

# Hardship Before Rescue

## Luke 21:5-36

**Series:** The Climax of the Cross (Luke, Spring 2020)

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**Worship:** With Power and Great Glory

**Key Sentence:** In the midst of hardship, believers prepare for rescue!

**Outline:**

I. The hardships of believers in every age. (Luke 21:5-19)

II. The hardships of Israel (Luke 21:20-24)

III. The hardships of the last days (Luke 21:25-33)

IV. The hardships of perseverance (Luke 21:33-36)

**Luke 21:5-38** And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, <sup>6</sup>“As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” <sup>7</sup>And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” <sup>8</sup>And he said, “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. <sup>9</sup>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.” <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. <sup>11</sup>There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. <sup>12</sup>But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. <sup>13</sup>This will be your opportunity to bear witness. <sup>14</sup>Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, <sup>15</sup>for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup>You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. <sup>17</sup>You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. <sup>18</sup>But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup>By your endurance you will gain your lives.

<sup>20</sup>“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. <sup>21</sup>Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, <sup>22</sup>for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. <sup>23</sup>Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. <sup>24</sup>They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem

will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

<sup>25</sup>“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, <sup>26</sup>people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup>And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” <sup>29</sup>And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. <sup>30</sup>As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup>Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. <sup>33</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>34</sup>“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. <sup>35</sup>For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” <sup>37</sup>And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. <sup>38</sup>And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.

## Hardship Before Rescue

### Luke 21:5-36

Did you ever hear the word trope? A trope is like a meme for drama. It's something that playwrights and authors use, often unconsciously, as a standard way to move a story forward. The dictionary definition is "a common or overused theme or device." One of the most famous tropes in American movies and TV is the cavalry coming over the hill. Someone is in deep trouble: cowboys or settlers or the damsel in distress. Things keep getting worse and worse until at the last moment the trumpet sounds and over the hill rides the calvary.

One of the grandest uses of the trope in recent history is in the Lord of the Rings. Gondor is besieged. The armies of Sauron have covered the Pelennor Fields and swarmed the very gates of the city. All is about to be lost. The Nazgul stands in the gates and only Gandalf is left to stand against him. But suddenly the wind shifts, the sky begins to lighten. And then trumpets. The army of Rohan, the cavalry of Rohan has arrived. And with the call of many trumpets they descend on the overwhelming horde of the enemy, crying "Death!"

Video, sound, Luk21v05 ROTK Rohan

Someday our king will come in power and great glory, crying "Enough" and rescuing us from the hardship, danger and death of this fallen world. But this is not that day, at least not so far, and until he comes he calls us to be faithful. He calls us to be faithful, recognizing the hardships of this age and the final desperate moment before his return. In Luke 20 Jesus describes some of the hardships of this time of waiting and some of the specific hardships that will come on Jerusalem and before the end of the age. He's teaching us that in the midst of hardships we should be prepared for his glorious rescue.

Stated simply God's plan for this age goes like this: "Jesus is coming again. He will return for his people. He will return to establish his kingdom." We have something to look forward to, a future and a hope, we have a purpose and a reason for perseverance. That's the substance of our text this morning. In Luke chapter 21 we're moving toward the crucifixion, and Jesus is teaching daily in the temple courts. Luke 21:5-7 *And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, <sup>6</sup>"As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."* <sup>7</sup>*And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?"*

There is no question the temple as rebuilt by Herod, was marvelous. Herod pioneered several beautiful building techniques. He used huge stones, intricately carved. In addition, he covered much of the temple gold. It was said that the light from the temple at dawn was as blinding as the midday sun. So, it's reasonable for the disciples to be impressed and it's shocking when Jesus says: "Not one stone will be left on another." Notice the disciples are fully convinced Jesus can make this prophecy. They don't say: "Are you sure?" or "You've got to be kidding?" They say: "When will this happen?" "How will we know?"

