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# STAYING SANE WHEN THE WHOLE WORLD GOES CRAZY

Luke 21:5-24

By

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Luke Lesson 96

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Luke 21:5-24

One of the biggest lies that Satan has promoted is that believing in Christ as Savior will bring a trouble-free life. The pitch goes, "Do you have problems? If you trust in Jesus, He will get you out of them." So the person trusts in Christ and his problems get worse, not better. The enemy comes to him and says, "See where trusting in Christ got you? You were better off before you became a Christian!"

The Bible *does* promise believers peace and joy, but it does *not* promise the absence of trials, freedom from persecution, or even protection from violent death. It promises peace and joy *in the midst* of such trials as we rely on the Lord and His promises.

Jesus and His disciples were going out of the temple when one of them commented about how impressive that building was. By all accounts, it was a magnificent structure. At that time, it had been under construction for about 50 years. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, some of the stones measured over 35 feet long, 12 feet high, and 18 feet wide. The current Wailing Wall is a part of the foundation left from that building. Its white marble walls rose about 200 feet above the Kidron Valley. The brilliance of the white walls and the gold trim in the morning sun was dazzling. The courtyard was about 400 by 500 yards square, so that thousands of worshippers could gather there. The rabbis said, "He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life" (cited by William Lane, *Mark* [Eerdmans], p. 451).

It was just an offhand comment by one of the disciples. The other disciples were nodding in agreement when Jesus shocked them by saying, "The days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down" (21:6). That was unthinkable! To their credit, the disciples did not doubt Jesus' words, but they did ask when these things would take place and what signs would precede this momentous event. Jesus responded with this lengthy discourse on future things, known as the Olivet

Discourse, although Luke does not mention that it took place on the Mount of Olives.

As with most prophetic sections of Scripture, there are some difficult interpretive problems (especially when you compare Luke 21 with Matthew 24 and Mark 13). Luke 21:5-24 focuses on the fall of Jerusalem as a preview of the more intense judgment that will happen at Christ's return (21:25-28). Thus there are multiple fulfillments of these prophecies, leading up to the final fulfillment at the second coming of Christ. Since Jesus emphasizes that many of these cataclysmic events will take place well before the end (21:9, 12), His words apply to believers in trying situations down through the centuries, as well as to those living at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem or just before His second coming.

Jesus is showing His followers how to hold on not only to their sanity, but also to their faith, when the world around them is chaotic and seemingly out of control.

When the whole world goes crazy, God's people can remain sane by knowing that all things are under God's righteous, sovereign control.

Jesus' purpose was not to satisfy curiosity about the end times. Rather, He was trying to instill assurance and faith in His disciples so that they would not fall away under intense persecution or world chaos. We will consider five points:

1. God knows in advance all things that will take place in this world.

We have seen numerous occasions where Jesus predicted His impending death (9:22, 44; 13:33; 18:31-33; 19:14-18). It did not surprise Him. As He explained in John 10:18, no one took His life from Him. Rather, He laid it down on His own initiative. Nothing surprises God.

Jesus here speaks of both big and little matters that God knows in advance. He knows about the total destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (21:6), about deceivers who will come (21:8), and about wars, earthquakes, plagues, famines, and signs in the heavens (21:9-11). He knows future persecutions that will take place before kings and governors (21:12) and those that will arise from family betrayals (21:16). He knows in advance the preserva-

tion of the hairs of the heads of all who follow Him (21:18). He knows the future of Israel and the course of the nations (21:24).

You may think that everyone who believes in Christ believes that God knows in advance all things that will take place. But that is not so. In 1994, Clark Pinnock and several other theologians published a book titled, *The Openness of God* [IVP]. Their view, called "free-will theism," a radical form of Arminianism, argues that "*the God of the Bible is with us in time and does not know the future in absolute detail*" (*Christianity Today* [1/9/95], p. 30, italics theirs).

*World Magazine* (7/17/99, p. 23) reported that Greg Boyd, a theology professor at Bethel College and Seminary in St. Paul, and the popular preaching pastor of one of the largest churches in the Baptist General Conference, holds a similar view. He has written three books and many articles proclaiming that "God can't foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they in turn create their decisions."

