



THE WORST TRAGEDIES CAN BE THE BEST OPPORTUNITIES

Part 86 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Luke 21:5-19 | August 14, 2011

Luke 21:5–19

⁵ And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶ “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.” ⁷ And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.”

¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. ¹² 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. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives.

SCRIPTURE IS TRUE BUT NOT ALWAYS CLEAR

This is a Bible. Here at Mars Hill we love this book, we study this book, we seek, by the grace of God, to obey and follow this book, and every Sunday it is my great joy to preach and teach from the Word of God. And what I want you to know is this: that everything in the Bible is equally true.

Everything in the Bible is equally true, but not everything in the Bible is equally clear.

What I mean by that is there are sections of Scripture that are hard to understand—harder to understand than others. Peter himself, who was a disciple of Jesus and the human leader of the disciples, who was himself trained by Jesus and wrote a few books of the Bible, he says this in 2 Peter 3, right around verse 16 where, in talking about certain parts of the Bible, he says that they are, quote, “hard to understand.” And so a disciple of Jesus, Peter, the leader of the disciples of Jesus, the author of Scripture himself, says Scripture is true but it is not always clear.

There are a lot of reasons for this. Sometimes it’s unclear because we don’t like what it says and so we’re fighting it. Romans says that’s suppressing the truth. Sometimes because we’re a few thousand years removed from that time and the cultural differences and colloquialisms could be such that it’s not as clear to us as it was to the original audience just because we’re separated from them.

Today we hit one of those sections of Scripture that is true, but not completely clear. In fact, some commentators would say that this is the most debated section in the entire New Testament; that when we hit Luke 21, the interpreters go a number of different directions. And so let me say this: I’m going to teach and preach, as I have the great honor of doing, and I want to be clear about what the Scripture says is clear, but I also want to give you freedom, those of you who are real studious, to perhaps disagree in a kind way. And in this we believe in unity at Mars Hill, but not uniformity. We agree on the big issues, the closed-handed issues about Jesus and the Bible and sin and heaven and hell and the need to turn from sin and trust in Christ. We also believe in open-handed issues, that there are things that we can dialogue and discuss and debate and disagree about, but we don’t need to divide over.

BIFOCALS

Today, in Luke 21, Jesus is requiring that we put on bifocals. Bifocals help you see near and far, depending upon how you’re looking. And what we’re going to see in Luke 21 is that Jesus is talking about events that are very near to his day and what happened within the course of some forty years, and then also he’s speaking into the very, very, very distant future, his Second Coming, the end of human history, which now has been a few thousand years, and we don’t know when he’ll return.

So we have the near and the far, and the big debate is around, well, what goes in the near bucket and what goes in the far bucket? And the category is something called *eschatology*, which means the study of last things and the return of Jesus and when will he come and how will he come and what will happen and what will the world be like in the days preceding his coming? And everyone has an opinion. It can be fun to discuss those things, but we

don't divide over them here at Mars Hill.

Here's the big idea that I want to teach you today. It comes from Luke 21:5–19, and if you're new, we've been in the book for almost two years. We really love the Bible, and we're just examining the life of Jesus here in Luke. And today the big idea is that the worst tragedies can be the best opportunities. And here, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, he's on his way to the cross, where he is going to be betrayed by a friend, executed, murdered, God in human flesh will be put to death in our place for our sins, the worst tragedy in the history of the world is also the best opportunity for the hope of the world.

THE TEMPLE WILL BE DESTROYED

So we'll begin looking at what Jesus says and does in Luke 21:5–7. And the first thing Jesus tells us is that the temple will be destroyed. "And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, '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.' And they asked him, 'Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?'"

Now, for us, the significance of this statement could, perhaps, be lost. But in that day, the temple was an icon of sorts. It represented the people of God and it was their hope and it was their spiritual center. In the Holy of Holies, at the center of the temple, that's where God dwelt. And the people of God would come to the city of God, Jerusalem, to be near the presence of God at the temple. And they would come for feasts and celebrations and to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin. They would come to meet with the priests, who were the mediators between them and God. And they would come as a people and this was their hope and this was God's home on the earth. You can't over-stress the significance of the temple for the people of God in that day.

There was originally a temple that was constructed on roughly that same site, and it had been destroyed. And then there was a massive rebuilding effort of what is called the Second Temple, the Herodian Temple, during the reign of Herod. And this was a massive project. And it went on for years, decades.

