

Luke 21:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh.

Analysis

And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Jesus provides a specific, observable sign for Jerusalem's imminent destruction—*kykloumenēn hypo stratopedōn Ierousalēm* (κυκλουμένην ὑπὸ στρατοπέδων Ἱερουσαλήμ, "Jerusalem being surrounded by armies"). The present passive participle indicates the action in progress—when you see the encirclement beginning, recognize what follows. The noun *stratopedōn* (στρατοπέδων) refers to military encampments, the methodical Roman siege strategy.

The phrase *hē erēmōsis autēs* (ἡ ἐρήμωσις αὐτῆς, "the desolation of it") echoes Daniel's prophecy of the "abomination of desolation" (Daniel 9:27, 11:31, 12:11). The verb *engiken* (ἤγγικεν, "is near") indicates imminent fulfillment—not distant eschatology but approaching historical judgment. This warning gave Christians specific instructions: flee when armies surround the city, don't wait for the siege to tighten.

Church historian Eusebius records that Christians heeded this warning. When Roman general Cestius Gallus withdrew his siege in AD 66 (inexplicably, from military perspective), believers fled to Pella in the Transjordan. When Titus returned in AD 70, no Christians perished in Jerusalem's destruction—Jesus' warning saved His people.

Historical Context

This prophecy was fulfilled with stunning precision in AD 70. After the Jewish revolt began in AD 66, Rome dispatched legions under Vespasian and his son Titus. The siege of Jerusalem began in April AD 70 and lasted until September. Josephus, the Jewish historian who witnessed the siege, describes horrors that fulfilled Jesus' warnings: starvation so severe that mothers ate their children, Jewish factions fighting within the city even as Romans attacked from without, over a million Jews killed, and the temple utterly destroyed—not one stone left upon another (Luke 21:6). The 'desolation' was complete—Jerusalem burned, the temple demolished, survivors enslaved, and the Jewish state ended until 1948.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does the literal fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy about Jerusalem's destruction validate His authority as a prophet and His warnings about future judgment?
2. What does the Christians' escape from Jerusalem by heeding Jesus' warning teach about the importance of discerning prophetic signs and obeying Christ's instructions?
3. How does Jerusalem's AD 70 destruction foreshadow the final judgment that Jesus also describes in this discourse?

Interlinear Text

Ὅταν δὲ ἴδητε κυκλουμένην ὑπὸ στρατοπέδων τήν
when **And** **ye shall see** **compassed** **with** **armies** G3588
G3752 G1161 G1492 G2944 G5259 G4760

Ἱερουσαλήμ τότε γινώτε ὅτι ἤγγικεν ἡ ἐρήμωσις
Jerusalem **then** **know** **that** **is nigh** G3588 **the desolation**
G2419 G5119 G1097 G3754 G1448 G2050

αὐτῆς
thereof
G846

Additional Cross-References

Luke 19:43 (Parallel theme): For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side,

Mark 13:14 (Parallel theme): But when ye shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not, (let him that readeth understand,) then let them that be in Judaea flee to the mountains:

Daniel 9:27 (Parallel theme): And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate.

Luke 21:7 (Parallel theme): And they asked him, saying, Master, but when shall these things be? and what sign will there be when these things shall come to pass?