24 And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. (Luke 21:24 NKJV)

I. INTRODUCTION

A. In Luke 21 Jesus predicts that Jerusalem will be trampled by the gentiles until the “times of the gentiles” are fulfilled. Over the years this has let to quite a bit of speculation about when the “times of the gentiles” begin and end, particularly since the establishment of the modern state of Israel. Some have wondered if the existence of the modern state of Israel indicates that the times of the gentiles have come to an end or are coming to an end.

B. Given that there have been numerous views of what the “times of the gentiles” actually refers to, is it actually possible to determine specifically what time period this refers to? If we take the view that Jesus intended His teaching to be relatively straightforward and easy to understand then it should be possible to know exactly what Jesus was referring to.

C. The good news is that if we look at the verse entirely in context, it actually becomes quite clear what Jesus meant by the phrase, when it begins, when it ends, and how it relates to God’s plan for Jerusalem. Knowing what Jesus is referring to is incredibly important for understanding what is and is not going to be required of the church in the future.

II. THE CONTEXT OF LUKE 21:24

A. Much of the confusion regarding the identity of the “times of the gentiles” has to do with whether or not Jesus was referring to the Roman invasion of 70 AD in Luke 21:24. Luke 21, along with the parallel passages in Matthew 24 and Mark 13, does seem to foreshadow the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, so we must examine the text to see if Jesus is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in a specific generation or a general way throughout centuries of gentile occupation. To determine that we must begin with Luke 21:20 which begins this segment of Jesus’ teaching.

B. The first thing to see is that the language of Luke 21:20 is very specific. Jesus is not referring to a generic situation throughout centuries, but a very specific event that we are to watch for. In Luke 21:8-19, Jesus gives general warnings of coming trouble to the disciples, but He begins verse 20 with “but when” indicating that He is transitioning in his prophecy and focusing on a single specific time period that comes at the conclusion of this general period of trouble.

C. Jesus even warns that the general trouble of Luke 21:8-19 is not related to the ultimate end (Luke 21:9) which is another reason why the transition in verse 20 is so significant and abrupt. He is contrasting what He predicts beginning in verse 20 with what He predicts prior to verse 20.
D. At first glance Luke verse 20 seems to only to tell us to watch for an event in which Jerusalem is surrounded with armies. This certainly seems to apply to 70 AD, but it is also important that we compare this verse with Matthew and Mark’s record of the same teaching to see if there are any other details that can help us interpret the passage.

1. When we look at Matthew and Mark we can see that they both use language that is very similar to Luke 21.

15“Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (whoever reads, let him understand), 16“then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Matthew 24:15–16 NKJV)

14“So when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not” (let the reader understand), “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Mark 13:14 NKJV)


a. First we see that Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14 both give a very specific indicator that tells us when the specific time of trouble will begin. In both passages Jesus specifically tells us to watch for the abomination of desolation.

b. It is clear that Matthew and Mark are referring to the same time period, but is Luke also referring to this same time period or a different one? If we look carefully at Luke 21:20, we see that it is referring to the same time period because Luke highlights the time of Jerusalem’s “desolation” using the same underlying Greek word that is used in Matthew and Mark. All three refer to the same period of desolation; the only difference is that Luke does not specifically refer to the abomination.

15“Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation’… (Matthew 24:15 NKJV)

14“So when you see the ‘abomination of desolation’... (Mark 13:14 NKJV)

20“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. (Luke 21:20 NKJV)

c. While Luke does not include the reference to the abomination that Matthew and Mark include, he clearly emphasizes the desolation of Daniel 9:27 because a consummate, or final, desolation is the main thrust of that particular verse. This further confirms the link with Matthew and Mark. Luke clearly has in mind the desolation of Daniel 9:27 which is why he uses this language of the time of desolation using the same Greek word for desolation that is used in Daniel 9:27 in the Septuagint. Luke carries over Daniel’s emphasis that, on the wings of abomination, a leader and his armies (Daniel 9:26) will bring desolation to Jerusalem.

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27 Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; But in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, Is poured out on the desolate.” (Daniel 9:27 NKJV)

d. Not only do we see a strong similarity in Luke’s language of desolation, we find that Jesus’ instructions on how to respond to this event are identical in Luke 21:21, Matthew 24:16, and Mark 13:14. In each case He instructs the residents of Judea to flee to the mountains. The exactness of this language is further confirmation that all three passages are referring to the same event.

16 “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Matthew 24:16 NKJV)

14 “…then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Mark 13:14 NKJV)

21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains… (Luke 21:21 NKJV)

3. Matthew, Mark, and Daniel help us to interpret Luke more precisely and we find that Luke is not referring to a general siege of Jerusalem, but a specific one that is connected to the abomination of desolation – one of the central events of the end-times. We know, of course, that the abomination did not happen in 70 AD.

4. Therefore Luke 21:20, like Matthew and Mark, is referring to a specific time in the future when the abomination is setup in Jerusalem. This means that the “times of the gentiles” that Luke 21:24 refers to is a period of time that must begin after the abomination.