And so you have this great city of Jerusalem, this great heritage of the people of God. You have this great location where Abraham almost sacrificed his son, Isaac, the father of the people of God. And it was said that there would be another provision for sin, and that would be God the Father, like Abraham, sending God the Son, Jesus Christ, to be in the position like Isaac, to carry his own wood on his back, as Isaac did, to go to a place of execution, as Isaac was willing to. And so the whole story of Father Abraham was that there would be a greater Father sending a perfect Son to lay down his life for the sins of the world. And that location became the place where the temple was built, essentially. And so the people of God held this place in high honor.

And even to go to Israel, as we had the privilege to a few years ago now, it's a city on a hill, just like the Psalms and other sections of the Bible say. And so it sits magnificently and majestically up toward God. And it was upon rock that the temple was built. And in the days of Herod when the temple was nearing its completion, it was one of the great wonders of the world. As I'd said, they'd been working on it for decades. And so every year, those who would come, making their pilgrimage to worship God for the high and the holy days, the days like the feast of Passover, as it is the season of, we find here in Luke 21, they would be excited to see what other work has been done on the temple, what progress has been made.

And you're talking, friends, about those who tended to be poor, simple, rural, common folk. They lived in homes that were about the size of one of our parking stalls, most of them. Their homes were made out of straw or wood or brick or stone. Very simple, very minimal, very primitive. And as they would journey, sometimes for days on foot, to go to the temple, to gather as the people of God, they would be overwhelmed and overcome at the magnificence of the temple.

It was surrounded with golden gates that would just shine in the sun, just blasting in brilliance. It was the biggest thing they'd ever seen. It was the most extravagant, luxurious thing they had ever seen. Just the foundation stones of the temple itself were about the size of a railroad boxcar. We had the privilege of going underneath the old ruins and remains of the temple and seeing some of these enormous stones. Also, some of the marble that was used for the foundation was so large that individual slabs weighed upwards of a hundred tons. And there were jewels and there was gold and silver and massive, massive financial investment made in the temple. It was the pride of the people.

We don't, quite frankly, have anything to compare to it. The White House is not as loved and as iconic as the temple was. In Great Britain, Buckingham Palace doesn't even begin to approach the place that the temple held in the hearts of the people of God. It's like that, but to a far grander and greater degree.

So when Jesus comes along and Jesus says, "This temple will be destroyed," he is making a statement that would have absolutely concerned the people of God, the Israelites, and furthermore would have been very scandalous to Herod, the Roman government, and the political leaders. This was not only a place of worship; this was a place of business. This is a place where commerce was transacted, tourists would come.

In some regard, it would be like Jesus coming today to Southern California and saying, "I'm going to destroy Disneyland." All of a sudden, all of those auxiliary businesses that are earning their income from that tourist destination, they have a stake. This is like Jesus coming to the United States of America and saying, "I'm going to get rid of the White House because we don't need it anymore." Or going to Great Britain and saying, "We will now be done with Buckingham Palace and I will take it to the ground brick by brick. There'll be nothing left."

See, people tend to associate holiness with a place. They tend to be idolaters who worship created things like church buildings or, like, man-made leaders

or, like, sacred spaces, be they churches or temples or mosques or synagogues. And they think that those are holy places that make them closer to God. And the truth is, if you try to take away someone's idol, they react violently. This is true of everything from alcohol to gambling to sex to religion. We attach ourselves to our idols, someone tries to take them away, and we attack them. And that's exactly what is going to happen here.

Jesus is saying, "The temple is going to be no more." And you need to know this, as well. The temple is not yet even done being constructed. It's been under construction for decades and it is nearing its completion, but it's not even done. And Jesus has come. And Jesus is condemning that whole religious system. And Jesus is declaring that it is no longer needed, the priests, the sacrifices, the temple, because he is our High Priest. He is our sacrifice. He is our temple and the presence of God on the earth.

What's interesting is those who heard him, believed him and they trusted him and they took him at his word. They didn't protest and say, "Jesus, you can't do that." Instead they say, "When will this happen? How will this happen?" Not "if," but "how and when." And they want to prepare themselves for this epic historical transition.

FALSE TEACHERS WILL ARISE

And so not only will the temple be destroyed, Jesus goes on to indicate that also false teachers will arise. And he says this in Luke 21:8-9, "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. 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.'"