Sadly, a committee at Bethel concluded that Mr. Boyd's "view of God is a biblically oriented, contemporary form of Arminianism ... within the bounds of evangelical Christian orthodoxy and compatible with the theological commitments expected of faculty members at Bethel." Pastor John Piper led a movement to propose an amendment to the BCG's Affirmation of Faith stating, "We believe 'that He foreknows infallibly all that shall come to pass.'" But it failed by a vote of 270-251. Apparently, unity was more important for the delegates than theological truth.

I hope that you all agree that God knows in advance all things that will happen. But we must go a step further:

2. God has ordained in advance all things that will take place in this world.

Jesus says that all of the wars and disturbances *must* take place, indicating God's settled purpose (21:9). He says concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, that it will happen "in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled" (21:22). God sovereignly chose Israel from all other nations to be His people and to bring forth the Savior of the world. He predetermined by His plan that Israel would crucify her Savior (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). And He sovereignly determined to judge Israel for her sin of killing her Savior.

Through Isaiah (46:9-11) God declares to His disobedient people, "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; ... Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it." Paul affirms in Ephesians 1:11, God "predestined [us] according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will." (See also Prov. 16:4.)

You may not like the thought that God ordains evil as well as good. Many Christians blame everything bad that happens on the devil as if he did it apart from God, without considering where that line of thinking leads. If the devil is able to do anything outside of God's sovereign plan, then he is a force at least equal in strength, if not greater, than God. That would mean that there is a chance that the devil could thwart the sovereign plan of God and achieve his evil purpose over and against God's holy purpose, a most frightening prospect! The Bible clearly shows, in the story of Job, that the devil can only go as far as God permits. God is sovereign even over the devil and the evil things that the devil does.

Calvin observes that none of these predicted disasters (21:9-12) happen accidentally. They are all under God's sovereign hand. He then applies it to believers: "for nothing has a more powerful efficacy to bring us into subjection, than when we acknowledge that those things which appear to be confused are regulated by the good pleasure of God" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [A Harmony of the Gospels], 3:121-122).

You're probably thinking, "If God not only *knows* everything in advance, but also *ordains* everything, then He is responsible for evil." Not so!

3. Although God has ordained all things, He is not responsible for evil.

If God were responsible for evil, He would have no right to judge the wicked. They could claim, "I only did what You ordained!" But Jesus is teaching that Jerusalem would be destroyed and trampled under foot by the Gentiles, and Israel would be led captive into all the nations, as a judgment for not recognizing the

day of her visitation (21:24; 19:44). As Peter stated on the Day of Pentecost, although God predetermined the death of Jesus, those in Peter's audience who nailed Him to the cross were guilty for what they did (Acts 2:23).

Scripture affirms that "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). "The Lord is righteous in all His ways" (Ps. 145:17). He is good and He does good (Ps. 119:68). His eyes are too pure to look upon evil (Hab. 1:13). "Righteous are You, O Lord, and upright are Your judgments" (Ps. 119:137). "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty" (Rev. 4:8; see Isa. 6:3).

While our finite minds cannot reconcile God's absolute sovereignty over all things and His absolute holiness, Scripture plainly affirms both. We must submit to its testimony. As already stated,

4. God will righteously judge all who reject His Son.

Jesus refers to Jerusalem's destruction as "days of vengeance" (21:22). It will bring "great distress upon the land, and wrath to this people" (21:23). In A.D. 70, the Roman General Titus laid siege to the city and completely destroyed it. Although he may have exaggerated, Josephus says that 1.1 million Jews were slaughtered. The Roman soldiers tore apart the temple stone by stone in an attempt to get all the gold that melted and ran between the stones when they burned it. Jesus' words were literally fulfilled.

God's judgments come in two forms: temporal and eternal. His temporal judgments fall upon nations and individuals according to His inscrutable wisdom. God explained to Abraham that his descendants would be captive in a foreign land for 400 years because the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet complete (Gen. 15:16). When their sin was full to the brim, God commanded Joshua to kill the entire population. It was His temporal judgment on a morally corrupt people in response to hundreds of years of sin. In His mercy in allowing the Canaanites to exist that long, God let His chosen people remain in slavery four long centuries, before using them to execute His righteous judgment.

