

LUKE 21:5–19. (EHV)

As some were talking about the temple, how it was decorated with beautiful stones and offerings, Jesus said, “These things that you see here—the days will come when there will not be one stone left on another—every one will be thrown down.” They asked him, “Teacher, when will these things happen? And what is the sign that these things are about to happen?” He said, “Watch out so that you are not deceived! For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. Whenever you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be terrified, for these things must happen first, but the end will not be right then.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines, and plagues in various places. There will be horrifying sights and great signs from heaven. But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, handing you over to synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name’s sake. It will turn out to be your opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand how to defend yourselves, for I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all people for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By patient endurance you will gain your lives.”

At one of my former congregations, one of my members asked me if I would compile a list of all the biblical signs of the end of time, and even publish them in the bulletin. I’m pretty sure he asked me for a list like that because he was astonished at what he was hearing in the news nearly every day. Maybe he wanted to know whether he should be surprised or not. Maybe he wanted to know whether the news he was hearing was just regular stuff to be expected in a sinful world, or something specific mentioned in the Bible meant to make us that much more alert for the end of the world.

Whatever his precise reasons, although I was intrigued by his request, I never did make the time to compile such a list. But if I had, this definitely would have been the place to start—Luke 21, or its parallels in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. Here Jesus gives us a list of signs of the end.

It was Holy Week, the week leading up to Jesus’s death on the cross. Jesus was spending his days in the temple courts in Jerusalem, and then leaving the city with his disciples in the evening and apparently staying in the village of Bethany, just over the Mount of Olives to the east. On one of these evenings, Jesus and his disciples had begun their journey out of the city. As they were leaving the temple courts, his disciples were taking in their beautiful surroundings. They called Jesus’s attention to the massive stones and magnificent buildings and beautiful decorations for the upcoming Passover festival. Jesus replied, “These things that you see here—the days will come when there will not be one stone left on another—every one will be thrown down.”

Jesus and his disciples then crossed the Kidron Valley and made their way up the Mount of Olives. There Jesus stopped and sat down and took in the evening view of the city. As he was

sitting there, his disciples came to him and asked, “Teacher, when will these things happen? And what is the sign that these things are about to happen?” If all we had were these questions in Luke, we might think that all of Jesus’s answer pertained to the destruction of the temple, which ended up taking place less than forty years later, in 70 AD. But according to Matthew, they also asked, “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” You see, in the disciples’ minds, the two were linked together. If the temple was going to be destroyed, they thought, then Jesus must be talking about the end of the world. They did not yet fully understand the meaning and purpose of the temple, and that its purpose would be fulfilled once Jesus died and rose again.

So even though, on the surface, they were asking him about the destruction of the temple, Jesus starts out by answering their real question. He starts out by telling them, and us, about what it would be like leading up to the end of the world. And in so doing, Jesus indicates that the forthcoming destruction of the temple would actually be a foreshadowing of the destruction on the Last Day. This is why many old German Lutheran hymnals included two things in addition to liturgical responses and hymns. They also included the unaltered Augsburg Confession, the chief confession that outlines our biblical, Lutheran doctrine, and Josephus’s account of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Jesus gives us these signs, first of all, to warn us. Things are not going to get better leading up to the end, but worse. First, there are going to be many people deceiving others with religious lies and false doctrine, and even doing so in Jesus’s name. “Watch out so that you are not deceived! For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them.”

Luke’s wording of Jesus’s warning is interesting. Matthew records Jesus saying that many will come saying, “I am the Christ,” but Mark and Luke have Jesus saying that many will come saying, “I am he,” or, “I am it,” or, “I’m the one.” In other words, there might be some people who come and say flat out, “I am the Christ, the Son of God.” For instance, back in the late 1900s and early 2000s, there was a man in Miami, Florida, named José Luis de Jesús Miranda who claimed that he was Jesus Christ in the flesh and even told his wife that he was God. He died in 2013, but of course many of his followers claim he didn’t really die. But those aren’t the only people who fulfill Jesus’s warning. They are also claiming to be Christ, or “it,” or the one, if they claim to have authority that only Christ really has, like the pope does when he claims in the Catholic Catechism that he “has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church,” and that he can “always exercise” that power “unhindered” (par. 882). They are also claim to be “it” or the one if they insist that you must follow them as individuals in order to follow Christ and that it is impossible for you to be following Christ if you are not following them. In other words, beware of churches and church bodies built around an individual rather than around Jesus Christ and the Scriptures.

Jesus says people will also deceive others by saying, “The time is near.” Now in the days of the apostles, this would have been deceiving because many of the signs that Jesus is about to mention still had to happen. For instance, there were some false teachers who tried to convince the Christians in Thessalonica that Judgment Day had already come and that they had missed it. But in our day and age, we can still be wary of those whose main message is, “The end is near.” Sometimes such people are dangerous because they try to convince people that the end is coming

on a specific day, even though Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour. Other times they're dangerous not because they're wrong—we can say the end is near at this point—but because that's the focus of their message. They merely try to instill fear in people about the end of time rather than instilling faith and confidence in them with the good news of free salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus wants us to look forward to the end of time, not be deathly afraid of it.