You see the bifocal perspective here? Jesus is saying, "Very shortly, the temple will be destroyed." And the temple was ultimately destroyed in AD 70. And just like Jesus promised, all of the stones were torn to the ground and it no longer exists. And the Temple Mount today is controlled by Muslims and Islam. There are no priests, there are no sacrifices. There is no temple. Jesus knows the future. Jesus controls the future. Jesus, in fact, prophesied something that no one thought could possibly happen: the destruction of the temple. That's the near prophecy.

And then here he gives us the far prophecy, that, in addition, there will be false teachers, and they will begin in the days of Jesus, and they will continue until the Second Coming of Jesus. And I want you to hear this. He says that they are, in fact, false teachers. And then what do they do? They lead astray. Now, they lead, but they lead astray.

Friends, not every religion is right. Not every spiritual leader tells the truth. Not every gifted, powerful person is leading you toward the truth of God. Some lead astray. This is very controversial in our day to say that it is not enough to be spiritual, you need to be truthful. It is not enough just to be sincere, you also have to be right about who God is and what direction your life is going. And Jesus says here that there are religions and false teachers and spiritual influencers who will come to lead people astray. To lead people astray. That it used to be that the center was at the temple and the center was around Judaism. And as Jesus has fulfilled that, that all of a sudden there is an opportunity for false teachers to come in and to compete with him for influence and for leadership for the hearts and the souls and the minds of people.

Now you need to know this: There are people who are false teachers. They do lead astray. And he says that they will prey on the emotions of people who are scared. In that day, people were devastated emotionally. Life as they knew it was forever altered. Their feasts, their high holy days, their ethnic devotion, their national identity, their spiritual history was forever changed. And it leads to anxiety.

Just like today, it's a season of anxiety. Times are tough economically. Times are tough, terrorism. Times are tough, uncertainty. Times are tough. The world feels unstable. Things are changing, and much of it's not for the good. People are losing money, losing help, losing encouragement and hope, losing their spouse. Life falls apart in a myriad of ways. And Jesus says when that happens, there's an opportunity for false teachers to come in and to give false hope and to lead people astray because they're particularly vulnerable in times of crisis. That was true in the near, in the days of Jesus, leading up to the destruction of the temple, and it's true in the far, including our own age.

Now, Jesus prophesied that there would be people who would predict two things. Number one, the end of the world. And number two, that they were him. And what's interesting is that many major religious leaders and founders absolutely, tragically fulfilled the prophecy of Jesus, that they would come and say, "I know when the end of the world is."

I'll give you some examples. The founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, he said that the end of the world would come by the conclusion of his life, which was, I believe, in 1891. Ellen White, the founder of the Seventh-Day Adventism movement had multiple, repeated predictions as to when the world would end. They were all wrong. If you ever drive by a Seventh-day Adventist church, some are cults, some are Christian. There's a whole myriad of belief within the SDA. But oftentimes they're having prophecy conferences and prophecy lectures and taking the Bible and taking the nightly news and putting them together and trying to predict when the end of the world will be and "these are signs of the end" and it causes people to be scared and to be worried and to have anxiety. And then it leads an opportunity for false teachers.

We recently got in the mail at our house yet another of these invitations. Oh, this Seventh-Day Adventist church is doing a prophecy conference on the beast and the mark of the beast and 666 and the end of the world and Armageddon and the global crisis and the oil shortage. And it can really freak you out. Jesus says that's what happens. Times get hard, some people think, "If I can get everyone scared, they'll follow me."

As well, in 1914, the Jehovah Witnesses, which is a cult that splintered off from Christianity, it predicted the Second Coming of Jesus in 1914, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society did. Obviously that was wrong. So then they said, "Oh, it was a spiritual return." Like in "The Emperor Wears No Clothes." "Oh, it really is a fact, but you just can't see it." They've since had upwards of nine other predictions of the end of the world, obviously all of which were false.

Some who are even within Christianity, like Hal Lindsey, he may not be someone you know, but they like to have television shows and programs and best-selling books. And he and guys like Jack Van Impe and others, they like to predict the end of the world, or at least talk about the signs of the end of the age. People get really scared and worried. In 1991, the Nation of Islam leader, Louis Farrakhan, he predicted the war of Armageddon that year around the Gulf Crisis.

We also recently saw it as well, didn't we? Harold Camping. He's a self-appointed Bible teacher. He predicted the end of the world in 1994, swing and a miss. So he predicted it again here recently, May 11, 2011. There were billboards all over the major cities in America. His followers and fans went out on bus tours and handing out literature and wearing shirts and going on the news. Swing and a miss, the date was wrong.

