

The coming of the kingdom

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Date: 07 March 2021

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from Luke chapter 17, verse 20 to 37. Once on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed.

Nor will people say, Here it is, or there it is, because the kingdom of God is in your midst. Then he said to his disciples, The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it.

People will tell you, There he is, or here he is. Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.

But first, he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man.

People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.

[1 : 21] It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.

It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, no one who is on the housetop with possessions inside should go down to get them.

Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.

I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding corn together.

One will be taken and the other left. Where, Lord? they asked. He replied, where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.

[2 : 32] Folks, sometimes there's a difference, isn't there, between, on the one hand, the things that we want to know, and on the other hand, the things that we need to know.

If I tell you, for instance, that at the Commission of Assembly meeting this Wednesday past, if I tell you that we spent three quarters of an hour in a private session, well, suddenly you're not really interested in what was being discussed in the public parts of the meeting, are you?

You immediately want to know what was discussed in those 45 minutes in private. But do you need to know? Does it profit you to know? Well, well, no.

There's a reason why that was a private discussion. Sometimes it isn't actually good for us to get what we want. And in the passage that we're looking at today, here in Luke chapter 17, there's a clear distinction between what the Pharisees want to know, and what the Pharisees actually need to know.

There's things that the Pharisees, things that the disciples, things that we too need to know about the Kingdom of God. There's also things that we don't need to know, however much we perhaps want to know them.

[3 : 40] And Jesus isn't withholding necessary information from his disciples. He's not withholding anything that we need to know. In fact, some of the things that we want to know, it would be to our detriment to know them.

Nevertheless, five questions are answered by our passage this morning. First, the Pharisees ask, when will the Kingdom come? Second, there's an implicit question, what is still to happen?

Which leads naturally to a third question, what warning will I receive? Fourth, what will my experience be? And then finally, verse 37, the disciples ask, where, Lord?

When will the Kingdom come? What is still to happen? What warning will I receive? What will my experience be? And where, Lord? So, this section begins with the Pharisees asking Jesus when the Kingdom of God would come.

That's verse 20. And it's a good question to ask, isn't it? Perfectly reasonable. The Pharisees have rightly understood from God's existing revelation up to that point. They know from the Old Testament, they know the Kingdom of God is something to be expected, something to anticipate.

[4 : 50] They know that their present experience in their day, that that doesn't reflect the fullness of God's plans for his world, the fullness of God's plans for his people. The Pharisees are quite right, to look for the dawning of the day when God's Kingdom will come in its fullness.

And yet, yet even as the Pharisees ask what is a good question, even as they speak truth, still, still they manage to show that they haven't understood Jesus' message, have they?

Willfully, they fail to see what's actually right in front of them. See, they're looking for some kind of grand demonstration, something that they can point to and say it is unavoidable, inescapable.

Clearly, we see this is the sign that Jesus' Kingdom is coming. But it isn't like that. I mean, there are signs for those with the wit to see them.

We've seen the signs in the form of Jesus' miraculous deeds, for instance. We've seen signs of the coming of the Kingdom in what Jesus has said. There are signs for those with the wit to see them.

[5 : 57] But the Pharisees, to be fair, in common with pretty much everybody before Jesus came, the Pharisees didn't expect the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the Kingdom of God. They didn't expect that to be a kind of dual event.

They anticipated only one coming of the King. And crucially, the Pharisees were unable, unwilling to change that perspective.

Where they've seen one thing, they're unwilling to look again and say, well, actually, there are these two elements. They're unable to recognise. And in fact, prior to Jesus coming to reign, he comes first to suffer.

And that comes through in verse 25. Before his coming in glory, he must first suffer many things and be rejected. And so Jesus says to the Pharisees, he says to them that they are failing to recognise what is already happening.

They fail to see what is in their midst. By the way, on that phrase, in their midst, just in case some of you are using an older edition of the NIV Bible, I know many of you still do, or indeed a different translation.

[7 : 07] Maybe it says something like within you here rather than in your midst. Yes, don't get too worried about that. The phrase Jesus uses is ambiguous. It could mean either of those two.

But what is perfectly clear is that if he does mean within you, then the you in that phrase can't be these Pharisees specifically and personally, can it?

It has to be a more generic you of kind of the whole generation, if you like. More generic. Because quite clearly, the kingdom is not within these particular Pharisees, is it?