When God's temporal judgment falls on a people, everyone suffers. Jesus proclaims woe especially on the women who are with child or who are nursing babies in the day of Jerusalem's judgment (21:22). If God's temporal judgment falls on America,

we all will suffer. I cannot tell you why God judged Rwanda with the terrible bloodbath a few years ago, but allows America to continue in open rebellion. But when civil war broke out in that country, thousands of Christians died along with the wicked.

God's temporal judgments are only a warning of the far worse eternal judgment that is coming on the whole earth. John describes "a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them" (Rev. 20:11). All whose names are not found written in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire (20:15). Israel came under God's temporal judgment because she rejected her Savior. Even so, every person who rejects Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord will face the eternal wrath of God.

If the Jewish leaders had heard Jesus' prediction concerning the temple, they would have scoffed. They killed Him, beat and killed His crazy followers who proclaimed His resurrection, and life in Jerusalem went on as usual for over 35 years. Some of the Jewish leaders grew old and died before Jesus' predictions came true. If you had interviewed them on their deathbeds, they would have said, "Jesus was mistaken. The temple still stands in all its glory."

How wrong they were! Just because God's judgment is delayed does not mean that it will not happen. Many make the same fatal mistake concerning God's eternal judgment. Just because for almost 2,000 years Christ has not yet returned to judge the earth does not mean that He will not do so in the future. His warning is clear: He will return in power and great glory and then it will be too late for those who have rejected Him to repent.

How are we who believe in Christ to live in these difficult times until He comes?

5. God's people are responsible to persevere in obedience and witness in this evil world, even in the face of persecution and martyrdom.

Jesus spoke these prophetic words to encourage His disciples to persevere, if need be, unto death. He did not want hardship or persecution to surprise them. He gives three areas where we need to be on guard:

A. To persevere in obedience and witness, we must be on guard against spiritual deception.

“See to it that you be not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He,’ and, ‘The time is at hand’; do not go after them” (21:8). By saying that they will come in His name, Jesus does not necessarily mean that they will blatantly claim to be the Christ. Some, such as Reverend Moon, are so bold, but true Christians are not likely to be deceived by such obvious error. The more deceptive errors come from within the church, couched in biblical terms.

Nine years ago I was preaching on the parallel passage in Mark’s Gospel. At the time, I had an associate pastor who wanted to bring a “Christian” Twelve Step program into our church. At first I was open to the idea. The programs seemed to help people with serious problems. I knew of many large evangelical churches that used them. A burgeoning “Christian Recovery” conference had recently attracted hundreds to Biola University. They used a workbook called “The Twelve Steps for Christians,” that was laced with Bible verses. So I thought that it must be okay.

But as I read the workbook and as I studied Jesus’ warning in Mark, the Lord opened my eyes to the spiritual deception. The workbook said things like, “The Twelve Steps work miracles. Trust the Steps.” Jesus said that false Christs would arise working miracles in order, if possible, to lead the elect astray (Mark 13:22). The Christian Twelve Step programs also are openly self-focused. They talk about the need to love yourself because you have loved others too much. They say that Jesus is the “Higher Power,” but they also admit that the Steps work no matter who your Higher Power may be. It dawned on me that if the Steps work no matter whom you fit into the Higher Power slot, then the real power is not the Higher Power, but the Steps. It purports to be Christian, but it encourages people to trust the Steps, not God alone.

So I preached a sermon that became known as my “famous sermon,” where I warned about the danger of these programs and told the church that I could not endorse them. Even though I said it kindly and just urged people to consider what I was saying, many angry people began calling for my resignation. But the years since have only confirmed what I then began to see, that the evangelical

church is being deceived by psychology and self-help programs that have only a veneer of Christianity.

Another major area of deception is the Christian unity movement. We are being urged to drop all doctrinal differences and come together on the basis of our common love for Jesus. In the process, core truths are being sacrificed on the altar of "love." But if we give up the importance of truths like justification by faith alone for the sake of unity, we have denied true Christianity. And we are most unloving if we compromise such doctrines, because a person's eternal destiny depends on believing such truths. Satan's most effective deception always comes from within. Beware!