E. Jesus continues to give more details about this period of time in verse 22:

22 For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. (Luke 21:22 NKJV)

1. Jesus tells us that He is referring to the days of His vengeance. This is a critical reference because this is a phrase that is used repeatedly in the prophets. In the prophets it refers, not to the vengeance of the nations, but to God’s final vengeance, or judgment, of the nations who have participated in the destruction of Jerusalem.

3 “I have trodden the winepress alone, And from the peoples no one was with Me. For I have trodden them in My anger, And trampled them in My fury; Their blood is sprinkled upon My garments, And I have stained all My robes. 4 For the day of vengeance is in My heart, And the year of My redeemed has come. 5 I looked, but there was no one to help, And I wondered That there was no one to uphold; Therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me; And My own fury, it sustained Me. (Isaiah 63:3–5 NKJV)

8 For it is the day of the LORD’s vengeance, The year of recompense for the cause of Zion. (Isaiah 34:8 NKJV)

4 Say to those who are fearful-hearted, “Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will
come with vengeance, With the recompense of God; He will come and save you.”  
(Isaiah 35:4 NKJV)

2To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, (Isaiah 61:2 NKJV)

6Flee from the midst of Babylon, And every one save his life! Do not be cut off in her iniquity, For this is the time of the LORD’s vengeance; He shall recompense her. (Jeremiah 51:6 NKJV)

2. This is clearly the time of His final judgment of the nations and not 70 AD. It is not enough for the nations to demonstrate their vengeance; God must demonstrate His vengeance for this passage to be fulfilled. Jesus is connecting the negative events of Luke 21:20-24 that will provoke His judgment to His deliverance which is described in Luke 21:25-28.

3. Jesus further enforces the fact that this is the final hour of God’s vengeance on the nations by explaining that these events will cause all that is prophesied to be fulfilled. This echoes the “consummation” language of Daniel 9:27 and the promise of Daniel 9:24. These are the days when, both the negative and the positive of the prophets are all fulfilled. This means that this desolation must end in the judgment of the nations and the salvation of all of Israel. Any time of desolation in Jerusalem that does not result in this end it cannot be the time of desolation Jesus is referring to.

F. Luke 21:24 also gives specific information about what the nations will do to Jerusalem.

24And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. (Luke 21:24 NKJV)

1. First many in the land will be taken captive into the nations. This sets the context for the massive regathering of the Jews from exile at the end of the age that we see described throughout Scripture (Psalm 14:7; 102:13, 19, 20; Isaiah 11:11-12, 15-16; 27:12-13; 35:5-6; 42:6-7, 16; 52:11-12; 61:1-3; Jeremiah 31:8-10; Ezekiel 39:25-28; Joel 2:32-3:1; Hosea 11:11; Micah 2:12-13; 4:6-7; 5:6; 7:12; Zechariah 10:6-11).

2. Second, Jesus tells us that Jerusalem will be trampled during this period of time. Matthew and Mark’s version of the Olivet Discourse both explicitly refer us to Daniel so we should expect to use Daniel to interpret Luke’s version as well. By referring to Daniel, we can connect this event directly to Daniel’s prophecy that the armies under the leadership of the Antichrist would trample Jerusalem underfoot (Daniel 7:7, 19, 23, 8:10, 13). This trampling of Jerusalem is not a generic trampling, nor is it a long period of gentile subjugation. It is a specific time of trampling predicted by Daniel.
3. Third, the construction of phrase “times of the gentiles” should also be understood as a reference to Daniel’s prophecy. The Greek word used for “times” is καιρός. This is the same word used in the Septuagint for “times, times, and half a time” in Daniel 7:25. The “times” of the gentiles in Luke is ultimately the “times” of the Antichrist in Daniel.

₂⁵_He shall speak pompous words against the Most High, Shall persecute the saints of the Most High, And shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand For a time and times and half a time._ (Daniel 7:25 NKJV)

G. It is important to also look at the two parallel passages that also describe the “times of the gentiles.” When we look at them we will also see that this is not a subjection of Jerusalem over centuries but a specific trampling of Jerusalem for a specific period of time at a specific moment in history.

1. Ezekiel 30 is probably the origin of the phrase and Ezekiel uses the phrase to refer to a specific season of time when the day of the Lord is near.

₂²_“Son of man, prophesy and say, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Wail, ‘Woe to the day!’ 3 For the day is near, Even the day of the LORD is near; It will be a day of clouds, the time of the Gentiles._ (Ezekiel 30:2–3 NKJV)

2. Revelation 11 also references the “times of the gentiles” and gives it a very specific duration. This time of trampling of Jerusalem by the gentiles will only last for 42 months or 3 ½ years and will occur just before the return of the Lord. This is the exact same time that was given in Daniel 7:25 for this event, confirming the link between Daniel 7:25, Luke 21:24, and Revelation 11:2.

