

Forecasting the Future

Luke 21:20-24

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for April 14, 2024

Stephen Davey

Every year, false prophets are exposed for attempting to predict the future and failing. That's why it's so vital for the believer to depend on the Bible to understand not just truths for our lives right now, but truths for the future as well. As Jesus continues His Olivet discourse, He delivers some warnings to the people of Israel in the form of prophecies, and 40 years later, all of His prophecies came true. That gives us all the more reason to trust His prophecies that haven't happened yet, as Stephen Davey explains in this sermon.

You're probably aware of so many attempts by people to predict the future: to predict success or failure; to predict what's going to happen next in our economy or in our world.

I remember Jean Dixon, an astrologer, who made one prediction after another. Even though she was either vague or completely wrong, she was followed by millions. She predicted that John F. Kennedy would lose the election; that China would bomb the U.S. in the 1990s and that world peace would come in the year 2000. She died in 1997 and wasn't able to see that prediction, like so many others, fail to take place.

Predictions are as old as human history.

Go all the way back to a Roman engineer by the name of Julius Frontinus, who said in the second century that inventions had reached their limit, and he saw no further developments taking place in the world.

John Ericksen, the surgeon to Queen Victoria, said in 1873: "The human heart is forever closed from any intrusion by a surgeon."

If you've had heart surgery, aren't you glad he was wrong?

I thought this was humorous: an American journalist by the name of Henri Browne said in 1893, "In a hundred years the law will be so simplified that lawyers and their fees will be greatly diminished."

Somebody should sue him for saying that!

Daniel Webster argued before the Senate in 1848, as it debated purchasing California from Mexico. He said, “I cannot conceive of anything more ridiculous than the idea that we will profit by this acquisition. [It will be proven] that California will not be worth one dollar.”

Who knows—there’s still time on that one!

Here’s an interesting prediction from Alex Lewyt, the president of a vacuum cleaner company back in 1955. He was quoted in the New York Times predicting, and I quote, “Nuclear powered vacuum cleaners will be a reality in 10 years.”

Nuclear powered vacuum cleaners—aren’t they loud enough already?

With the recent solar eclipse, I heard all sorts of end-times prophesies and so-called prophets who unfortunately said they represented God, who were saturating the internet, podcasting, preaching all kinds of predictions of the end of the world.

I read one pastor who said that he’d studied this eclipse and what it would mean for thousands of hours; evidently the trail of darkness from the eclipse was going to pass over one town named Alpha and another town named Omega and that was a sign the Lord was returning.

He went on to predict that since the trail of darkness also passed over a town named Nineveh, this was a sign that the solar eclipse would usher in the tribulation.

Another pastor called his congregation of several thousand people together the night before the eclipse; I watched a video clip where he declared that the eclipse was the sign of the rapture.

Fortunately for them, the church doesn’t take false prophets outside the city gates and stone them to death.

But unfortunately, the world is given even more reason to mock the idea of the Lord’s return.

All these false predictions give the world one more reason to keep on partying. “Hey, what do you know, Jesus didn’t come back after all; we’re in the clear!”

It invites the world to mock the Lord and the church and deny the credibility of the Bible.

It adds fuel to the fire of their unbelief.

What we should do is stop speculating and stick with prophecy that has come true, and we ought to be very careful to interpret prophecy that has yet to come to pass.

The Bible has several hundred prophecies of the Lord's future return, and a volume of predictions regarding His first coming: His birth, His life and ministry on earth, His death and resurrection.

- Micah 5:2 says that He will be born in Bethlehem.
- Hosea 11:1 predicts the Lord will spend time in Egypt, which he did as a little boy when Joseph and Mary ran with Him from Herod to save their lives.
- Isaiah 11:1-2 predicts that the Messiah will descend from Jesse, David's father and that He would be anointed by the Holy Spirit.
- Zechariah 9:9 predicts that the Lord will ride into Jerusalem on the unbroken foal of a donkey.
- Psalm 41:9 is fulfilled in the upper room; the Psalmist says, "Even my close friend ... who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me."
- Zechariah 13:7 predicts the event in the Garden of Gethsemane when the Lord's followers scattered and abandoned Him.
- Zechariah 11 predicted the thirty pieces of silver given for the Lord's betrayal and even the prediction that this money would later be thrown back into the temple, which is exactly what Judas did.

