiety in alcohol or other soul-numbing addictions. Even the necessities and daily cares of this life will not satisfy or quiet the longing that lives within you. There will be a certain detachment about you. You will be intensely mindful that you live under his severe and merciful gaze every moment. Prayer will not be a sporadic activity but a steady communication. Sin will break your heart, not only your own but tears will come for those who are blind to Jesus Christ and upon whom his coming will be a sudden surprise that catches them unprepared like an animal in a trap.

¹⁸ Fuller, *Stories*, 47.

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After days at sea, the skipper of a fishing boat headed into the bay. His crew looked eagerly towards the dock where a group of loved ones waited. Through binoculars the skipper could identify them, “I see Bill’s Mary and Tom’s Margaret and David’s Anne.” There was a fourth man in the crew, and he was anxious because his wife was absent. He left the dock with a heavy heart and trudged home, where he saw a light in his cottage window.

As he opened the door his wife ran to meet him, “I’ve been *waiting* for you!”
“Yes,” he replied, “but the others were *watching*,”¹⁹

Jesus’ final word of warning is this: verse 36, “But *watch* at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man.” Everyone’s waiting, but not all are watching.

CONCLUSION

As a last image Luke brings us back from the future to the same temple scene with which we began. Here we see not the glorious returning Lord but the earthly Jesus, teaching in the temple, sleeping under the stars, speaking to all who would listen, “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 the temple to hear him.” It matters who we listen to. The future belongs to Jesus. Count on it. Act on it. Live towards it. Jesus deserves and demands your loyalty.

Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
March 10, 2013

¹⁹ Michael Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 50.