Clearly, they do not know. Clearly, they do not understand. So on balance, the newer translation, in your midst, is more helpful, I think. The point being that it is around them.

It is taking place now. It is there before them in the person of Jesus. The point being they have no excuse for failing to see what is right under their noses.

[8 : 05] Now here's the danger. The danger is that the Pharisees are so focused on their expectations, so focused on that coming in glory that they expect, so focused on the coming king, on the coming reign, so focused on that that they do not see the reality, so focused on the future to come that they don't acknowledge the present truth.

And what we have to ask is whether we're in danger of doing that ourselves, don't we? Because there are some people who love to focus on the end times. People who are obsessed with agonising over every last detail of the book of Revelation, trying to map it minutely onto the events of history.

And there's a danger that in focusing on that, they neglect what they should be focusing on. If you're more interested in figuring out when will Jesus come back, then you are interested in thinking through the implications of the fact that he came the first time, then you've got your priorities out of whack.

Come back to reality. Trust the Saviour who stands before you. Trust the Saviour revealed here in the pages of the Gospels. If you are looking for some kind of grand, dramatic signs of the coming of the kingdom, stop looking for that, because by the time those grand, dramatic signs come, it will be too late.

There's that danger of being too focused on what is to come. And equally, I think some of us are in danger of a kind of opposite error to that of the Pharisees.

[9 : 37] See, the Pharisees saw just that one coming of the Messiah, just that coming to reign in glory, and ignored kind of the first time that he came to suffer, just the reign in glory without the suffering first.

Well, so too, I think some Christians today see just one coming of the Messiah. And that is the one that's already come about. See, we're quite willing to talk about him coming to suffer.

We recognise the central importance of Jesus' crucifixion, of his death upon the cross. We recognise the importance of Easter. And we do need to know his crucifixion if we're to be saved.

Of course we do. But there's a danger that in focusing on that coming, we neglect this second one. We deny the reality that he will come again to reign in power, that he will return to judge the living and the dead.

We deny that reality, or at least we fail to live in the light of it. We fail to live now as if that were true in the future. It's a danger. It's a danger.

[10 : 43] So Jesus answers the Pharisees about what's already happened. Well, that brings him naturally to a corresponding reality. He says, this is the kingdom in your midst now. Don't forget to see that. But then we come to our second question of the morning.

What is still to happen? Interesting. No, that's the right passage, just the wrong heading. Don't get distracted.

It's fine. What's still to happen? This question is in the background. Jesus shifts the focus with his disciples. He shifts to address his disciples from verse 22 onwards.

Now, folks, if Jesus is right to say that the kingdom is in their midst, that it's a present reality for that generation, the question then is, well, is that all there is? Well, no, of course not.

No, we know there's plenty more yet to come, don't we? Verse 25, we've already seen. The Son of Man must first be rejected and suffer many things. And then after that suffering many things, after that rejection, we then come to this period when, as verse 22 says, when the disciples, and we might infer those who come after the disciples, when they and we, when we will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but will not.

[11 : 58] There's going to be this period when people try to say that he's returned. There he is. He's here, over here. Well, my friends, the question then is, how can you be confident that when somebody says he's returned, how can you be confident whether or not that is the case?

Verse 24 is very clear. When he actually does return. It will be like lightning that lights up the whole sky. There won't be any mistaking his return.

Nobody's going to say, is it a bird? Is it a plane? Nobody's going to say, I wonder. I wonder, could it be the second coming? No, it will be immediately, unambiguously evident to all and sundry.

No question. No debate. This isn't a localised event. This isn't only apparent to a select few. The news isn't going to travel by word of mouth. The whole world will know.

Immediately. And therefore, therefore you don't need to try and pry into hidden things. You don't need to worry that you're going to miss out. You don't need to chase down every last rumour, thinking, if I don't follow that up, maybe I'll miss the Messiah.

[13 : 08] You won't. You won't miss it. What you need to know is that when that day comes, you can be 100% certain that it has arrived. And therefore, every day up till that point, you can be 100% certain that the day has not arrived.

There isn't any room for doubt or debate. Third question. What warning will I receive? If the actual arrival is going to be unambiguous, then what about some advance notice, please?

What about some signposts to suggest that the time is at hand? What warning will I receive? Well, folks, folks here, we are squarely into that territory of things that we want to know, but do not need to know.

