

56. The Persecution of the Saints

Luke 21:12-28

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

We are continuing our study of the Olivet Discourse as recorded by Luke in chapter 21 and also looking at Matthew's recalling of the same talk (Matthew 24). □

As Jesus and the disciples were leaving the Temple Courts that Wednesday evening, the disciples had marveled at Herod's Temple with all its expenditure of gold and precious stones. Jesus replied that there would not be one stone left on another—a truly shocking statement of destruction. In our last study, we saw that the disciples waited (Matthew 24:3) until they were seated on the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley from the Temple Mount before asking Jesus two questions: “When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3).

The disciples thought that Jesus was talking about the end of the age or what is referred to as “the Day of the Lord.” Looking back in history, however, we can see that the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. was not the end of the age. The end of the age is still a future event. In responding, Jesus was answering both questions, what will be the sign of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and, secondly, what would be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age. In verses 8-11, He described signs of His coming at the end of the age, which we reviewed in the previous study, but at verse 12, Jesus explained to His disciples what they should expect to take place before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This is confirmed with Jesus’ words, “But before all this...” (v. 12).

Let’s examine together verses 12-24:

¹²But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³This will result in your being witnesses to them. ¹⁴But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. ¹⁶You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷All men will hate you because of me. ¹⁸But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By standing firm you will gain life (Luke 21:12-19).

²⁰When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that it’s desolation is near. ²¹Then 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. ²²For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. ²³How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. ²⁴They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Luke 21:20-24).

The Lord forewarned His disciples about what was ahead for them so that, when it happened, they would not abandon their faith. There are four main things about which we read:

1) A time of persecution (v. 12). Jesus prophesied that the early believers would undergo a time of persecution for their faith. After the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost, the attack was against the apostles and leaders. In the Book of Acts, chapter 4, we read of Peter and John being persecuted for a miracle of healing and for teaching about Jesus. In Acts chapter five, all the apostles were put into jail for healing people and teaching their message about Jesus' being the Messiah (Acts 5:18; 28). In Acts 12, we read of the first of the apostles to be martyred, viz. James, the brother of John. □

The Jewish religious elite was so pleased at the news of Herod Antipas, grandson of Herod the Great, had put Peter into prison expecting to execute him also on the next day. God had other plans for Peter and supernaturally released him. The Lord allowed the persecution to widen with a man called Stephen stoned to death at the hands of the religious elite (Acts 7:59). Stephen's death caused great persecution that drove the believers out of Jerusalem with their message (Acts 8:1-2). The Gospel message began to spread out to districts outside of Jerusalem (Judea and Samaria, Acts 8:1-3; 12:1-5).

In God's plan for the worldwide propagation of the Gospel, He allowed persecution to come to drive out the believers from Jerusalem ahead of the destruction in 70 A.D. The message of the kingdom was preached to the rest of the world and many believers were spared the destruction that came upon Jerusalem! □

The persecution was God's provision for them not to be caught inside the Roman embankment or barrier walls that were built around Jerusalem ahead of its destruction: **"The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side"** (Luke 19:43).

The persecution also gave the believers in Jesus opportunities to speak to rulers and leaders as well as the ordinary people. Persecution has always resulted in church growth and blessing upon the church. Our enemy, Satan, has not learned that Christianity cannot be destroyed by persecution. He has tried it over hundreds of years until this present time, but when the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of God shall lift up a standard against him (Isaiah 59:19 KJV). □

There is always a mighty move of the Spirit that results from a demonic flood against the church of Jesus. For instance, conservative estimates of the growth of Protestant Christianity in China is said to be upward of 110 million, according to the Communist government.¹ This growth was primarily caused by the persecution at the hands of the Communist government of Mao Zedong in 1949 and other persecutions since. Jesus warned his disciples that being persecuted for their faith is something that comes along with living wholeheartedly for Christ.

Growth through persecution has been proven to be true through the centuries. Paul wrote to Timothy, his protégé, to expect persecution, saying, **"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"** (2 Timothy 3:12). The great champion of the Christian faith, Paul the Apostle, became a Christian after encountering the Lord as a direct result of Paul's involvement in the stoning of Stephen. As Stephen was stoned to death, Paul heard his dying response. ⁵⁹**"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'** ⁶⁰**Then**

¹ <http://www.billionbibles.org/china/how-many-christians-in-china.html>

he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59-60). Paul was there watching and was greatly convicted as he watched this godly man praying for his persecutors while his life was slipping away (Acts 26:14). This persecution of Christianity has been going on for more than 2000 years and has resulted in significant growth in the Church. □

Question 1) What did Christ mean when He said; “By standing firm, you will gain life?” (v. 19).

