

“Heaven and Earth Will Pass Away” (Luke 21:5–38)

November 17, 2019

Brian Watson

Does anyone know what’s going to happen tomorrow? How about next year?

A lot of people make claims about the future. People make predictions about sports, about which team will win today or which team will win the championship. People make predictions about the economy, whether the market will rise or fall. People make political predictions: who will win next year’s election. Whose predictions can we trust?

Generally, we trust predictions made about the future if predictions about the past have come true. That’s how science often works. Scientists come up with hypotheses about how the natural world works, then they make predictions based on those hypotheses. If experimentation and observation prove that the predictions are true, then those hypotheses become theories. Those theories could always turn out to be false, but we trust that things in physics, chemistry, and biology will work tomorrow the way that they have worked today.

But not everything that happens tomorrow can be predicted by science. Some events are singular and can’t be predicted scientifically. Human behavior, for example, isn’t always predictable. Divine behavior—what God will do tomorrow and beyond—isn’t always predictable. Yet people make predictions about the future, so how do we know if we should trust them?

We generally can’t know ahead of time if a prediction is correct, but we tend to listen to people who make predictions if they have a history of making correct predictions. If a political commentator has correctly predicted who will win elections, you will probably listen to their predictions regarding the next election. If a sports commentator has correctly predicted who will win this week’s games or the next championship, you’ll think their predictions for this week and this year might be good guesses. But we don’t expect these people to predict the future perfectly.

But what do we do when it comes to the things of God? Science can’t address much of the issues related to God. He is spirit, an immaterial being, so we can’t detect his activity scientifically. Does that mean we can’t know the truth about God? I think we can know the truth about God, but science won’t get us there. To know God, we need to have him reveal himself to us. Of course, many different religions claim that they have received a revelation from God. They say very different things about God, the universe, human beings, and how we can have a

right relationship with God. These different religions can't all be true. Are any of them true? How can we know?

One way to test a religion is to see if its alleged revelation matches up with history. Is there any archaeological evidence that lines up with what that religion's holy book claims? Did the predictions made by that religion's prophets turn out to be true?

When we test Christianity, it comes out well. For example, though not all of the Bible's historical claims are backed by archaeological evidence, I believe that none of its claims are refuted by archaeological evidence, and every time a new discovery is made, it supports what the Bible says. Also, prophecies about the future are made in the Bible, and we can see if those prophecies have come to pass. Not all religions can say as much. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, claimed that a temple would be built in Independence, Missouri within a generation. Yet that generation died before a temple was built there. His prediction was wrong.¹

On the other hand, Jesus, who was a prophet (and King and Son of God), made predictions regarding what would happen within a generation. And his predictions came true. Specifically, he predicted that Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed within a generation. He made this prediction either in the year 30 or, possibly, 33. (Many of the writings of the Bible are difficult to date with great precision because ancient writers didn't provide specific dates for the events about which they wrote. But the details of Jesus' life are such that the details of the week of his death can fit with either the year 30 or 33.) The three Gospels that record these predictions were most likely written sometime between the late 50s and mid-60s. Then, beginning in the year 66, Jewish people in Palestine rebelled against the Roman Empire, the world's greatest superpower and the occupying force of Judea. Rome responded by destroying Jerusalem and its temple, slaughtering many Jews in the year 70. So, Jesus' prediction, made forty years earlier (the length of a generation according to the Bible; Num. 32:13), was true. Since the Bible says that the test of a true prophet is that he speaks the truth (Deut. 18:22), that means that Jesus is a true prophet, and that we should take Jesus at his word. And Jesus predicted a greater future event: he said that one day he would come again to the Earth, this time to judge everyone who has ever lived and to recreate the world. The destruction of Jerusalem nearly two

¹ Robert M. Bowman, Jr., "Joseph Smith's Missouri Temple Prophecy," *Institute for Religious Research*, August 22, 2017, <http://mit.irr.org/joseph-smiths-missouri-temple-prophecy>.

thousand years ago foreshadowed that greater day of judgment, which will come in the future. To be spared judgment, we need to respond to Jesus.

