LIFT UP YOUR HEADS

Luke 21:5-36

Key Verse: 28

“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Thank God for the repeated teaching of our Lord Jesus that the Son of Man is coming in clouds with great power and great glory as our King to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. That kingdom of Christ continues to the eternal kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus appeals to each of us to be ready for his glorious powerful appearing and his righteous majestic kingdom. In this hope and vision, the gospel of salvation, that is, the gospel of the kingdom, must first be preached to all nations. Today we are going to study Luke’s version of the Lord Jesus’s eschatological teaching that leads to his second coming. May God fill us with the hope and glory of his coming again.

Luke starts this passage in verse 5, “Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God.” As we studied, this temple, called Herod’s temple, was one of the wonders of the ancient world.  Some writers say it was the greatest, most impressive building in the world. By all accounts, it was the most beautiful building in the world. It is said that Herod actually trained priests to be masons and carpenters and craftsmen so that they would be actually leading the work as one who understood holy things. Every stone in that place was made of mezza, white brilliant stone available in the land of Israel, which can be finely cut and polished so that it looks like marble. They flattened the old Zerubbabel temple to the ground and laid massive new foundations stones, some of which are still there and visible today. The place was large enough to accommodate hundreds of thousands of people. The temple contained, of course, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, surrounded by walls and gates filled with colonnades and porticos.  There were at least thirty-two caves, pits and cisterns for water storage.

But it was all going to come down. Jesus said, “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.” According to Matthew and Luke, this was the fourth time Jesus made this prediction. In Luke 13, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem and said, “Look, your house is left to you desolate.” (13:35). That was six months before. And the day before, in Luke 19, Jesus talked about the enemies building an embarkment against Jerusalem and said, “They will not leave one stone after another” (9:44). That was right before he entered the temple for cleansing. Then on this day, in Matthew 23 Jesus poured out six woes on the religious leaders and said, “Look, your house is left to you desolate” (23:38) and then he left the temple. Now, here, Jesus predicted the total destruction of the temple one more time, when some of the disciples were remarking about the fascinating temple building. Surely, it’s coming down.

On August 29, 70 A.D., Titus Vespasian, the great Roman general, came in after a long siege and began burning the colonnades, the great porticos and colonnades that surrounded the outer courtyards.  According to historians, then some soldier, by his own volition and against the wishes of Titus, took a torch and threw it into the Holy Place.  They tried to put it out but they couldn't save it and down came the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. The whole thing was torched.  There were about 6,000 people, who were trying to seek refuge in the temple but were consumed in the fire to death. And more than tens of thousands were massacred by the Romans throughout the city of Jerusalem.  The priests tried in a feeble way to defend their temple.  They got up on the highest parapet where there were spikes driven up to keep the birds from perching there and they were pulling the spikes out and throwing them at the Romans. However, that was a useless effort to stop the horrible destruction.

To the minds of the disciples, the temple’s destruction as God’s judgment would involve the restoration that was to take place, which means the messianic kingdom was very near. And they expected it all to happen in one arrival of the Messiah. So the disciples asked, “Teacher, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” Again their question was not just about the time and sign of the destruction of the temple building but related to the time and sign of the end of the age. So Jesus’ answer is the longest one as an answer to any question raised in the Bible. In fact, Jesus’ answer covers the whole future, giving an amazingly revelatory/apocalyptic prophecy pointing to his second coming, astonishing, rapturous and glorious.