2) The apostles would be brought before kings and governors (v. 12). This was fulfilled when Paul was brought before Felix, the governor in Acts 24. He also appeared before King Agrippa in Acts 26. Paul had appealed to appear before Caesar as well, although we are not told in the New Testament when that happened. When the religious elite of Jerusalem persecuted the Apostles John and Peter, their response was to stand firm and not back down from preaching about Jesus. Instead, when they got back to the house where many believers had gathered, they did not pray that the persecution would stop, they prayed that God would strengthen them in the persecution. God responded by shaking the building in which they were gathered, and a tremendous second filling of the Spirit came upon them (Acts 4:31). □

3) Armies would surround and destroy Jerusalem (v. 20-23). Answering the disciples’ request as to the timing of the end of the age, Jesus gave a warning that they were to get out of the city before Rome’s armies surround Jerusalem. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the time, tells us that in A.D.70, this prophecy was fulfilled as the Roman emperor Vespasian sent his son Titus to crush a rebellion and destroy Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. Over one million lives were lost, and 97,000 Jews were taken as slaves into the nations of the world.²

If the church had not been persecuted and driven outside the city of Jerusalem, the believers would have been killed when the Romans attacked the city. Although they were saddened at the death and destruction that happened, they were thankful for the guidance of the Spirit. If we live with our ears open to the Spirit in the days of tribulation/persecution that are yet ahead for the church, we can expect that the Lord will supernaturally guide us, although some will be martyred:

¹³Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” ¹⁴I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:13-14).

Jesus said that there would be great persecution of the saints before His second coming: “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me” (Matthew 24:9). Along with persecution in these end-times, the Lord has promised that there will be a great outpouring of the Spirit: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (Acts 2:17).

4) Jerusalem would be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (v. 24). The word trampled on is the Greek word *Pateō*, which means “a beaten path. To

² Charles R. Swindoll, Study guide in Luke 16:19-24:53. Word Publishing, Page 87.

tread, as a winepress. To trample on or have in subjection.”³ Since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Jewish people have been dispersed and persecuted in many countries of the world. The nearly 2000 years of their dispersion throughout the world is called *The Diaspora*. They have been a people without a country.

In the meantime, their homeland has been under subjection and trampled on by many nations. However, God did not leave them without hope. He said there would be a time when He would bring the Jewish people back to their own land. Zechariah the prophet spoke hundreds of years before Christ concerning the days in which we live when the people of Israel return to their homeland:□

⁷This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. ⁸I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God" (Zechariah 8:7-8).

The prophet Ezekiel also wrote about the return of the Jewish people to their homeland:

²⁵Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "I will now restore the fortunes of Jacob and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be zealous for my holy name. ²⁶They will forget their shame and all the unfaithfulness they showed toward me when they lived in safety in their land with no one to make them afraid. ²⁷When I have brought them back from the nations and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will be proved holy through them in the sight of many nations. ²⁸Then they will know that I am the Lord their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind. ²⁹I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the people of Israel," declares the Sovereign Lord (Ezekiel 39:25-29).

Question 2) What do you think this phrase means: "I will no longer hide my face from them?" (v. 29). What causes God to hide His face? How can we invite the Lord to reveal Himself to us more clearly?

In fulfillment of these prophecies, the Jews started to return to their land at the beginning of the twentieth century. The British had captured the area from the Turks in 1917 during the First World War. It was then that the Jewish people were given the right to return to their homeland, then called Palestine, by the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour. This famous document was called the Balfour Declaration.

The letter was written to Lord Rothschild, seen as a representative of the Jewish people. The letter stated that the British government "viewed with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." Jewish people returning to the land became a flood after the Second World War when the Holocaust of six million Jewish people occurred at the hands of the Nazis.

³Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers, Number 4251 in the Greek Lexical Aids.□

Britain moved out of the land in 1948, and the land was divided up between Jews and Arabs. It was at that point that Israel finally became a nation. Immediately upon the announcement of the new State of Israel, the Gentile nations around Israel attacked. Israel could not capture Jerusalem at the time, but it had resounding victories on all fronts.