And it kind of turned Christianity into a laughing stock among many. "Oh, those silly Christians and their false predictions." And when a guy like that comes along and says, "I know what the Bible says. And if you believe the Bible, you must believe me." All of the Bible is equally true. Not all of the Bible is equally clear. Corinthians tells us that we see some things dimly, like a fogged window that we're gazing through. The reality is true, but our sight might not be entirely clear. And what that does is that causes some people to then have a distrust for the Bible.

But let me tell you, friends, there's a difference between what the Bible says, and what one man's interpretation of it is. And it's sad when things like that happen because the late-night talk show hosts then start making jokes about foolish Christians and their nonsensical predictions. And the truth is, Jesus is coming. There will be a resurrection of the dead. There will be heaven and hell. We don't know when it is, but we know that it will be. And so we need to be humble in the prediction of when that might be, and avoid unnecessary speculation, but not miss the big truths. And when we put them all together with our own predictions, then what we do is we undermine the credibility of the entire teaching of the Bible in the eyes of the watching world.

And you're gonna see it again next year, friends. And don't freak out. Because 2012 is, according to some, the end of the Mayan calendar. And some say that means the end of the world is next year. And people are already freaking out, right? Stacking up ammo, canned goods, bottled water. And you're gonna see movies coming out, there's a few already teed up, they're gonna be about the end of the world, big, cataclysmic, box office, epic, freak-you-out, sleep-with-one-eye-open, the-end-of-the-world-is-nigh kind of stuff.

Here's what Jesus says, it's right here, "The end will not be at once." It's what he says. He says it's not gonna all happen in an instant. God's patient, the Bible says elsewhere. God's got a plan for human history. Furthermore, Jesus says elsewhere, "No one knows the hour or the day." No one! Do you know who that includes? Everyone. No one knows the hour or the day. So if somebody writes a book or gets on TV or predicts a date or says we're close or "in my lifetime," Jesus says no one knows.

So here's the position of Mars Hill Church. We are on the welcoming committee, not the planning committee in regards to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. When he shows up, we'll welcome him. We are not planning the party, getting the kazooos, commissioning the cupcakes, and setting it all up because we know when it'll happen. We're on the welcoming committee, not on the planning committee.

So Jesus says there will be false teachers who prey on our insecurities and our fears. And they will predict the end of the world and/or they will tell the world that they are the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Because see, friends—if you don't know this, I don't want to assume anything—Jesus came, lived, died, rose, conquering Satan, sin, death, hell, and the wrath of God. He appeared for forty days, this is historically, actually, factually true. He had the crucifixion scars, he witnessed to crowds of upwards of five hundred people, including family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and enemies. They all got to see him, touch him, hear him, verify. He is God, like he said, he conquered death, like he said he would, then he ascended into heaven. And he will return. He promised that. He promised that.

And so for us Christians, we're in the time between the times. We're in the time between the First and the Second Coming of Jesus. And Jesus says some will try to get you really scared, saying, "I'm coming any minute. The end of the world is near." And others will say, "I'm he, I'm Jesus, I've returned." And again, many cults and false religious leaders and false religions have actually said this.

I'll give you some examples. Arnold Potter, he lived in the 1800s, he broke off from the Latter-Day Saints, which is Mormonism, which is a cult that broke off from faithful Christianity. He claimed that the spirit of Jesus Christ entered his body, and he became "Potter Christ, Son of the living God." And this stuff isn't new. I mean, all the way back, right after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, people were predicting the end of the world. Also, Paul even has to correct the Thessalonians, "Hey, it's not any day now, feel free to go back to work." And many people were saying, "I'm Jesus, I'm Jesus, I'm Jesus. I've come back." And so this has a long history of false teaching.

Baha'u'llah, he was born a Shi'ite, lived at the end of the nineteenth century, he became the father and the founder of the Baha'i faith, and he said that he was the prophetic fulfillment and promised uniter of all major world religions. So that's what he said, but it's not true.

Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church is a cult; he claims to be the Messiah and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Jim Jones said he was the reincarnation of Jesus, Buddha, and Vladimir Lenin. Interesting trifecta. He organized the mass murder-suicide in Jonestown.

Marshall Applewhite, this was some years ago, the late '90s, he claimed to be Jesus. He founded the Heaven's Gate cult. He said when the Hale-Bopp comet was coming through, there would be a spaceship behind it, so he organized a mass suicide so that their souls could all be taken on that space shuttle and taken off into wherever the spiritual realm would take it.

