

Luke 21:10-19
Prepare for Persecution

As I think about it, it seems that most of my sins have to do with either the future or the past. That is, if I am angry, it is about something that has already happened. If I am lustful, it is about an unfulfilled desire for something in the future. Sin tends to work that way. Satan would have us focused on either the past that we cannot change, or the future we cannot control. God, in turn, wants us focused on what we ought to do right now.

Regret, disappointment, and bitterness are all rooted in the past. Fear, doubt, and despair are all related to the future. Satan cares less about which extreme we take, as long as we do not concentrate on whatever it is we ought to be doing right now. God has good works for us to do *today*. Perhaps those good works might include planning and praying for the future or forgiving someone for a wrong done in the past, but those are good works to do today. To dwell on either the past or the future is not spiritually healthy.

And yet, Jesus spoke often about the future. As Passion Week progressed toward the inevitable conclusion of the cross, Jesus presented one final discourse to His disciples as they walked from the temple complex to the Mount of Olives. The topic of this last talk was the signs of His return. But the purpose in outlining the future signs of His return was so that the disciples might know how to act now, in this present age. Jesus knew He would not return during the lifetimes of these closest followers - though they, of course did not know that. Jesus, therefore, instructed them on what to look for, and how to prepare so that when He did return, they would be ready, and if He did not return during their lifetimes, they would lead God-honoring lives that would further the kingdom of God.

Having used the illustration of the destruction of the magnificent temple complex to begin His discourse, the disciples wondered aloud “when therefore will these things happen?” (Luke 21:7). Jesus did not answer directly, but instead told them to “see to it that you are not misled” (Luke 21:8). There would be many disturbing signs that Christ’s return was imminent, but the disciples ought not to overreact to every single event as if it meant the end of the world. Certainly even the dramatic and cataclysmic destruction of the temple itself did not mean the end of the age.

Instead the disciples ought to “keep on the alert at all times” (Luke 21:36). That is, they ought to do each day whatever was required to be prepared for the return of Jesus when it happened. Though the events Jesus described were terrifying in the extreme, to worry about them was both futile and unproductive. God’s plan is perfect, and His plan results in the salvation of His people. That is what the disciples needed to focus on, and so should we.

Things to Come

As Jesus taught of the things to come that would mark signs of His return, He began “by saying to them, ‘nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom’” (v. 10). The disciples had little experience of wars. There were stories of the Maccabean revolts, of course, but it is our generation that has become used to war. Yet, even for us, we must know that all the wars of human history will appear insignificant in light of the extraordinary conflicts that will usher in the final days. Consider this vivid

description of the beginnings of the final conflict in Revelation, ³when He broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, ‘come.’ ⁴And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him” (Revelation 6:3-4).

This world wide war, on a scale never before imagined, will result in the death of 25% of the world’s population (Revelation 6:8). If that were to happen today, it would mean the death of more than 1.9 billion people. By comparison, that is *forty* times as many people as died in World War 2. The final battle of these final wars will take place at Har-Magedon.

“¹²The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river, the Euphrates; and its water was dried up, so that the way would be prepared for the kings from the east. ¹³And I saw coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs; ¹⁴for they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty . . . ¹⁶And they gathered them together to the place which in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon” (Revelation 16:12-14, 16).

The location described is the plain of Megiddo, the site of many battles in Israel’s history. It was there that the prophetess Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam defeated the Canaanite kings (Judges 4-5). It was there that king Josiah was killed in a battle against the Egyptians (2 Chronicles 35). And it is there that Christ will ultimately destroy His enemies (Revelation 19).

Let us remember that as much as beauty pageant contestants may wish it, there is no biblical argument for universal peace. Not, at least, until this world has been done away with. When Christ returns,

“He will judge between the nations,
And will render decisions for many peoples;
And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not lift up sword against nation,
And never again will they learn war” (Isaiah 2:4).

But that is in the future.

But this was not all the disciples should expect. Jesus continued, “there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven” (v. 11). As there has always been earthquakes, disease, and famine no single cooccurrent can be taken as a sign. It is the scale, intensity, and savageness of these events which will increase dramatically in the last days.

Since the 1930s, when seismologist Charles Richter developed his scale for measuring earthquakes, there have been nearly forty earthquakes of magnitude 8.5 or higher. For comparison, the Northridge quake of 1991 registered a 6.7 on the scale. This is considered a ‘strong’ earthquake, but is not at the level of ‘major’ (7.0-7.9) or ‘great’ (8.0 or greater). There are about 20 or so of these latter two types of earthquakes every year.

