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A Time to Look Up, Not Down

Luke 21:5-28

INI

I bring you grace mercy and everlasting peace from God the Judge of all and Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Lord, grant us Your Holy Spirit through Your Word. Amen.

Luke 21:5–28

5 Then, as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and donations, He said, 6 “These things which you see—the days will come in which not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down.”

7 So they asked Him, saying, “Teacher, but when will these things be? And what sign will there be when these things are about to take place?”

8 And He said: “Take heed that you not be deceived. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He,’ and, ‘The time has drawn near.’ Therefore do not go after them. 9 But when you hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately.”

10 Then He said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake. 13 But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. 14 Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; 15 for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. 18 But not a hair of your head shall be lost. 19 By your patience possess your souls.

20 “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. 22 For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. 23 But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. 24 And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

25 “And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on

the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; 26 men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near."

This is the Word of the LORD. Thanks be to God. Amen.

We've come to the crux of the question: are these signs of better things to come or of something worse? Some see this last week's election as signs of something better: a Republican-controlled Congress, a take no prisoners leader, plans to fix Washington, immigration, healthcare, the economy; some would say there are better times ahead. But others disagree. Others would say that these are signs of something worse: the degradation of our political system, intensified hatred, a time filled with name-calling, slander, and other things that the media seems to revel in, a divided leadership over a divided country; some would see it as a precursor of something worse. And so we come to the crux of the question: what do these signs mean?

We speak of this nation as our pride and glory; the integrity of our Constitution, our rights, our freedom ... these are the stones that we have laid, the sacrifices that we have made, the prices that we have paid. Let's make America great again. But the question remains: how long will these things last?

And when when Jesus noticed how they spoke of the greatness of the Temple and the beauty of it all, such great stones and such lavish offerings that made this project possible... and he said to them, "do you see these things? The days are coming in which not one stone shall be left upon another that will not be thrown down."

They are walking about the courtyard of that great Temple like tourists admiring the beauty of this structure; stones bigger than a man and heavier than 50! It was one of the greatest projects that King Herod had ever accomplished. This was the holy city, the place of God's stronghold and refuge, the place of help and hope. So the people recall the greatness of those stones and the greatness of the contributions that made it possible. But, Jesus says, not one of those stones or contributions will remain which will not be thrown down.

These are the days of vengeance. The days of which the LORD spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying, "The time of vengeance is in my heart." The time of God's wrath is coming upon those who have rejected his grace and who have rejected His Son. It brings Jesus to tears as he cries out, "If only! If only you had know the things which make for your peace! But you were not willing."

Which brings us to the crux of the question: when will these things be and

what will be the sign they are about to happen? Jesus addresses these questions in three specific areas of life: the religious signs, the political signs, and the natural signs.

He speaks of the religious signs that you might expect: many will come, saying: "I'm here representing the Lord and the end is near!" Prophets and pastors and church leaders will arise claiming they have the answer to it all. But the end is not yet.

He speaks of the political signs: nations will rise against nation; there will be wars and rumors of wars; the media will fill our airways with global news of turmoil in this country and that government. But the end is not yet.

He speaks of the natural signs: earthquakes, famine, and disease which strikes devastation upon the land. But the end is not yet.

And that is because the real question is not "when?" The question Jesus wants his disciples to think about is not when, but who? He brings it home; close to home so that these signs become more about our readiness to listen to the Word and faith to endure the turmoil than about a specific time. He takes these same three areas of life and makes it personal.

The religious signs we are to look for is not from some religious figure that will say "look here" or "look there," but rather the religious figure that will say, "look at them." Persecution is the real sign of the end. The apostles will become victims of hatred for Christ. They will be delivered to the synagogues and Roman authorities; betrayed by friends and family; and some will be martyred for what they believe and confess.