Today, we're looking at a lengthy section of the Gospel of Luke. We'll be reading Luke 21:5–38. Most people think this is entirely about what hasn't come to pass yet, the "end times," as they're often called. I think that's wrong, as I'll show when I explain the text. Some people think it's entirely about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. I think that's very possible. But I think the best reading is that though this passage is primarily about the destruction of Jerusalem and specifically the temple, that event foreshadows the end of the world as we know it.

One more note before I start reading this passage: Today's sermon may feel a bit like a history lecture. But I think it's important to know history, and it's important to know that Christianity is an historical religion. It is based on historical events, events that are recorded even outside of the Bible. This is one of the ways that we know Christianity is true.

So, without further ado, let's begin reading. We'll start by reading verses 5–7:

⁵ And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶ "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." ⁷ And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?"²

This is probably Thursday morning, the day before Jesus will be crucified. He and his disciples are in the temple complex in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the capital of Judea, the holy city of the Jews, and the temple was the religious, political, and symbolic center of their world. It was the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover, when Jewish people throughout the Roman Empire would come to Jerusalem, to worship at the temple.

It's hard to stress how important the temple was to the Jewish people. It was where God dwelled among them, where they worshiped, where sacrifices for their sins were offered. God told the Israelites to build a tabernacle, a portable temple, about fourteen hundred years earlier. During the reign of Solomon, a temple was built in Jerusalem. That temple was destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians, because the Jewish people had been unfaithful to God. They worshiped idols and refused to obey God, so God used a foreign nation to judge them.

This was the second temple, which was built in 515 BC, but was substantially renovated by Herod beginning in 20 or 19 BC. Most of the work on the building was finished within a

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

decade, but ornamental details were worked on until about AD 63 or 64. The temple was one of the most impressive buildings in the middle east. Herod increased the Temple Mount to an area the size of thirty-five football fields. The retaining walls of the temple were made of huge, heavy stones. “In the 1990s an archeological exploration of the temple foundations revealed a large stone . . . that was 42 x 14 x 11 feet in size and estimated to weigh 600 tons.” Two other stones they found were 40 and 25 feet long.³ The temple was covered with gold plates that shone so brightly in the sun that people were nearly blinded. This would have been the most impressive site that people living in that area had ever seen.

When some of Jesus’ disciples comment on how impressive the building is, Jesus says the whole thing will be torn down. He doesn’t give the reason why this will happen here, but elsewhere he says it is a judgment by God against a largely unfaithful Jewish people. Also, the time of the temple was about to be over. Jesus, the true temple of God, was about to offer himself up as the only sacrifice needed for sin. Jesus’ words must have shocked his disciples. So, they ask him when this would happen, and what sign would occur before this would take place. This is very important, so I’ll repeat it. Jesus has said that the temple will be destroyed, and his disciples ask when that will happen. This is primarily what this passage is about.

Jesus starts to answer that question in verses 8–19:

⁸ And he said, “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. 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.”

¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. ¹² 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. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives.

³ Robert H. Stein, *Jesus, the Temple, and the Coming Son of Man: A Commentary on Mark 13* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 55.

First, Jesus tells his disciples that the time leading up to the temple of the destruction would be one full of people trying to deceive them, claiming that they are the Messiah. We know that there were several people in the first century who claimed to be the Messiah, so this prediction came true.⁴ Second, Jesus says there would be wars and rumors of wars. These things happen all the time, so the disciples shouldn't be worried about such things. There was a war between Rome and Parthia in 36 and a local war between Herod Antipas and the Nabatean king Aretas in 36 and 37.⁵ And the war between the Romans and the Jews started in 66. Perhaps that's what Jesus means when he says, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." But the "end," the destruction of the temple, was still to come.

