

## **Luke 21 The Olivet Discourse**

At some point in my life, I'd really like to see the Holy Land. I think visiting the biblical places would give me a deeper understanding and appreciation for the Bible and the places it mentions.

In Jerusalem, one of the main places to see is the Wailing Wall. This wall is just a small section of a large retaining wall, often called the Western Wall, that supports the temple mount, the place where the temple used to be. In the spot where the temple used to be is a Muslim shrine—the Dome of the Rock. The Jewish temple was destroyed in AD 70, and it was never rebuilt. The Muslims built a mosque on the temple mount in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Going back in time, the temple in Jerusalem had been originally built by Solomon in about 900 BC. The Babylonians destroyed that temple about 300 years later. About 70 years after that, a very modest temple was rebuilt in the same spot under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Several centuries later, Herod the Great remodeled and expanded the second temple. When Jesus was in Jerusalem, the temple was a very beautiful and impressive structure.

In vs. 5, we find that Jesus' disciples pointed out the grandeur of the temple, particularly noting its impressive stones and "gifts."

In response (vs. 6), Jesus asserted that not one stone would be left standing on top of another; all would be thrown down. The entire city would be destroyed. I'm told that if you go to the temple mount today, you can still see the stones lying at the base of the Western wall, exactly where the Romans threw them when they destroyed the city nearly 2000 years ago.

Jesus' statement led the disciples to ask (vs. 7), "When shall these things be? And what sign will there be when these things shall come to pass?"

Jesus then launches into a message often titled The Olivet Discourse. It's called the Olivet Discourse because other Gospel writers tell us that the disciples asked these questions a bit later, as they were on the Mount of Olives looking down into the temple area.

The Olivet Discourse is all about the future, both the near future and the distant future. Some of the things that Jesus mentions would happen during the lives of the disciples, but some of these prophecies will not happen until Jesus returns. Some of these things have happened already, but some of them are still future to us.

The purpose of the Olivet Discourse is not merely to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to give practical, ethical teaching for the present time. In this discourse, Jesus combines *eschatology* (information about end time events) with *exhortation*. He is preparing his disciples—and that would include us—to live and to witness in a hostile world.

The meaning of the passage is closely tied in with the two major predictions in it: the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the Tribulation at the end of the age. Probably the best way to understand the discourse is to realize that Jesus shifts back and forth between two viewpoints—near future and remote future. Some of the events seem to describe the destruction of the city in AD 70 (i.e., near future), while others describe end time events (i.e., remote future). The former event foreshadows the later event.

Besides warning us about future events associated with his Second Coming, the Olivet Discourse is a strong encouragement to persevere in the face of opposition and hostility. Christians must endure many difficulties on their earthly journey. But eventually, Jesus will return and establish his kingdom on earth. So as we look forward to that event, we must patiently endure the troubles of this life. We must watch and pray as we await Jesus' return.

Before we get into the passage itself, we should recognize that over the history of the church, people have interpreted the eschatology (biblical predictions concerning the last days) in different ways. The Olivet Discourse, which is also found in Matt 24 and Mark 13, is notoriously difficult to interpret.

Regarding interpretation of eschatology, I am aware of four different approaches:

**Historicist:** the events of the Discourse cover the whole of church history. The Discourse is a kind of pre-written account of church history. I.e., these kinds of things will happen during the history of the church. Jesus is not referring to any particular event or set of events; he's describing the kind of things that will happen before his second coming.

**Spiritualist:** the events are symbolic and allegorical, standing for spiritual conflicts the church will endure. The Discourse relates a great drama depicting spiritual realities, not actual events. On this view, we don't take the words literally; it's more like a parable.

**Fulfilled/Preterist** (comes from two Latin words *praeter*, “beyond,” and *ire*, “to go.”): all events described in the Olivet Discourse happened during the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Even Jesus’ 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming happened at that time. This viewpoint denies the future second coming of Christ and the future bodily resurrection of believers and unbelievers.<sup>1</sup>

**Futurist/Dispensationalist**: although some of the events obviously do refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, some of the events described will take place in the future. Dispensationalists are futurists. We see much of this material as future to us, primarily happening during the Tribulation period.

My approach is Dispensational. That is, I try to take the words at face value. The things that Jesus predicts will happen actually and literally. Thus, some of these things happened just a few decades after Jesus predicted them, and some of them have not happened yet, most significantly, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ.

