

# Are These the Last Days?

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**R. C. SPROUL**



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R. C. SPROUL

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## Contents

<b>One</b>	The Destruction of the Temple . . . . .	1
<b>Two</b>	The Signs of the Times . . . . .	9
<b>Three</b>	The Great Tribulation . . . . .	19
<b>Four</b>	The Coming of the Son of Man . . . . .	29
<b>Five</b>	The Day and the Hour . . . . .	39
<b>Six</b>	The Faithful and Wicked Servants . . . . .	47



## Chapter One

# The Destruction of the Temple

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a serious potato famine struck the nation of Ireland. Facing starvation, multitudes of people fled to other countries to seek sustenance. Some boarded ships and sailed for the New World, with many finally landing in New York City. Among those immigrants was my great-grandfather, who came to the United States from Donegal in the northern province of Ulster. Since he wanted his children and grandchildren to remember their heritage, he told tales of former days in

## Are These the Last Days?

Ireland and encouraged all of the family to learn the songs of the Irish people. My mother sang Irish lullabies to us and permitted my sister and me to stay home from school each year on Saint Patrick's Day, when the Pittsburgh radio stations played Irish songs all day.

However, to this day, I think of myself more as an American than an Irishman. Although I've been to Europe many times, I've yet to go back to Ireland. On the other hand, my son has been more zealous about our ancestry, making sure that all eight of his children have Irish names. And as a tribute to his ancestry, he wore a kilt to his ordination service.

At my house, we left many of the markers of our ethnic identity behind, but for a Jew in antiquity, this would certainly not have been the case. The Jews are one of the most remarkable groups of people who have ever populated the face of the earth. In the first century AD alone, their nation was conquered, their temple destroyed, and their capital, Jerusalem, was burned to the ground, killing an estimated 1.1 million Jews. After this, most Jews were dispersed to the four corners of the world. They went to what are the modern-day nations of Russia, Poland, Hungary, Germany, and Holland, and to many other places. Even though Jews have been without a homeland for most

## The Destruction of the Temple

of the past two millennia, they have never lost their ethnic and national identity.

This remarkable phenomenon is predicted in detail in the Olivet Discourse.

One of the most important and controversial chapters in all of the New Testament, the discourse, which is found in Matthew 24, is one of the most dramatic prophecies given by our Lord.

Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” . . .

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at

## Are These the Last Days?

the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” (Matt. 24:1–3, 32–35)

Before we consider this text, I’d like you to consider a “what if” scenario. Suppose I were to claim that last night I received a special revelation from God. I declare that I now have the gift of prophecy and will give you a prediction of things that are to come to pass. I predict that sometime within the next twelve months, the United States will fall, the Capitol building in Washington will be destroyed, the White House will be demolished, the fifty states of the union will be dissolved, and the United States as an independent nation will cease to exist. Finally, I don’t know the exact timing, but only that it will happen sometime within the next twelve months.

Without question, within the next twelve months, you would know for certain whether my claim was true or false. If it didn’t come to pass, you would be justified in labeling me a false prophet, unworthy of your attention.

I give this illustration to demonstrate what is at stake in the text. In all of the Bible, I cannot think of any prophecy

## The Destruction of the Temple

more astonishing than the prophecy that our Lord Jesus gave on the Mount of Olives concerning the temple and Jerusalem. In Luke's account, He told the disciples that not one stone of the Herodian temple would be left on top of one another and that the city of Jerusalem itself would be destroyed (Luke 21:6, 24). This was a truly shocking claim. Herod's temple was magnificent, to say the least. The temple's stones were as large as sixteen feet long and eight feet high. In the first century, if there was any building that seemed impregnable, it was the temple in Jerusalem. When Jesus made this prediction, the Jewish people would have considered Him either a lunatic or a prophet endowed with supernatural knowledge.

Of course, we know that Jesus had supreme authority to make these claims, and history has vindicated Him. These things came to pass in perfect detail; as foretold by Jesus, the temple was destroyed in AD 70 and the Jews were dispersed throughout the world. This prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple provides firm proof of the identity of Jesus and the inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit, and it should close the mouth of even the most hardened skeptic.

After Jesus made this astonishing prediction, the disciples

## Are These the Last Days?

immediately came to Him and wanted to know the exact timing of His predictions. Jesus then engaged in a long discussion of the signs of the times, and gave a description of the great tribulation and of His return.

In recent days, these topics have seen increased interest. Books such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series have been wildly popular. Everyone is interested in the timing and exact details of Jesus' return. However, Jesus' answer to the question of timing creates some challenges for us. He says in verse 34, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

Do you see the problem? To the Jews, the term *generation* referred to a time frame of roughly forty years. So, Jesus seemed to be saying that the destruction of temple, the destruction of Jerusalem, and His appearance at the end of the age were all going to take place within forty years. Many critics thus reject Jesus because they believe He was saying that His return, the end of the world, and the consummation of His kingdom would all take place within four decades.

How do we deal with this? The critics deal with it very simply. They say Jesus was partially right in His predictions

## The Destruction of the Temple

and partially wrong. Therefore, He was a false prophet. Others say He was completely right in His prediction and that every New Testament prophecy (i.e., His return, the future resurrection, the rapture of the saints, etc.) was fulfilled in the first century, leaving nothing for future fulfillment. I don't agree with either of these positions.

I am convinced that what Jesus is talking about in this passage had special reference to a judgment of Christ coming on the Jewish nation, thus ending the age of the Jews. This Jewish age ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews, which triggered the beginning of the New Testament time period, which is later called "the age of the Gentiles." This is where we still find ourselves today.

In the next few chapters, I'm going to interpret the Olivet Discourse in a manner that I believe is consistent with the way that it would have been understood by the disciples at that time. When Jesus is asked when these things will happen, He says, "I can't tell you the day and the hour, but I can tell you with absolute certainty that this generation will not pass away until all of these things take place." I believe our Lord was speaking the unvarnished truth.

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# What are the end times? And are we living in them?

Wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, international upheaval—Jesus said all of these things would be signs of His return. It sounds like Jesus was describing our own time, but was He really predicting the events that we see in the news every day?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul looks at Jesus' prophecies to consider a controversial question: Are we living in the last days? The answer may surprise you.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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