Third, says that there would be earthquakes, famines, and pestilence. Again, these things happen all time. There was a large famine during the reign of the emperor Claudius, between roughly 45 and 48 (predicted by the prophet Agabus in Acts 11:28).⁶ There were several major earthquakes between 33 and 70, including earthquakes in Antioch (37), Phrygia (53), Asia Minor (61), and Jerusalem (67).

Fourth, Jesus says there will be signs in heaven, probably something to do with stars. Beyond what the New Testament tells us, much of what we know of first-century Palestine comes from Flavius Josephus, a Jew who was a leader of the rebellion in Galilee. He was captured by the Romans and would eventually write histories of this time. Josephus says that during the time when Judea was at war with the Roman Empire, comets were visible for a year and a star that looked like a sword appeared over Jerusalem.⁷

Fifth, Jesus tells the disciples that they would be handed over to civic and religious authorities. We know from the book of Acts that the disciples appeared before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council in Jerusalem, and were flogged (Acts 5:27–42). Stephen and James were martyred (Acts 7:58; 12:2). In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul describes getting flogged and beaten (vv. 23–25), probably by leaders of local synagogues. And Paul appeared before various governors

⁴ Stein, *Jesus, the Temple and the Coming Son of Man*, 77, mentions several: Theudas and Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37; Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.271; *Jewish Wars* 2.56); Simon of Perea (*Antiquities* 17.273–77; *Jewish Wars* 2.57–59) and Athronges of Judea (*Antiquities* 17.278–84; *Jewish Wars* 2.60–65). Right before A.D. 70, there were Menahem, the son of Judas the Galilean (*Jewish Wars* 2.433–48), John of Gischala (*Jewish Wars* 2.585–89; 4.121–27), and Simon bar-Giora (*Jewish Wars* 4.503–44; 4.556–83).

⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 903.

⁶ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 372–374.

⁷ Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.274–89.

and kings (Acts 18:12–17; 23:23–24:27; 24:27–26:32). All of this would happen before the temple was destroyed.

Normally, we would think that people being killed simply because they're Christians is a bad thing, but Jesus says that something good will come out of this. When the disciples stand before various religious and civil leaders, they will have an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus. We see that happen most clearly with the disciples in the books of Acts. The disciples were beaten in Jerusalem, but not before proclaiming Jesus (Acts 5:27–32). Stephen gave a long speech in Acts 7 before being killed. Paul used his appearances before various leaders to proclaim Jesus.

Here, Jesus tells the disciples, “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 or contradict.” Some people misuse this passage to say that we should never think about how to tell people the news of Christianity, or how to answer their questions about and objections to our faith. But think about the context: Jesus is telling his disciples what will happen to them between roughly the years 30 and 70. And, furthermore, he's telling them not to think about how to answer during times of persecution. He promises them to give them wisdom during those times of great pressure. In those situations, it might be very difficult to say anything, and God will give his people the words to say. But we shouldn't use this passage as an excuse not to prepare for evangelism. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the apostle Peter tells us, “always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). I think Christians gravitate towards this passage in Luke because they don't read passages in the Bible in context and because we're lazy. There's no excuse for not knowing the Bible, not knowing what the central message of the Bible is, and not knowing how to communicate to people who don't believe what we believe. Just as I don't fail to prepare a sermon and say, “Well, God will give me the words to say on Sunday morning,” we shouldn't fail to prepare to tell people the truth about God.

Jesus also says, in those verses we read earlier, that family will be divided. “You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death.” Earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus said that he didn't come to bring peace to all people, but to bring division. He said that family members would be divided because some would respond to him and others would not (Luke 12:51–53). That happened then, and it

happens today, especially in areas of the world where there is great persecution against Christians. In this past week's prayer list that we publish, there was a story from the Voice of the Martyrs about an Egyptian woman who converted from Islam to Christianity. Her own father and brother beat her and tried to kill her.