David Koresh and the Branch Davidian cult were in the 1990s and you probably have seen this on TV or YouTube. He said he was the Son of God and the Lamb of God. And he holed himself up in Waco, Texas, with his followers, and fifty-four adults and twenty-one children died in flames.

And today there's even another man that claims to be Jesus Christ. There's the Growing in Grace cult, that's the English translation of this cult. It

started, I believe, in South Florida, around Miami. José Luis de Jesús Miranda. He says, quote, “I do much greater things than Jesus of Nazareth.” He says he is, basically, the Second Coming of Jesus and even greater than Jesus was during his first coming. He’s been on the news, he’s gotten attention, he’s a man who claims to essentially be God among us.

So what does this mean? This means when times get hard, people get scared and wolves rise up to lead sheep astray. You need to know this, friends. In the Bible there are sheep, those are Christians. There are wolves, those are false teachers. And there are shepherds, those are pastors who love their people and love the Scriptures and love Jesus and through the Scriptures try to lead the people to love and follow and serve Jesus. That’s my job, that’s our job, and that’s what we want. We don’t want you to be afraid when times get hard. It doesn’t mean that it makes it any easier, but it means that you don’t want to emotionally open yourself up to being led astray, to freaking out unnecessarily, and to losing your hope that God loves you and is involved in your life.

What can happen is when times get hard, we run after false saviors, and we run after functional messiahs. And sometimes this can be religious leading astray. And sometimes more practically, this can be, “My spouse will be my savior. My kids will be my savior. My job will be my savior. My money will be my savior. My investments will be my savior. My home equity will be my savior. My grade point average, my portfolio, my work history, my resume, my health will be my savior. Someone or something is gonna get me through this really hard time.” And the big idea is this: there’s only one Savior, and his name is Jesus. And any functional savior, anyone or anything that we cling to thinking that this ultimately will deliver me from these hard times, it’s demonic, it’s false. Not that that person or thing is bad, but we put them in a place of God and we’re expecting them to deliver us.

This is why when the economy crashes, people lose hope. When their home equity goes away, people lose hope. When they lose their job, people lose hope. When their health goes away, people lose hope. When their marriage goes away, people lose hope. When their children go away, people lose hope. And it’s not that we shouldn’t be discouraged, and it’s not that times are not hard, but it does mean that we need to be certain that our hope is in Jesus and that we’re running to him and trusting in him and leaning on him and not simply mourning that our savior didn’t save when, in fact, we had a false savior.

And so I would encourage you, always be checking your heart. When times get hard, where do you run? When times get hard, who do you trust? When times get hard, where do you seek refuge? Jesus says hard times come, false teachers arise to lead people astray. Be careful that’s not you.

SIN WILL CONTINUE

He then says, as well, that sin will continue. This was in his day, it’s in our day, until the last day. Luke 21:10–12, “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.’” Cataclysmic, natural disasters. Tsunamis, hurricanes, and the like. “‘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.’”

Again, bifocal perspective. Jesus says shortly coming, in the next few years, continuing all the way to the end of the age, things are gonna get hard. And there’s gonna be seasons of great, cataclysmic, global suffering. This is because of sin. Friends, you need to know this. It’s because of sin. When God got done with the world, he said it was all, quote, “very good,” Genesis 1:31, “All very good.” Ecclesiastes says that God made us upright, and we have made life crooked. That everything God did was good and everything that we’ve done is bad. And Romans 8 says that creation is groaning and yearning and awaiting its deliverance because our sin has affected, infected every one and every thing.

NATURAL DISASTERS

So when you look at things and they’re horrible and cataclysmic—I had the opportunity, as some of you know, to be in Haiti right after the quake. Just dead bodies everywhere. The stench of death in the street. People homeless, devastated, poor, suffering. Even to go back a year later, very little progress. And so we’re funding and serving and helping in that area and region through Churches Helping Churches. But just to look at what happened in just a few short seconds. Lives taken, we’ll never know the number. Homes destroyed. Families broken. Women widowed. Children orphaned. We can’t look at God and say, “What have you done?” We have to look at ourselves and say, “Look what we’ve done.” Look at what sin has done to the world. That we’re working incongruent with God the Creator and with his creation. And as a result, everything that God made good has gone very bad. And it’s a reminder of how sinful sin truly is.