The prophecies of Scripture even predicted some of the specific details about the Lord's death:

- Isaiah 50:6 says that the Lord would have His beard pulled out, His back severely beaten with his accusers spitting on Him.
- David writes in Psalm 22:16: "They have pierced my hands and my feet." This is remarkable because David is predicting a crucifixion when this form of execution had not even been invented yet.
- In Psalm 22:18, it's as if David is watching the scene on Mount Calvary and he writes: "They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."
- Jesus even quotes the first verse of Psalm 22, tying His death to the prophecy of David. Verse 1 says, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

Add to these precise prophecies from Scripture—hundreds of them—the predictions made by Jesus Himself.

In fact, He's about to make a prediction that will come true 40 years later. In His mercy, He's effectively going to give this generation time to repent.

Let me show you His prediction. We're back in Luke's Gospel as we continue going through the Lord's Mount Olivet Discourse—the greatest sermon on prophecy ever delivered.

Everything He said in this sermon has come true, or will yet come true, as He forecasts the future for us here.

Here in Luke chapter 21 the Lord predicts the fall of Jerusalem and the judgment of God upon this generation.

Now before we dive in here, what Luke records here is unique to him. In Matthew's account, Matthew refers to events that take place in the middle of the tribulation period, a future time of judgment when the antichrist desecrates the temple in Jerusalem.

Luke isn't referring to that distant event which occurs in the tribulation, Luke refers to the destruction of Jerusalem that's going to take place sooner, when the Roman army arrives and destroys Jerusalem and the temple.

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Courageous* (Victor Books, 1989), p. 99

Matthew and Luke give us some different descriptions of this destruction, which lets us know these are two different events.

Now here's the prediction of Jesus according to **Luke 21:20**:

"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written."

Luke 21:20-22

God is moving to bring the nation Israel into judgment. Again, this event will take place 40 years later when this generation will be brought to justice.

The Jewish people will be exiled and scattered among the nations. And to this day, 2,000 years later, the Jewish people are still scattered. According to the Bible, they will return during the tribulation.

Today, there are millions of Jews living in other countries besides Israel. In fact, nearly as many Jewish people live in America as live in Israel.

As Jesus says this, they are about to be scattered to the wind throughout all the nations, and when did this happen? Jesus' prediction here in Luke 21 came to pass in A.D. 70.

Let me set the stage for you. The Jews had revolted in A.D. 66. General Vespasian arrives and puts down the revolt and brings much of the land back under Roman control.

But then Nero commits suicide, and the Roman empire stops its military conquests for about a year as they figure out what to do next. And what they do next is crown General Vespasian as the new emperor.

He soon promotes his son, Titus, and sends him to Jerusalem to finish the job. It will take five months to conquer Jerusalem.

And keep in mind, if anyone had taken Jesus' prophecy seriously, they would have had plenty of time to leave the city.

But when Titus arrives, Jerusalem decides to defy Rome and lock its gates.

So, the Roman army builds a stone wall that literally encircles the city, with Roman soldiers stationed around the entire circle. This way no one can escape, and no food get in.

Dale Ralph Davis, [Luke: The Year of the Lord's Favor](#) (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 151

This was what Jesus meant here in **verse 20** when He said that Jerusalem would be surrounded.

And Jesus clearly warns them, here in **verse 21**, to run for the hills. If you live in the country, the last place you want to come is to the city of Jerusalem.

In other words, Jerusalem didn't have some kind of special protection. It was actually facing the judgment of God and Rome was the sword in the hand of God.

Jesus says it clearly here in **verse 22 that "these are days of vengeance."**

This will be a time when God judges this nation.

J.C. Ryle writes here that because of the nation Israel's unbelief and unrepentance, a thunderstorm which has been gradually gathering is about to burst; the sword which had been long hanging over Israel's head was about to fall."

