"The Days Will Come"

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Luke 21:5-19

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This is a scale model of what the temple in Jerusalem may have looked like in the time of Jesus. It is part of the Holyland Model of Jerusalem, which was designed and constructed about sixty years ago by Michael Avi-Jonah, professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He built it based on what we know about Jerusalem in the first century both from archaeological excavations and literary sources. It is a very large and impressive model, capturing the magnificence and grandeur of both the temple and the entire city. If you are ever in Jerusalem you can see it for yourself at the Israel Museum.

Here's another model of what the temple may have looked like. This one was built by Leen Ritmeyer, who was, for four years in the early '70s, the official architect of the archaeological dig at the temple's western and southern walls. Ritmeyer has produced a large number of architectural designs of Jerusalem and the temple in the time of Jesus. This one shows the entire temple complex, looking from the southwest corner toward the northeast. The temple itself is the tall structure in the center. It faces east, towards the Mount of Olives in the background, and the sun as it rises each morning.

I show you these pictures to try to give you a sense of just how incredibly *marvelous* this temple was during the time of Jesus. Herod the Great had put an enormous amount of money and resources into rebuilding and expanding the temple. He doubled its size, making it the largest religious sanctuary anywhere in the world. It wasn't one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World – but it sure was close.

Which makes Jesus's words in today's Gospel lesson especially striking. "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'" Our historical sources indicate that Herod had employed ten thousand laborers to expand and rebuild the temple, and another thousand priests to keep services running throughout the many years of its reconstruction. And Jesus says, *it's all going to come tumbling down.*

He was right. Just four decades after his death and resurrection, four years into the massive Jewish revolt against Roman occupation, Roman forces, under the command of General Titus (who later became Emperor Titus), destroyed and burned to the ground major portions of Jerusalem, including this magnificent temple. What had taken decades to reconstruct burned to the ground in a single day – a day the Jewish people now commemorate annually in late July or early August on what is called *Tisha B'Av* – the ninth day in the Hebrew month of Av. There is a debate among scholars: was the burning of the temple an impulsive act by a Roman soldier – or had Titus himself ordered it? Either way, the Roman legions took the spoils of their conquest back to Rome. If you are ever in Rome, make sure you visit the Arch of Titus, right near the ancient Roman Forum. It was built not long after the fall of Jerusalem. One of the panels on its inside wall is a relief depicting spoils that were taken from the

Jerusalem temple, including golden trumpets, fire pans for removing ash from the altar, and – most especially – the menorah, the sacred golden candlestick, which the Jews always kept burning; and the showbread, the holy loaves of bread that were dedicated to God and that were always on display. The burning of the temple and the theft of these sacred items were devastating to the Jewish people.

By the time Luke was compiling his Gospel account, those events had already taken place. Around the year 30, Jesus had said the temple would not remain standing; now, writing sometime after 70, Luke knows – beyond any shadow of a doubt! – that Jesus had been right. Right about *so many* things! This whole passage from Luke's Gospel is filled with calamities of various kinds, events and circumstances that, Jesus said, would come to pass. By the time Luke was writing, *they already had*.

They fall into four main categories. The first is *false prophets*. "Beware that you are not led astray," said Jesus, "for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them." We know from other sources that around the year 45 – about 15 years after Jesus – a man named Theudas, who called himself a "prophet" and who claimed to have the ability to part the Jordan River, persuaded a large number of people to follow him in an effort to revolt against Rome. He was captured and killed by the Romans, and his movement died with him. About ten or fifteen years later, an Egyptian man who also called himself a prophet gathered thousands of men on the Mount of Olives and planned to storm Roman-occupied Jerusalem. One source says he claimed that the walls of Jerusalem would just fall down at his command. The Roman governor came out in force against him. The false prophet escaped, but many of his followers were captured or killed, and his movement died. Then, about five years later, another man promised "deliverance and freedom from their enemies" if they would follow him into the wilderness, but both he and his followers were killed by the next Roman governor. Then, during the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, someone claiming to be a prophet called people to come to the Temple, saying that God would deliver them, but everyone who came wound up dead. There were others, all of whom met similar fates, and all of whose movements died. Jesus predicted these false prophets; by the time Luke wrote his Gospel, many had already appeared.

