



**Suffering Church Action  
and Awareness Week**  
2022 - 2023

# Understanding **the Times**

Eight daily devotions focusing on Luke 21:1-36

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## Introduction:

# God is working out His purposes

*“I have heard the distant sound of hoofbeats. I have seen the evil riders on the horizons of our lives. I am still an evangelist whose one goal is to proclaim new life in Christ, but there is serious trouble ahead for our world, for all of us who live in it, and in the four horsemen of the Apocalypse there is both a warning and wisdom for those troubled days ahead.”*

– Billy Graham, 1983

**On** 7 May 2022 the *Daily Telegraph*<sup>1</sup> newspaper's colour magazine carried a dramatic black-and-white page almost totally filled with the words, in large capital letters: WAR, PLAGUE, PERSECUTION, FAMINE ... DOES CHRIST HAVE A MESSAGE FOR THE MODERN WORLD?

Writers and film-makers are increasingly focusing on what the secular world describes as apocalyptic or even post-apocalyptic events, perhaps little realising they are referencing the book of Revelation! Their creative work depicts a world hurtling towards disaster, a world devoid of hope, of meaning, of purpose. Mayhem and death reign. Care and compassion have been crushed out of existence, as desperate human beings fight for survival

1 A secular British newspaper

This choice of subject matter surely arises from contemporary events in the real world, which is fast becoming a seething cauldron of unquenchable hate and violence. In the midst of the chaos, the drumbeats of war sound out. Tempests, earthquakes and volcanoes warp the planet. A broken, polluted world is in its death throes.

Fear of the present and foreboding about the future therefore fill the mind and trouble the soul of many people today. The Bible and its message, though widely rejected, have now become the interpreter of events for those truly seeking to understand.

In the time of King David, it was said of the tribe of Issachar that they had many “men who understood the times” (1 Chronicles 12:32). Not only could these men discern the spiritual realities that lay behind physical events but also

they “knew what Israel should do”.

Here in Luke 21 we see Jesus interpreting the times to His disciples, taking them beyond the physical to the spiritual realities of the present and the future, including approaching disasters. Some of what He predicted occurred within 40 years when Jerusalem fell to the Roman army and the Temple was destroyed, but some has yet to happen. At the heart of it all is the message that God is working His purposes out, that the world will not go on the same for ever, and that what the Bible calls elsewhere the Day of the Lord is approaching. That will be a day of calamity, terror and judgment.

See, the day of the LORD is coming  
– a cruel day, with wrath and  
fierce anger –  
to make the land desolate  
and destroy the sinners within it.  
(Isaiah 13:9)

Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sound the alarm on my  
holy hill.  
Let all who live in the land tremble,  
for the day of the LORD is coming.  
It is close at hand –  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and blackness.  
(Joel 2:1-2. See also Amos 5:8-20)

There is a famous hymn that begins “God is working his purpose out”<sup>2</sup> and goes on to speak of

The time that shall surely be:  
2 Arthur Campbell Ainger, published 1894.

When the earth shall be filled  
With the glory of God  
As the waters cover the sea.

This is derived from Habakkuk 2:14 about the earth being filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. These words occur in the middle of a long list of the sins of the people of Habakkuk's time. The prophet condemns the sins and warns the sinners of God's punishment to come. So for those who love the Lord the words are a wonderful promise, but for those who do not they are words of judgment and doom.

The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, taking us by surprise (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3; 2 Peter 3:10). Wars and uprisings are *not* a sign that the end of the world is imminent, says Jesus (Luke 21:9). Therefore we must be alert and ready at all times so that when the Day comes, we are able to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:34-36).

***Thank you, O Jesus Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, that You are in control and that Your purposes will not be thwarted. Help me to be always ready for Your return.***

# Seeing events with the eye of faith

**Luke 21:1-8,20-28; Revelation 6:1-2; John 14:27**

The Temple in Jerusalem was famed for its beauty, splendour and rich ornamentation. It had been rebuilt in the sixth century BC, after being destroyed by the Babylonians, and then completely reconstructed by Herod the Great around 20-10 BC. Now its pillars, some standing over ten metres high, were of white marble, each made from a single block of stone. There was a decorative vine of solid gold with clusters of grapes as tall as a man. The Jewish historian Josephus (c.37-100 AD) described how the front of the Temple was “covered all over with plates of gold” which at dawn reflected the rays of the rising sun so that people had to turn away their eyes from the Temple’s dazzling brightness.<sup>1</sup> This was the physical appearance of the building when Jesus foretold its destruction, which occurred barely a generation later in 70 AD when it was besieged and conquered by the Roman armies.