Jesus continues, verse 26, just as it was in the days of Noah. So also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark.

Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.

[14 : 25] So Jesus is very clear here, isn't he? It will be sudden and unexpected. These descriptions of what was happening in the days of Noah and what was happening in the days of Lot, the days of the city of Sodom.

Here the focus is not on the wickedness. On other contexts we might focus on the wickedness of those days, but here these are just ordinary things, aren't they?

The focus is on the unexpectedness. Without people being aware that it was the time the floodwaters began to rise. Too late then to do anything about it. Without people knowing today is the day the fire and the sulfur rained down from heaven.

Unexpected. Without warning. There have been, down through the ages, there have been plenty who have undertaken their complicated calculations and who conclude by assuring us that the Christ will return at this particular date and time.

Sometimes even at this particular location. And somehow when he does not actually do so, even still they somehow seem to manage to recalculate and say, oh yes, I overlooked that detail.

[15 : 41] It will actually be six months hence. Here's the new date. By the way, your checks should be made payable to J. Doe Ministries Incorporated. Whether out of a desire for public recognition or just from simple greed or even perhaps that they've been deceived themselves, there will always be those who are inclined to say, there he is.

This will be the time of his coming. But Jesus' instruction is simple. To all who wish to be his disciples, he says, do not go running off after such proclamations.

Do not be deceived. Do not be led astray. Do not think there are going to be signs that will let you say that's going to be the day. No. Eating, drinking, buying and selling, it will continue.

So how do we respond to that knowledge? Well, it means clearly, doesn't it, that we must be prepared at all times. It means we have to say, eating and drinking, these everyday things, means we have to say these things aren't enough, doesn't it?

Not enough for us to do these things as though we were born for nothing else. Noah ate and drank, but he also built the ark when he was commanded to do so.

[16 : 57] Lot's daughters were pledged to be married. It was very ordinary. But when he was told to get up and go, Lot had to actually leave. The everyday is not enough. Verse 32, we're instructed, remember Lot's wife.

What's the significance of Lot's wife? Well, you can read the account for yourself in Genesis 19. Lot and his family, they were warned to get out of the city and not look back. And yet that's exactly what his wife did.

And she died because of it. She stands as a warning. The story of Lot's wife. It's a profoundly sobering tale, isn't it?

I mean, she got as close to salvation as it is possible to get without actually achieving salvation. She was married to a righteous man.

She was told to get out on this particular date and time. In fact, she was brought out of the doomed city. The angels grabbed her and dragged her by the hand and set her on the way to safety.

[18 : 08] And yet, even having been brought out, she looked back. She lingered. She was more interested in what she was leaving behind than what lay ahead.

She came so close. And yet, ultimately, even having fled alongside her husband, she left her heart behind her in Sodom.

She stands, doesn't she? She stands as an example for us of the attitude that we must have. Or rather, an attitude of the example we must not have.

The attitude we should have is laid out in the verses leading up to verse 32. No one on the housetop should go back inside to get anything, nor return to the field. Sorry, return to the house from the field.

No, says Jesus. When that day comes, flee while you can. Urgency is demanded. But actually, more than urgency. The example of Lot's wife shows us that what's needed more is detachment.

[19 : 10] See, if the prospect of Jesus' return is precious to us, well, that naturally means that we hold lightly to everything else.

That we're willing to say of the things of this earth, of the beautiful house that Lot's wife left behind her, that we must be willing to say of these things, to be willing to say even of our lives, to be willing to say these are yours, Lord.

Do with them as you choose. We're going to come back and focus in on verse 33 next week. Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.

I've concluded that there's more there that we need to drill into to think about that as a more general principle. So we'll focus on that one verse next week, okay? For now, question four.

What will my experience be? When that day comes, when the kingdom is fully realised, when Jesus comes in glory, what should I expect to happen?

[20 : 15] Verse 34, I tell you on that night, two people will be in one bed, one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding corn together, one will be taken and the other left. It's a separation, isn't it?

It's a division into two different categories, two different groups of people. It's not geographical, it's not ethnic, it's not because of the job you're doing, or it's not because of how you're behaving. Even the two people in the closest possible proximity, even the husband and wife, are asleep together in bed, one will be taken and the other left behind.

Don't get caught up, by the way, with which is which. Some people think that they're taken for judgment and left in safety. Some say they're taken, a kind of taken like Lot out of Sodom, taken to safety.

