

The Destruction Of Jerusalem And The Return Of The Son Of Man Luke 21:5-36

As we were ending our program on Tuesday July 12, we had a question from a viewer about a passage in Luke. He quoted it as follows:

Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:36 NKJV).

The question concerned what does it mean to be “counted worthy to escape?” Does this refer to escaping the punishment that the Lord will send to the world, the Great Tribulation? Is the escape speaking of the rapture of the church?

In other words, will some Christians go through the Great Tribulation period because they are not living worthy lives? The belief that this is the correct understanding of Jesus’ words is known as the “partial rapture theory.”

This seemed to be the gist of the question from our viewer, and it is a great question. Please note we deal with the issue of the partial rapture theory in my book on the Rapture. We’ve posted it on the website for those interested in the pros and cons.

Due to lack of time, I promised to deal with it at the start of the next Q and A program (Monday July 18). So, before we go live on that date, I’d like to summarize a number of important things in answer to the question. There are indeed many issues that come up. Consequently, I may later expand my answer.

This Is A Difficult Passage of Scripture

To begin with, Luke 21, Jesus’ teaching about the destruction of the temple and His return to the earth, the Olivet discourse, is a notoriously difficult chapter. The *Preaching the Word Commentary* puts it this way:

According to Earle Ellis, the venerable New Testament scholar, the ... Olivet Discourse, recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, “has been the subject of more scholarly debate than perhaps any other passage in the Gospels.” ... The study of it requires a proper humility and a willingness to admit that we do not have all the answers (*Preaching the Word Commentary*, The Olivet Discourse, Luke 21:5-38).

The Context

It begins with Jesus at the temple observing the money that the rich people were putting into the treasury. Then a poor widow came and cast in a very small amount. Jesus stated that she put in more than any of them because it was basically all that she had. This is a further illustration of Jesus’ teaching regarding wealth. As with the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16, we find that wealth does not always mean God’s blessing is on someone’s life, as poverty does not always mean God’s disfavor.

Still at the temple, the people were admiring the beautiful stones. Jesus then predicted the destruction of the temple to the place where no stone would be left upon another. In other words, total destruction:

As for these things that you are gazing at, the days will come when not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down! (Luke 21:6 NET).

This caused the following questions to be asked:

So they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that these things are about to take place?” (Luke 21:7 NET).

The two questions are actually synonymous. These people wanted to know when this sacred building would be destroyed.

We should note that these are not the same questions we find in Matthew 24:1-3:

Now as Jesus was going out of the temple courts and walking away, his disciples came to show him the temple buildings. And he said to them, “Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down! As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his disciples came to him privately and said, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:1-3 NET)

These questions, and Jesus’ answers, were directed to His return to the earth at the end of the age. The questions in Luke merely have to do with the temple that was standing at that time and its coming destruction. It’s important that we recognize this distinction.

The End Is Not Yet

In answering their question, Jesus also made it clear that they would see certain signs. However, these signs do not mean the end is imminent:

He replied, “Don’t let anyone mislead you, for many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and saying, ‘The time has come!’ But don’t believe them. And when you hear of wars and insurrections, don’t panic. Yes, these things must take place first, but the end won’t follow immediately” (Luke 21:8,9 NLT).

In other words, there first will be wars, insurrections, famines, earthquakes, and disease (21:9–11) which will occur before this event takes place, the fall of Jerusalem. While these events may signal the nearness of the end, it is not possible to make any calculation based upon their occurrence. Furthermore, persecution of believers will also precede the end (21:12-19). This is important for us to understand.

The Two Events

In answering the specific question that is found in Luke, Jesus actually speaks of two events. The event on the near horizon is the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, as well as the people being led into captivity. There is also the anticipation of another event, namely the return of the Son of Man and the final judgment. They do not happen at the same time.

The Destruction Of Jerusalem As A Picture Of The Final Judgment (Luke 21:20-24)

The Lord first speaks of the coming destruction of Jerusalem:

And when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then you will know that the time of its destruction has arrived. Then those in Judea must flee to the hills. Those in Jerusalem must get out, and those out in the country should not return to the city. For those will be days of God’s vengeance, and the prophetic words of the Scriptures will be fulfilled. How terrible it will be for pregnant women and for nursing mothers in those days. For there will be disaster in the land and great anger against this people. They will be killed by the sword or sent away as captives to all the nations of the world. And Jerusalem will be trampled down by the Gentiles until the period of the Gentiles comes to an end (Luke 21:20-24 NLT).

Jesus Then Began to Speak about His Return (21:25-33)

We find that the first section specifically deals with the destruction of the temple that was then standing, as well as the captivity of the people. Then Jesus spoke of a far-off event, His return to the earth.

After Jesus speaks of His Second Coming, He closes with this claim:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Luke 21:33 NET).

Then He give some personal instruction to His disciples:

But be on your guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day close down upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will overtake all who live on the face of the whole earth (Luke 21:34-35 NET).

Luke 24:36

We then come to verse 36, the verse in question. But something seems to be amiss!

As we mentioned earlier, the New King James translation, following the King James Version, reads:

Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36 NKJV).

However, the New English Translation, the NET Bible, along with most other modern translations, read as follows:

But stay alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that must happen, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36 NET).

Instead of “pray that you may be counted worthy to escape,” almost all modern translations read “pray that you may have the strength to escape.” They are not saying the same thing!

Why the difference? Does the Greek word actually mean “to have strength” rather than “to be counted worthy?” Has our understanding of the meaning of this word changed over time?

The Answer Lies In The Greek Text

No, the meaning of the word has not changed. What we have here is a variant reading, a variation in the Greek text. Some of the manuscripts read “you may be counted worthy to escape,” while others read, “you may have the strength to escape.”

