

## THE LAST DAYS

### Luke 21:5-19; 25-31:

<sup>5</sup> Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, <sup>6</sup> “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.”

<sup>7</sup> “Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”

<sup>8</sup> He replied: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. <sup>9</sup> When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”

<sup>10</sup> Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

<sup>11</sup> There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

<sup>12</sup> “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. <sup>13</sup> And so you will bear testimony to me. <sup>14</sup> But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. <sup>15</sup> For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. <sup>16</sup> You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup> Everyone will hate you because of me. <sup>18</sup> But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup> Stand firm, and you will win life.

<sup>25</sup> “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. <sup>26</sup> People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

<sup>29</sup> He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. <sup>30</sup> When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. <sup>31</sup> Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

### MESSAGE:

In the Rogers and Hammerstein classic musical *Oklahoma!* a cowboy sings a song about a trip he took to Kansas City. The song goes like this: “*Everything’s up to date in Kansas City; they’ve gone about as far as they can go; They went and built a skyscraper seven stories high; About as high as a building ought to grow!*” The song had special meaning to me when I was a child because I grew up in Joplin, Missouri, a town just south of

Kansas City, where the tallest building in town was eight stories tall. I didn't see anything taller than that until I was twelve years old and our school safety patrol got to take a train trip to Kansas City, where I was amazed to see skyscrapers that were a whole lot taller than eight stories. So I can relate to the cowboy's song. In the same way, I can relate to the awe that Jesus' disciples felt when they beheld the beauty and majesty of the Jerusalem temple. Mark records that the disciples exclaimed, "*Look teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!*" (Mark 13:1) I imagine all of us have experienced a similar feeling when we gazed upon some engineering marvel like the Golden Gate Bridge or Hoover Dam. It's impressive what human beings can build when they put their minds to it.

Jesus, on the other hand, was not impressed. "*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.*" He reminded his disciples' that what man had built, man could destroy. There is a Sears Tower, but there was once a World Trade Center.

When they heard this, the disciples immediately wanted to know, "*When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?*" Give us a leg up on things, Jesus! What's the stock market going to do? How will we know when it's going to do it?

In Matthew's account of this conversation, Jesus responds directly to their question: "*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*" (Matt. 24:36) Clearly, God does not consider it to be in our best interest for us to know the "whens" and "hows" of future events. One thing we can be sure of, He says, and that is that the future will be filled with calamities: wars, revolutions, earthquakes, famines, diseases, the hatred and the persecution of believers, betrayal by friends and even the members of one's own family and, ultimately, the meltdown of creation itself.

What a different future this is from the one envisioned by modern secular man who dreams of a future full of progress in which the human intellect triumphs over everything that stands in the way of human happiness. Peace will replace war when we just give peace a chance; agricultural progress will eliminate hunger, medical science will wipe out disease or at least minimize its effects; enlightened government will engineer a perfect society in which there is no crime and perfect justice is dispensed; there will be no more poverty and we will even be able to control the climate. In short, we will someday build utopia and then all there will be for people to do is ride their non-polluting bicycles to and from their eco-friendly jobs.

Two opposite visions of the future. But, as someone once said, if you want to see what the future looks like, just look at the past. And which of the two visions of the future of mankind best comports with the history of mankind? Has man made progress throughout history? Has he been able to improve his condition in such a way as to give us confidence that he can continue to do so in the future? Well, in certain ways—yes. We can point to

the advances we've made in science and technology and argue that progress in these areas has brought many benefits to mankind—in transportation, communication, information storage and retrieval, medicine, nutrition and many other areas. For these advances we can be thankful and take pride. But there is also a dark side to things. It seems that every time we come up with a scientific and technological innovation, we find ways to use it for evil purposes as well as good.

The internet, for example, has given us fantastic new abilities to communicate through email and social media, but it has also furnished a perfect venue for pornography and terrorist activity. Rocket science has put a man on the moon and given us the GPS and satellites, but it has also given us ICBM's. Nuclear physics has expanded the ability of medical science to diagnose and treat diseases but it has also made it possible to wipe mankind off the face of the earth. Bacteriology? Virology? Pluses and minuses. As long as human nature is sinful, men will find evil uses for things. In fact, new technology actually enables those who want to do evil to magnify the evil they set out to do. A machine gun can kill a lot more people than a knife. A bomb made with fertilizer and carried in the back of a pickup truck can demolish a multi-story building. What enables man to build also enables him to destroy, and the evidence of man's destructive tendencies throughout history equals if not exceeds his constructive tendencies. It is a fact, for example, that more people perished from war and genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century than in all previous centuries combined. Whatever else one wants to make of that fact, it hardly demonstrates an improvement in man's moral and spiritual character.

Even judging from a more limited timeframe—say the past fifty years—the direction of change in our own country is not encouraging. The rates of divorce, depression, suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, pornography addiction and fatherless homes are significantly higher they were fifty years ago.

And speaking of the future, what are its implications for our children and their children? In a poll of junior high school teachers conducted back in the 1950's the top five concerns of teachers were: chewing gum in school, running in the hallways, whispering during study hall, throwing spitballs at each other and failing to do homework. In a recent poll, their top five concerns were: fear of being physically attacked by a student, being sued by a student's parents, drug usage among students and their parents, teenage pregnancies and sexual harassment in the hallways. These are facts of life and they are indicators of the increase in the spiritual and moral decay of society which the Bible predicts. It's an ugly picture, but it's the truth and it's evidence that if we place our faith and hope in the future of the kingdom of this world, we are in for many rude awakenings. What man builds, man destroys. Solomon, the King of Israel, built a great temple and Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, tore it down. Herod the Great built another magnificent temple, and Titus, the Roman emperor, tore it down. Our walk through this world is a journey through the valley of the shadow of death, and there is always someone in the valley who is meaner and tougher than you are. It's called the pecking order and that's the way the kingdom of this world operates.

There is, however, another kingdom, a kingdom that is not of this world, a kingdom called the Kingdom of God. Instead of being ruled by a pecking order it's ruled by love; instead of encouraging a spirit of retribution, it encourages a spirit of forgiveness. Instead of defining greatness in terms of human power and authority, it defines greatness in terms of loving service toward one's neighbor. Instead of defining joy in terms of wealth and worldly pleasure, it defines joy in terms of the promise of eternal life. It is a kingdom whose citizens have been humbled by repentance for their sins and who have been transformed by God into people who value charity above pride. It is a kingdom in which human minds have been opened to the wisdom and truth of Scripture. It is a kingdom which Jesus ushered in at the cross and which will last forever. It is not a kingdom which you can point to and say, "There it is!" or "Here it is!" because the geography of this kingdom is the human heart. It's King is Jesus, who lives and reigns it in forever.

When you enter this kingdom, everything changes. You begin to live with hope rather than despair; with the truth rather than lies. Your life is harder in some ways because your sins bother you more than they used to, but you have the assurance that they are all forgiven. When hard times come—as they do to all, both Christians and pagans—you no longer face them alone: God helps you to bear them and He has even promised to bring good out of your suffering. When times of joy come—and they come often to those who believe—you know where they came from and who to thank for them. You will have stepped over from darkness into light, from the ephemeral to the real, and from the temporary to the eternal. Even the terrible things Jesus describes that lie ahead, things that will cause those who have placed their hopes in the kingdom of this world to faint from terror as they see their idols being cast down stone by stone—even these things will be a cause of rejoicing for you, because they will be a sign that a new heavens and a new earth are right around the corner. Remember the King's promise: "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

The signs have been given! The Kingdom of God is here and it is now! Come and worship the king!

Amen.