A second war, the 1956 Suez Crisis, still did not yield Jerusalem to the Jews. Jerusalem was finally captured from Jordan during the Six Day War in June of 1967, and Israelis were now finally able to worship at the Western Wall, which is believed to be a retaining wall of the Temple area. They left the Temple Mount area itself remaining in the hands of the Muslims because of the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount, which is a holy site for Muslims. The Temple Mount with its mosque and shrine are currently administered by an Islamic trust that enjoys total autonomy.

[Question 3\) Do you think the time of trampling down of Jerusalem is finished? Are the times of the Gentiles over? \(Luke 21:24\). What could this verse mean?](#)

This occupation of the Temple Mount has been a sore point to the Jewish people. The Muslim trust forbids any Jew or non-Muslim, from praying upon the Temple Mount. □



The picture above is a sketch of the Temple Mount with the Western Wall with its plaza on the bottom left, the golden Dome of the Rock in the center, and the black-domed al-Aqsa Mosque on the far right.

The issue of ownership of Jerusalem will continue to be a controversial issue until the coming of Christ. Jerusalem has been declared to be the capital of Israel, but no countries have placed their embassies there. All nations have their embassies in Tel Aviv, Israel's largest city.

God warns the new nation of Israel that, even though He will bring them back to their land and restore them to Jerusalem, the issue of Jerusalem will be something that will injure any party that attempts to solve the problem:

²I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling. Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem. ³On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves (Zechariah 12:2-3).

Now, I am going to stick my neck out and say something that is going to be a shock for many of you. I do not believe that there will be a battle of Armageddon. I do not find anything in Scripture that tells me that Armageddon will be the site of the last battle on earth. Nowhere are we told that Jesus will fight the armies of the nations at Armageddon. I will explain why I believe this from the following Scripture. There is only one place in Scripture where Armageddon is mentioned, and to that place, three evil spirits are sent out to gather armies:□

They go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty. ¹⁵"Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." ¹⁶Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon (Revelation 16:14-16).

It is my belief that Armageddon, also known as the Valley of Jezreel, is a gathering or mustering place, for the nations of the world. It is a natural flat area with the port of Haifa to the west. The armies of the east will come across the Euphrates River and gather together on the east side of that valley. The troops from the north will come through Lebanon and gather there also. It will serve as the "staging post" for that which will be central to the end times—Jerusalem. □

¹A day of the LORD is coming when your plunder will be divided among you. ²I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. ³Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. ⁴On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. ⁵You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him (Zechariah 14:1-5).

God will gather all nations (v. 2), but Zechariah is explicit in His detail; the fight will be for Jerusalem. This battle cannot be talking about the attack from Rome in 70 A.D. In that war, we do not see all nations, only Rome. We did not see any evidence of the Lord coming with His holy ones at that time. When this attack on Jerusalem happens, it will be something that will cause the people of Israel to cry out to their God. All hope is lost for them, or so it will seem, but in their distress, they will call out to God as one nation and plead with Him to save them. Jesus told them that He would not come until they would be ready to receive Him:

Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 13:35).

Scripture is clear that the Jewish people will have a seven-year period when a leader called the Antichrist would make a covenant or solemn agreement giving them peace between Israel and her enemies:□

He will confirm a covenant with many for one "seven." In the middle of the "seven," he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him (Daniel 9:27).

This passage is interesting. Let's try to understand it clearly:□

- 1) There will be a seven-year agreement.
- 2) There will be a temple built in Jerusalem.
- 3) After three and a half years, this man called the Antichrist will desecrate the temple, setting up an "abomination that causes desolation."

Paul the Apostle also wrote about this same time, saying:

¹Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, ²not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. ³Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for (that day will not come) until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4).

This writer believes that the Times of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24) is only completed when the seven-year peace agreement is signed. This agreement, or covenant, will enable the Jewish people to rebuild their temple, a national site of worship. There is considerable controversy over the timing of these events and over whether or not the temple will be rebuilt or whether it is symbolic.

Either way, the events leading up to the return of Christ are linked to this tiny country where God's story began and where the final events will take place before His coming. God has not forgotten His people. I believe that the end-time events will open up the eyes of many people in many nations, including the Jewish people. Even today, we see many Jews and Muslims opening their hearts to faith in Jesus. Christ's Bride, His church, consists of all nations, and we are made one body through the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus paid for all.