“you may be accounted worthy” is a translation of the Greek word *καταξιωθητε* the dictionary form is pronounced kata ksee ah oh.

“for the strength to overcome” ... the Greek word used here is *κατισχυσητε* ... the dictionary form is pronounced kat is cue oh

Translations That Say “You May Be Accounted Worthy”

The older English translations Wycliffe, Tyndale, Bishop’s Bible, Geneva Bible, the Latin Vulgate have the same reading as the King James and New King James.

On the other hand, almost all modern translations have the other reading. It is rendered as follows:

The phrase ... ‘that you may be strong to escape’ is translated ‘that you will be strong enough to escape’ [NCV], ‘that you may have strength to escape’ [BECNT, NTC, WBC; HCSB, NASB, NET, NRSV], ‘so that you have the power to escape’ [GW], ‘that you prevail to escape’ [Lns], ‘that you can escape’ [CEV], ‘that you may be able to escape’ [NIV], ‘that, if possible, you may escape’ [NLT], ‘that you will have the strength to go safely through’ [TEV], ‘for the strength to pass safely through’ [REB], ‘for the strength to come safely through’ [AB]. (*Exegetical Summary Series*, Luke 21:36).

So which is it? Are we to pray that we are to be “counted worthy” to escape or to pray that “we have the strength” to escape?

This is one of those instances where a decision is not easy. Each reading will work in the context.

We explain each as follows:

Option 1 The Strength To Escape

The warning to His disciples is primarily to those who will witness the fall of Jerusalem (which took place in A.D. 70, some forty years after Jesus gave this warning). They were to leave when they saw the armies arrive. We saw this earlier in Luke 21:20-24.

They should pray to have the strength to escape, since they know what is going to take place, per the words of Jesus. Indeed, the city and the temple were both destroyed and the people were either killed or taken captive. The good news is that many Christians heeded the words of Jesus and did escape Jerusalem while they could get out.

You may be able to escape (have strength to escape)

There are number of ways that commentators explain the ability to escape:

The purpose of prayer is to escape (literally be strong enough to escape) the things that are about to take place. Only through such prayer will they be able to “not give up” (Luke 18:1) and “keep the faith” (cf. 18:8). All that is about to happen. This alludes to the “messianic woes” suggested in the signs of 21:25-26. These circumstances, which come upon the believer from outside, along with those mentioned in 21:34–35, which come from within, pose a danger. Through prayer, however, the believer will be strengthened and able to escape from apostasy and sin (Luke, *New American Commentary*)

“Strength to escape” (v. 36) could refer back to the escape of verse 21 or to enduring the persecutions of verses 12-19; “standing before the Son of Man” may mean persevering or being presented triumphant before him. For this use of “snare” or “trap” as judgment imagery, cf. perhaps Is 8:14; 24:17-18; Jer 48:43-44; 50:24; Ezek 12:13; 17:20. (Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, New Testament. Luke 21:34-36)

Basically, it is Jesus warning them to pray for strength to do what is necessary. This includes dangers from within and without.

Option 2 Be Counted Worthy To Escape

Since most modern commentators do not believe that this is the correct reading they don’t bother trying to interpret this difficult phrase. This phrase is more difficult one to interpret in this context.

When it is interpreted there have been those who conclude that it teaches a rapture of the church before the Great Tribulation, a pre-tribulation rapture. It is also argued that if a person needs to pray to be worthy to escape, then it seems to indicate that the unworthy Christians will not escape the judgments which will come upon the earth. In other words, they will not be taken up in the rapture of the church. This is why it is called the “partial rapture theory.”

J. Vernon McGee, while accepting the reading in the King James Version, makes it clear that our worthiness has nothing to do with escaping the Great Tribulation:

How are you going to be worthy? The only thing that will make me worthy is my position in Christ. Therefore, I have trusted Him as my Savior, and I have committed my way to Him, so that if I am alive at the time of the Rapture, I'll be going to meet Him in the air by the grace of God (J. Vernon McGee, Thru The Bible Commentary, Volumes 1-5, Genesis Through Revelation, Luke 21:35-38).

If “be counted worthy to escape” is what Luke originally wrote, then what Dr. McGee wrote would be the proper understanding of what our Lord said. Indeed, our worthiness is because of Him, it has nothing to do with our faith or our behavior. We are saved by what He has done for us, we can do nothing to earn it, or to keep it. In sum, only He is worthy, we are not!

Therefore, whichever of the two phrases that one may believe to be original, they both can be explained in a way that does not contradict the totality of Scripture.

Summing Up Luke 21:36 In Light Of The Context

There are a number of difficult issues in Luke 21 to which good Bible-believers differ. They include the following:

Based upon the questions that Jesus was asked, some feel the entire chapter is about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

Others, believe the context switches from the predicted fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple to the time of the end, the Second Coming of Christ. This seems to be the best answer when all the facts are considered.

The reason as to why certain English translations differ in Luke 21:36 has to do with a variant reading in the Greek text. Some manuscripts read “pray that you will be found worthy to escape” while others read “pray that you'll have the strength to escape.”

Since there is a question as to how the original text read, this verse should not be used as evidence of either a pre-tribulation rapture or a partial rapture. While there is evidence for a pre-tribulation rapture, there is none for a partial rapture.

“Keep alert” has been the focus of the parables of Jesus when the Lord spoke of His return. We find the same thing emphasized here.

Indeed, as we wait for His return, we occupy till He comes. In doing so we honor Him by the way in which we live, all the while knowing that it is by His grace that are saved from our sins and that He will eventually take us to be with Him either through death or the rapture of the church.