This gives Jesus the opportunity to teach them about the hardships and the hope. The first thing he does is warn them that this is not going to happen immediately. They, and we, will have to endure considerable hardship in the normal course of events. Verses 8-19: *And he said, "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. <sup>9</sup>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." <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. <sup>11</sup>There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. <sup>12</sup>But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. <sup>13</sup>This will be your opportunity to bear witness. <sup>14</sup>Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, <sup>15</sup>for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup>You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. <sup>17</sup>You will be hated by all for my name's sake. <sup>18</sup>But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup>By your endurance you will gain your lives.*

Jesus is talking about a time before the end, a time when there are hardships for both believers and non-believers, without necessarily indicating the end is near. In other words, a time like today. What are the hardships? The first is that people claiming to be Jesus will say the time is near. That happened frequently in the early days of the church, and continues to happen today. The most successful recent claimant was Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church, who died in 2012. But there are several others alive today who make the same claim.

Jesus says: don't follow them. He implies that his return will be so dramatic that there will be no mistaking it. He also says that wars and rumors of war will continue, as they did in the Roman empire, and as they do today. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There has in fact been no generation since Christ in which there was worldwide peace.

Next, he says there will be great earthquakes, famines, and pestilences. Rome 262 A.D., plague, 5000 die a day. Antioch, 526 A.D., earthquake, 250,000 killed. Europe, 1340 A.D., the bubonic plague decimates the population. India, in the 1870's, 5 million killed. Sub-Saharan Africa, famine in the 1970's kills millions. 2004, Indonesia, the Boxing Day tsunami kills 225,000. In every age, every generation there has been tremendous hardship from what we called natural causes. These are in God's hand, and often we don't understand why he allows them, but they are not, in themselves, signs of the end. These hardships come to all men, to believers as well as to non-believers.

But for believers there is a special hardship to life in a fallen world: persecution. Jesus says that before the rest of these things happen, you will be persecuted. This prophecy was true. We see persecution throughout the book of Acts. He says "they will deliver you to synagogues and prisons," which happened to Peter and John in Acts chapter 4, to Peter in Acts chapter 12. He says: "You will be brought before kings and governors on account of my name," which happened to Paul in Acts 22-26. Jesus knew his followers would face the same kind of persecution he did. He also knew they'd need God's help to stand. He promises that through persecution they will become witnesses to many and will be given the words to defend themselves. Paul testifies in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth."

But even the help of the Spirit does not mean persecution will cease "You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me." We see this in Islamic countries where new believers are often betrayed by their families, and put to death simply for confessing the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. More believers are being martyred now than ever before in the history of the church.

Yet Jesus offers this comfort: "not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives." What does he mean? How can they put you to death, yet not a hair of your head perish? The answer is that death leads to eternal life. They can kill the body, but they cannot touch the soul. When the 21 Coptic Christians were martyred by Isis in 2015, Brian Mattson penned a stirring tribute to them and then listed their names as the great song "Even Though," by More Than Rubies played. "But the life we gain through Christ cannot be taken. Even though we lose it all, we'll not be lost. We'll not be lost. Behold, this love of God has ransomed us. He's ransomed us. Even though."

We know that suffering and hardship is possible, but we can take comfort in the fact that suffering is not meaningless. Ultimately God will be glorified in it, and we will be delivered. Next, Jesus describes the hardship that will come on Jerusalem. Luke 21:20-24 *But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. <sup>21</sup>Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, <sup>22</sup>for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. <sup>23</sup>Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. <sup>24</sup>They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*”

Jesus is answering the question the disciples asked. “When will the temple be thrown down stone from stone? What will be the sign?” “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies you will know its desolation is near.” It was normal, when an enemy invaded, to flee to the walled cities, but the destruction of Jerusalem will be so great it would be safer to flee to the mountains. He says those who are vulnerable, pregnant or nursing, will be especially victimized by this destruction. There will be great distress, they’ll fall by the sword, they’ll be taken prisoner to other nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles. This is a pretty horrible picture, and every bit was fulfilled. The Jewish historian Josephus was an eyewitness, and his images of the siege of 70A.D. are gruesome. Here are his first words after Jerusalem has fallen. “There was no one left for the soldiers to kill or plunder, not a soul on which to vent their fury. . . . So Caesar now ordered them to raze the whole City and Sanctuary to the ground, leaving only the towers . . . to show later generations what a proud and mighty city had been humbled . . . . All the rest of the fortifications encircling the City were so completely leveled that no one visiting the spot would believe it had once been inhabited.”