Some would argue that the "Times of the Gentiles" has already been fulfilled because Jerusalem is no longer dominated by the Gentiles, seeing that it was recaptured in the 1967 war. However,

the re-establishment of the Jewish Temple is of pivotal importance in the end times. Without a national site of worship restored, the Jewish people cannot build their temple and reinstitute the sacrifices, which Jesus (Matthew 24:15), Paul and Daniel 9:27 (above) tell us will happen in the last days. What that will look like, I do not know, but time will tell. What we do know is that a man known as the Antichrist will set himself up as god and king over the whole world.

Question 4) What would you like to have done, or be completed by the time Christ returns? Is anything holding you back from accomplishing your life goals?□

Jesus spoke clearly that, at the time of the end, there will be cosmic signs seen before His coming. These are unlike anything we have seen before.

Cosmic Signs Before Christ's Coming

²⁵There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:25-28).

I do not know what the signs in the sun, moon, and stars could be. From the view of the earth, it could mean the planet itself is shifting on its axis, thus making the surrounding planets seem as if they are falling, depending on one's perspective. This cosmic sign is also mentioned in one of the prophecies of Isaiah:□

¹⁹The earth is broken up, the earth is split asunder, the earth is thoroughly shaken. ²⁰*The earth reels like a drunkard, it sways like a hut in the wind;* so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion that it falls—never to rise again. ²¹In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below. ²²They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days. ²³The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed; for the LORD Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders, gloriously (Isaiah 24:19-23).

All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved, and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree (Isaiah 34:4).

"Immediately after the distress of those days" 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken (Matthew 24:29).

Luke further records Jesus as saying that “nations will be in perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea” (v. 25). To be perplexed means to have trouble or confusion resulting from the complicated things happening. Verse 26 says that the population of the earth will be terrified due to the things that come upon the earth. This could include threats by nations that have managed to

get hold of nuclear weapons, thus terrorizing Israel and other countries. Never have we seen such terror in major proportions in so many parts of the world at once. □

Verse 27 says that our Savior will come at a time during which something devastating will be occurring on the planet. Matthew tells us:

²¹For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. ²²If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened (Matthew 24:21-22).

This verse seems clear that the Lord is talking of a period right before Christ's actual return. There are those who claim that the "end of the age" refers to the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. and that these things have all already been fulfilled. I would respond that many of the words in the same passage are not fulfilled yet. In Scripture, we often see multiple fulfillments and shadows of things to come, and then later the ultimate fulfillment.

Suffice it to say that I do believe Scripture points to a time when the Jewish people will once again have a national site of worship, and that we will see a man who will set in motion the final stages of the end times through the act of desecration referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, when the Antichrist proclaims himself God. □

Some would argue that Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated the Jerusalem temple in 167 B.C. believing that he was a god. Thus, they conclude that all of this has already happened. In my opinion, that act was a foreshadowing of the ultimate act of desecration of the temple by Antichrist that is yet to come.

Many things can cause great perplexity on the earth. The most important thing for each of us to know is that God loves us and that He wants us to be with Him for eternity, no matter what happens on Earth. There is an assurance to the Christian that this earth is not all there is and that we await an eternal home. If you are in Christ and He is in you, then He has promised that He will come again and take us to be with Himself (John 14:2-3). We finish the passage with Jesus' words in verse 28:

²⁷At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.
²⁸When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:27-28).

Many years ago, I read these prophecies of the Lord Jesus. They excited me but scared me. I was afraid that, when He would come, I would be left outside His kingdom. That night I decided I had to find out more about the Christian faith. The turning point in my life came with a new direction toward Christ. I decided to give my life to Him in complete abandonment, and He has led me ever since. I no longer feel alone or afraid of the future, whatever it may hold. I pose this question to you, dear reader: Have you decided to trust Him as your Lord and Savior? Have you crossed from Satan's dominion of darkness to live under the love, compassion, and mercy of Christ's kingdom? I urge you now to consider where you will spend eternity.

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Colossians 1:13).

You can do it today. Pray a simple, sincere prayer something like this:

Dear Lord Jesus, would You have mercy on me today? I have been living my life for myself only, but now I choose to live in Your Kingdom. I want so much to please You with my life. Forgive me for my sin, give me hope, and let me not be ashamed at Your coming. I receive You as Lord and Savior of everything that I am and all that I hold dear. Sit on the throne of my life, be my Guide, and direct my future. Amen!

My prayer is that you may understand what God has done for you, and for you to become a child of God by faith in Christ. God wants all of us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are His and to be certain of our eternal destiny (1 John 5:13).

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com