

April 9, 2023

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN

Luke 21:5-38

(8 of 16 in a series through Luke 16-24)

In Daniel 7 there is a prophecy about one like a son of man being given dominion and glory and a kingdom in order that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. You could very much say that all of the Old Testament is looking forward to this one to come—this man who would be given dominion over all things as king so that all nations should serve him. And, though we might not often make this connection, that is what happens as Jesus walks out of the tomb on that Easter Sunday morning. He rises as the one who has saved his people and conquered death. But he also rises as the one who is given dominion as king so that all nations should serve him. Another word for “dominion” is “authority.” This is why, after he is raised, Jesus gathers his disciples together and tells them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” and then commands them to go make disciples of all the nations who will obey Christ as their king (Matt 28:18-20). He’s telling them that he is the one fulfills Daniel 7.¹

So, the risen Christ is God’s forever king. Now, sometimes it doesn’t feel like it because we still see Christ’s enemies—like death itself—reigning in this world. We dealt with that over the past couple of weeks as we saw the tragedy in Nashville. And so we still await the day when Jesus will come back from heaven and demonstrate his reign as king fully by judging his enemies (even death itself), saving his people, and making all things new. That day—his second coming—is certainly coming, and that’s what our text this morning (Luke 21:5-38) is about. Well, actually, it’s about two things. It’s about the second coming, but there’s also a large focus on the fall of Jerusalem, which happened in AD 70.

We see this from the opening paragraph of our text. Luke tells us that while some were speaking of the temple and how amazingly beautiful it was, Jesus announced that it would one day be destroyed, saying, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (v. 6). Which of course leads them to ask, “When will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” (v. 7).

Now, Jesus doesn’t answer that question immediately. Instead, he starts out by warning them about all kinds of things that are going to happen that *don’t* signify these things immediately happening and providing some warnings and exhortations to his disciples. But then eventually he does begin speaking about when the destruction of Jerusalem will happen in verse 20. He

¹ This same reality is depicted in Revelation 5 as there is none worthy to take the scroll, break its seals, and open it until John is directed to the Lion of the tribe of Judah. As he turns, he sees the Lamb, as though he had been slain, but he is alive. This is a picture of the crucified and risen Lord who is given all authority in heaven and on earth to reign over God’s kingdom forever.

tells them that when they see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, “then know that its desolation has come near” (v. 20). And that really did happen in AD 70.

For years the Jews has resented and revolted against Roman rule, but eventually they pushed too hard, and Rome responded as Roman armies began advancing on them as early as AD 66. But things took a terrible turn right around this time the year in AD 70. A few days before Passover, when Jerusalem would have swollen multiple times its normal population because of the number of Jews who would have come there to celebrate, Rome finally laid siege to the city, and those inside were trapped. They cut off all supplies, and they wouldn’t invade and destroy the city until five months later. Josephus says that over 1.1 million Jews died at this time and that when they came into the city there were hardly any to kill because most had starved to death. Of course, at that time, the temple was destroyed, just as Jesus prophesied in this text.

And, interestingly, Christians had gotten out of the city before this. Jesus had warned his disciples in verses 21-22 that when they saw the armies approaching they should flee to the mountains, get out of the city, and not try to enter it by any means. They did and were spared. And Jesus makes clear (as we saw earlier) that this destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 was a divine work of judgment. He was judging his people for not recognizing and worshiping him as the Messiah—God’s promised, forever king. So, this text talks about Jerusalem’s destruction, but that’s not all.

Now, some think that when you get to verse 25 Jesus is still talking about the destruction of Jerusalem. They would argue that though he points to cosmic signs like “signs in the sun and moon and stars” (v. 25) that this kind of language was used when God judged other ancient cities, like Babylon, in the Old Testament. And they’d say that when Jesus speaks of “coming in a cloud with power and glory” in v. 27, that he’s simply saying that Jesus’ reign and vindication will be “seen” when the temple is destroyed. And so they’d say this whole text is simply Jesus talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. But I don’t think that reading works for several reasons, which I’ll list here.

First, though the disciples do indeed ask about when the temple will be destroyed, it’s not unlikely that they also have in mind the end of the world itself. One reason to think this is because in Matthew’s parallel text to Luke 21 the disciples explicitly *do* ask Jesus, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matt 24:3). And since so much in these chapters parallel, it’s not unlikely that they’re asking the same question here.

Second, in verses 25-26, we see Jesus talking about all of these cosmic signs, and it’s hard to limit this to the destruction of Jerusalem. He says, “And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and on earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the power of the heavens will be shaken.” Notice here how Jesus says this will cause distress (or

anguish)² of nations, and people will faint “with fear and with foreboding of what is coming in the world.” That suggests an event that greatly affects and terrifies not just those in and around Jerusalem but the whole world—all the nations.

