

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 (ούαί, "woe") is a cry of grief and warning. Pregnant women (en gastri echousais, ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχούσαις, "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 (όργὴ 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 ἔχούσαις 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 ὄργὴ ἐν τῷ λαῷ
distress great in the land and wrath in G3588 people
G318 G3173 G1909 G1093 G2532 G3709 G1722 G3588 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?

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org