The second category of events Jesus describes are *war and insurrections*: "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." I've already been talking about some insurrectionists, and the full-blown Jewish revolt against Rome. It was *bad*. Four years of war, culminating in a six-month siege of Jerusalem, which resulted in a massive famine inside the city before the Romans finally invaded. Jewish Zealots held out for another three years, ultimately retreating to the mountaintop fortress of Masada, where they met their fate. But there were also wars in other parts of the Empire. The Romans were conquering Britain; they waged war against the Parthians for control of Armenia; then in the year 68 civil war broke out in Rome itself, and in the space of one year, four different men proclaimed themselves Emperor. The decades between when Jesus said those words and Luke wrote them down were filled with numerous wars and insurrections.

There's a third category: *natural disasters and astrological signs*. "There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." There was a famine in Judea in the years 44 to 48. There was a major earthquake in Italy in 62. Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79, wiping out Pompeii and Herculaneum. There was a plague in Libya, Egypt, and Syria. And Halley's Comet was visible in the sky for several months in the year 66.

Finally, Jesus mentions *persecutions*. "They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name.... You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name." The Book of the Acts of the Apostles – which Luke also wrote – describes some of these events. Peter and John are arrested in chapter 4. All the apostles are arrested in chapter 5. Paul and Silas are arrested in chapter 16. Paul is arrested again in chapter 22. Christian leaders are brought before the Jewish Council, several Roman magistrates and governors, and ultimately, perhaps, even the Emperor. A deacon named Stephen became the first Christian martyr, murdered around the year 36. James, the brother of John, was executed by King Herod Agrippa I in about 44. Later Christian writings say that every single one of the twelve apostles, except for John, was killed. Then in 64, Christians got blamed for starting the great fire in Rome, which led to the first persecution against us. Many more persecutions followed that one. And in the midst of all that, some Christians were betrayed by their own family members or friends.

I have thrown a lot of names, dates, and events at you today. Here's my point. We often look at passages like this and think they are talking about things that *have yet to happen*. We fail to realize that they are often talking about things that *already have happened*. We often look at the difficult times we are living in and think that the end *must* be coming soon. But many kingdoms and even empires have risen and fallen in the centuries since Jesus walked this earth, and none of those collapses have led to the imminent return of Jesus or to the end of all things. Jesus himself tells us earlier in Luke's Gospel that "the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (Luke 12:40) So perhaps as we worry about the state of the world today, we would be wise to stop saying things like "it's the end times!" or "the apocalypse is happening now!" Perhaps, instead, we should simply focus on how Jesus wants us to live, in good times *or* in bad, in peace *or* at war, in prosperity *or* in hardship. Which leads me to the very last two verses in this passage, two very simple things that Jesus says, that stand for *all* times.

The first is this: "But not a hair of your head will perish." Let's not take this too literally, for Jesus has just told his followers that some of them will be put to death. Sooner or later, we will *all* die, and our hair will stop growing. Let's look at this differently. The Greek word that is translated "perish" could also be translated "be lost." "Not a hair of you head will be lost." That makes much more sense, doesn't it? Earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus had said, "even the hairs of your head are all numbered." God knows us *that* intimately, God cares about us *that* much. So Jesus is saying: *God is going to take care of you.* No matter what happens – no matter what disasters, violence, or calamities we face in life, *God will look after us*. Even if we should die, *we will be okay*. We have *nothing* to fear. We are in *good* hands.

Jesus also says: "By your endurance you will gain your souls." There *will* be famines and plagues. There *will* be wars and insurrections. There *will* be calamities and what appear to be signs. There *will* be people who will try to lead us astray. Our job is to *just to persevere*. Just keep on, keeping on. No matter *what* may come! What is Jesus is calling us to do today? The same thing he's been calling people to do for twenty centuries, in all kinds of different circumstances. *Keep being faithful.* No matter what may happen, just *keep being faithful*. The world might be going mad all around us, but we don't have to go mad along with it. We just need to keep our eyes on Jesus. *Keep doing what he asks us to do.* That's all he asks of us. Steadfast faithfulness. *No matter what*. And by our endurance, we will gain our souls.

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