

# Everything Will Fall

*A sermon on Luke 21:5-19 by Nathan Nettleton, 16 November 2025*

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## Message

Jesus warns us that disasters are ubiquitous and do not all herald the end of time, and calls us to persevere in the life of love even when we are blamed and persecuted.

## Sermon

A week ago, I had a catch-up on Zoom with my friend Bishop Malkhaz at the Peace Cathedral in Tbilisi, Georgia. He was telling me that the political situation there is getting more and more perilous. It is only 35 years since Georgia became an independent democracy after decades under Soviet rule, but once again opposition politicians are being jailed, and protesters and journalists are being attacked. Malkhaz himself has started giving some thought to what books his family should bring to him if he is jailed. He said to me, “I was born under totalitarianism; I was hoping not to die under totalitarianism.”

My recent time in Georgia made me realise how sheltered I am. Not only am I healthy, educated, and financially well off, but I live in a country that has oceans for borders and that has one of the most robust, fair and trusted democratic systems in the world. And most of the time, I take all that for granted. Apart from my health, which is showing signs of age, I mostly assume that the rest will just go on forever.

But here’s the thing. Most of my friends in the USA felt like that ten years ago too, and many of them are not feeling nearly so confident about the stability of their democracy and their nation’s future today. And my friends in other great Western powers like France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are feeling increasingly jittery too. Things that once seemed so certain and secure seem to be increasingly shaky.

“This beautiful temple you are all admiring,” says Jesus. “So solid, so dependable, so impressive. You’re thinking it is an immovable monument to the stability of God’s guarantee of our national future. Really? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

“You will hear of wars and insurrections; these things must happen. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be terrifying events and great signs from the sky.”

The gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record versions of this speech where Jesus goes all apocalyptic while looking at the Jerusalem temple. The onlookers are feeling pretty good about its beauty and its permanence, but Jesus pulls the rug out from under them. It’s all going to come crashing down, he says. Everything will fall.

The people immediately hear this as an end-times prophesy. I don’t think that is what Jesus is saying, but it is their reaction. “When will this be, and what will be the sign that it is about to happen?” They don’t hear Jesus’s words as a negative condition report on the structural integrity of the temple, or even as a warning that the Romans are coming with wrecking balls (which is probably what he meant). To his hearers, the Temple crashing down can only mean one thing: the end of the world.

We've been making similar mistakes in response to Jesus's words ever since. In every era, things happen that seem unprecedented, incomprehensible, and ominous, and they seem to us so earth-shattering that we start to think they must herald the collapse of society as we know it, or perhaps even the end of the world. Whether it is wars, or famines, or pandemics, or bizarre leaders; whatever threatens and disrupts our sense of normality and security has us wondering if this is a sign of the end.

Many of our reactions are overblown because we imagine that anything we haven't witnessed before is unprecedented, when usually that just reveals our own historical ignorance. We react to someone like Donald Trump as though the world has never before seen a national leader so obsessed with self-promotion and self-aggrandisement, when history could show us any number of Roman emperors or monarchs of England and Europe who make him look comparatively humble and prudent. But in every era, we mistakenly imagine the current set of circumstances to be uniquely catastrophic.

Often when we look back, we wonder how we got so jittery. This past week marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dismissal of the Whitlam government, and it is a bit bemusing to look back on how many of us were seeing that as the death of democracy and thinking we'd begun a rapid slide into some sort of totalitarian nightmare.

Now at risk of ignoring my own warning here, it seems to me that some of the circumstances of our own day are posing threats that are bigger than any before. There are plenty of precedents for pandemics before covid, but what covid showed us is that in an era of widespread global travel, a pandemic can now become truly global in a way that something like the Spanish Flu epidemic a hundred years earlier never could. And the scientists tell us that there is no way that covid will be the last one.

We've been living with the threat of nuclear war for decades now, and as grave as it is, we've kind of gotten used to it. But unlike nuclear war which would require someone to do something insane, the growing threat of climate catastrophe now just requires everyone to do nothing and go on as usual. In fact, unless the very power-brokers who stand to profit most from climate denial undergo a massive repentance and conversion, climate catastrophe is now pretty much inevitable. It is just a question of how bad it will be.

Another circumstance which both covid and climate change highlight to us is the breakdown in trust of public information and institutions. We have unusual numbers of people who outright deny the existence of both. There have been fanatics who have continued to deny the existence of covid even while suffering and dying from it. There are people who deny climate change, even while mopping up after a third once-in-a-hundred-years flood in the space of five years. No doubt there have been eras where public trust has broken down before, but the scale and the global implications of the current pattern are certainly noteworthy, if not perhaps unprecedented. And with that breakdown in trust, we are seeing a breakdown in many of the social institutions, including patterns of liberal democratic government.

Whether or not we are right in thinking that the collection of the global threats we are facing in our era is something bigger than ever before, the first thing to note from what Jesus says in this story is that he is quick to hose down speculation about whether it is heralding some new

earth-shattering act of God. He tells us that in every era, there will be people jumping up saying that the second coming is about to happen, or that it has happened and they're it. "Do not go after them," he says. And do not get caught up in that kind of speculation.

In fact, in earlier chapters of Luke (17:20-21; 19:41-44), Jesus has told us that the earth-shattering act of God is already here, and that it is because we fail to recognise God among us that we end up with the Roman forces bearing down on us and tearing everything down. Rather than the disasters heralding some future event, they are a consequence of our prior failure to follow Jesus in the way of radical love and peace.

