

WATCH OUT that you're not Deceived!

Luke 21:5-36

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based on a message by Pastor William Cwirla

The famed physicist Stephen Hawking is in the news again, with a prophecy, a prediction. He's warning that humans may have only 1000 years left on earth, and so, we've got that much time to find a new place to live. Well, he's not the first, and he won't be the last, to predict the end of our world.

In 177 AD Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, predicted that the world would end in 1000 AD. Hippolytus, a student of his, predicted the world's end earlier, in 500 AD, based on the size of Noah's Ark. In 200 AD Tertullian of Carthage predicted that Emperor Nero would come back from the dead and appear as the Antichrist, re-conquer Rome and rage against the Christians for 3½ years. Christ would then appear with the lost 12 tribes of Israel as His army, conquer the Antichrist, convert all nations and take possession of the Holy city of Jerusalem.

In 1688 Mathematician John Napier calculated the end of the world would be this year based on calculations from the Book of Revelation. In 1998 authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins stated the Y2K bug would trigger global economic chaos, which the Antichrist would use to rise to power. Remember 2012 and the Mayan calendar coming to an end? Last year it was all about the 4 blood moons, based on supposed prophecies from the Bible, pointing to the second coming of Jesus.

And there's a whole list of others, *sure* of when it's all going to end. Except, none of them ever get it right. And none of them ever will. One thing about many of them, they're very convincing! Filled with drama of speech, image, and music. And above all, speculation. They're very good at twisting things, personal visions and voices from God. But very often, there's very little focus on Jesus as Savior of sinners. All the focus is on other events and details. And that's where your focus ends up as well. Any you're led astray and don't even know it. Nothing quite captivates our interest like the end times.

Jesus was walking around the temple courts during "Holy Week," the week leading up to His death and resurrection. The temple was undergoing an extensive renovation under King Herod. The temple that had been built after the return from Babylonian exile over four hundred years before Christ was built on a bit of a shoestring budget. And so Herod was throwing a bunch of money at the temple to bring it up to Solomon's specs, hoping the people would love him for it.

As Jesus and His disciples are walking around the temple courts, they can see the scaffolding and hear the stone cutters hard at work. People are admiring the craftsmanship and the materials – the noble stones and offerings. *Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. And Jesus says out loud, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."*

The temple was the national and religious center of Israel, its history, its dreams, hopes, expectations. When Messiah comes he will restore the temple they thought. And Jesus says the days of this temple are numbered. *"The time will come when not one stone will be left on another!"* Imagine standing in the middle of the Capital mall in Washington D.C. looking toward the Capital Building, the Lincoln and Washington monuments, and the White House, and then being told that all these things would be destroyed. It would only be natural to conclude what? That the destruction must be equated with then end of the American republic!" (Kim Riddlebarger)

Jesus made two predictions in His earthly ministry. Both came to pass. Jesus died and rose, just as He said. And the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed by the Roman army in the Jewish wars of AD 66 to 70.

"When?" That's the question the disciples ask Jesus. That's the question that's been asked, and far too often answered, ever since. But notice, that's *not* the question Jesus ever answers. He doesn't tell us *when* the end will come. Instead, what does He say? *"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. 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."*

This is what will happen. Jesus refers to three time periods. The near future. A time pertaining to the destruction of the temple in just forty years. The days from now until He returns. Days of persecution, as we witness them in the book of Acts and onward until the Final Day when Jesus returns. And the last period, the end of the end and the Last Day.

Instead of answering the “when” question, Jesus lays out how things are going to go. Why? So we’re not surprised when they happen and be led astray by what’s going on around us.

Jesus lays out how things are going to go in the **religious** realm - false Christ’s, false religions, false gospels which are not good news at all. False Christs and false saviors. Substitutes to the real Jesus, the real Savior. Some, even performing what look like miracles to get you to believe them. But notice what they don’t point to. Jesus is not the center of attention, but dreams and visions and details of events and dates and predictions. And you’re left thinking about what? Everything else, other than a Savior - born for you, living for you, dying for you, rising for you, coming for you, following Him day in and day out, and rejoicing in the good news. Looking forward to being with Him. Instead, you’re deceived and lead astray from Him.

Jesus lays out how things are going to go in the **political** realm - wars, rumors of war, nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom. It’s in the news every day. Dictators, strong men, communism, militant religion. Beheadings. Terrorism. Refugees. Just as peace is established in one part of the world, war breaks out in another.

Jesus lays out how things are going to go in the **natural** realm - earthquakes in various places, tsunamis, floods, famines, natural disasters. As Paul says in Romans 8, the entire creation groans under the burden of our sin, waiting expectantly for our resurrection. And more will come. Expect them.

Jesus lays out how things are going to go in the **family** realm - they will be betrayed, even by those closest to them. Brother would betray believing brother. Children would betray believing parents, even putting them to death.