This and every prophecy by Jesus about Jerusalem was true. But the fall of Jerusalem would not be the signal for Christ’s coming. Some commentators, working from Matthew or Mark, see the two events as one. But Jesus says here that Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. He doesn’t say whether it will be ten years or two thousand, but clearly he saw that some time would pass between these events and the hardships and fulfillments of the last days that he describes in the next section. Luke 21:25-33 *“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, <sup>26</sup>people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*”

<sup>27</sup>Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” <sup>29</sup>He told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. <sup>30</sup>As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup>Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. <sup>33</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The first verses describe the tribulation of the last days. This is not just the ordinary calamity of a fallen world but an escalation that involves the sun, the moon, the stars and the seas. These are the ‘last-days’ prophecies of Joel, Daniel and Revelation. Joel 2:30 “I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. <sup>31</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.”

When will this take place? I believe it is just before Jesus returns to set up a kingdom that will last, nominally, for a thousand years, a millennium. Revelation 20 says “I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image . . . They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. <sup>5</sup>The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. <sup>6</sup>Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.” Many of the promises of the Old Testament can best be understood as fulfilled during that thousand years, when Christ reigns in Jerusalem.

The alternatives to this position are post-millennial, Christ comes after a thousand year reign of the sanctified church and the saints on earth, and amillennial, there is no thousand year period at all, simply a final judgment. This view has some strong proponents, but I feel the pre-millennial understanding is better than the others. Recently the Evangelical Free Church of America voted to remove the word premillennial from the doctrinal statement, seeing it as not a central issue to the Gospel. And I agree: it is not central to the Gospel. But it is, I think, the best understanding because it allows God’s many promises to Israel to be plainly fulfilled, not as shadows or types but as plain promises.

But this premillennial coming of Christ, or any theory of Christ’s coming, has to include a period of tribulation. What we see here echoes many other texts of Scripture. In Daniel 12:1, for example, Daniel is told that there will be a time of distress such as has not happened since the beginning of nations.

In Revelation 7 John sees an enormous multitude in white robes. When he asks who they are, he's told: "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." Christ comes after a great tribulation. But I also see in Scripture that believers are removed from the wrath of his coming. This is called the rapture and is described in 1 Thessalonians. "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

In our text we have the beginning of the tribulation, and then we read that "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Is this the rapture? Some would say no, but in the parallel text in Matthew we read "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other." That sounds like the rapture, the moment of final redemption. Luke 21:28 "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." We will have to suffer hardship, either in the normal course of fallen world history, or in the special dangers of the first part of the tribulation. But redemption is at hand. We will see his glory. He will rescue us from all things, will take us to be with himself.

Jesus repeatedly says that we do not know the day or hour when this will occur. But he also teaches that the signs of impending return will be clear. He says that when you look at a fig tree you can see when it gets leaves, and so you know that spring is here and fruitful summer is on the way. In the same way, when you see these signs you know that the kingdom of God, redemption long awaited, is near. I've been a believer fifty years, and I think we're beginning to see some of these signs even now. Not in the heavens, but in the ungodliness of Western culture and the increasing persecution of Christians worldwide.