With the eye of faith Jesus could see what was to befall the huge and magnificent Temple. The pride and hope of the nation would be destroyed.

Perhaps John, who was almost

certainly there when Jesus made this prediction (Mark 13:1-4) and lived to see it fulfilled, had this catastrophe in mind when he wrote of the rider on a white horse – a conqueror intent on conquering (Revelation 6:1-2) – the first of the “four horsemen of the apocalypse”.

Jesus went on to warn of two other perils: (1) false teachers preaching false hope, (2) giving way to fear at the thought of what was to come (Luke 21:8-9). With signs and miracles the false teachers would try to deceive even the elect (Matthew 24:24) and Jesus did not want His followers to succumb either to false hope or to utter hopelessness. His disciples must accept the reality of the calamity to come, when people in besieged Jerusalem were reduced to cannibalism and hundreds of thousands died.

***Dearest Lord Jesus, keep me from false hope, keep me from faithless despair. Thank You for Your gift of peace.***

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, book 5, section 5.

# The blood red horse of strife and war

**Luke 21:9-10; Revelation 6:3-4; Isaiah 9:6**

After their sin and fall, Adam and Eve, shut out from Paradise, entered a broken world (Genesis 3). Alienated from God, the first human family soon became alienated from each other. Feelings of hatred, jealousy and anger led to the act of murder. When Cain killed Abel (Genesis 4:1-8), a cycle of violence began, man against man and nation against nation, which was to lead to fearsome wars and endless bloodshed. Chaos and tragic destruction have shaped the history of the human race ever since (Isaiah 19:2; Zechariah 14:13).

In Revelation 6:3-4 we see the unleashing of the red horse of strife, which will bring about the complete disintegration of all human relationships, for its rider has been given power to take peace from the earth.

When the ancient Greeks wanted to portray war in a drama, they did not bring on to the stage armies of extras dressed as soldiers, but rather a bent and bewildered old woman leading by the hand a weeping child who had lost his parents. Going to war is often presented as a thing of glamour

and those who participate in it are honoured as heroes. But what of the suffering of the innocent, the pain and anguished cries of those who have lost everything, and the fear and terror of the multitudes?

Luke 21:9 speaks of wars that would engulf societies and nations. The same Greek word [*polemoi*] is used in James 4:1 from which we see that at the heart of human conflict are the selfish passions which consume us and the longing for power, possessions and pride. We desire what we cannot have, we covet what we cannot obtain, and so we seek to destroy the other.

Heaven was also once a place of war (Revelation 12:7) when Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and expelled him. The defeated dragon (Satan) now makes war on earth, against the people of God, those who keep His commandments and bear testimony to Jesus.

***O Jesus, Prince of Peace, please fill with Your true peace my relationship with You, my relationships with others, and my own heart.***

## A broken world

*Luke 21:11; Romans 8:18-25*

The sin of Adam and Eve affected not only human relationships but also the whole of the created order. The harmony of God's original creation became unbalanced, its perfection marred (Genesis 3:14-19).

Just as humans turned against each other, so the other parts of creation began to compete. Weeds now smother fruitful plants; tectonic plates heave against one another producing earthquakes and tsunamis; storms and cyclones wrack the skies; floods and droughts assail the earth. Nature is "red in tooth and claw"<sup>1</sup> as food chains of carnivorous animals kill and eat each other. On top of this, human activities pollute and defile (Isaiah 24:5).

Worse is to come. In Revelation 8:7-12 we read of a series of large-scale natural disasters: grass and trees burnt up, fish dying in the sea, fresh waters polluted and undrinkable, the sun blotted out. There will be loss of human life and loss of livelihoods. The technology on which our modern world is built may be of little help as societies crumble and fall. Suffering will know no bounds.

But our creator God and loving heavenly Father is still in control. There is hope. The Apostle Paul explains that

creation itself is longing to be set free from its suffering and that its freedom is linked to our redemption.

... the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. (Romans 8:20-24)

***Lord Jesus Christ, whose death brought us redemption, help us to endure our present sufferings in confident hope of the glory that will be revealed.***

<sup>1</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, 1850.