So we should recognize that there is quite a bit of variety regarding how people have interpreted the Olivet Discourse, but I believe the futurist approach is best.

Just before the Olivet Discourse, we have the passage about the Widow’s Mite (21:1-4). So let’s look at that briefly.

.1 Jesus saw rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. The treasury consisted of thirteen funnel-shaped receptacles stationed in various locations in the court of the women in the temple complex. People came to the treasury to pay their tithes or to give freewill offerings. They didn’t pass the plate like we do.

.1a-2 Jesus observed how wealthy people donated much and poor people gave little. He noticed that a poor widow threw in “two mites.” A mite was the smallest denomination of coin. Two mites make a “farthing” (KJV Mk 12:42), that is, a Roman quadrans, equal to about 1/64 of a denarius. In our money, the value of two mites would be about \$1.50. That is a small amount, but for this woman, it was all she had.

.3 Jesus told his disciples that this woman contributed more than the others, because the others had given a small portion of their wealth, but she had given a larger portion—“all her living”—of out of her penury (i.e., poverty, destitution). She didn’t have much, and she gave all she had.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, “A Critique of the Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* October–December 2004.

Question: Is Jesus *commending* the poor widow for her sacrificial generosity, or is he *condemning* the corrupt religious system that required her to give her last two mites? Most people see this as Jesus commending the woman's sacrificial giving, but we also see evidence in the context of a corrupt religious system that was "devouring widows' houses" (Lk 20:47). Jesus may be both commending the woman for her generous giving as well as condemning the corrupt Jewish system that took everything she had.

The brief story about the widow's mite shows us that God appreciates sacrificial giving. He knows how much we give and he knows how much of a sacrifice it is when we give. God knows when we are giving him the leftovers or if our giving is a true sacrifice, if we are giving off the top or off the bottom of our income.

The sacrificial giving of this poor widow woman is a rebuke to those of us who have much and give little. It's a rebuke to those of us who have much and don't give sacrificially. It's also a comfort to know that God knows when we give sacrificially.

And we should learn that giving like this widow did is a matter of supreme trust. To give sacrificially as an expression of worship shows your trust in God to provide for you. Normally, we don't put our last two cents in the offering plate. Most of us give out of our abundance. We may not be rich, but we are not desperately poor, either. When we give to the Lord instead of spending it on ourselves, we are expressing our trust in God that he will provide for us. When we give sacrificially, we are exercising our faith. That is a very commendable thing.

With all of that in mind, let's now consider what Jesus taught regarding what would happen immediately before his Second Coming. The overall point in the Olivet Discourse is that disciples of Christ should prepare for Jesus' return by living righteously.

BTW, this is the final message from Jesus in the book of Luke. This concludes his teaching ministry; there is no more teaching after this in Luke.

#### I. Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple .5-7

- A. Herod the Great had begun rebuilding/remodeling the temple and the surrounding area in about 19 BC. The second temple, built many centuries before, had fallen into disrepair. Herod's remodeling project was not completely finished until AD 64—the entire job took over 80 years.

- B. Herod's temple was indisputably one of the most majestic complexes of impressive buildings to be found in the ancient world. Huge stones, white marble, and gold adorned the temple, while beautiful courtyards and stairways added to the overall magnificence of the place. That explains why the disciples commented on the beauty and majesty of the buildings.

According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, some of the stones measured over 35 feet long, 12 feet high, and 18 feet wide.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Western Wall contains one of the largest building stones in the whole world—it weighs between 250-300 tons.

Can you imagine maneuvering such huge stones before the advent of power equipment? Even today, we don't really know how they moved stones of that size.

- C. The temple was an architectural wonder and its size and location dominated Jerusalem. To the Jews, nothing was as magnificent as their temple.

**Quotes:** Its sanctuary and surrounding structure were huge, solid, and glistening, a symbol of Jewish religion and Herodian splendor.<sup>3</sup>

The rabbis said, "He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life."<sup>4</sup>

So the disciples were rather proud of this magnificent structure.

- D. .6 But it would all come tumbling down. Jesus said that "*not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down.*"
- E. This is a prophecy; Jesus told his disciples what was going to happen in the near future. All these events that he's about to explain are part of God's sovereign plan for Jerusalem, Israel, and the whole world. God knows what's going to happen because he has planned for them to happen. This prophecy shows that God is sovereign; he knows and controls future events.