And Jesus says in that day, and in the days that continue until his Second Coming, this is the way the world is going to be. We’re gonna have seasons and cycles of these crises and tragedies because of sin, until Jesus comes to put an end to all sin, to take this world that is corrupted by sin and to liberate it, and to bring a new heaven, new earth, new Jerusalem, Kingdom of God, a new creation, that we rise from death in new bodies. And God says in Revelation, “Behold, I’m making all things new.” That’s the promise and the hope of the Bible.

So when we see what we’ll call natural disasters and acts of God and hurricanes and tsunamis and earthquakes and pestilence and plague and famine and injustice and tyranny and evil and war, it’s all a dress rehearsal for the end of the age, when evil makes its final assault, when Satan and sinners and demons conspire to war against God and good, and then they’re forever put to rest so that the Kingdom of God can reign forever. And so friends, when we see those times, those are dress rehearsals—the great Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon says—those are dress rehearsals and anticipations and preparations for the end of the age, the Second Coming of Jesus.

WARS

He says, in fact, that there will be wars. And I pulled up a quote from Will Durant, a very well-respected historian. He says, “War is one of the constants of history, and has not diminished with civilization and democracy. In the last 3,421 years of recorded history, only 268 of those years have

seen no war.” That’s of recorded history. There are many nations, places that are not part of what is, generally speaking, the canon of Western history and civilization. But he says there has been constant war, almost unbroken, even just in recorded history, for more than three thousand years.

The point is, Jesus’ words were true. And some, then, are very concerned and they take the Bible and they take the news and they say, “Well, then this must be the end. The end must be near.” So all of these books on the Second Coming and the end of the age, they were very popular turning into the new millennium. They’re very popular again in light of some of the natural disasters and crises.

PERSECUTION

Jesus says, in addition, there will be persecution. That’s what he says. He says, “They will lay their hands on you and persecute you.” That’s what he says. The Christians will suffer. The Christians will be persecuted. The followers of Jesus will be persecuted. And he says that they will be handed over by family and friends and co-workers and neighbors. And it’s a grievous thing.

There are two kinds of persecution, friends. There is covert and overt. The covert is the kind of persecution that we tend to face in the West. They don’t kill you, they just fire you. If you’re a professor who’s an evangelical Christian at a state university, you just don’t get tenure, you don’t get to be in the classroom, you don’t get to espouse your beliefs, you just lose your job. If you’re in a business and you love Jesus and you want to act according to Christian, biblical principles and conscience and not steal and not be corrupt and not turn your corporation into a Ponzi scheme and take advantage of people—it’s covert persecution. You’re terminated, fired, not promoted, demoted. Why? Because you affect profits. And if profit is god, then we have to make sacrifices for the god of profit and that might be the Christian who wants to act according to conscience and Scripture, with integrity.

This could even be covert persecution in your own family, where you become a Christian and, as a friend of mine who recently met Jesus was told by their family, “You better not be one of those G-D born-again Bible thumpers.” That’s what the family told him. Well, why? “Then we’re not gonna talk to you and we’re not gonna hang out with you. We don’t wanna hear any of this Jesus stuff. Keep it to yourself.” That’s covert. Means don’t come over for Christmas to celebrate the birth of Jesus and say anything about Jesus. Otherwise, the family’s going to persecute. “We’re not gonna call you, we’re not gonna talk to you, we’re not gonna invite you to family affairs and events. What are we gonna do? We’re going to ostracize you. We’re going to criticize you. We’re going to marginalize you.”

Same thing can happen with your friends. “Oh, I’ve started going to church, I’m in a Community Group, I’m reading my Bible.” “Uh oh, then we’re not going to invite you out with us, we’re gonna pull back socially, relationally. We’re going to criticize you personally. We’re going to find ways to marginalize you practically.” All of that’s covert. It’s covert. It’s covert persecution.

Sometimes, yes, God would call us to die for the cause of Jesus. Sometimes God would call us to live for the cause of Jesus. And both can be hard. There are people in Mars Hill who, they’ve met Jesus, and their families disowned them, or their bosses fired them, or their spouses left them. That’s covert persecution. And Jesus said it’ll happen.

All the way up to overt persecution, which we don’t see as much of yet in the West. We may, we may, with legalization of gay marriage in New York and with hate speech laws and certain cultural expectations, it’s not inconceivable to think of a day when those who believe the teaching of the Bible are seen as breaking the laws of the land. It’s not impossible.