But these, too, will all seem like mere tremors compared with what is to come in the last days.

“¹²I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; ¹³and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. ¹⁴The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. ¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains” (Revelation 6:12-15).

But the final earthquake will be even more devastating.

“¹⁸And there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth, so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty. ¹⁹The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath. ²⁰And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found” (Revelation 16:18-20).

In describing plagues and famines, Jesus referred to two other devastating natural disasters. Epidemics of various kinds have ripped mankind throughout the years. There were great plagues in Athens in the 5th century BC; the last of which determined the result of the Peloponnesian War with Sparta. There was a great plague during the reign of Justinian in the 6th century AD. And, of course, the Great Mortality of the 14th century that reduced the population of western Europe by 40% in only five years. Again, imagine if 130 million people died in the United States between now and 2023.

Famines, also, are a constant source of grief to mankind. Perhaps we do not recognize it so much here in the affluence of our own society, but most of the world’s population have lived at a subsistence level for most of human history. An early frost, too much rain, or storms during harvest might determine whether entire populations would survive or die. In recorded history, we know that a famine wiped out the great Mayan civilization of Central Mexico in the 11th century, and the Great Potato Famine of Ireland in the 1840s resulted in the death or emigration of more than one-half of the entire population of the island.

Terrors and signs from heaven are more general terms for things such as comets, tornadoes, hurricanes, fires and the like. Again, human history is littered with such stories of destruction. But all of these events, will seem inconsequential in light of the events that will unfold in the final days.

“⁵When He broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, ‘come.’ I looked, and behold, a black horse; and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶And I heard something like a voice in the center of the four living creatures saying, ‘a quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine’
¹²a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them would be darkened and the day would not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way” (Revelation 6:5-6, 8:12).

“⁹Behold, the day of the Lord is coming,
Cruel, with fury and burning anger,
To make the land a desolation;
And He will exterminate its sinners from it.
¹⁰For the stars of heaven and their constellations
Will not flash forth their light;
The sun will be dark when it rises
And the moon will not shed its light” (Isaiah 13:9-10).

But First

But this was all in the future. Jesus wanted to impress upon His disciples their need to be aware of more immediate concerns. “But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name’s sake” (v. 12). The great events just described would not occur during the lifetime of these men, but each of them would experience the persecution that came with being a follower of Christ.

The synagogue dominated Jewish life before the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Jewish leaders were active in their persecution of the new faith. “¹Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2). Such action was something of which Saul boasted at the time, “I said, ‘Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You’” (Acts 22:19).

The disciples would experience first-hand this persecution.

“¹As they [Peter and John] were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, ²being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. ³And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening” (Acts 4:1-3).

“And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him [Stephen] and dragged him away and brought him before the Council” (Acts 6:12).

But the persecution of the disciples was engaged in by more than simply the Jews. Gentile leaders, “kings and governors” (v. 12), as well persecuted them, as Jesus had promised.

“¹Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. ²And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. ³When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also” (Acts 12:1-3).

“After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney named Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor [Felix] against Paul” (Acts 24:1).

“²And the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews brought charges against Paul, and they were urging him, ³requesting a concession against Paul, that he might have him brought to Jerusalem (at the same time, setting an ambush to kill him on the way). ⁴Festus then answered that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea and that he himself was about to leave shortly” (Acts 25:2-4).

“So, on the next day when Agrippa came together with Bernice amid great pomp, and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in” (Acts 25:23).

History records that each of the disciples had reason to recall the words of Jesus.

James executed by decapitation under Herod Agrippa I in 44AD.

Philip was crucified in Egypt in 54 AD.

James, son of Alphaeus, at the age of 94, was beaten and stoned by persecutors, and then killed him by hitting him in the head with a club in AD 63.

Simon was crucified in Rome about AD 64.

Matthew was martyred in Ethiopia, where he was supposedly stabbed in the back by an swordsman sent by King Hertacus, after he criticized the king's morals. He died between 65-70 AD.

Andrew was tied, rather than nailed to a cross, in western Greece about AD 70.

Bartholomew preached in India. In one account, he was beaten and crucified, while in another, he was skinned alive and then beheaded about AD 70.

Thomas preached the gospel in Greece and India, where he angered local religious authorities, who martyred him by running him through with a spear in about AD 70.