What is Jesus doing? Trying to scare His disciples to death or cause them to doubt or despair? No. Jesus lays out how things are going to go, so we’re not surprised when they happen, and be led astray by what’s going on around us – in the religious realm, in the political real, in the natural realm, in the family realm. All the wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, famines, persecutions, Jesus calls what? The *birth pangs*, the labor contractions, of the *new creation*, the age to come. Just as giving birth is painful and often difficult, so is the coming of the new creation.

His disciples would be considered heretics by the religious world. They would be tried in the religious courts. Banished from their own houses of worship, the synagogues they grew up in. The government would be used against them. They’d be hauled before kings and princes to testify.

Yet Jesus assures them, they would be *equipped* for the challenge. *“Don’t worry what you’re going to say. Just speak what you are given by the Spirit.”* Think of the apostle Paul in the book of Acts. Hauled before the religious high court. Tried before governors and kings. And no matter where he goes, no matter what the circumstances, what does he do? He continues witnessing to Jesus, to the good news, all the way to his own martyr’s death. Nothing can stop him. Nothing can stop the Gospel.

“When you see the abomination that causes desolation standing in the holy place,” (Matthew 24) *you will know that the time is near.* This desecration of the temple happened earlier, in 168 BC under Antiochus Epiphanes, when he set up a statue of Olympius and sacrificed a pig on the altar of burnt offering in the Jerusalem temple. The Jews of Jesus’ day would have recalled that incident vividly, and would think of it again when the Roman armies ran over Jerusalem in 70 AD, desecrating and destroying the temple.

Jesus was speaking to the people of His own day when He told those in Judea to flee to the mountains without turning back. In other words, “Don’t do what people often did when under the threat of attack – lock themselves within the safety of the city walls for protection.” There would be no safety within the walls of Jerusalem when the Roman army came. All you could do was flee, like Lot did when Sodom was about to be destroyed.

These things don’t pertain to us today. When the Last Day comes, it won’t come in Judea, but all over. All at once. And the mountains will offer no safety. On that Day there will be nowhere to run. No time to gather up our stuff and pack our bags. Every protection we built for ourselves will fail. On that day, there will be only One place of safety - the death and resurrection of Jesus. That’s the only thing that will save us.

Herod’s temple was an impressive sight. One of the wonders of the ancient world. Forty years later, it actually happened, just as Jesus said. The Roman army invaded Jerusalem and completely destroyed the temple. The only part that survived was a small portion of the temple mount’s north wall, known today as the “wailing wall.” Not one stone left standing on another. A testimony of what’s yet to come.

Jesus said, *"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again."* The Jerusalem temple never rose, and it never will. But the temple of Jesus' body rose from the dead. He is the true temple. His Body and Blood are the true sacrifice for sin. The true way back to God.

For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Mt 24:27) No one's going to miss it!!! "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, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Notice that. What's drawing near? Your redemption, not your destruction. Jesus wants you to know that as you live in these last days, you're to be optimistic. Filled with optimism. Jesus gives a picture. The fig tree in spring, and all the trees. The branches fat with sap. The buds ready to burst. The leaves ready to break out because summer is already near. So it is with the kingdom of God. The world (in all its moral decay) may be sitting in the dead of its winter. The whole planet (its people and plants and animals and environment), all of creation (the sun, moon, stars, planets and galaxies) may be groaning as in labor pains. But the sign Jesus gives to His disciples is not a sign of death, but of life. The budding fig tree. Summer is near, even in the dead of winter.

If you've a fan of "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" you get the picture. The snow is melting. The buds are opening. The flowers are appearing. Winter is coming to an end. Spring and summer are on their way. Aslan is on the move! Jesus is coming back.

The next big prediction? "Something BIG's going to happen very soon!" The so-called "end time prophets of God" are very good at manipulation, twisting things, deception, sharing personal visions and voices from God. But very often, there is little focus on Jesus as Savior for sinners. All the focus is on other events and details and that's where your focus ends up.

"When?" That's the question so many like to speculate about. Jesus doesn't tell us when the end will come. It's not for us to know the times or the seasons. Speculation will only lead us astray. These last days we live in are not days for speculation, panic, anxiety, or uncertainty. They're days for alertness, readiness, watchfulness, expectation, longing, hopefulness, patient endurance. There'll be hardship, pain, difficulty. But these are only the *birth pangs* of a new creation that has already come in Christ.

Don't be captivated by the end. Be captivated by Jesus and what He's done for you and when He comes again, being within Him for all eternity. Christ is coming - even as He comes now in His Word, His written Word. Heaven and earth will pass away. His words will never pass away. His words of forgiveness, life, and salvation spoken to you will never pass away. Nor will you, dear believer. Not a hair of your head will perish. Stand on God's promises to you. Stand on His Promise, namely Jesus Christ, instead of some false speculation concerning what's in the daily news. As the hymn writer puts it, *"Standing on the promises I cannot fall. Listening every moment to the Spirit's call. Resting in my Savior as my all in all. Standing on the promises of God!"*