

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 21:5-19

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The apocalyptic discourse in Luke is Jesus' last words to his disciples prior to the passion. The character of this speech is very different than any other part of the Gospel of Luke. This is Jesus speaking in the Temple to a small group of his disciples whom he has gathered around him. These are quiet words that are highly intense. They are words of warning—hard words about what is ahead for the apostles, for the nation of Israel, and for the temple where they are standing. It is a very poignant speech because Luke's telling of this story in 80-85 A.D. would have been some 10 to 15 years after the destruction of the Temple, which happened in 70 A.D. Indeed, there are a series of allusions to that event in Jesus' prophecy.

When Jesus spoke these words about the Temple being surrounded and the enemies encamped around it, it is his prophecy about what will happen in the future. The assumption of the story is that the date of the speech is 32-35 A.D., some 35 years before the destruction of the Temple. Luke is telling this in the more or less immediate aftermath of the destruction of the Temple and of the enslavement of an entire generation of Palestinian Jews. Josephus' estimate is that over 1 million Jews were killed in the attacks and that some 600,000 were taken as slaves to Rome. Jesus is speaking hard words about a great tragedy which lies in the future for the nation. They are also words that are heard by Luke's listeners as something they know has already happened.

This first section is part of a much longer speech which I suggest you read aloud so that you sense where this part of the speech comes. This first part is about the Jewish war and what happened in the period between Jesus' death and resurrection and the time of Luke. "There will be wars and insurrections." There *was* a great insurrection, which initiated the Jewish war. There were arrests and persecutions of the apostles. They were handed over to synagogues and prisons. Acts has some of those stories: the execution of Steven, the assassination of James, the son of Zebedee, and the stories of Peter and Paul being brought before trials, synagogues, thrown into prison, and testifying before kings and governors.

All of those things are told in the later parts of Luke's story in Acts, specifically in the stories of Paul's trials. In these trials, Paul clearly had not prepared his defense ahead of time, but rather he speaks the words that are given to him in that moment and his opponents are not able to withstand or contradict him. At the end of all his trials, King Agrippa says Paul could have been released and the Roman governor agrees. But Paul was also betrayed by relatives and friends, fellow Jews. Clearly, Paul and the others were hated because of their belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

The impact of Jesus' speech is heightened by the fulfillment of his prophecies in the years of the war, the Temple, and the great tragedy for the Jewish people. Luke's listeners know

that these things have taken place. The promise is that Christ will set them free in the midst of these trials and tribulations. There are many echoes in this speech of prophecies from the Old Testament that are fulfilled in the events of subsequent times. Jesus is referring to times of destruction that are ahead. But for Luke's listeners, these are things that have already taken place to a significant degree. The prophecies about the judgment to come upon the world following the speech, however, are not yet fulfilled. The overall impact of this speech is to increase the credibility of Jesus' prophecies.

A primary motif here is that Jesus recommends that they will triumph by being nonviolent, by endurance, just as Jesus will triumph by his endurance of suffering and death. This may be the meaning of Jesus' saying, "Not one hair of your head will perish." In the sentences just preceding this saying, Jesus clearly states that "some of you will be killed." Endurance means seeing things through in faith and suffering for the word of God, suffering for Christ.

In the context of the ancient world, the most striking thing about this speech is that there are no words encouraging them to fight or to win glory by going into battle. That is the background against which all this was heard. In the context of the war and the aftermath of the war, Jesus' words make supreme sense as a way of dealing with the conflicts in warfare that happen in the world. Jesus describes this from a somewhat detached perspective and encourages the apostles and us to think about this in light of the coming kingdom of God and the vindication of the righteous and the possibility, indeed the reality, of the triumph of those who are non-violent.