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<sup>2</sup> Steven J. Cole, "Lesson 96: Staying Sane When the Whole World Goes Crazy (Luke 21:5–24)," in *Luke*, Steven J. Cole Commentary Series (Dallas: Galaxie Software, 2017), Lk 21:5–24.

<sup>3</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 1020.

<sup>4</sup> Steven J. Cole, "Lesson 96: Staying Sane When the Whole World Goes Crazy (Luke 21:5–24)," in *Luke*, Steven J. Cole Commentary Series (Dallas: Galaxie Software, 2017), Lk 21:5–24.

Notice vs. 9b—“these things must first come to pass.” This is what God’s sovereign plan requires. This is the blueprint; this is the design, and it God guarantees that his plan will be fulfilled. God has decreed for these things to happen, and they will, by necessity, happen.

Notice vs. 22—*all things written may be fulfilled*—could be translated literally *in order to be fulfilled all things written*. There is no question here whether these things would be fulfilled. The days of vengeance will come, and they would fulfill all those things written. Again, it shows the sovereignty of God in bringing all of this to pass.

Isaiah 46:9–11 *Remember the former things of old: For I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times the things that are not yet done, Saying, My counsel shall stand, And I will do all my pleasure: ... Yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it.*

None of this will happen randomly, by accident, or just as the outcome of blind forces. God has ordained that all of these things come to pass.

**App:** We can have confidence that all of the things Jesus tells us here will happen. The culmination of this plan is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom. And before the kingdom arrives, believers will experience the kinds of things Jesus warns about here—persecution, wars, natural disasters, betrayal, and even death. We must endure such difficulties; we must persevere in faith and in good works until the Lord returns.

We believe things will get worse and worse before the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ. And we are beginning to see that things could get bad for us here in the US.

- F. .6 Was this prophecy about the stones being thrown down fulfilled? Yes, in AD 70, when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the Roman general Titus.
1. Jesus’ prophecy is very specific: “Not one stone here will be left on another.” The Roman army utterly destroyed all the buildings on the temple platform, including the temple itself to which the prophecy refers.

The interior of the temple was paneled with wood and covered with gold. The Romans set fire to the temple and all the major buildings in Jerusalem. I've read that the gold of the temple melted and ran down between the stones of the building. That's one reason the temple was completely dismantled—to recover the gold, they removed every single stone.

2. So completely was the temple destroyed that very few artifacts of it have been found. Even the exact location where the temple stood on the temple mount is uncertain.
3. Within forty years after Jesus spoke these words, the temple would be destroyed, about a million Jews killed, and Jerusalem left a smoldering ruin. Only the foundation stones of the temple mount remained (the Wailing Wall is part of that remaining structure). Just as Jesus said, not one stone of the temple would remain upon another; it would all be thrown down.
4. All of that happened within the lifetime of many of the disciples. They lived to see the temple finished and destroyed, every stone of which was thrown down. And you can still see some of those stones at the base of the Western Wall.

**App:** That tells us that when Jesus says something will happen, it will definitely happen. We expect prophecy to be fulfilled literally. That's one of the distinctives of the futurist approach to prophecy—we don't allegorize it or spiritualize it away.

.7 You might wonder why this teaching is called the Olivet Discourse. According to the other Gospels, the disciples asked these questions some time later, when the group was standing on the Mount of Olives (hence the name *Olivet* Discourse).

The Mount of Olives is a hill across the Kidron Valley, directly east of Jerusalem. From that spot, you can look down on the entire city of Jerusalem. The temple location was especially easy to see from that spot.

.7 The disciples asked two questions: *when shall these things be? and what sign will there be when these things shall come to pass?*"

The disciples wanted a sign, some sure way by which they might know that the destruction of the temple was about to occur and that the end of the age was approaching. Jesus goes on to answer their questions in vss. 8ff.

But we will reserve our study of his answer for next time.

As we finish today, we should consider these two main truths: 1) God appreciates those who give sacrificially to the work of the ministry. 2) God is sovereign over world events. He is bringing his plan to fulfillment. Both of these truths call on us to trust in God and believe his promises.

We can be sure that the end of the age is indeed approaching. Every day brings us closer to the end of the age and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ. I expect conditions to get worse and worse as that great day approaches. Perhaps we are seeing right now some preliminary indications of how bad things can get. That's why we need to persevere by faith until our Lord returns.