Jesus doesn't sugar-coat things here. He says that persecution will come to his followers. Some will even die. But, strangely, he says that not one of their hairs will perish. He can't mean that literally. He must mean that even if they should die for their faith, they will not ultimately be harmed. The worst that someone can do to them is kill them. They can kill the body, but not the soul (Luke 12:4–7). Those who endure in their faith, even through persecution, will be saved. Real faith allows a person to survive even death.

Now that Jesus has told his followers what will happen before Jerusalem and its temple is destroyed, he starts to talk about what will happen when the Roman Empire surrounds the city and destroys it. Let's read verses 20–24:

²⁰“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. ²¹ Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, ²² for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. ²³ Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. ²⁴ They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

There had always been conflict between the Jews and the Roman Empire, who took control of Palestine in 63 BC. Eventually, the conflict would come to a head in AD 66. In 70, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. This war left untold numbers dead. Josephus tells us that over 600,000 died from starvation in the city and that some people resorted to eating the dung of cattle (*Jewish Wars* 5.569–571). Even more disturbing, he reports that some women ate their own children (*Jewish Wars* 6.201–212). This is what would happen when a foreign army came in and besieged a city. They would cut off escape from the city by building siege works. Because this type of battle took a long time, the conquered city would run out of food and people would starve. Josephus tells us that 1.1 million Jews died and 97,000 were taken captive (*Jewish Wars* 6.420). Some people believe Josephus exaggerated numbers, but even if he did, the destruction in this war was great. According to D. A. Carson, “There have been greater numbers

of deaths—six million in the Nazi death camps, mostly Jews, and an estimated twenty million under Stalin—but never so high a percentage of a great city’s population so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the Fall of Jerusalem.”⁸

When Jesus says that Jerusalem “will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled,” he could mean that Romans—the Gentiles—would thoroughly crush the city. I think that’s the most natural way to read this passage. Others think that Jesus is pivoting to talk about his return. In Romans, the apostle Paul says that many Jewish people will come to faith in Jesus in the future, but only after “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Rom. 11:25). That’s a hard to understand passage, just as elements of this passage in Luke are hard to understand. But it seems that prior to Jesus’ return, a large number of ethnically, or biologically, Jewish people will come to faith in Jesus. Jesus could be referring to that reality here.

Most commentators believe that the next few verses are about Jesus’ return to Earth. If you don’t know the Christian story, Jesus will die the day after he says these things. He will be crucified, killed as an enemy of the Roman Empire, not because he did anything wrong, but because it was ultimately God’s plan to have the sin of his people punished. Because we have rebelled against God, in a far worse way than the Jewish people rebelled against the Roman Empire, we deserve death. But God has graciously given us a way to escape his wrath and have our sins punished. If we put our trust in Jesus, if we believe that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done, we are forgiven. But Jesus didn’t just die to pay the penalty for our sins. He rose from the grave on the third day in a body that can never be destroyed. And shortly thereafter, he ascended into heaven, where he is right now. But he will come someday in the future, to judge the living and the dead. And Jesus is probably talking about that in verses 25–28:

²⁵ “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

⁸ D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 501.

I think it's possible that Jesus is actually talking about the destruction of the temple as his vindication. He says that people will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud." That's a reference to something written in the Old Testament book Daniel, when the prophet Daniel sees a vision of a "Son of Man" coming to "the Ancient of Days" to receive dominion, glory, and a kingdom. We understand that this means Jesus, the Son of God, comes to God the Father to receive that kingdom, and he did this after ascending to heaven. Notice that in this passage in Luke, Jesus doesn't say where "the Son of Man" comes. Is he coming to Earth or to the Father? It could be that Jesus means something like this, "The destruction of the temple will be to the Jewish people as if their world is destroyed. To them, it will be as if their world is shattered. But don't be afraid. That judgment will be a vindication of me. It will prove that my words are true. When you see that happening, stand up straight, confident in the faith." That could be true because the Bible often uses language of "signs in sun and moon and stars" hyperbolically, to talk about the destruction of an empire, the end of one age and the beginning of another.