Thaddaeus was crucified at Edessa (the name of cities in both Turkey and Greece) in 72 AD.

Simon the Zealot preached in Mauritania on the west coast of Africa, and then went to England, where he was crucified in 74 AD.

John was the only one of the original disciples not to die a violent death. Instead, he passed away peacefully (though in exile) on Patmos in his old age, sometime around 100 AD.

The Purpose and the Plan

But all of this suffering was not to be without its purpose. Jesus encouraged His disciples that “it will lead to an opportunity for your testimony” (v. 13). No doubt their looks were downcast and confused. This was not what they had expected. So Jesus reminded them that while the years ahead would be difficult, they would be full of meaning. Even more, He promised that they would not be alone. Knowing that fear might dominate their thinking, Jesus insisted they “¹⁴not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; ¹⁵for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute” (v. 14-15). That is, Jesus did not want them thinking about what they were to say if the worst happened, but rather they were to do their duty, as God showed them their duty, and leave the rest to God.

As with every promise of God, this has proved to be true. As the early church suffered persecution, it led to increasing opportunities for testimony before large crowds who attended the ritual slayings of believers. And the apostles did testify.

“⁸Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘rulers and elders of the people, ⁹if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead - by this name this man stands here before you in good health. ¹¹He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became

the chief cornerstone. ¹²And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:8-12).

It was a common teaching in the early Church that followers of Christ would suffer, but that their suffering was for their own good. Paul “²¹returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²²strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21-22).

This promise has continued to be fulfilled throughout Church history. The church father Tertullian wrote in his *Apologeticus*, “we multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed.” Facing martyrdom, the aged Polycarp (2nd century bishop of Smyrna) was offered his freedom if he would renounce Jesus. He responded, “eighty and six years have I served Christ, nor has He ever done me any harm. How, then, could I blaspheme my King who saved Me?” Fifteenth century Czech reformer Jan Hus was condemned to be burned at the stake for his teachings against the Catholic Church. On his way to the stake he said, “in the same truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached . . . I am ready to die today.” Martin Luther, standing before the Diet of Worms and Emperor Charles V was ordered to recant his writings. He said, “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me.”

No Exceptions

And Jesus emphasized that there was to be no escape. Lest any one of the disciples think they might be reprieved or excepted from the persecution, Jesus continued, “¹⁶you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, ¹⁷and you will be hated by all because of My name” (v. 16-17). A literal interpretation is unnecessary. Hated by everybody means all kinds of people; it does not mean every literal person. But still, there will be no exceptions.

Believers must remember that there is no good behavior, or consistent testimony, or acts of kindness will prevent them, or us, from being persecuted. The children of Cain will always hate children of Abel. Scripture reminds us that we ought “not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13). After all, “¹⁸if the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. ¹⁹If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you” (John 15:18-19).

Yet we must also make certain that our being hated is not the result of our own bad behavior or toxic personality. If we are disliked by family members and people in general because we are difficult to get along with, complain too much, or are prideful, that is our own sin issue. That is not the persecution of which Jesus was speaking. The emphasis of Jesus is that this persecution happened because of “My name.” We take our stand on the cause of Christ, and if our family renounces us, so be it. As Jesus taught in an earlier setting, “²⁶if anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.

²⁷Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple’ (Luke 14:26-27).

The Promise

But Jesus ended with a promise. Perhaps finally smiling at His disciples after such a stern and serious talk, He promised “¹⁸yet not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹By your endurance you will gain your lives” (v. 18-19). This was a proverbial saying. Here is an example from the history of Israel, “but the people said to Saul, ‘must Jonathan die, who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Far from it! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.’ So the people rescued Jonathan and he did not die” (1 Samuel 14:45).

Again, this gracious promise was not to be taken literally. The meaning was that what is best about us is safe from harm. Our treasure is in heaven. What Jesus was speaking of here is the permanence of salvation.

This is one of the most precious promises in Scripture, and especially so in light of the terrifying prophecies of which Jesus spoke.

“¹³Jesus answered and said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; ¹⁴but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24).

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37).

“³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

“⁴[We have] an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:4-5).

“¹³In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14).

“²⁷My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:27-29).

Takeaways

Let us take comfort from the fact that our salvation is secure in Christ. Therefore, until He returns, may God give us the grace to focus our attention on the kingdom of God. Let us put aside fear and complacency and concentrate on doing what we can to further God’s kingdom right now, today.