

Interpret the Signs

[Announce Text] Please Open your Bibles to Luke 21:25-33. [Page 880](#)

[Scripture Introduction] Good morning, my name is Brett Sweet and I'm one of the pastors here at Grace Christian Fellowship where we exist to glorify God through gospel-centered worship, evangelism, discipleship, and community. We are continuing our series through the book of Luke.

[Prayer for illumination] Please pray with me...

[Illustration] Smartphones have changed things so much. I'm told that they now have apps that when you hold the camera up to a sign in a foreign language, it can automatically interpret the sign for you. The whole point of the reality TV Show *the Amazing Race* was to watch people try to figure out how to travel around the world when they didn't know how to communicate with the people around them. I suspect they don't let them use their phones. Imagine, you see a sign for what appears to be a pet store, only to find that it's a restaurant and Guinea Pig is on the menu! You need to see a pharmacist but you drive right past the sign saying "chemist" because, you aren't looking for a cleaning solution. You need to interpret the signs. If you don't you may live to regret it. Or die regretting it.

We are in what is probably Luke's most difficult passage to interpret. I have found it to be the most disagreed upon. It began with Jesus announcing the destruction of the Temple and that was followed by two questions from the disciples- When will these things be, and what will be the signs? Last week we looked at the timing, now we're going to look at the signs. Jesus is telling us to interpret the signs- [Luke 12:54ff](#). If we read the signs wrong

[Proposition] Interpret the signs.

As we think about interpreting the signs, we'll try to do that with four practices in front of us. Practice #1 is to interpret the signs according to the immediate context. Practice #2 is to interpret the signs according to the wider context. Practice #3 is to interpret the signs with hope. And Practice #4 is to interpret the signs with faith.

[Practice #1] Interpret the signs according to the immediate context.

So many people go wrong right here. We come with so much baggage, that we miss what's right in front of us. What does the Bible say in these verses? What would the original audience think about this? So let's look at the immediate context:

Let's read vv. 5-7 and then vv. 25-32

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?"

The immediate context for these signs is Jesus talking about the destruction of the Temple. Luke does not have Jesus answering a question about the end of the world OR Jesus' second coming. This can surprise some of us, but stick with me. Now let's read vv. 25-32

"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding 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 in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place."

[Illustration] The immediate context really matters. Words we have in English can mean something else when spoken in the immediate context of other languages. We know what the word "kiss" means in English. But if you say that while in Sweden, it implies going #1 in the toilet. If you go to a gift shop in the United States, you're looking for a present. If you go to a shop and you see something called a gift in Germany- it means poison. No matter what it might mean

elsewhere or what we want it to mean, the immediate context makes a huge difference.

[Exposition] The immediate context here is addressed to people in the first century looking forward, not people in the 21st Century looking forward. And notice v. 32, Jesus talks about “this generation.” We need to get a bit technical for a few minutes. I did a fair bit of research into the Greek this week and most scholars are in wide agreement that the word *genea* translated “this generation” most commonly means the contemporaries alive in Jesus’ time. That is especially true with how Luke uses the term. And remember, at least for Luke, Jesus is not answering the question about the end of the age in the immediate context. That’s the immediate context we should be thinking about when we seek to interpret the signs.

But what about all these signs in vv. 25-27- this seems like end of the world language to most of us! It’s important to know that this sort of language was used elsewhere to refer to events that most certainly weren’t the end of this age. This is the case in Isaiah 13:9-10 where there are all kinds of Heavenly signs in stars, sun, and moon when speaking about God’s judgment on Babylon. In Ezekiel 32:7-8, 15 God is judging Egypt for the evil they’ve recently committed against His people. God talks about blotting out the heavens so that no light is seen from Sun, moon, and stars. And striking down every Egyptian. In Isaiah 34:4-5, God speaks about all of the host of heaven falling like leaves from a fig tree and the sky being rolled up like a scroll. But the context there is the soon-coming judgment on Edom for how they responded to Israel’s abuse by invading armies. Specifically, it’s important to note that in the biblical worldview, what we see happening in the earth around us is reflective of a deeper spiritual battle going on in the heavenly realm. Jesus’ hearers and Luke’s readers were not raised in an atheistic type of culture like ours. When they hear these sorts of things it’s likely that they see beyond the physical heavenly bodies, but also think about things in the spiritual realm. I think that this has to be kept in mind as we think about immediate context.

Additionally, the immediate context about seeing the Son of Man coming in the cloud could possibly *not* refer to Jesus’ return at the end of time. In Daniel 7, the Son of Man on the clouds is an image of one arriving in the Ancient of Days’ (aka

God's) presence and being given all authority. The word "coming" here is not the usual word that carries the meaning of Christ's return. That word is Parousia. This word is *erchomenon*, which can, on occasion, actually mean "go" not come. So it is very possible that the immediate context is telling us to interpret the signs and recognize that all of the chaos happening in 70AD is confirmation that Jesus really is in charge. That He is on His throne. That He is ruling all things. That is the immediate context for Jesus' readers.

