

The Promise

Luke 21: 5-19 (November 13, 2022)

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⁵When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶“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.” ⁷They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them. ⁹“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.” ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. ¹²“But before all this occurs, 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. ¹³This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Historical Context

By the time Luke puts the finishing touches on these verses, the temple’s destruction has already happened. Luke’s Gospel is dated to about 85 ce, 15 years or so after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 ce, which means that for Luke’s readers what Jesus says in Luke 21:5-6 is more a reflection on the temple’s destruction than a prediction of it.

Theme: The Promise

A close reading of Luke 21:5-19 shows that using this passage as a springboard for proclaiming God’s judgment on society would miss the point. Rather, the passage warns us about becoming too fixated on temporary human institutions, perhaps with the implication that we should attend to the poor in our communities instead (21:5-6; see also 21:1-4), and it exhorts us to be firm in our trust in God when calamity and persecution strike (21:7-19). Despite its language and imagery of destruction, Luke 21:5-19 is ultimately a passage grounded in hope — in the hope that God remains present in the world and in one’s life even when things have gotten so bad that it feels like the world is closing in on us.

David Livingstone, the legendary missionary to Africa, prayed, “Lord, send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me.” And he testified, “What has sustained me is the promise, ‘Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.’”

This is the promise Jesus conveys in the midst of his prophetic warnings of what will yet come.