Nonetheless, there is, around the world today, overt persecution. If you’re not familiar with it, go to persecution.org. It’s a great website. And they’ll talk about martyrdom and suffering and how Christians are being persecuted around the world. They’ve got good books and newsletters and they tend to keep people abreast of what’s going on globally. And, the truth is, that there really is one Church, capital C, universal Church, made up of all of God’s people, a few billion of us, professing on the earth, and it doesn’t matter what nation or culture or language or tribe those people are a part of, ultimately, they’re part of the capital C Church; they’re our brothers and sisters in Christ. And so we need to know what’s going on in the world. And so if you want to educate yourself, persecution.org is a good place to look at persecution of Christians.

And we’ve even seen this practically with those we’re connected to. In the Acts 29 church-planting network, we’ve seen, in the grace of God, about four hundred churches planted in the U.S. and there’s a lot of churches participating. We don’t take credit for all of that, but we do participate in that and give generously toward that, and now it’s expanded to include church planting in thirteen different nations. And some of the places we’ve seen the most overt persecution are India and Pakistan, with Hindu and Muslim radicals and extremists who will literally, if a village comes to Christ, come in and burn the homes to the ground and even slaughter people. And there have been incidences of that, including some that have affected even pastors we’re involved with.

One of our pastors, for example, as he was talking to people about Jesus, false charges were made against him by, I think it was Hindu extremists, and they brought him up on charges. And he was actually arrested. Pastor went to jail, one of our guys. And his court case lasted three years, just for talking about Jesus. Ultimately, the most amazing thing happened, and that was those extremists who were seeking to silence him, they got saved, they met Jesus, they became Christians, and they stood before the judge in court and openly declared, “These were false charges, for three years we’ve been lying, we’ve met Jesus, the pastor’s done nothing wrong.” You can cheer for that if you like; that’s amazing.

A more tragic story was a pastor that we were connected to, as well, in that same region of India and Pakistan. He and his brother were brought up on charges for preaching Jesus. So they had a day in court. An extremist walked into court with an AK-47, shot and killed them both. These are church planters we’re connected to. This was on national and international news. It’s not a secret. It was a few years ago. Shot and killed both brothers dead. So there is overt persecution, there is covert persecution, and what Jesus said has come to pass, both in the near and in the far, in that day and in ours.

MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY OPPORTUNITY

So what do we do with this? I mean, the temple will be destroyed, false teachers will arise, and sin will continue! That's pretty scary stuff, right? What do you do as a believer? What if it gets worse? What if there's more earthquakes and famine and poverty and terrorist attacks and the bottom falls out and we're all upside down financially? What if false teachers rise up and the cults become more powerful and the false world religions get bigger and Islam continues to expand and grow into urban centers? And what if even out of what was faithful Christianity, even new cults rise up and maybe some of the young leaders who were formerly evangelical pastors that are becoming increasingly popular but denying essential doctrines, what if they end up being cult leaders and our version of Joseph Smith or Charles Taze Russell and young people are led astray in large numbers and cults are formed? What do we do?

Jesus tells us. Make the most of every opportunity. I love this. Luke 21:13–19, “This will be your—” what? This will be your what? “Opportunity!” Not your tragedy, your opportunity. Not your end, your beginning. Not the worst thing that could have happened, but the biggest opportunity you've been given. “This will be your opportunity,” to what? “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.” Covert and overt persecution. “You will be hated by all for my name's sake.” A lot of people are gonna hate us and hate you. “But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.”

Here's what he's saying. The worst tragedies can be the best opportunities. When the world runs out of hope and runs out of help, that's when the Christians run in. Yes, things are hard. Yes, days are dark. Yes, the world feels like it's falling apart. Yes, the nations are literally shaking. Earthquakes, tsunamis, poverty. It is global pandemic. The United States of America just keeps printing money, pretending that somehow, someday, someday a savior will come in the form of an economic turnaround or a presidential candidate or a global lifting of this painful recession. And what if it doesn't happen? It's our opportunity.

It's our opportunity to say there is a world after this world. There is a King beyond our kings and queens and princes and princesses and politicians; his name is Jesus. That King has a Kingdom that never ends. That ultimately this life, though it is exceedingly important, it is for a little while, and the one to come is the one that lasts forever. There is life after this world. This world is not our home. This world is not our heaven. This world is not our hope. That ultimately, things are not as God intended, and Jesus is coming to make all things new.

We have a message of hope. We have a message of help. We have a message of healing. That Jesus Christ is alive. That Jesus Christ is King of Kings. That Jesus Christ is Lord of Lords. That Jesus Christ makes life meaningful. That Jesus Christ makes death meaningful. That Jesus Christ makes suffering meaningful. That Jesus Christ makes persecution meaningful. And one day we will die and we will leave it all here. And we will be with him. And everything we need will be given by him. And everything we've suffered will be healed by him. And everything we've longed for will be fulfilled in him.