Let me add that verse 32, which says "this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened" is difficult. It's clear the disciples' generation saw only the destruction of Jerusalem, before they all passed away. It was not the second coming of Jesus. It may be that Jesus was turning back to speak of that destruction, or it may be by 'generation' he meant the whole church age or was referring to the last generation of the church age. I don't know which, but one of those or something like it must explain the long gap of time between his words and our waiting. In fact, Jesus would not have us be concerned with the timing much at all. He mostly wants us to be ready, prepared at all times.

The final section shows the hardships of perseverance. Luke 21:34-36 *“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. <sup>35</sup>For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”*

Jesus lists three things that weigh down our hearts and keep us from being ready for his return. First, there is dissipation. This is the result of wasting one’s time and energy on frivolities, indulging in pleasure, especially drinking, gambling, drugs to the point of harming oneself. A mild case of dissipation might take the form of being too busy to do what God wants you to do, being too indebted to give what God wants you to give, too selfish to love the way God wants you to love, Dissipation is letting life get in the way of Godly living.

Drunkenness is self-explanatory. Though we could bundle in a whole bunch of other life dominating sins that get in the way of unstained commitment to Jesus. Its a sobering thought, that Jesus might come while you were right in the middle of whatever it is that you’ve fallen into. The third thing here is to be weighed down with the anxieties of life, paralyzed by fear. Given the state of the fallen world, and the hardships of living in it, there is a real danger that we will lose hope, stop expecting rescue, and give ourselves up to life’s anxieties.

Jesus says that if we’re in any of these conditions, His return will spring on us like a trap. That’s an incredible metaphor. It will catch us totally unaware and shock us. I don’t want to be unprepared when He comes. I want to be on the watch and praying. Ready every day, hopeful every day, pure every day, prayerful every day. As Twila Paris said in one of her songs: “Down on our knees, eyes to the east. Watch and pray. No one knows the moment, no one knows the hour or the day. Watch and pray ‘til you see him coming, coming through the clouds in white array to take his Bride away.” When I get up tomorrow, I want to be ready. When noontime rolls around, and the day is wearing on, I want to be ready. When I’m at work, when I’m at play, when I’m thoughtful, when I’m relaxed, whatever mode I’m in, whoever I’m with, I want to be found unashamed and ready to meet the Lord. I want to be ready to be rescued.

Near the end of World War 2 the United States Army in the Pacific Theater carried out what is called the greatest rescue of the war. A specially trained ranger battalion crept ahead of the main invasion force and in league with Filipino guerrilla forces attacked a Japanese prisoner of war camp and rescued 511 prisoners at the cost of only two lives to the rangers and 18 to the Filipinos.

But it's the hardship before the rescue that struck me. These prisoners had been captured when the Philippines fell, and had endured, with 80,000 others, the Bataan death march. As many as 24,000 Filipino and American prisoners had died of heat, brutality, disease, malnutrition and exhaustion. Then they'd been kept prisoner for three years of brutality, disease, starvation, tortures, firing squads and hangings. By early 1945 the huge camp at Cabanatuan had been reduced by transport and death to just 500 sick and injured Americans, many suffering from malaria. They knew the Allies had landed. They hoped they would be rescued. Then they learned that at a similar camp on Palawan the Japanese had crowded the prisoners into air raid shelters and set gasoline fires that cremated them alive. After this hope waned.

But the Japanese were losing. At one point the camp was abandoned by the Japanese, who said that any prisoner who left would be shot immediately. The prisoners used this time to raid the supplies the Japanese had left behind, gaining some of the best nutrition of their imprisonment. But then the Japanese returned and stationed a thousand men at the camp. The tortures and hangings continued. The Japanese even stockpiled rare gasoline for the pyres. Then one night, out of the sunset, with no warning, the intrepid band of Rangers and Filipinos attacked the camp, cut off the Japanese defenders and freed the Americans. Many of the Americans were so surprised that they had to be told over and over, "we're here to rescue you. Get up. Come with us. It's time to go."

We too may have to go through many kinds of hardship before our rescue comes. But in the midst of hardship my prayer is that we will be prepared and waiting. "Straighten up, raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."