Jesus says there are going to be a lot of deceivers. If you encounter them, do not follow them.

Second, there are going to be political signs. “Whenever you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be terrified, for these things must happen first, but the end will not be right then. ... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.” Right now we have the Russo-Ukrainian War going on. Many people, even in our country, were stunned and terrified when that war broke out. Just like World War I was supposedly “the war to end all wars,” so also today people are still surprised and terrified when revolution and war breaks out. We shouldn't be. Jesus said it's going to happen.

Third, there are going to be signs in nature. “There will be great earthquakes, famines, and plagues in various places. There will be horrifying sights and great signs from heaven.” Just in the last twenty years, the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake claimed nearly 228,000 lives, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake claimed about 160,000. Historically, there were two enormous earthquakes in the city of Antioch in Syria, where the book of Acts tells us that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. One earthquake rocked Antioch in 115 AD and another in 526. Both supposedly claimed more than 250,000 lives. As for famine, it was a potato famine in Scotland, Ireland, and the European mainland in the 1840s and 1850s that drove many people to emigrate to this country. Since 2010, Africa has been the continent most affected by famine. And plagues—who of us can forget the COVID-19 pandemic? That, too, took many by surprise, including many Christians, because God had graciously given us many decades of peace and prosperity with only a few hitches and glitches here and there. But earthquakes, famines, and plagues will continue.

Jesus also says there will be “horrifying sights and great signs from heaven.” When we compare these words to Matthew and Mark, it seems that Jesus is talking about the great heavenly signs that will occur on Judgment Day itself, when the sun and the moon will fail, the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. But certainly he could also be talking about heavenly phenomena like eclipses, comets, and meteorites.

Fourth, there is going to be persecution of believers, and Jesus said that this would actually be the first sign, chronologically speaking. “But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, handing you over to synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for my name's sake. ... You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all people for my name's sake.” We can't help but think of Peter and John being imprisoned and put on trial before the Jewish ruling council. We can't help but think of Stephen being stoned to death and the apostle James being beheaded. We can't help but think of the apostle Paul and his companions being stoned and flogged and imprisoned. We can't help but think of the apostle Paul eventually being beheaded and the apostle Peter being crucified.

But even though that was the sign that happened first, it has certainly continued to happen and it certainly will continue to happen. There were multiple persecutions and executions of Christians by Roman emperors prior to Constantine. We think of Luther being brought before the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire at the Diet of Worms and subsequently being outlawed. Still today, it is estimated that thirteen Christians are killed for their faith every day, with countries like North Korea, Afghanistan, and Pakistan being some of the most antagonistic toward Christians. And notice that Jesus tells us to expect to be betrayed by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends, just as he was betrayed by a close friend. “You will be hated by all people for my name’s sake.” Jesus warns us not to be surprised that Christianity, its teachings, and those who take its teachings seriously are becoming more and more hated in this country. That trend will continue.

But Jesus doesn’t just give us signs of the end to warn us. He also gives us these signs to comfort and encourage us. Part of the comfort lies in knowing the signs in advance. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Just as it can be easier to prepare for a storm if you know that it’s coming and if you know how serious it will be, and to prepare for an illness if you know you have it and you know what to expect as it takes hold of your body, so also it is easier to prepare for the end when you know it’s coming and you know what to expect as it draws near.

He has also given us specific promises in connection with these signs. When he talks about persecution, he says, “It will turn out to be your opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand how to defend yourselves, for I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.” In other words, even though you know Christians will be persecuted and put on trial, you don’t have to spend hours and days worrying about what you might say if you ever end up in a situation like Stephen or Paul or Luther. If Jesus has in mind to put you in such a situation, he will help you when the time comes to say what needs to be said, and to say it in such a way that no one will be able to argue against you or contradict you. Just stay in his word in the meantime.

Then there is this beautiful promise, that in spite of all of this, “not a hair of your head will perish. By patient endurance you will gain your lives.” There’s actually something called Doomsday phobia, which is basically the fear of the end of the world. We Christians don’t need to fear the end of the world, or the signs leading up to it. As believers in the One who, by his death, opened the gates of eternal life for us, the worst that anyone can do to us is usher us into eternal life. By patiently enduring in the Christian faith, we may lose our homes, our wealth, or our reputation, we may be betrayed by family and friends, but we will gain our souls and our lives for eternity. We will inherit eternal glory with Jesus, where we will also have treasures and honor and family and friends beyond compare.

Plus, all of Jesus’s words show that he is ultimately in control of all these things. He knew about them in advance. He limits and directs them. He turns them to good use and purpose for his believers. And since all of these signs have now happened, we know he could come at any time to deliver us safely from every evil to himself in heaven, where no deceit, war, natural disaster, or persecution can ever harm us again, and where we will therefore have every opportunity and desire to thank and praise him for all eternity—for his salvation, and for his signs of the end—signs that warned us, and signs that comforted and encouraged us. Amen.