

Gaining one's soul: Luke 21:5-19

by [F. Dean Lueking](#) in the [November 4, 1998](#) issue

Late in Jesus' ministry, the disciples stood with him on Jerusalem's holiest ground and stared at the stunningly beautiful temple, Herod's masterpiece of appeasement of the Jews.

It was a sight to stir the soul. Though the temple has been gone since 70 a.d., the site still stirs wonder as the foundation stones remind today's pilgrims of the splendor that once was there. Anyone with a sense of history cannot view Mt. Zion and yawn.

But Jesus broke into his disciples' reverie of pious amazement with a real shocker, a blunt, prophetic pronouncement: all the magnificence before their eyes would one day be rubble, he declared. In less than 40 years, the temple would be a smoking ruins.

Jesus turned away from marble stones and golden adornments (Josephus describes opulent vestments for a thousand priests) and spoke of ominous yet hopeful things soon to come, things which would test the soul's endurance and at the same time help the disciples "gain [their] souls."

Jesus spoke of the soul not as fixed but "gained." The soul, he said, is not a gauzy abstraction fit only for occasional armchair speculation. The soul is that inward capacity in which the divine and human connect in a lifelong process of anchoring and maturing and enduring--enduring that will not flinch in the face of suffering.

The temple tour had turned serious. What began with architectural admiration became a prophetic glimpse of what discipleship would cost those who would bear his name. It would bring public persecution and betrayal by those closest in the circle of family and friends. Six centuries earlier, Jeremiah had stood in the first temple Solomon built on this same site and declared its doom. Now the long-promised Messiah-prophet had come and taken his place in a temple rebuilt for the third time. His very presence was the visitation of God. To reject the divine reign he brought would be to bring down the judgment of God. To endure under his gracious reign would be "to gain your souls."

Gaining of soul is a phrase that says a lot about discipleship as the year 2000 nears. One perennial temptation for the church is to equate the kingdom with beautiful stonework and adornments.

But another temptation these days, increasingly evident, is the curiosity over signs and speculations about what God is up to as the calendar turns from 1999 to 2000. Computer technology is vexed with the Y2K conundrum. Newspapers report that one bank was so paralyzed by the technical difficulties this raised that the board of directors sold out to a parent corporation. As 2000 draws nearer, Christian theology must walk a line between obscurantist claims and total neglect of millennial themes--a path not always clear.

Several months ago a *New Yorker* article described the sensation among ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem caused by a Mississippi cattle breeder who noted an unblemished red heifer in his herd, read Numbers 19 and declared that the animal was a sign that the temple must be rebuilt in preparation for the millennial reign of Jesus--regardless of the escalation of mayhem such exegesis in action would heap upon Jews, Muslims and Christians in the Holy City.

There is a better way, an alternative to the seduction detours posed by the signs against which Jesus warned. Yes, the New Testament has its puzzling apocalyptic passages. But the clear and overwhelming witness is to Jesus himself as the new and living way, whose death and resurrection are decisive. The key to the End Time is the cross, not heifers and stones and rebuilt altars. Disciplined, enduring discipleship is what to look for as 2000 comes along, and it will remain the mark to look for in all the years to follow.

The great gain for the soul begins in baptismal dying with Christ to sin and being raised daily with him in faith. Our calling now and always is not to sugarcoat the gospel as entertaining diversion from a writhing world but as the power from God for sharing in its convulsions as people of indestructible hope. Wherever that may lead in daily vocation, in congregational commitments and in costly service to those waylaid on some Jericho road, the outcome is the same: gaining of soul, deepening and building the character which is tested by endurance and drawn forward in hope.

Magnificent buildings. Megacongregations or mini-size. Liturgies old and new. All these, like the temple of old, are impressive and can point in the right direction as long as the right direction is discipleship with endurance.

Jesus is no stranger to the horrific forces still on the prowl in the world we know. Their terror, whether cosmic or personal, is overcome by the assurance that he knows his own, even the number of the hairs on their heads. He went to the cross to make that assurance trustworthy. He holds his own fast through the worst. It is not stoic determination that gets us "gain of soul," but faithful reliance on his promise of grace sufficient in weakness, a grace that works in everything for the gain of the soul.

This End Time truth about gaining one's soul comes through in these words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on suffering, written shortly before the Nazis hanged him in April 1945:

O wondrous change! These hands, once so strong and active, have now been bound. Helpless and forlorn, you see the end of your deed. Yet with a sigh of relief you resign your cause to a stronger hand, and are content to do so. For one brief moment you enjoyed the bliss of freedom, only to give it back to God, that he might perfect it in glory.