And those who are left are left to judgments. On balance, I think it's probably the latter. That seems to fit with 1 Thessalonians 4. But actually trying to work out which is taken and which is left, it only matters if you're trying to head off into some of those crazier conspiracy theories of end times predictions.

Because the point isn't about that one is removed and the other remains, the point is the two are different. The two are separated. There is a distinction between one person and another.

[21 : 27] A separation between those who are for the Son of Man and those who are against Him. A distinction between those who, verse 33, try to cling to their life and those who willingly surrender it to their Saviour.

And so finally, verse 37. Where, Lord? I don't know about you, but I don't think that's the question I'd have asked at that point.

I don't think that's what's full-frozen to my mind after what Jesus has been saying. I don't think the location of this taking place, I don't think that's what I'd be worried about. And yet that is the disciples' concern.

Maybe they're still worried that they might not know that it's happening. That, you know, maybe they're worried it will happen over there and I might miss it. Maybe Jesus' response kind of picks up the sense of obviousness that vultures are uncannily able to find dead bodies.

Well, so too there will be no doubt that people will know Christ has returned. Maybe it's back to the ideas of verse 24. Could be that. I think on balance Jesus has moved on from talking about the obviousness of his return.

[22 : 39] I think he's talking now about the inevitability of judgment. Maybe they're asking where, Lord? Because they want to avoid that location. They want to get away from where judgment is going to take place.

If it's going to be judgment over there then I'll be over here thanks very much. If that's what's going on well, they've got a pretty dodgy idea of the nature of Jesus' return, haven't they? And Jesus corrects them here.

He corrects them by saying well, there isn't anywhere you can go to avoid it. There isn't anywhere where there's a dead body and yet the vultures don't find it. There isn't anywhere where judgment is required and it does not fall.

That's what Dale Ralph Davis says the disciples are asking. Where is judgment going to occur? And Jesus says wherever it needs to. Just as surely as vultures can find available prey, judgment will find its target.

There is no avoiding it. And maybe that sounds like a bit of a grim, brutal end to Jesus' teaching here.

[23 : 48] Maybe that isn't the happy ending to a sermon that you were hoping for this morning. That's where Jesus seems to leave it. Judgment's inevitable. Judgment can't be made palatable, can it?

It isn't a pleasant idea. There's nothing I can say about it that will make it desirable. It's not a pleasant idea, but it is an inescapable reality.

That some will be taken to safety and others will face the fire of judgment. And that it will happen at the time you least expect. Without warning.

So, so do not hesitate. Do not delay. Cast yourself today on the mercy of the one who can offer you hope.

Give up your life to the one who will preserve it. Friends, if you feel like you don't know how to do that, well, well, it is at the one and the same time incredibly straightforward and also completely earth-shatteringly complicated and life-changing.

[25 : 04] Straightforward because all you have to do is pray. Is say to God, I am sorry for my sins. Please forgive me. Have mercy upon me. Be Lord in my life.

All you have to do is trust Jesus to pay for your sins and he will. It is very simple. But it's also the biggest decision you'll make. Because if you pray that and you mean it, it's going to change absolutely everything about your life.

You will have to let go of your life, says Jesus, verse 33. You will have to let him be in charge, not you. Simple.

Yet earth-shattering. Folks, if that's something that you're realising for the first time this morning that you need to do, well, I would love to talk to you about it. I'd love to pray with you.

I'd love to pray for you. I'd love to help you think through some of the implications of that decision. So please drop me an email, pick up the phone, all the details will appear on the screen at the end. I'd love to talk to you more about it.

[26 : 12] This matters, doesn't it? thinking about what is to come. There are things that we need to know because there are things that we have to live in light of and yet there are things that we do not.

So let's resolve not to try and investigate the things that we just want to know about, just to satisfy our idle curiosity or to try and avoid things that can't actually be avoided.

Let's not try and investigate what we want to know. Let's hear from God's word what we need to know. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for telling us what we need to know.

Thank you for revealing to us things that are yet to come. Thank you for warning us about the reality of judgment. Thank you for telling us that one will be taken and the other left behind.

Lord, help us to face up to that truth. Help us to live in light of it. Help us to surrender our lives to you.

[27 : 18] Help us to entrust them to you for safekeeping as the only one who is able to preserve us. In your name we pray. Amen.