Third, when Jesus refers then to seeing “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (v. 27), the natural way to read this text is to see it as Jesus coming “personally and visibly.”³ Moreover, Jesus says that when these things begin to take place, our “redemption is drawing near” (v. 28), and it would be hard to argue that Christians saw their redemption drawing near when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Not only that, but in the parallel text in Matthew 24:30-31, Jesus says, “They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” And when you look at other references “to the Son of Man’s coming, angels gathering the elect, trumpet calls, clouds, glory, tribes of the earth mourning, celestial disturbances,”⁴ they are all related to the second coming of Christ (just as we saw earlier in Revelation 1:7).

Finally, Jesus goes on to say in verse 31, “So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” And it’s hard to think that Jesus meant that when Jerusalem is destroyed, then we’re about to see the fullness of the kingdom because that won’t happen until he returns, which is the most likely reading of this text. Therefore, I think this text refers to the fall of Jerusalem, but then in verse 25 Jesus also begins talking about his second coming, most likely because the judgment on Jerusalem was a picture or type of what is to come for all who fail to recognize and trust in Jesus as Lord.

Now, I will admit that there is one tricky element to interpret here in light of what I’ve just argued. Jesus says in verse 32, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.” You can see, then, why some have wanted to see all of this text as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. How can Jesus say to those listening to him that that very generation wouldn’t pass away until all has taken place? Well, I think it makes sense when we consider what he’s just said in verse 31. There Jesus says that just as you see the fig tree leafing out you know that summer is near, he adds, “So also, when you see these things taking place you know that the kingdom of God is near.” Then, he notes in verse 32 that this generation won’t pass away until “all” has taken place. And I want to argue that “all” in verse 32 is parallel to “these things” in verse 31. That is, Jesus is talking about all the things that will precede his coming. This is even more clearly the case in Matthew’s parallel where after talking about the fig tree, Matthew writes, “So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place”

² This is the same word Paul uses when speaking of his “anguish of heart” in 2 Cor 2:4.

³ Tom Schreiner, *Luke*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 1045.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Matthew 13-28*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 493. See, for example, Matthew 13:40-41; 16:27; 25:31; 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:15-17; 2 Thess 2:1; Rev 1:7.

(Matt 24:33-34). There, it's even clearer that all these things can't include Christ's return, since Matthew makes clear that all these things take place first, and then, after that sometime, Jesus returns. And I say after that "sometime" because in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' very next words are, "Concerning that day and hour no one knows" (Matt 24:36).

So, here is what I think Jesus is saying in verse 32 of our text in Luke. All the things he's been talking about in our text—false Messiahs, wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilence, persecution, gospel witness, and the destruction of Jerusalem—will all take place prior to the coming of Christ. In fact, that very generation he's speaking to will see all of them in their lifetime. And they did. But it's also true that we continue to see all of these things. That is, all of those things didn't happen in that generation and then stop. We continue to live in a time of people claiming to be the Christ, of wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, persecution, and gospel proclamation. So, what do we do as we live through these realities as we await the return of Christ? Let me list a few things:

We should make sure we're not deceived

Right after Jesus' disciples ask him when the temple will be destroyed, Jesus doesn't answer their question. Rather, he tells them, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them" (v. 8). We've already seen clearly in Luke's gospel that when Jesus returns, it won't be secret. He didn't appear to Joseph Smith privately to tell him to start Mormonism. He didn't appear secretly to anyone. You don't have to worry about thinking anyone who claims to be the Messiah is indeed Jesus, having come back, because when Jesus comes back, the whole world will know. It'll be clear from one end of heaven to the other. Second, we should not be afraid of tumultuous world events.

We should not be afraid of tumultuous world events

As Jesus continues, he says in verse 9, "And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once." Jesus will add that nation will rise against nation, there'll be wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, but all these things simply must take place in this age as we await Christ's return. So don't be terrified by them.

When I was growing up, you'd have thought that Jesus said, "When you see these things, be terrified. They're not normal." The reason why is because every time there was a war in the Middle East or rumors of a war or some big natural disaster, people would seem to step up with the message that we need to be terribly afraid because the world was about to end.

But Jesus says the opposite. He says that when you hear of these things, "Do not be terrified." We should, rather, just say, "Jesus said these things would fill this age. We don't have to panic. We can just keep walking in faithfulness." But this leads us to our third point: we should anticipate and prepare for persecution.

We should anticipate and prepare for persecution

Jesus adds, “But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake” (v. 12). This certainly happened in the generation to which Jesus initially spoke these words, but it’s happened in every generation since as well as Christians await Christ’s return. Therefore, we should anticipate and prepare for persecution.

Persecution is the norm for the believer in a world where Satan is called god of this age or ruler of this world. Jesus told us that if we were of the world, they would love us, but he’s chosen us out of this world, so they hate us, even as they hated him. He told us that if they persecuted him, they will persecute us as well (John 15:18-21). So, we can thank the Lord and be faithful in our gospel witness if persecution isn’t coming our way at any one moment, but we should anticipate that it is coming and not be surprised when it does. Jesus said this would happen. But he also gave us some great encouragement as we face persecution.

