

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Luke 21:25-36

Verses 25-28

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth people will be in distress and anxiety over the roaring and tossing of the sea. They will be fainting in anticipation of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with power and tremendous glory. When these things begin to happen, stand erect and lift up your heads because your redemption is near.

This section is found in Luke's apocalypse, verses 6-36. The final phase before Christ's coming is the destruction of the universe, God's judgement extending to **sun, moon and stars**. Christ calls these **signs** for they serve as a joyful signal to the faithful and mentioned in verse 28, for they **can lift up their heads** at the approaching **nearness of redemption**. However, there may indeed be a period of peace following these portents (17:26-30).

The **earth** γης and the **world** οικουμένη refer to this place on which we live. The earth is the place and the world are the inhabitants. Obviously, what happens in the universe involves the planet on which we dwell and it is understandable that the signs of God's judgement will concern us here on earth.

Those who are in **distress** are in fact the unbelieving generation, though Christians will be caught up in the earth's destruction, they know the Saviour and they know why these things are happening. **Distress, anxiety and fainting** occur because of a refusal to believe that this world can end. People are not prepared because they go on hoping that the convenient life they have will continue. They live for the earth and the world and all that they have in it and therefore cannot endure the terrors of the end.

Jesus' repeated word to his people is to stand firm (vv. 19, 36).

The final act of judgement on unbelievers occurring on the dissolving remains of this earth will be the appearance of the Lord of glory and power, the man who is God. For believers in Christ, the Lord tells them to get ready for deliverance by **standing up** and looking towards their victorious deliverer. Jesus is first and foremost the Redeemer. **Redemption** απολύτρωσις in its usual understanding is the act of buying back a slave or captive. It has to do with forgiveness and releasing people from their bondage to sin, death and the devil. Here, it means deliverance from the travails of creation for Christ tells his children to respond to the signs by anticipating not destruction but redemption. Instead of fear and perplexity that the non-Christian population will experience, Christians will have a quiet hope and a growing excitement that their deliverance is getting closer (Habakkuk 2:4).

The power and glory of God is obviously Christ's too (Revelation 1:5,6). See Daniel 7:13 for an understanding of **the clouds and the Son of Man**. In the Psalms, a cloud represented God's chariot (68:4; 104:3). It is a symbol for power and dominion.

Verses 29-31

And he told them a parable. Consider the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout their leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So for you, when you see these things happening you know that the kingdom of God is near.

The signs are nothing in themselves. People may look for solutions but the end will relentlessly follow. Jesus began his ministry by saying the kingdom of God is near (Mark 1:15; Luke 8:1) and the kingdom did come with Jesus' work, especially his death and resurrection (Luke 10:9; 11:20; 12:32). For Christ could say that the kingdom is in the midst of his disciples or within them (17:21). But from chapters 19-23 of Luke, the Kingdom is particularly a future event. In this

context, Jesus uses the word **near** ἐγγύς to mean the arrival of the kingdom visibly. By faith the disciples of the Lord possess the kingdom but not by sight. That will come at the end with visible power and glory.

Verses 32,33

Truly I tell you that this generation will never pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away but my word will never pass away.

We come to a notoriously difficult verse to interpret. What is meant by **this generation** γενεά αὐτή? Several options are possible: a) Jesus was mistaken for indeed the generation he addressed has certainly passed away, b) he referred to a future and indefinite generation that will eventually see these final signs before his coming, c) it was a type of generation that he had in mind, one that was skeptical or demanded miraculous proof before it would repent. Clearly a) is unsatisfactory. In his humanity, Christ did not know the time the Father had set for the end (Matt 24:36) but on such an important matter it seems instinctive to say that he would not make a misleading statement. And besides, Luke probably wrote this gospel after some of the generation of Christ had passed away and would surely have made an attempt to alter it. The second option has more merit but the word **this** precludes an indefinite generation. The best option is c) and in support of this is the word **all** and not **all these things**. **All** πάντα stands alone and may not only refer to the signs of the end but to all of Jesus' ministry, from the beginning to the very last event that fulfills this prophecy. **This generation** taunted our Lord for signs (11:29-32). This generation comprises those Jewish people who reject their Messiah. It was given signs but never responded. Yes, it will get its signs, but signs of a different and most unwelcome nature.

Jesus concludes his prophecies on what will pass away: the universe and the unbelieving Jews. **Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.** What does Jesus mean when he says the universe will pass away? Does he mean that not one atom, not one person, not one star will ever exist? Jesus is making a contrast between what seems to endure eternally but is really contingent on God's power and **his words** that will endure and be heard when all other noises cease. These words are unalterable whereas the universe can change, decay and eventually at this coming, be renewed. This is a momentous saying that indirectly exalts Jesus as God. We know the power of decay but many things have a habit of lasting because of libraries, archives, computer memory, time capsules etc. All of these things will disappear. We know of God's promises of a new heaven and earth and of the resurrection of the dead, including those destined for perdition. But before the creation of all things in an utterly new fashion there must be the word of God. Jesus' words are the resurrection and have the same creative power of the words that God uttered at the beginning when he said, **let there be**.

Verses 34-36

Pay attention to yourselves in case your hearts are weighed down by dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life. That day might approach you suddenly and close on you like a trap. It will rush in suddenly on all those living on the face of the whole earth. Watch at every time praying that you might be able to escape all these things about to happen and to be able to stand before the Son of Man.

Jesus exhorts his listeners as he did in verse 19.

Distraction is one thing but the Lord mentions a life-style of near debauchery, of completely giving oneself over to carousing and drunkenness. But the desire to get rich or the anxiety to avoid poverty can also control one's life so that no thought of the kingdom, its coming and the appearance of the Redeemer is ever present. There is much that can consume life, body and mind. The final day and the coming of Christ are **sudden** ἀφνίδιος. There is no warning and there is no gradual development in Christ's return. Therefore, repentance at the end will not be possible. Christ gives a further graphic warning about his coming's suddenness: **close on you like a trap**.

Nor will his coming be a spreading event, going from one area to another. **The whole face of the earth** will witness the end and the coming of the Lord. Again, Christ mentions its suddenness but

uses a verb: επεισελεύσεται. **Watch** αγρυπνειτε means to keep faithful and doing the Lord's work, which means, mission and maturing. Jesus normally adds praying but here prayer is for **escaping** from the ordeals that will occur before the end of all things. If God does not exempt us from such grievous suffering, then Jesus adds that above all pray that one can be presented to Christ without shame. One normally **stands** to greet the Lord but here it is faithfulness that Christ has in mind. We are justified by grace and can stand without spot or blemish as Paul says (1Corinthians 1:7,8) and we also do not want to negate faith by a careless disregard for the gift of salvation evident in a disobedient life lacking in commitment.