## The black horse of famine

*Luke 21:11; Revelation 6:5-6; Habakkuk 3:17-18*

The brokenness of the world brings hunger. Adam and Eve's act of disobedience was to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one tree in the Garden of Eden that the LORD God had forbidden them (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-6).

Part of God's response to this food-related sin was also food-related. Eden had been full of trees that were "good for food" (Genesis 2:8-9). It seems this fruit had only to be plucked and eaten, but now God cursed the ground so that humans had to toil wearily to grow crops to feed themselves (Genesis 3:18-19). The "thorns and thistles" which God Himself mentions are representative of many other challenges: weather extremes, plant diseases, and animal foes ranging from caterpillars to elephants all add to the difficulties of growing food. On top of this is the loss of crops when armies rampage across arable fields, or when people are displaced by violence and can no longer farm or tend their plots.

The black horse of Revelation 6:5-6 represents famine. A voice tells us that staple crops are being sold at exorbitant prices. Clearly, food

is scarce, inflation is rampant and economic collapse is imminent – a scenario in many parts of today's world. But, although shockingly expensive, the wheat and barley are still priced by volume, which is a somewhat variable measure (Luke 6:38). The weighing scales carried by the rider of the black horse signal a worsening of the food crisis. For in Old Testament times, "eating bread by weight" was an indicator of extreme food shortage (Leviticus 26:26; Ezekiel 4:16). This meant that bread was being rationed and, for maximum accuracy, the rations were measured by weight.

However, as Jesus told the devil, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). Worse than a physical famine is a famine of hearing the words of the LORD (Amos 8:11-12).

***O Lord, my Creator and Provider, feed and strengthen me with Your Word that I may rejoice in You no matter how desperate my physical circumstances.***

# Pestilence, the sword of the Lord

**Luke 21:11; Revelation 6:7-8; 1 Corinthians 15:42-43**

When David sinned by taking a census, the LORD let him choose between three punishment options: war or famine or “the sword of the Lord” which was pestilence/plague (1 Chronicles 21:12-13). David chose pestilence, saying, “Let me fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is very great; but do not let me fall into human hands.”

In the Bible, pestilence is usually linked with war and famine, and often linked also with God’s judgment. Ezekiel spoke a message from the Sovereign LORD about sending upon Jerusalem “four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague” (Ezekiel 14:19-21, see also Jeremiah 14:12; 24:10). The fourth horseman of the apocalypse, whose name was Death, riding a pale green horse, links together war, famine, pestilence and judgment (Revelation 6:7-8).

Most disease, however, is inflicted by Satan, not by God. It is another outcome of the fall, another aspect of the brokenness of the created world, that sickness widely affects humans, animals and plants. For example, Satan was given permission by God to harm the body of righteous Job, and covered it with painful sores (Job 2:4-8). One of

Satan’s names is Beelzebul<sup>1</sup> meaning “Lord of the flies” (Luke 11:15). This name turns our thoughts to rottenness, decay, and swarms of flies ready to bite.

Scientists have made wonderful advances in treating formerly fatal diseases, but in the extended lifespans other diseases may begin to manifest themselves such as dementia. Furthermore, there are many people too poor to access the necessary treatments. We also face the spectre of antibiotic resistance, which may soon render useless many vital everyday medicines. Covid-19 is the latest of many pandemics, and we are told to expect more new diseases to emerge.

In a disease-ridden world, we must not be anxious or afraid. We should put ourselves into God’s hands, as David did, and trust Him while taking wise precautions. In heaven there will be no pain (Revelation 21:4).

***Merciful and loving God, my body, mind and spirit are in Your hands to do with according to Your good, pleasing and perfect will. Glorify Yourself in my life.***

<sup>1</sup> Beelzebul in some translations

# Persecution comes first

**Luke 21:12-19; Matthew 5:10-12; Philippians 1:29**

Before the wars, natural disasters, famines, plagues and terrifying heavenly signs that precede the return of Jesus, His followers will be persecuted (Luke 21:12,25-27). We could therefore say that persecution is the beginning of the beginning of the End. As such, is persecution something we should struggle to avoid? Or should we accept it, even embrace it and welcome the honour of having such a part in God’s eternal plan?

The persecution that Jesus predicts (Luke 21:12-16) is a kind that has been familiar to His followers for nearly 2,000 years: betrayal to the authorities, even by friends or close relatives, arrest and imprisonment, perhaps beatings and torture (Mark 13:9; Matthew 24:9 NRSV), ending for some with death. It is a sequence of events which, just days later, Jesus Himself would experience.