₂²_But leave out the court which is outside the temple, and do not measure it, for it has been given to the Gentiles. And they will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months._ (Revel 11:2 NKJV)

H. Finally, we should look at the verses that come immediately after Luke 21:24. These verses further establish the time period when the events of verse 24 come to pass.

1. First, it is important to see what events also occur during the “times of the gentiles.” Jesus gives the same signs that are given throughout Scripture for the time of final trouble and tribulation (Joel 3:15; Matthew 24:29; Revelation 6:12-17; 8:12).

₂⁵_“And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; 2⁶ men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken._ (Luke 21:25–26 NKJV)

2. Secondly, we are told that Jesus will appear right after these events coming in great power and glory. This is what makes these days the “days of vengeance” (Luke 21:22) because His coming sets the events of Isaiah 63:1-9.

₂⁷_Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory._ (Luke 21:27 NKJV)

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3. Finally, we are told that when all these things begin to happen, we should look up with great expectation for our redemption.

28Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.” (Luke 21:28 NKJV)

a. “These things” refers to the sequence of events that begin in Luke 21:20. Jesus assures us that when these things begin that it means redemption is drawing near. In other words, He will not leave the city desolate. He will only allow the gentiles to trample the Holy City for a brief period of time (Daniel 7:25; Revelation 11:2-3) and He will answer their trampling with His vengeance (Luke 21:22) and with His redemption.

b. To summarize, this means that the desolation of Luke 21:20 will also be accompanied by cataclysmic signs in the heavens and result in the redemption of Israel. Once again, events that did not occur during the trouble of 70 AD.

III. THE “FULLNESS OF THE GENTILES”

A. Having seen that the Scripture clearly identifies the times of the gentiles, we must also address one other passage that has caused some confusion with regard to the interpretation of Luke 21:24 and that is Romans 11:25.

25For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. (Romans 11:25 NKJV)

B. By not recognizing the specific timing elements that are present in Luke 21:20-24, some commentators have inadvertently attempted to use Romans 11:25 to interpret the “times of the gentiles.” However, by looking at the two passages we can see that these two verses are referring to two very different things.

1. First the two Greek words are very different. The Greek word for “times” in Luke 21 (καιρός) simply indicates a period of time. This is the same kind of language used in Daniel 7 to describe the Antichrist’s reign of terror (Daniel 7:25). The Greek word for “fullness” used in Romans 11 (πλήρωμα) emphasizes “completeness” or the full quantity of something. Paul applies the word not only to the gentiles in Romans 11:25, but also to the Jews in Romans 11:12. That usage alone tells us that this is different from the “times” that are applied only to the gentiles in Luke. In Romans, the word is not negative; it refers to the full number of each group who are to be saved in this age.

2. We saw that Luke 21 is describing specific events that will occur at the end of the age. That is also confirmed by the parallel passages. Luke 21 is also describing a very negative scenario: for a specific period of times gentiles will trample down Jerusalem in a final act of rage against God’s plans for that city. This is not the glorious result of the global proclamation of the gospel; it is the final rebellion of the nations against the gospel.
3. In Romans, Paul is describing a glorious mystery in which God will bring both Jews and gentiles into the fullness of their salvation (Romans 11:12, 25). “Fullness” in Romans 11 is consistently used in a positive way to describe the receptivity of each group to the gospel – exactly the opposite of the scenario described in Luke 21.

C. If Luke 21 is properly set in the context of the text and viewed in light of the timing indicators Luke records, then it is very clear that the “fullness of the gentiles” and the “times of the gentiles” trampling down Jerusalem are two very different things.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. When the “times of the gentiles” is not seen in its specific biblical context, it generates confusion and leads to speculation about the interpretation of redemptive history and the season of time we are living in. However, when we look at this phrase in its complete biblical context, we find that it is quite clear and that Jesus was referring to one single period of time that is described in similar terms throughout Scripture.

B. We can certainly see a foreshadowing of this devastation in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, but it is important that we recognize that 70 AD is not the fulfillment of this passage. The occupation of Jerusalem by gentile powers over centuries also does not fulfill the precise language given in this passage. Jesus simply gives too many specific details that indicate this is a specific period of time.

C. Understanding when this trampling takes place is not a small issue for the church. It is very significant for how we understand the mission of the church in the days ahead. When this phrase is misunderstood, it leads us to believe that the antagonism of the nations against God’s plan for Jerusalem is either over or nearly over. This leads to passivity in the global church in regard to God’s plan for Jerusalem and a lack of preparation for the enemy’s assault that will come against that plan.

D. When we understand that this terrible time is in Jerusalem’s future, it means the church must remain vigilant, watchful, and prepared to engage in God’s plan for Jerusalem when the enemy makes one last attempt to trample the city and its people and prevent God’s Son from ruling the nations. It means we must engage in ministry in both Israel and in the nations surrounding Jerusalem with a focused intensity in light of what Jesus warns us is coming.