First of all, Jesus replied, “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time is near.’” As we also thought of in Matthew’s and Mark’s account, deception is the first thing Jesus mentioned: do not be deceived and misled. We can say that human history is the history of deception since man’s fall. But through Jesus’ coming, the light of the truth began to shine as John said in 1 John 2:8, “…the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining’ and as also Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life…” However, as Jesus predicted here, the darkness and the light, and the falsity and the truth have both continued, and it will be so to the end of the age, with more intensity of the deception. The battle will be more and more fierce. In light of this prophecy of Jesus, we see how the world has been deceived, particularly in the realm of Christianity. From the end of the 1st century there was the rising of Gnosticism which Apostle John fought so fiercely. There were truth-distorters in the Ephesian church, whom Apostle Paul warned against, and false teachers Apostle Peter severely condemned in 2 Peter. In Catholicism, there has been the worship of Mary, and the Pope’s authority was above the authority of the Scriptures. Islam has been a Satanic counterfeit of Christianity in many ways. Mormon claims the need for the Book of Mormon to be above the Bible. Jehovah’s Witnesses only believe the kingdom on earth, denying the eternal kingdom of heaven and the eternal punishment of hell. There is also the New Age movement in our time, etc. Huge deception has been going on with the rise of many false messiahs and false prophets throughout the world as Jesus predicted. It seems that false Christianity, including prosperity gospel, appears stronger than true Christianity. Nowadays, deception seems to be more and more powerful with all the power of technology. Truly, the whole world seems to be going astray under the control of the evil one as John wrote in 1 John 5:19. The world is deceptive and, more seriously, human hearts are deceitful and they go together. In fact, when people refuse to love the truth, God sends a powerful delusion and they believe the lie. Jesus clearly said, “Do not follow them.” Human smartness is not reliable at all, because the human mind is deceptive. Paul said in Romans 8:6, “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.” And Jesus said in John 6:63, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” We should cherish and hold to the truth of God’s word absolutely not lingering in the grey area so as not to drift away by the worldwide deception coming, and more and more terribly.

Jesus continues in verses 9-11, “When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.” Interestingly, Luke included pestilences in disasters, probably as a doctor, which makes sense to us. Great events and fearful signs from heaven, we will think about them in the latter part.

In verses 12-17, Jesus talks about persecution: “But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. 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. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.” In these words of Jesus, we see that the time of persecution is an opportunity to witness about Jesus. He will give us words and wisdom. There will be those who are martyred. In such circumstances, we are to still believe God’s protection that “not a hair of your head will perish.” What protection! Nothing happens apart from God’s sovereign power and leading. Luke also wrote the words of Jesus in 12:4-7, “I tell you the truth, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear. Fear him, who, after the killing the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you fear him… the very hair of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid…” Fearing God and believing in God’s protection are one set of faith.

Now let’s read verse 20 together, “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.” Matthew wrote in 24:15, “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand.” Mark also wrote in a similar way in Mark 13:14. According to Matthew, the abomination that causes desolation is to be understood in the words of the Daniel s first related to Antiochus Epiphanes, who invaded the temple of God and set a statue of Zeus on the vary altar of God. But later on, the final Antichrist will sets himself there to be worshipped, pitching his royal tents in the city of Zion, Jerusalem (Da 11:45). He does so by honouring and relying on a god of fortress (Da 11:38), that is, military power. So what Luke wrote is consistent with the book of Daniel. Of course, in history this kind of event has happened such as Romans’ conquering Jerusalem in AD 70, the first of The Crusades in 1095 that sacked Jerusalem, Suleiman the magnificent, the great Ottoman, Turkey’s sultan, conquering Jerusalem in the early 1500’s, etc. But here, what Luke mentioned is the final one, the strongest army lead by the final Antichrist. Such military power signifies that its desolation is near, that is the trigger of the Great Tribulation.

Jesus continues, “Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.” We feel that to Jesus all the events are in the palms of his hand and so he can give very realistic advice, saying, “flee,” “get out,” not enter.” And here the time of punishment is the time of vengeance, the vengeance of God, which in an Old Testament expression. God is the God of vengeance. This teaching flows through the whole Bible (Isa 34:8; 61:2). In other words, God is the God of judgment/punishment as well as the God of salvation. As for Israelites God poured out his love so much on them, even through many adversities and through the invasion of other countries again and again, hoping that they may recognize the LORD, the only true God and worship and serve him wholly. God sent the Messiah, Christ Jesus, according to his promise, but God’s chosen people of the nation rejected him, crucifying him on the cross. When such rejection goes on to the end, God will show his vengeance on the people, wrath against this people (23, Da 8:19; 11:36), specifically the unbelieving people. God says in Zechariah 14:2, “I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked… Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations…” In God’s vengeance and punishment, two thirds of the people will be killed and one third will be saved as remnant written in Zechariah 13:8-9. Luke wrote here in verse 24, “They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” God has the whole plan and he is truly sovereign for his salvation work. We should not only believe in the God of salvation but also the God of vengeance and bear his bountiful grace in Christ Jesus and serve his purpose wholeheartedly throughout our lives.

