

Luke 21:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people.

Analysis

But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. Jesus expresses compassionate lament—ouai (οὐαί, "woe") is a cry of grief and warning. Pregnant women (en gastri echousais, ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσαις, "having in womb") and nursing mothers (tais thēlazousais, ταῖς θηλαζούσαις, "those giving suck") face particular vulnerability during siege and flight. Pregnancy and infant care make rapid escape nearly impossible—these women cannot flee quickly to the mountains (v. 21).

The phrase *estai gar anagkē megalē epi tēs gēs* (ἔσται γὰρ ἀνάγκη μεγάλη ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, "for there shall be great distress upon the land") describes unprecedented suffering. The noun *anagkē* (ἀνάγκη) means necessity, constraint, calamity—unavoidable suffering pressing down. The specification *epi tēs gēs* ("upon the land") likely refers specifically to the land of Israel, though some interpret it as earth generally. The phrase *orgē tō laō toutō* (ὀργὴ τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ, "wrath upon this people") identifies divine anger directed at covenant-breaking Israel—not humanity generally but specifically "this people" who rejected Messiah.

Josephus's account confirms the horror. He describes mothers eating their own children during the famine (Jewish War 6.3.4), fulfilling Moses' graphic warning (Deuteronomy 28:53-57). The phrase "great distress" proved tragically literal—over one million Jews died during the siege and its aftermath.

Historical Context

The AD 70 siege created conditions exactly matching Jesus' prophecy. Josephus records that the siege began at Passover, when Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims—increasing the death toll. Roman legions encircled the city with siege walls, preventing escape or supply. Starvation became so severe that people fought over garbage, leather, and eventually turned to cannibalism. Josephus describes a noblewoman named Mary who killed and ate her infant son—a horror that shocked even battle-hardened Roman soldiers. Pregnant women and nursing mothers faced impossible choices: flee and risk losing children, or stay and face starvation. The 'great distress' and 'wrath upon this people' were historically documented realities, not hyperbole.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. What does Jesus' specific compassion for pregnant and nursing women reveal about His concern for the vulnerable even in the midst of divine judgment?
2. How does the literal fulfillment of 'great distress' and Moses' warnings about cannibalism demonstrate the seriousness of covenant-breaking?
3. How should the reality of divine wrath against sin inform both Christian evangelism and personal holiness?

Interlinear Text

οὐαὶ	δὲ	ταῖς	ἐν	γαστρὶ	ἐχούσαις	καὶ	ταῖς	
woe	But	G3588	in	them that are with child	G2192	and	G3588	
G3759	G1161		G1722	G1064		G2532		
θηλαζούσαις	ἐν	ἐκείναις	ταῖς	ἡμέραις·	ἔσται	γὰρ		
to them that give suck	in	those	G3588	days	there shall be	! for		
G2337	G1722	G1565		G2250	G2071	G1063		
ἀνάγκη	μεγάλη	ἐπὶ	τῆς	γῆς	καὶ	ὀργῇ	ἐν	τῷ λαῷ
distress	great	in	G3588	the land	and	wrath	in	G3588 people
G318	G3173	G1909		G1093	G2532	G3709	G1722	G2992
τούτῳ								
this								
G5129								

Additional Cross-References

Luke 23:29 (Parallel theme): For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.

Lamentations 4:10 (Parallel theme): The hands of the pitiful women have sodden their own children: they were their meat in the destruction of the daughter of my people.

Mark 13:17 (Parallel theme): But woe to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

Matthew 24:19 (Parallel theme): And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

1 Thessalonians 2:16 (Judgment): Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.

James 5:1 (Parallel theme): Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.

1 Peter 4:17 (Judgment): For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?

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