But Jesus could very well be talking about his return to Earth. He might mean something like this: "The temple will be destroyed, just as it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. These acts of judgment are pictures of a greater, final judgment when I return. Don't worry about signs that appear before my return, because you won't miss that. Everyone will see me come. And many will be afraid. But when I return, you have no reason to fear—if you endure in your faith." All of the judgments we read about in the Bible, whether it's the flood during Noah's day, the destruction of the city of Sodom, the judgment that came upon the Egyptians during the Passover and the Red Sea, and the destruction of Jerusalem's temples, foreshadow the great, final judgment. Those who have rejected Jesus should be afraid. They will be condemned. But those who have put their trust in Jesus have no reason to fear.

Then, Jesus returns to a discussion of what will happen before the fall of Jerusalem. Let's read verses 29–33:

²⁹ And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

When the disciples see that the things Jesus says will happen before the destruction of the temple come to pass, they should know that God's kingdom is advancing. And they are drawing one day closer to when the kingdom of God will be fully realized on Earth. Jesus says that his predictions regarding Jerusalem and the temple would happen within a generation, and they did. This is further proof that his word is true. And he boldly declares that even though this world as we know it will pass away and be replaced with a new creation, one where there is no evil, no decay, and no sin, his words won't pass away. Jesus speaks the words of God, because he is God. So much of the words we bother with are short-lived, but Jesus' words endure forever. Because what he says is true, we can take him at his word. His true predictions about what happen in the first century give us confidence that everything else he says is true, including his return when he comes in glory to gather his people, to condemn those who rebel against him, and to bring about the new creation.

Jesus then concludes his message with a warning for all of us. Let's read verses 34–38:

³⁴“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. ³⁵For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶But 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.”

³⁷And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. ³⁸And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.

Jesus tells us to be ready, not to get overpowered by distractions and drunkenness, not to fall into a spiritual stupor or be overwhelmed by “the cares of this life.” Instead, we should live life knowing that Jesus could return soon—or we could die at any time. Either way, we will have to stand before him in judgment. Therefore, we should stay awake. Jesus doesn't mean that literally. He slept like everyone else. But he means we should be spiritually prepared. We should put our faith in him. We should realize that this life will not last forever.

The apostle Paul says something similar in 1 Thessalonians 5. He says that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2). Most people will think they are secure, but they will be destroyed (1 Thess. 5:3). Then, Paul says to Christians,

⁶So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has not destined us for

wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Here's the main thing you should take away from today: What Jesus said would happen has happened. This isn't just recorded in the Bible. Josephus, who was not a Christian, wrote about it. One can also look at the Arch of Titus in Rome, which was built around the year 81 to celebrate Titus's victory over the Jews and which has depictions of that victory on it. We have good reason to believe that Jesus made his predictions in the year 30 or 33, and that the Gospel of Luke was written in the early 60s. (In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul quotes Luke 10:7. Paul wrote that letter in the mid-60s, so Luke must have been written earlier. Also, there are good reasons to believe that the book of Acts was written by the mid-60s. Since Acts is the sequel to Gospel of Luke, and since Luke probably conducted research for his Gospel while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea around 57–59, there's no reason why Luke couldn't have written his Gospel around the year 60.) So, Jesus' predictions came before the destruction of Jerusalem. His predictions were true. Why shouldn't we believe everything else he says? His words are the words of God, and they will endure long after the words of today's politicians, journalists, academics, actors, novelists, and historians will be forgotten.

Trust in Jesus. Be ready for his return. And tell other people how they can endure in the faith so that they can gain eternal life.

If you do trust in Jesus, know that he hasn't promised us an easy life. He didn't promise his disciples that things would be easy for them. We may or may not face great persecution, but all of us will suffer. Yet Jesus promises to be with us and he promises that he will ultimately deliver us from evil.