Jesus says in verse 25, “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.” Through Matthew and Mark, we know that these signs are “the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from the sky.” These are signs in the heavens. Luke also wrote that the seas will roar and toss – the Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, southern Ocean, Artic Ocean etc. According to a scientist, if something like a rogue moon comes very close to the earth, it creates the kind of waves that affects the delicate balance of the earth, tilting it a few degree on its axis. The planet is so perfectly aligned on its axis that even the smallest tilt would produce such roaring and tossing of the seas. What turmoil in the seas! Nations will be in anguish and perplexity on the greatest scale, for these were unique expressions in the Bible. Here “anguish” is in Greek *sunoche* only used here except one other time (2 Cor 2:4) in the New Testament. It could be translated as severe anxiety that knows no bounds with no relief at all. It is compounded by perplexity, which is in Greek *aporia* used only here in the New Testament. It simply means confusion in its most severe form.

Jesus continues in verse 24, “Men will faint from the terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” The word “faint” is in Greek *apopsuchó* used uniquely here in the New Testament. Shock is so great that men will faint from fear. The word means to breathe out or to expire.  People will be scared to death. This is lethal emotional trauma causing rapid pulse, low blood pressure and cardiac collapse. This fear may be the greatest fear since men was cast out of the Paradise in the Garden of Eden. Isaiah 13:6-8 says, “Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. Because of this, all hands will go limp, every man’s heart will melt. Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them…” Isaiah, of course, spoke of judgment on Babylon, but that was also a small preview of what was to come on the whole earth and the whole world. And Isaiah 24:1-5 says, “See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatters its inhabitants…The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws…” God’s judgment is consistent in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Here, surely “men” in Luke 21:26 includes all kinds of people. John expressed it this way in Revelation 6:15-17 “Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”

Then Jesus says in verse 27, “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” How powerful his coming is! At his coming he can send the entire creation into disarray and chaos. He can reorganize it in a split second and create a totally new environment, changing the topography of the earth, the sea and alter the sky. He will destroy Satan, demons, Antichrist, and all enemy armies. His power is absolutely shocking, stunning beyond comprehension. And at his glorious coming, the completely dark world becomes so bright, seven times brighter than by the sun. His power and glory cannot be separated but they work together. While at his powerful and glorious coming, all nations of the earth mourn in fear and anguish and perplexity trying to find a hiding place with no courage to look up to heaven, the people of Christ Jesus are to stand and look up (in KJV), lifting their heads. What a contrast in their response, in their attitude!

“For your redemption is drawing near.” “Redemption” can be most important word in the Bible. Redemption means to buy something back, paying the price. Christ Jesus purchased us from slavery to sin and Satan by paying the price of his very life (Eph 1:7), and made us his possession. Jesus Christ came to redeem mankind. The word “redeem” or “redemption” is used four times in Luke’s gospel. In Zechariah’s song, he said in Luke 1:28, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.” This is the first coming of Jesus. And Luke wrote in 2:38 that when the prophetess Anna saw the baby Jesus along with his parents at the temple, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. After his resurrection, while the two disciples going to Emmaus said to the risen Jesus incognito in 24:21, “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.” Here, the word redemption is used in the expression, “your redemption is near.” This redemption is the redemption of our bodies, the final redemption on top of the redemption of our souls. It will be the complete redemption. Paul wrote in Romans 8:23-24, “We groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.” The day of this redemption is the most glorious day with the glorification of ourselves, the fulfillment of our hope in Christ Jesus, which is to be like our loving Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ, which is God’s ultimate purpose for us. Paul said in Romans 8:29, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” He said in 1 Corinthians 15;49, “And just as we have borne the likeness of the early man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” John said in 1 John 3:2, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” What a hope! Praise God for the redemption of our bodies at his coming!”

“Look up and life up your heads” indicate where we are put our hope. Paul says in Colossians 3:1-2, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” “Look up and lift up your heads” also can mean to be confident in life. “Do not lose confidence” for we are children of God redeemed and purchased by the very life of God’s Son. Hebrews 13:6 says, “…we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

The glorious coming of the Lord Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. He says in verse 31, “Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” According to Matthew all the nations will be gathered before him to be judged so that he will figure out who will enter his kingdom. And he said in verses 32 and 33, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Finally, how should be prepare for this glorious day? In verses 34-36, “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.” Here are warning and encouragement.

Here, “be able to escape” is “be counted worthy to escape.” We are reminded of Revelation 3:10, “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” What grace! So Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:3-4, “While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness…” Paul continues, “Since we belong to day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.” And then he says in 5:16-18, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Thank God for our Lord Christ Jesus’ powerful and glorious coming. In this hope. may we be always watching and praying, looking up and lift up our heads, rejoicing in all life situations. Amen!