The political signs we are to look for is not World War III, but rather a time when the earthly power we think is our safety and security becomes the place of God's judgement. Jerusalem, that holy city, that place of refuge and promise will become a desolation when God gives it over to the Gentiles. In 70 A.D. the Romans will have had enough of the Jews resistance to their power. They will surround the city, starve it out, and then devastate it and its Temple. Not one stone will be left upon another.

The natural signs we are to look for are not merely natural at all. Jesus tells us to look behind it all and see what is really at work. We are not to look for the earthly powers to be shaken, but the powers of heaven. What really signals the end is near is the heavenly powers: signs in the sun, moon, and stars ... distress on earth ... terror by sea. Each of the three realms of heavenly power: in the sky, on land, and in the sea. Because what is really at work here is not natural but supernatural. These are the spiritual powers which are at work in order to terrify those who have no hope and bring low those who are filled with pride.

Which brings us to the crux of the question. How can we be ready? When will these things be? From our perspective, it seems these things have already come to pass. In fact, every generation can say they've experienced the same in one way or another. And that is just the crux of it. It is not about when, but about who.

And the answer is the crux. The word crux is shorthand for the word crucifix. In other words, the answer is the cross. The crux is the cross. That is where these signs find their fullest answer. It was on the cross when the final judgment came into our midst most clearly and most fully. All these things of which Jesus speaks have their meaning in him. And every sign which comes upon us is an experience of the cross.

On the cross, Jesus was betrayed by those closest to him, persecuted by His own people, and hated to the point of death.

On the cross, Jesus was surrounded by Gentiles, handed into the judgment of the crucifixion—the very death that the Romans reserved for the worst of criminals—and the city which was to be the place of refuge, became the place of God's judgement against all nations.

On the cross, Jesus experienced the powers of the heavens being shaken. The earth quaked, the sky was darkened, and the powers of the hell were brought against him.

There on the cross, Jesus faced the end, the final judgment of God against sin. That day, that distress, that terror of our guilt and condemnation had come to God's own Son where the crux of the question was answered. And that crux was the cross. And that cross was the time of God's vengeance. But to understand it, we cannot simply look down. To understand this sign and to understand all signs that come upon the world, we must look up.

We must look up to see what it all means. And there we see him, as spoken by the prophet Daniel, "coming in a cloud with great power and glory." The cloud of glory carries Jesus—risen from death, living, victorious, and eternally reigning over all. This is the answer we've been looking for. He rises from the dead, ascends to the right hand of God and will come again in like manner. And that means stop looking down, and start looking up—your redemption is near.

Every sign, every indication that the end is near, every distress that comes upon us is a reminder that we should look up.

It means that when false prophets come to point you to this sign or that or when you face your own persecution at the hands or words of those who do not believe—look up.

When nation rises against nation, or when the nation that you look to for greatness and protection and help is torn down—look up.

When the earth quakes, the sea roars, the powers of heaven are shaken and sickness and distress come into your life—look up.

Don't be consumed by what is down here—by news reports, conspiracy theories, religious deceptions. See what's behind it all. The powers of the heavens are being shaken and for us, that is a time to look up and see Christ. Behind it all is the risen Lord Jesus, reigning over it all. Behind it all is God the Father taking all things out of our hands and giving them over into the hands of His Son. Behind it all is the power of God's Spirit overcoming every foe by the proclamation of the Gospel. And that means, it is a time to look up. That means, your redemption, your freedom, your own resurrection is near at hand. Now is the time of redemption; now is the time in which God has come to save you! For God says through Isaiah, not just that "the day of vengeance is in My heart," but adds, "the year of my redeemed has come!" (Is. 63:4)

The crux of the question is where when gives way to who—and that who is you. It is in this crux of the cross that you find there is only one place to turn: up. Then what Malachi writes is true for you—that this is not a day of distress and terror, but of joy and hope: "for the Sun of righteousness will rise with healing in His wings and those who suffer will be healed and you will rejoice in the joy of everlasting life"—through Jesus Christ our risen and reigning Lord. Amen.