J.C. Ryle, [Expository Notes on the Gospels: Luke](#) (Evangelical Press, orig: 1879, reprint: 1975), p. 332

And don't miss this: this is a warning to every nation to this day.

Our own nation is not somehow immune to God's judgment; our country has no special covenant with God.

If Jerusalem can be judged for rejecting God, I don't know why any other nation would think they have a free pass to defy Him, to mock His word, to deny His creation of our universe, our world, our own bodies which belong to Him.

We are not a city shining the light on some hill; we are a nation officially and judicially and even religiously endorsing the sins of darkness.

- I cringe when I hear our national leaders saying with such pride that abortion is a health care issue.
- I shudder for our nation when it takes one day out of its national calendar to celebrate “Family Day” but one entire month to celebrate homosexuality.
- I am stunned to listen to the recordings of the arguments before our Supreme Court who went on to redefine marriage in defiance of Scripture and the created order of God.
- I am grieved over the loss of moral sensibility today that allows men dressed up like women to read to 3rd graders in school, or worse, to let them into girls locker rooms and dorms rooms.

But let me tell you, what grieves me more is that immorality and abortion and greed and drunkenness is as much a part of the so-called evangelical church today as it is in the world.

- I have seen a pastor leave his wife and never miss a Sunday in his pulpit.
- I have seen a pastor who committed adultery never miss teaching his Bible study.
- I have read of a pastor assaulting a woman in public and then tell the judge he was under stress.
- I have heard religious leaders defend their lavish lifestyle as something they deserved from God.

This was Jerusalem, surrounded by a corrupt, immoral Roman culture from the outside, and at the same time led by immoral, greedy, hypocritical religious leaders from within.

Throughout human history, a nation is often destroyed by corruption from within long before it is destroyed from without.

This destruction of Jerusalem has been long coming. It will be a foreshadowing of the greater destruction that will occur during the tribulation when all nations and all of unbelieving mankind will be unable to escape their appointment with God (***Revelation chapter 20***).

There is coming a day when God will hold every pastor and priest and religious leader accountable for having misled their generation by denying or distorting the teaching of Scripture (***James chapter 3***).

And God will hold every national and civic leader accountable for failing to defend righteousness and protect the innocent and stand for justice as they were appointed by God to so do (**Romans chapter 13**).

And that's in the distant future. But get this: this prediction from Jesus here in **Luke 21** is also a warning for us today, that any nation, including ours, can experience the judgment of God for its sin and defiance long before that final judgment of nations that will take place at the end of the tribulation period.

With that in mind I echo the words of an early American president, who said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just and that His justice cannot sleep forever."

For the Jewish people here in the first century, this prediction from Jesus was beyond shocking. It meant that everything they knew was going to collapse; everything about their world was going to change.

Jesus was telling them that Jerusalem would hold no sacred place of protection for them any longer. If you're out in the field, stay out there, don't come to Jerusalem; if you're inside the city of Jerusalem, get out while you have the chance.

It's hard for us to understand the shock and significance of Jesus' words here, but to tell them to leave the city meant to leave the temple; it meant that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed, set aside, that God evidently wasn't on their side after all.

Adapted from David E. Garland, [Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2011), p. 833

Now in the providence of God, this event would lead to a greater expansion of Christianity as the people who did believe the Lord scattered. And the church took Jesus seriously.

Eusebius of Caesarea wrote in the early 3rd century that many Christians left Jerusalem and scattered abroad, taking the gospel with them.

Davis, p. 151

But for everyone who ignored the warning, we can't imagine what it would have been like to hear the war drums of the approaching Roman army. To see rank after rank marching toward them: the baggage trains, the siege equipment, the battering rams, the catapults and endless columns of soldiers.

John Phillips, [Exploring the Gospel of Luke](#) (Kregel, 2005), p. 258

Once the army built that small stone barrier around the city, everything inside it was marked for destruction. Escape would be impossible.

And we know from history that Rome showed no mercy. Josephus writes that a million Jewish people died. Anyone trying to escape was caught and then crucified in plain sight of the city.

Historians tell us that the Roman army stopped crucifying Jews only because they ran out of wood.

