

# LUKE—WEEK 26

## THE OLIVET DISCOURSE



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is “Entry into Jerusalem” by Giotto (1267–1337)  
on display at Cappella degli Scrovegni (Arena Chapel), Padua*

Jesus gives a long and detailed description of the end times. Though parts of it are widely misunderstood, one part proves life-saving; He tells the disciples to flee to the hills instead of retreating to within the city walls when Rome attacks.

The Roman siege of the city in 70 AD was a slaughter. The Christians who fled survived.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.

Luke 21:10–36 — The Olivet Discourse  
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1 Luke 21:10–19 (ESV)

*Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. 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. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.*

This passage separates two time periods. *There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you.* For now, let's just refer to them as the time of “*all this*” and the time “*before all this*”.

Since the rest of this passage deals entirely with the “*before all this*” period, let's stick with that for today. We'll get to what “*all this*” refers to later. Remember that the previous passage ended with, “*the end will not be at once.*” So, *all this* could be a long way off.

*Before all this*, there will be terrible persecution, but *this will be your opportunity to bear witness*. What a quaint way of putting it. “Don't worry about the persecution because it'll give you a great chance to witness.” Heavenly goals trump pain avoidance every time.

Jesus then specifically describes how He will bless this witness. “*I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.*” No promise of pain avoidance there.

Then comes the hook. “*Some of you they will put to death. ... But not a hair of your head will perish.*” Again, Heaven is the only thing that matters. “You'll be dead, but everything will be great.”

Then Jesus says, “*By your endurance you will gain your lives.*” Gain? They're alive now. Gain what? Glory.

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The terrors these folks were about to endure make our trials and tribulations look like a picnic. Jesus' message to them is incredibly blunt—you will not be spared physical suffering, but it'll be worth it.

How do you like them apples? Is this how Christianity was first described to you?

Or was it sold as an offer too good to be refused—a free ticket to heaven. If so, it's time to recognize the truth and get ready for real life in Christ. And please don't evangelize by selling a cheap gospel.

People need to count the cost before they sign on the dotted line.

2 Luke 21:20–24 (ESV)

*“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 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, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. 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. 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.”*

Is this describing the time of *all this* from yesterday’s reading? Is this the time of *great earthquakes ... and great signs from heaven*?

No. There’s no mention of any supernatural events here. Still, the connective “but” (“de” in the Greek) feels like a switch to the other time period. That’s an unfortunate translation effect; that’s not how it feels in Greek. “De” can even be translated as “and”. The passage would make perfect sense if it was, “And when you see Jerusalem ...” The NIV even leaves out the “de” and starts verse 20 with, “When you see Jerusalem ...”

But translating “de” as “but” is best. “De” is a connective of contrast used here to show that the subject is changing from persecution to the destruction of Jerusalem. It just isn’t meant to be a switch to another time period. This isn’t a different era; it’s a different event.

And the contrast is stark. The Christians will be brutally persecuted, but if they follow the advice Jesus is giving here, they will survive while the Jews will be slaughtered. That’s exactly what happened.

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

Oh no, not another time period! Now we’ve got “*the times of the Gentiles*” to add to the time of “*these things*” and the time “*before these things*,” from yesterday’s reading. And don’t forget “*the end*,” which *will not be at once*, from the reading two days ago.

Tomorrow’s passage will pull all these pieces together.

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We live in a great nation which does not persecute Christians, but the enemy has many minions and many tricks up his sleeve.

So what? Does this mean anything in terms of how we live our lives? Is there something special we should be doing to deal with this kind of threat?

Since the forces of evil are boundlessly smarter than we are, prayer is our only safe path.

Pray regularly for the leaders in your church; they’re in the crosshairs.

3 Luke 21:25–28 (ESV)

*“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.”*

This is obviously much more than just the siege of Jerusalem. *For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*

It sounds more like “*the end*,” from verse 9—since “*your redemption*” and “*the Son of Man coming in a cloud*” are definitely end time events. Also, the “*signs in sun and moon and stars*” sound like the “*great signs from heaven*” from verse 11.

So, we may have matched two of the time periods we were trying to sort out. The time of “*all this*” seems to be the same as “*the end*.” Of course, that would make the time “*before all this*” the entire Christian era.

Also, this plain reading of the text matches quite well with the historical record. Jerusalem fell, but all the other things haven’t happened yet.

But what is “*until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*” in verse 24 referring to? The text says that “*Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles*” until that time. That’s still going on; the places is overrun with tourists.