Persecution will provide opportunities for gospel witness

Jesus adds in verse 13, “This will be your opportunity to bear witness.” It may well be that you or I will be dragged before local officials, state officials, or even federal officials because we’re faithful followers of Jesus Christ. It’s getting less far-fetched every day to think that this might happen because we proclaim that God made us male and female and pronounced it good or declared that marriage is only between one man and one woman or a host of other things. You may be dragged before school officials because, as a teacher, you’re not abiding by what the officials mandate you say in the classroom. But any time this happens, let’s make sure that our first thought isn’t, “Woe is me!” but rather, “This is my opportunity to testify to the gospel of Jesus Christ.” This isn’t your time to shrink back but to be bold. We shouldn’t feel self-pity. Jesus is giving you an opportunity to proclaim that he is Lord. But you might say, “Oh, I’m not good at speaking in those situations.” Well, here’s another bit of good news.

Jesus will give us words to say in those moments

Jesus continues, “Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand and contradict” (vv. 14-15). Isn’t that the most encouraging thing in the world? Jesus will provide us the words to say in those moments. Have you ever read the stories of martyrs where they bear witness before those who persecute them, and thought, “Man, what they said was so good”? Well, there’s a reason for that. Jesus gives his people words to say in those moments, and he’ll give them to us as well. Let’s determine we’ll be bold in those opportunities, don’t worry about what we’ll say, and watch Jesus provide words for us. But there’s one more piece of encouragement.

Our Lord will preserve us

In verses 16-19 Jesus adds, “You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.” Now, how do we square Jesus saying, “Some of you they will put to death” with “But not a hair of your head will perish”?

Well, Jesus is saying that they may well kill us, but Christ will ensure that we do not shrink back from following him. He’ll preserve us so that we will not perish *eternally*. Nothing will pluck us out of his hand. He’ll hold us fast. They may do all kinds of evil against us, and we must endure, but our Lord will hold onto us, preserve our faith through it, and bring us to him. That’s what he means by not allowing us to perish. And isn’t that incredibly encouraging? And so, we should anticipate and prepare for persecution, seeing it as an opportunity to speak the gospel boldly and determining that we’ll do so, trusting that Jesus will give us the words, and knowing that he’ll hold us fast so that we will not perish. And, finally, we should live faithfully unto Christ, awaiting his return.

We should live faithfully unto Christ, awaiting his return

In verses 20-24 Jesus explained the fall of Jerusalem, which we’ve already noted,⁵ and in verses 25-27 he begins to talk about the second coming. But notice two things Jesus says in these final verses. First, in verses 27, Jesus reminds us that as he begins to bring judgment on the world, we don’t have to fear because, for us, it means our “redemption is drawing near.” Then, in verses 29-30 he tells a parable, noting that just as trees leafing out in the winter shows that summer is near, so when we see all of these things take place, we can know that “the kingdom of God is near” (v. 31).

In other words, it seems that all that needs to take place in order for Jesus to return has happened. Some would debate this, and it may be that these things Jesus predicted will keep happening in every generation and even escalate perhaps, but I think we can argue that his coming is imminent. It could be any time. And all of that leads to one final exhortation. Jesus says, “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (vv. 34-36).

We don’t need to allow dullness to take over our hearts or get caught up in chasing after things this world offers. We need to live deliberately and faithfully unto Christ, knowing that he’s

⁵ He does say in verse 24 that “Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, *until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*.” It seems that the “times of the Gentiles” is a reference to the mission to the Gentiles that is launched in the early chapters of Acts and continues throughout this age. Therefore, it seems that Jerusalem will never be restored as it once was in this entire age, but this is an admittedly difficult phrase to interpret as Luke is the only gospel writer to include it.

coming soon. Our redemption is near. Therefore, let us intentionally seek to live our lives knowing that he is coming, and it could be today.

And then interestingly the text ends with this note in verses 37-38: “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 him in the temple to hear him.” Doesn’t that feel out of place? Jesus is saying, all kinds of crazy things will happen, the temple and all of Jerusalem will be destroyed, and the Son of Man will come and bring judgment and redemption. And then Luke says, basically, “And then just got on about his business.” But maybe that’s the lesson for us. Yes, we’ll live in a time of wars, pestilence, earthquakes, famines, and persecution. And one day Jesus will come back in the most remarkable way ever, and it’ll mean the judgment of the world and salvation of God’s people. But, as we await that day, just live in this one, being about the business that the Lord has given us to do. After all, he lived, died, and was raised for us so that we might walk in newness of life and obedience to him. May we then be faithful and always giving thanks to him in this life as we await his return. Let us do that now as we come to the table. Amen.