Ibid, p. 259

Inside the city, the population was starving. Everything Jesus had predicted, up to this point, was fulfilled.

Jesus doesn't express any remorse for the destruction of the city or even the temple, but He does express grief here in **verse 23, when He says:**

“Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people.”

Luke 21:23

Again, none of them needed to experience this horror. Had they believed Jesus and taken His word and believed His prediction of coming judgment, they would have left with the Jerusalem church and found safety.

But just like the world today, the prediction of God's final judgment is ignored, it is mocked, and the world parties on.

The city of Jerusalem finally surrendered, and the Romans army killed nearly a million of them, and then deported the healthier and younger Jewish people—nearly 100,000 Jews—to various places where they were sold into slavery, some as gladiators to be killed in the games.

Ibid, p. 259

Jesus's prediction in verse 24 also came true:

“They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles.”

Luke 21:24

The glorious golden plated temple was burned up; whatever was flammable burned to the ground.

The soldiers literally dismantled the temple in order to collect all the gold that had melted into every crevice of every stone.

Again, this was predicted by the Lord back in verse 6:

“The days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Luke 21:6

The Jewish people couldn't have conceived of this destruction. They felt that God was on their side no matter what they did. Surely there was some kind of force field surrounding them.

I think of a more recent example of what must have been incredible shock and national devastation over everything a nation believed and had been taught.

I couldn't help but think of the country of Japan. They entered World War II completely confident that they were uniquely, divinely unconquerable. And that was because they believed their emperor was divine—the embodiment of the gods, primarily the sun goddess.

According to their national Shinto religion, he was the living descendant from a long line of emperors who had supposedly descended from deity. He had the claim of divine protection for himself and his nation.

When Japan lost the war, it was more than losing a war, it was the loss of their national religion, their gods, the emperor's status, the supposed power of their goddess; it was demoralizing as a nation to discover the stunning reality that their divine leader was just a man.

And in 1946, the emperor publicly declared that he was not divine.

General Douglas MacArthur understood this unique devastation and he knew the solution. He called on America to send a thousand missionaries to Japan, who would give them the gospel of the truly divine Son of God.

I preached in a church many years ago that had been planted by missionaries who had responded to the needs in Japan.

Now here in Luke 21 Jesus gives an important time stamp in this prediction.

He now tells this nation that the judgment of God won't last forever. Luke records this signature timestamp here in **verse 24:**

“They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Luke 21:24

With this, Luke looks further off into the distance, well beyond A.D. 70.

This phrase, “the times of the Gentiles” means—and you might write it in the margin of your Bibles—“until the times of Gentile rule is over.”

In other words, the domination of Gentile world empires will come to an end.

These times of the Gentiles began in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, according to Daniel chapter 2, and it will end when Jesus finally returns at the end of the tribulation and destroys the defiant Gentile nations as He arrives to set up His millennial kingdom.

At that time, the nation Israel will be restored; they will have repented, and they will be awaiting the Messiah as He returns to sit on David’s throne.

And that’s another series of prophecies, and another sermon or two—or twelve.

Let me wrap up our study today with some timeless truths from this event that took place in time.

If Jesus can forecast the future, if the Bible can predict with precision what will happen to kingdoms and nations and rulers and citizens, if Jesus can successfully predict the future, then these three principles are true:

First—it’s almost too obvious to miss—but here it is:

Jesus knows what’s going to happen next.

He doesn’t just know it in general; He knows it in particular.

He actually designed it to fulfill His purposes for human history and the movement of nations until His kingdom comes.

Secondly:

Evil never goes unnoticed by God.

J.C. Ryle warned 150 years ago to this point when he wrote, “We must never allow ourselves to suppose that the conduct of wicked men or wicked nations is not observed by God. All is seen and all is known, and a reckoning day will come at last.”

Ryle, p. 332

Third:

God is holding the hourglass of time, and it's running out.

The sands of time are running out.

There's an end date to the times of the Gentile rule; the nations that parade across the stage of human history won't last. No matter how strong, how proud, how confident.

God alone knows how much time is left.