So what he's saying is the worst tragedies can be the best opportunities. That friends, when times get hard, don't ask the wrong questions: “Where is God? Does he care? Is he good? Is he paying attention? Does he love me? Will he forsake me? Has he abandoned me?” Those are all the wrong questions. Instead, ask this question: “Where's the opportunity? Who can I help? Where can I serve? What should I say? This is my opportunity.”

And these people in that day, they felt like the bottom fell out. The temple is torn down stone by stone, roughly forty years after Jesus prophesied this. Shortly after the temple was concluded, it was dismantled. They can no longer worship in the presence of God as they had previously. The priests are gone.

Do you know what happened to the nation of Jerusalem? The Romans sieged it. That means they surrounded it. They cut off all the food and all the water and all of the supplies for months. Historians like Josephus and Tacitus, outside of the Bible, they record what happened. The city started to starve to death and the Romans just waited patiently. People started dying of starvation and dehydration. Some literally started eating the dust of the ground. Mothers who were pregnant miscarried because of malnutrition. Children who were born healthy died because their mother was so lacking nutrients that she couldn't even feed her own baby. There are reports of cannibalism where people would kill and eat one another in the city of Jerusalem.

The bottom fell out worse than what you and I have ever experienced or seen. Josephus says that upwards of a million Jews died. It was a Holocaust. Tacitus comes along about the fourth century, another respected historian, and says the number was maybe half a million. No one will ever know. The point is, hundreds of thousands of people died, starved to death.

And when the Romans took the city, there was no resistance because the people had no fight left in them. Their lives were destroyed. Their businesses were destroyed. Their homes were destroyed. Their religion was destroyed. Their city was destroyed. Their nation was destroyed. And it was the best opportunity because the Christians left with the story of Jesus: that apparently the world has changed, and how we used to know God is not how we now know God because the shadows have gone away, and the Son of God has come.

And all of a sudden, the worst tragedy became the best opportunity. All of a sudden, the Christians scattered. And to this day we're scattered all over the earth. And there are billions of us, not just Jews, but Gentiles from all the nations. And the worst tragedy became the best opportunity.

And here's the big idea, friends. God does not do evil, but he uses it. God does not do evil, but he uses it for good. God works out all things for the good of those who love him, the Bible promises. God takes what was intended for evil and uses it for good, the saving of many lives, the Bible says.

Friends, if you're not in that season, there may come a day when you are in that season; that it feels like your life has ended, the bottom has fallen out, the world as you know it has gone upside down. Your boss says, "You're fired." Your spouse says, "I'm divorcing." Your children say, "I hate Jesus." Your doctor says, "It's cancer." It can be an opportunity to testify. That's what Jesus says. "Well, here's who Jesus is. Here's who I am in Jesus. Here's the hope that I have. Here's the purpose for the life that I live. And here's the eternity that awaits me." The worst tragedies can be the best opportunities.

Father God, thank you for the Scriptures. That God, you don't promise us that if we belong to you, life will be easy. But you do promise us that if we belong to you, life will be meaningful, life will be purposeful, life will be fruitful. God, we believe that you're good, and you don't do evil, but you are sovereign and powerful and you will even use evil for good. And God, this is the story of Jesus. The worst evil in the history of the world, is that the creation murdered its Creator; that sinners murdered their Savior. And God, the worst tragedy became, at the cross of Jesus, the greatest opportunity. Lord God, when his friend betrayed him, when his disciples abandoned him, when his family disowned him, when the soldiers arrested him and beat him and mocked him and scorned him and plucked out his beard and scourged him and ultimately crucified him, it was you, Lord Jesus, who testified. The Holy Spirit gave you the words to say, "Father, forgive them. It is finished. Into your hands I commit my spirit." Jesus, we thank you that you died for our sins, that you rose as our Savior, that you're coming again. We do not know when, but we know that it will happen. And when it does, I pray that you would find us, individually and corporately, exceedingly glad, not on the planning committee arguing over the details, but on the welcoming committee celebrating your arrival. And Jesus, we thank you that you took the worst tragedy and turned it into the greatest opportunity. And we pray when our days are dark and our body is weak and our heart is discouraged and our soul is saddened and our life is confusing, that you would remind us of that wonderful word, "This is your opportunity." Amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.