But Jesus also warns us that this way of love and peace is going to provoke hostility and persecution. Now, setting aside the religious right who tend to claim that they are being horribly persecuted if anyone laughs at them or doesn't agree with them, or if the government doesn't legislate everything they want, I think most of us have tended to ignore this warning and think that it belongs to another era or at least another place. But my friend Malkhaz in Georgia is not being paranoid when he wonders what he will read in prison, and there are perfectly sane Christians in the USA who are being arrested for obstructing the brutalities of ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Neither of those countries are places where we would have expected to see such things ten years ago. So what's going on, and what's it got to do with these words of Jesus.

Firstly, note that despite the context, Jesus is not describing such persecution as particular to some future end-times. He says quite the opposite. He hoes down speculation about the end-times, and then says, before any such things happen, you will be being arrested and persecuted.

It seems to me that there are two significant causes of this, and we can see both happening in the world we live in, even if they are not so apparent in Australia at this point. Unfortunately, we can see reasons to be concerned that we may not be spared it for long.

The first factor is that in times of significant crisis, hostile nationalism seems to become socially expected and even socially compulsory. The MAGA movement in the USA is quite open about their commitment to "America First", but even when the same slogan isn't adopted, you can see the same commitment in play in many debates here, especially those about immigration and refugees.

And as climate catastrophe begins to bite and we start to see more and more climate refugees fleeing places that are no longer habitable, and everyone starts to fear that if we let them in it will mean trying to stretch increasingly sparse rations and resources here, you can be sure that there will be even bigger anti-immigration crowds in the streets and that advocating welcome and hospitality to our global neighbours will come to be denounced as anti-Australian and as a threat to our security and our lives.

But what sort of action is called for? Is it just advocating, or protesting against the message of the hostile protestors? This week, some of those who were involved in counter-protests against the recent anti-immigration marches faced the courts charged with violence against the police. When our focus is on opposing those we think are wrong, we are always in danger of becoming the mirror image of those we are opposing and just another faction in the cesspool of hostility.

The alternative to which Jesus calls us is to boldly create the opposite practice, to create practices of beauty in the face of rising ugliness. If hostility towards refugees and calls for their deportation are ramping up, then we create communities of radical hospitality which welcome, shelter and provide for persecuted refugees. When Jesus boldly took despised and rejected people under his wing, the hostility and abuse turned on him. If we follow his example, we can expect the same.

That links to the second and related cause of persecution. Refusing to join the violent scapegoating and rejection of refugees and other minorities and demonstrating the beauty of the opposite practice unmasks the lies on which such nationalistic scapegoating is built. The big lie is that we are different from other people, that we are good and are right to preserve our goodness by using force to keep out bad people. But, you see, that's probably exactly what the people who support ICE in the USA and the people who maintain apartheid in Israel think they are doing. Whereas what Jesus has done and continues to do is show that good religious people who believe in the goodness of their own self-protection will actually crucify the perfect embodiment of goodness – will crucify God – in their blindness to their own sin, to their own similarity to the very people they think they are so much better than.

As the global crises escalate, so will the dangers escalate and we will all find ourselves either mutely conforming with the angry people around us, or committing ourselves again and again to following Jesus in building bold counter-practices that unmask the lies and model radical love and hospitality, and face the consequences.

Now it might not sound like there's much good news in that, but this has actually been a part of the gospel message, the good news, since the beginning. We've just had the good fortune of living in an era where that didn't bite too sharply, but it appears that our short season of good fortune is collapsing like the temple Jesus pointed to. So how is it to be good news in the midst of that?

Two things. Firstly, what Jesus is calling us to is to live the life that really is life, regardless of the circumstances, and living that life is a reward in itself. The canticle we sung from Isaiah before spoke of joyously drawing water from the wells of salvation. When we have drunk deeply of the water from the wells of salvation and discovered the deep joy of feasting on grace and compassion and love that know no borders, we would never readily go back to timidly conforming with the angry spirit of the times, just to stay out of trouble. The life that is drawn from those wells is just too good, even if the days are coming when people denounce us as traitors for stepping out of line and putting it into practice.

Secondly, Jesus promises us a life that ultimately cannot be touched by the worst that anyone can do to us. We heard him say tonight, "but not a hair of your head will perish," which if you took it totally out of context might sound like a promise that you will be protected from anything bad ever happening to you. But in context it is obviously nothing of the sort. It says, "You will be betrayed by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

If anything, it is promising you that if we are true to the life Jesus is leading us in, then bad things will happen to us, but that the worst that anyone can do to us cannot destroy the life

that God is giving us. Just as the worst that anyone could do could not destroy Jesus, so too the life into which we are called cannot be forever entombed. It is a life so rich and so full that nothing can ultimately hold it down. It just keeps bursting free and bursting back to joyous, exuberant, extravagantly generous life.

There is much to appreciate about the relative peace, prosperity, and security that Australia has offered. But when we stand back and admire them, and imagine they will surely last forever or at least for our lifetime, Jesus comes to us saying, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; everything will fall." But the most important part of what he is saying is that those things were only cheap counterfeits of the life that is really life anyway. And although there might be some very tough times ahead, if we don't capitulate to the rising tides of resentment and hostility, but instead endure the worst and hold tenaciously onto the best, onto radical love and hospitality and hope and joy, then life in all its fullness will continue to open before us in this world and beyond.