In the mercy of Jesus, He gave Jerusalem 40 more years to respond to His warning. And don't miss it, when the Roman army arrived, 40 years later, a million people had refused to listen.

They kept sacrificing in that beautiful golden temple; the religious leaders kept reassuring them, "We know God; He's on our side. We have this temple, we have our history, there's no need to worry. We know what Jesus said, but look around, He's no king, there's no kingdom; so just keep doing what you're doing."

Jesus gave them 40 years; how much time has He given you?

You'd better choose the right King.

Because one day, and here's another prediction from Scripture:

The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord ... and He will reign forever and ever.

Revelation 11:15

You'd better choose the right king. You'd better belong to the right kingdom.

You'd better make the right choice today. While there's still some sand in the hourglass of your life, decide to follow King Jesus.

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Sermon Summary

In the unfolding of history, we witness the fulfillment of divine prophecy, as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, accurately foretold the future. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, as recorded in Luke 21:24, was not merely a historical event but a testament to the sovereignty and omniscience of God. The Jewish people, confident in their divine protection, could not fathom the devastation that awaited them.

Jesus's prophecy in Luke 21:24 also introduces the concept of "the times of the Gentiles," a period of Gentile domination that began with Nebuchadnezzar and will culminate with Christ's return and the establishment of His millennial kingdom. This period serves as a reminder that the reign of earthly empires is temporary and subject to God's ultimate plan.

The precision with which Jesus predicted the future establishes three foundational truths. First, Jesus knows what is to come, not just in broad strokes but in specific detail, orchestrating history to fulfill His divine purposes. Second, no act of evil escapes God's notice. Third, the hourglass of time is in God's hands, and the sands are running out.

The warnings of Luke 21 are not confined to the past but resonate with us today, serving as a sobering reminder that any nation, including our own, is susceptible to divine judgment for sin and defiance. The moral decay within a nation often precedes its external downfall, and the church is not exempt from this truth. Religious leaders who mislead their congregations and national leaders who fail to uphold righteousness will be held accountable by God.

As we reflect on these events and the certainty of God's word, we are compelled to choose the right King and belong to the right kingdom. The choice we make today, while there is still time, will determine our eternal destiny.

Key Takeaways:

- As believers, we must trust in the Lord's sovereignty and recognize that history unfolds according to His perfect plan. This trust should not lead to complacency but to a life of active faith and obedience, knowing that God's purposes will prevail.
- The inevitability of God's judgment on evil is a sobering reality that should motivate us to pursue holiness and justice. We are called to be salt and light in a world that often celebrates wickedness. Our response to evil should be one of compassion for the lost and a commitment to sharing the transformative power of the gospel.
- In a world that offers countless false saviors and fleeting pleasures, the call to surrender to Christ's lordship is paramount. Our decision to follow Him has eternal significance, and we must boldly proclaim the gospel.

Discussion Guide

Bible Reading:

- Luke 21:20-24
- Revelation 11:15

Observation Questions:

1. What signs does Luke 21:20-21 describe as indicators of Jerusalem's impending desolation?
2. According to Luke 21:22, what is the purpose of the days of vengeance, and how does it relate to what has been written?

Interpretation Questions:

1. How does the description of Jerusalem's fall in Luke 21 align with the concept of divine judgment and prophecy fulfillment?
2. What does the phrase "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" in Luke 21:24 suggest about the temporary nature of earthly powers?

Application Questions:

1. Reflecting on the certainty of God's word and the fulfillment of prophecy, what is one way you can demonstrate trust in God's sovereignty in a current situation you are facing?
2. In light of the temporary nature of earthly powers, identify one temporal pursuit you can deprioritize this week in favor of investing in your spiritual growth or service to God's kingdom.
3. Considering the inevitability of God's judgment, can you think of a specific area in your life where you need to pursue holiness more diligently, and what practical step will you take to do so?
4. How can you use the historical example of the spread of Christianity after Jerusalem's fall to encourage someone who is currently facing trials or uncertainties?
5. What is one conversation you can initiate this week to share the hope and salvation found in Jesus Christ with someone who may be seeking a "false savior"?