That one remains a mystery for now. This passage doesn’t say when “*the time of the gentiles*” will be fulfilled. It doesn’t make any connection between that event and “*the end*” either.

They don’t need to be connected. People have an unhealthy infatuation with trying to predict the end times. It’s understandable to want to know what’s coming; that’s why news shows include a weather forecast.

But we don’t know when the end times are coming, and we’re not supposed to know either.

*“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”* — Matthew 24:36

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Even though these devotionals like diving into complex issues, there’s a danger in that. Salvation is simple. Too much focus on details can distract us from the gospel. There’s a little bit of Pharisee in us all.

The purpose of Bible study is to draw us closer to God, not to figure everything out. Sometimes, the best answer to a tough question is simply that it’s above our pay grade. Instead of a logical answer, we get a dose of humility.

That’s a good thing.

4 Luke 21:29–33 (ESV)

*And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

This is a difficult passage. Let’s tackle the last verse first.

*Heaven and earth will pass away* obviously means *the end*. But how can heaven pass away? Eternity is eternal. The Greek word translated here as “heaven” (οὐρανός, ur-an-OSS) can mean “heaven” (eternity) or “the heavens” (the sky, including outer space). Here, it can’t mean eternity. The earth, sun, moon and stars will pass away, *but my words will not pass away*.

Jesus’ words will outlast the universe. Hmmm. Sounds like we’ll still study the Bible in eternity. Never thought about that.

Now, let’s look at verse 32. *Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place*. The Greek word translated as “generation” (γενεά, gen-e-A) has many meanings. The Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker lexicon defines genea as:

1. *family, descent, possibly nation* — those descended from a common ancestor,
2. *generation, contemporaries* — the sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include all those living at a given time,
3. *age* — the time of a generation,
4. *family or origin* may be closest. — See Acts 8:33, 1 Clement 5:1 and Isaiah 53:8 in the Septuagint.

If it’s the first definition, it means that the Israelites (or some generalization thereof) will not be wiped out. However, many early Christians assumed it’s the second definition. They were surprised when the Lord tarried. Nevertheless, many scholars still prefer the second definition. However, they struggle to reconcile this chapter with the realities of history.

A good reason to doubt that *genea* means generation is, “Why would Jesus set a deadline on His return?”

*“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* — Mark 13:32 (ESV)

Even He doesn’t know when He’s coming back.

One of the things the first century Christians had that we don’t have is deadline pressure. They thought He was coming back in their lifetime. That kept them alert and on task. Conversely, we tend to focus on other things. If Jesus hasn’t come back for the last 20 centuries, what’s the chance He’ll come back in this one?

Better than you might think. The Bible predicts that in the end times, Israel will exist as a nation and that the ending will start in the Middle East. The stage is set.

5 Luke 21:34–36 (ESV)

*“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. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. 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.”*

After all that complex prophesy, Jesus now gives us some basic advice. *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.*

The list of items that can weigh down our hearts is intriguing. The Greek word that’s translated as “dissipation” (κρεπάλη, kre-PA-lay) means drunkenness—with an emphasis on its effects (staggering or hangover). The New King James translates it as, “carousing.” In any case, we have two references to excessive partying.

But at the other extreme, the word that’s translated as “cares” (μερίμναις, mer-IM-nais) means anxiety, worry, cares. So we see both the happy-go-lucky response to the pressures of life and the obsessive-compulsive one. Jesus doesn’t want our hearts to *be weighed down* either way.

But notice that the recommendation is to *watch yourselves*. Our sinful nature is the problem. One way or the other, we always seem to come up with a dumb response to our challenges. If we don’t watch out, we’ll slip into one of these dysfunctional modes.

Jesus is warning us to not be owned by the rat race. Instead, we must *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.*

Just like the bumper sticker says, “Life is short; pray hard.”

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Too many of our prayers are about the cares of this life. We should always try to start out with praise and worship, but the main body of most prayers is still dominated by us telling God what we want Him to do.

That runs counter to this lesson.

Instead of mostly asking God to do us favors, seeking His will should dominate. Asking God to tell us what we should do is the proper attitude for disciples towards their teacher.

To paraphrase JFK, “Ask not what the Lord can do for you; ask what you can do for the Lord.”

This can get serious. How ready are you to respond to what happens next? Maybe we should pray about that too. “Lord, open my heart to Your will.”

This is long term stuff. Seeking God’s direction is tricky.

Snap decisions are rarely appropriate.