During this process, some will stand trial, accused perhaps of various false charges, but basically facing the law court because of their allegiance to Jesus. So it is marvellously fitting that He Himself will give us the wisdom and words we need on those occasions, even if we are appearing

before the highest in the land. Jesus tells us to neither worry about what we will say nor try to prepare our speech beforehand (Mark 13:11; Luke 21:14) but simply to rely on His promise that, at the time we need the words, He will give them to us through the Holy Spirit (Luke 21:15; Mark 13:11).

Such trials are an opportunity to testify to our faith (Luke 21:13). We should ensure it is for Jesus that we are hated (Luke 21:17), not for any other reason.

If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. (1 Peter 4:15-16)

Then our suffering will be glorious and our death – if it comes – will be martyrdom.

***Jesus, my Lord and Saviour, You suffered and died for me. If I am allowed to suffer and die for You, help me to do it well.***

# Preservation of our souls

**Luke 12:4-7; 21:18; Revelation 6:9-11; Isaiah 54:17**

“Not a hair of your head will perish,” says Jesus (Luke 21:18). It must have reminded His listening disciples of an earlier time when He had reassured them that the very hairs of their head were all numbered by God, so they should not be afraid in times of persecution (Luke 12:6-7). In the care of providence, absolutely nothing happens to us without God’s will.

But moments earlier Jesus had said that some of the disciples would be put to death (Luke 21:16). Is He contradicting Himself? Of course not. His promise of preservation is about our souls, not our earthly bodies, which will be replaced by resurrection bodies (1 Corinthians 15:35-56).

In understanding times of persecution, we must realise that it is our eternal souls which are important, not our temporary bodies. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,” Jesus tells us (Matthew 10:28).

Viewed from this eternal perspective, the need to seek justice, freedom and equality for ourselves as Christians on earth takes a back seat. These things are good in themselves,

but they are not priorities. If wrongs are not righted on earth, they will be righted in heaven.

After seeing the four horsemen ride forth, John is next shown the souls of the martyrs, calling loudly for justice, as they ask the Lord how long it will be until He judges the earth and avenges their deaths (Revelation 6:9-11). They are told to wait a little longer, until all those destined for martyrdom have been killed. Likewise, we on earth should wait patiently for God, in His time, to bring justice and judgment.

Many people strive to prolong their physical lives to the utmost. Some wealthy individuals have had their bodies frozen after death in the hope that future scientists will find a way to revive them. But with a spiritual understanding of the times, we can resist the desire to preserve our bodies and embrace the purposes of God who will keep us for all eternity.

***Thank You, Lord Jesus, for Your eternal promises, protection and provision. Help me to have a heavenly perspective on earthly events.***

# Perseverance under pressure

**Luke 21:19; Romans 8:35-39**

Luke 21:19 is a short verse, but has been translated into English in a multiplicity of ways. The key Greek word is *hupomone* which various Bible versions translate as perseverance, endurance, or standing firm. “By your endurance you will gain your souls,” says the NRSV Bible, accurately reflecting the future tense and that it is our souls (*psuche*), not our earthly lives, which we shall gain.

In a parallel passage, Jesus describes a future time of persecution when Christians are falling away from the faith and betraying one another, false prophets are leading people astray, wickedness is increasing and many who used to love the Lord no longer do so,

but the one who stands firm [*hupomone*] to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come

(Matthew 24:13-14).

If we stand firm, not only shall we save our souls but also the Gospel will be preached.

*Hupomone* is impossible to display in our lives when times are easy, for it is all about pressing on through trials and difficulties. It is not the “patience” listed as part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). It is the perseverance produced when we suffer (Romans 5:3), when our faith is tested (James 1:3) or as we strive to keep on living a godly life in a corrupt and immoral world (2 Peter 1:6).

Twice in the book of Revelation we read “This calls for *hupomone*” (Revelation 13:10; 14:12). The first occurrence is when the beast is being allowed to exercise authority on earth and to “make war on the saints”, even to conquer and kill them (Revelation 13:7 NRSV). The second is in the context of God’s wrath towards those who worshipped the beast (Revelation 13:12; 14:9-11). These descriptions indicate situations of acute pressure on believers, when much courage is needed to face danger unflinchingly and much discernment is needed to avoid being deceived and to understand the times.

***As the storm clouds gather in our world, Lord, make me steadfast and unswerving as I follow You.***

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