So when we think about interpreting the signs of Jesus' final return, we should make sure that we view them as close to the way the original audience would have. Perhaps not as literally as many of us have been taught. It's possible that the original audience, in the immediate context, would find some of the popular opinions of our time as very unfamiliar and unlikely.

Interpret the signs according to the immediate context. Now let's notice something else that can also help us.

[Practice #2] Interpret the signs according to the wider context.

The immediate context of the text in front of us shows us that it is quite possible, perhaps probable, that most of what is being spoken about here occurred in the decades that followed Jesus' death and resurrection. But we should also interpret signs according to the wider context.

[Illustration] Imagine that you've always wanted to have riverfront property. But the closest you could get was 150 yards away. And there were several houses between you and the river. Well, one Spring day you come out after massive snow melt and two weeks of heavy rain. You look out your front door and a river flows right in front of your porch. Finally! Your dreams have come true! What a day to celebrate! That's your immediate context. But then you look out. You widen your gaze. You look at the wider context. And you realize that there are other things to notice. People being rescued from their roofs by helicopters from massive flooding. Cars being stranded in waist deep water. Trees uprooted and turned into floating battering rams. It helps you interpret what you see off your front porch.

[Exposition] In the same way, the wider context should help us interpret the signs. Even if the immediate context points to most of these signs referring to past

events, there are lessons from the wider context of the Bible. The most important is the future event of Jesus' return. Let's look at v. 27

And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

I am very inclined to believe that we are hearing about the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in a way that foreshadows the end of all history. I think the parallel in Matthew supports this because that is the third question Jesus answers in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew, He's talking about signs at the end of the age. And Jesus has compressed them so that the two appear as one, even though there's a gap of time behind them.

[Show Wind farm picture]

For me, then, when Jesus says, "THEY will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud." The wider context of the Bible and earth history reminds us that the future holds a sudden, visible, personal, bodily return of Christ at the end of history. When there is chaos, when there is a panic, when there is a fear of the future- vv. 25-26, we can have confidence according to the wider context that Jesus will return. Some people have zoomed in on the immediate context so much that they have even claimed that Jesus has come in full finality in 70AD. This is simply not true. In fact, I would go so far as to call that a heresy.

The sudden, visible, personal, bodily return of Christ is so important that it is worth dying for! Why would I say that? Because the Bible makes it clear that it would be unimaginably painful to die without this fact. This is always considered a source of hope and joy for Christian.

Jesus' return will be visible to every eye when He comes again. So the idea that He has come back and been missed by someone is not a possibility. This seems to anticipate the resurrection as well. Everyone in earth's history will see Jesus' return. This is the testimony of John 14:3, Acts 1:11, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Hebrews 9:28, James 5:8, 2 Peter 3:10, 1 John 3:2, Revelation 22:20.

And listen to Revelation 1:7, written after 70AD, says this

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

[Gospel] That verse from Revelation challenges us, doesn't it? It's hard for a lot of us to hear. "All the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him." This return of Jesus is not viewed as a pleasant show for everyone on earth. If Jesus has the power to ride on clouds. He has the power to raise people from the dead so that they see His return. If the tribes of the earth wail on account of Him. Then, He has a sort of power that is unprecedented. Some of us have seen some terrifying things, but nothing like this. If you are here and you aren't a Christian, then you should be terrified. You will be meeting an Almighty Judge as one of his enemies. The consequences are words that we don't like to hear spoken in polite company: wrath. Hell. Punishment. And it's aimed at you. What you think your biggest problems are now: your looks, your health, your finances, your relationships with others, or whatever else. They will disappear from your mind. Perhaps you think your sins aren't so bad. They're just little sins, after all. You just gave into little temptations. Not murder, just anger, and gossip. Not adultery, just lust. Not stealing, just envy.

But do you see how your little sins are great sins? Imagine someone came up to you to pay you for becoming a traitor- maybe having a one-night affair or committing treason against your country. This person guarantees that nobody will ever find out, what would be the amount of money? \$1000? \$1,000,000? \$1 billion? The greater the amount the greater the temptation. The smaller the temptation the greater the offence. How appalled would people be if you betrayed your country or spouse for a dollar? We can almost understand the murderer who kills someone who tortured his family. But what if you read about a murderer who killed because dead man stole his corn nuts or Doritos. Small temptation- giant sin! But you've betrayed the King of the Universe for small temptations! In some sense it's a greater and more offensive sin than giving in to the "bigger" sins. What this means is that we are in trouble. Every sin is GIANT! Every sin flows out of a corrupted heart. Every sin will be punished. And the wider context talks about the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory- to judge. Interpret the signs.

Interpret the signs according to the immediate context and according to the wider context of future judgment. But there's good news here too

[Practice #3] Interpret the signs with hope.