- B. To persevere in obedience and witness, we must be on guard against fear in the face of political and natural catastrophes.

Jesus says that wars, disturbances, earthquakes, plagues, famines, and terrors and great signs from heaven will all take place before the end comes. Many of these things happened prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, and they have continued throughout history. We now hear warnings of global warming and of the possibility of asteroids hitting the earth and causing major disaster. We have been spared war on our home soil, but terrorists with atomic and biological weapons could easily wreak havoc in our land.

Jesus commands us not to be terrified at such things. His command to the disciples to flee Jerusalem when they see the armies beginning to surround her shows that we may need to take precautions to protect our lives. There is nothing godly about courting danger and death. But if we take due precaution and yet face death, we can face it calmly with trust that the God of Jacob is our stronghold and that He will guide us until death (Ps. 46; 48:14).

- C. To persevere in obedience and witness, we must be on guard against compromising our testimony under persecution.

We American Christians have faced very little persecution, but we should steel ourselves for it, making up our minds in advance that we will be faithful witnesses even if it costs us our lives. Jesus explains that persecution will give us opportunity for testimony (21:13; the Greek word for testimony is "martyr"). He promises

that we don't need to worry about what to say, because He will give us the mouth to speak and the wisdom to confound our opponents. This is nothing less than a claim to deity on Jesus' part, since He could not possibly do this unless He was omnipresent.

But He warns us that even family and close friends will betray us and that we will be hated by all (*i.e.*, many unbelievers) on account of His name. J. C. Ryle observes, "The Christian of whom everybody speaks well, can hardly be a faithful man" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], Luke 11-24, p. 367). We need to make sure that the offense is the cross and not our abrasive personalities! But if we hold to Jesus Christ as the *only* way to God, to the utter sinfulness of the human heart, and to faith and not works as the only way of salvation, we will be branded as intolerant, narrow-minded, and unloving. Just recently the Southern Baptists were accused of "hate crimes" because they stated that people of other major religions need salvation. Persecution could easily be just around the corner! Be ready!

When Jesus says (21:18) that "not a hair of your head will perish," He is not promising immunity from death, which He just said will happen to some (21:16). He means that if we are faithful witnesses, even if they kill the body they cannot touch the soul. By endurance in bearing witness to the truth we prove ourselves to be true followers of Christ and gain our souls (21:19).

### Conclusion

So when the whole world goes crazy around us, we can remain calm and sane by knowing that all things are under God's righteous, sovereign control. Even if we die for our faith, we will live forever with Him.

During the second century, the aged bishop Polycarp was arrested and brought to the Roman arena to die in front of the cheering crowd. The proconsul pressed him hard to renounce Christ and thus spare his own life. Polycarp replied, "For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" The proconsul warned that he had wild beasts. "Call them," said Polycarp. "I can burn you with fire," the proconsul warned. Polycarp replied, "The fire you threaten burns for a time and is soon extinguished. There is a

fire you know nothing about—the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment, the fire reserved for the ungodly. But why do you hesitate? Do what you want.”

The proconsul shouted to the crowd that Polycarp had confessed that he is a Christian. The crowd shouted that he must be burned alive. They quickly collected the wood. Just before it was lit, Polycarp prayed, thanking God that he had been counted worthy of this day, to partake in Christ’s cup of suffering. The fire was lit and Polycarp stepped into the presence of his Lord.

I realize that God gives special grace at such times. But we all need to ask, “Do I have that kind of confidence in the righteous, sovereign God?” If I do, I can stand firm even when the whole world goes crazy, because my trust is in the faithful God.

#### Discussion Questions

1. Are we being contradictory to say that God ordains all things and yet He is not responsible for evil? Why/why not?
2. How can a Christian grow in discernment so as not to be taken in by spiritual deception?
3. Is it fair when God’s temporal judgment falls on everyone in a culture, not just on the wicked? Why/why not?
4. How can we prepare ourselves now to stand up under persecution if it comes to our land?

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