Look at v. 28

"Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

We've heard that there are people who are in their sins. And they should be terrified when they interpret the signs. But there are people who, when they interpret the signs. Are called to straighten up, not cower. To look up, not cower and stare at their feet. When Jesus comes again, everyone is going to know. So those who are in Christ will have hope because their redemption is drawing near. The reason why they can interpret the signs with hope is that Jesus has come the first time. All that wrath and Hell that they deserve was placed on Jesus at the cross. There was an infinite pile of punishment reserved with each Christian's name. And Jesus picked it up and called it His own. Now Jesus is for us and not against us. So, Christ's Return is a time of hope and rejoicing. They've believed that Jesus has the right to punish them, but believed that He's taken that punishment on Himself fully and finally in His great love for them.

[Application] There is a tendency for us to hear people talk about interpreting signs related to Jesus' return and be afraid. To stress and to worry. To be anxious. But Jesus calls us to hope. The people in Jerusalem in 70AD had reason to hope and so do we. Because Jesus is our Redeemer. His return will bring the fullness of our redemption. We believe that Jesus has paid the full price. We are now free. Jesus has come for us once to satisfy the punishment our sins deserve. His resurrection from the dead is proof that God is satisfied with that payment. Thus, when Jesus returns for His people, we can be confident that we will receive only good from Him. If we're opposing and turning away from our sin and resting in Jesus, then any sign that points us to Christ's return should fill us with hope. He's defeated death. He can carry us through any sort of suffering.

Maybe you hear about court cases. Or trouble in the Middle East. Or social movements. Or national debt and you have concerns. The Bible makes it clear that we are living in the last days- whether there be only a few or a few hundred

thousand. Whether those days are short or long. But Christians, we have hope. Jesus is not coming to punish you; He's coming to free you. To reward you. To bring you into the full meaning of comfort and peace. Your new heart will be fully cleansed. Your body will be rebuilt and reformed. Your mind and soul will be at rest. Jesus' return is a reason for hope and joy- not fear and anxiety.

And notice what aren't signs of the end of the world: having your girlfriend break up with you. Losing your math assignment. Having the car breakdown. Going without a hot water heater for a week. Losing your job.

Interpret the signs. Interpret them according to the immediate context and the wider context. Interpret the signs with hope. Lastly...

[Practice #4] Interpret the signs with faith.

We're moving into Winter. The trees are losing their leaves. But, unless Jesus returns or some sort of disaster strikes Spokane, there will be a time next year where we'll look at the trees. Brown branches will have a hint of green budding on their tips. And then those buds begin to grow into leaves. And we don't need to guess if Summer is coming. We know it. We can have confidence. Jesus uses this imagery and idea. The same goes with how we should interpret the signs. And notice how He ends it.

Look at v. 33

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

This is a remarkable thing for Jesus to say. Whenever Jesus' return occurs, whether you're premill, amill, postmill, or a mix of all the above. The sky above and this earth will go through a sort of purifying fire changing them forever. Listen to Isaiah 51:6

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner, but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.

It will be rebuilt into something even more beautiful and glorious. But even though these things pass away, Jesus' words can be trusted. His words will not

pass away. Jesus' words can be trusted. They can be believed. They should build our faith. But Jesus is making claims here that His Words are God's Word.

Isaiah 40:8 says

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Jesus is saying that when everything else is burned and changed, His words will not pass away. He can be trusted.

[Application] Aren't you looking for someone to trust? You have your preferred preachers, newscasters, podcasters, friends, and family, but there are times when you wonder if they are completely on track. Do they really see the whole picture? Especially when we think about things like the end of the age. Jesus can be trusted. And your trust should be in Jesus' words. And we find them in the Word of God.

There is no record of any crisis of faith among the earliest centuries about Christ's return. Because they had faith in Jesus and His Words. So when people are concerned about a catastrophic asteroid or solar flare. When people are concerned about rising ocean levels or world temperatures or artificial intelligence. When persecution intensifies around the globe or here. Those could be signs of the end. Jesus can be trusted.

But some of us want to master the future. But so far, one of the few truths that has crossed all denominations in all time periods is this: when people interpret signs and think this means that Jesus will be coming in the next few months or years, they have been 100% wrong. So how can we have confidence? We have confidence by having certainty by believing Jesus' words- not in our ability to interpret the signs.

Some of you want me to tell you specifically, if the things we are reading about in Luke 21 apply to us now. Will we see these sorts of signs when Jesus comes back a second time? If we interpret them properly, meaning that we understand them the way the original audience would have understood them, the answer must be yes.

[Conclusion] The main application is coming in next week's sermon. But when we zoom out for a minute and look at Luke 21:5-32, here's what I take away. Every

Christian should be excited for these things to take place. When Jesus returns, whether we have interpreted the signs correctly- we're going to know. Here's what it will be like...I knew it!