

The Coming of the Kingdom

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Date: 13 April 2025

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] It's inevitable that when we talk about Christian salvation, we talk about the cross.! We talk about a historical event that happened 2,000 years ago just outside the present-day! We understand that Jesus died there to take away our sins. We owe our lives to the sacrificial death of Christ, which is why the cross is the central symbol of the Christian faith.

As Christians, like the Apostle Paul, we live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me. But the cross is not all that is. Without the cross, there's no salvation, but there is more to Christian salvation than the cross. Ten years ago, my wife and I visited Prague in the Czech Republic. We visited a very ornate church with beautiful sculptures, carvings, stained-glass images. But for all its beauty, the church left me cold.

There were many images of the Passion of Christ, including pictures and sculptures of Christ on the cross. But there were no sculptures and no carvings and no stained-glass images of the risen and exalted Christ. There were no pictures of Christ gloriously clothed in the majesty of His divine exaltation. For all its beauty, the church in Prague was dark. And all because there was nothing of the glorious Christ who rose on the third day, ascended to the Father's right hand, and is coming again to judge the living and the dead. There was no light in that church.

There was never a darker place on the cross where Jesus died. Yet even here there was light. When it was on the cross, Jesus triumphed over sin and death. And as Christians, we never lose our wonder for the cross. Without the cross, there is no salvation for any of us. But the cross is not all there is. For according to Jesus' own teaching, a day is coming when He shall return. Not this time as a suffering criminal, but as a glorious and majestic King. He taught His disciples to pray for that day.

Your kingdom come. He taught them about the great messianic banquet and about the fulfillment of His kingdom. In these verses, Luke 17, 20 through 37, in response to the questions He has asked, Jesus teaches us more about the light and the hope of His kingdom return. The cross of Christ is not all that is. The coming of Christ is the completion of all our hopes and dreams as Christians.

[3 : 12] And in this passage, Jesus teaches us three things about His kingdom and especially about His glorious return. First, Christ and His kingdom in verses 20 and 21. Second, Christ and His coming, verses 22 through 25. And third, Christ and His judgment in verse 26 through 37.

Let it never be that ours is a church like that one in Prague, a place of darkness and despair. Let it always be that the light of the hope of the glory of Christ shines forth from this pulpit, shines forth from this place, and shines forth from us.

First of all then, Christ and His kingdom. Christ and His kingdom, verses 20 and 21. Our passage begins with the Pharisees, these religious leaders, asking Jesus when the kingdom of God would come.

Now, for the Pharisees, the kingdom of God was an earthly kingdom of might and power. In their minds, when the Jewish Messiah came, He would raise a Jewish army and with the mighty help of God overthrow the Romans and a new age of Jewish empire would begin. The Messiah would reign as king of the world.

[4 : 47] It would be a far greater empire than Rome ever was, and at its head would be the Jewish Messiah, the Jewish son of man. He would be its captain and its king. It would be a political and military empire unmatched in human history. The throne of the Messiah in Jerusalem would replace the throne of the emperor in Rome. For however great the kingdoms of David and Solomon were in the Old Testament, the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of the Pharisees understood by the kingdom of God. And so, they're asking Jesus, when shall these things happen? When shall you begin to raise a Jewish army? When shall you begin to overthrow the Romans?

Now, there are many Christians today who mistakenly believe the same thing, that the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom of the kingdom, characterized by military and political power. They think that eventually a Christian kingdom will rise, which will destroy the evil kingdoms of this world. And perhaps this was at least part of the motivation behind what we call the Crusades. But Jesus had no truck with these views.

He goes out of His way to distance Himself from any earthly glory. He says to the Pharisees, the kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed.

The Pharisees associated the rising of rebellion against the Romans with the coming of the kingdom of God. But Jesus says, that's not the way the kingdom of God will come. You won't be able to observe a Jewish leader raising the flag of rebellion and saying, the kingdom of God has come, rally to me. Many false messiahs tried to do that, and they all failed. Rather, Jesus says, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you, or the kingdom of God is among you.

And by saying this, Jesus is saying, He is the kingdom of God. That it's not a political or military empire. The kingdom of God is a person, Jesus Christ. Wherever He is, there is the kingdom of God. Where He rules and reigns as king, there is the kingdom of God. In 1746, after a hundred years of warfare, the Jacobite rebellion was finally crushed on Culloden battlefield. Body of Prince Charlie, the last remaining steward, heir to the throne, was forced to flee. He went into exile in France.

[7 : 45] But even then, in secret, Jacobites, some of them my ancestors, no doubt, would toast their king with a wee dram and say to the king across the water. Because they dreamed of a day when Charles Edward Stuart would return at the head of an army and assume the kingship of the United Kingdom and reign in power. As long as he was still alive, there was hope. Because he, body of Prince Charlie, didn't just represent the Jacobite cause. He was the Jacobite cause.

And in an even greater way, the reign and rule of Jesus Christ is the kingdom of God. But what was so distressing to the Pharisees is that Jesus' Messiahship isn't marked by military or political power, but by the power of love and righteousness and mercy, compassion, justice and acceptance? He's just healed ten lepers, one of whom was a Samaritan. In the minds of the Pharisees, the kingdom of God was to be an exclusively Jewish kingdom, admitting no foreigners at all. What kind of Messiah and what kind of kingdom would admit unclean Gentiles? Well, Jesus did, and He still does today. The kingdom of God is Jesus Christ, His reign and rule in the lives of His followers, the way He works in them to make them people of love and righteousness and mercy, compassion and justice and acceptance. They do not kill their enemies. They love their enemies, and they pray for them. As the Word of Christ is preached here today in this place, the kingdom of God is among us. Jesus is present by His Holy Spirit, inviting us to swear loyalty to Him as our Lord. Whoever we are, the kingdom of God is for us, and He calls us to enter in today by His cross and through faith in Him. The kingdom of God is in our midst. How then shall we respond? Christ and His kingdom. But then second, in verses 22 through 25,

Christ and His coming. Christ and His coming. The kingdom of God is here among us. Because the risen and exalted Jesus is present by His Spirit through His Word. But a time is coming when He shall be present not merely by His Spirit, but the risen and exalted Jesus Christ shall physically return in the glory of His Father. Just as He was physically crucified, and just as He physically rose from the dead, so Jesus will physically return. He calls these the days of the Son of Man, the days of His return. In this section, Jesus is describing or discussing the timing and circumstances surrounding His coming again. In the first instance, you'll notice He discourages anyone from speculating as to the exact date or time. Over the centuries, many mistaken Christians, and some of them not mistaken, just mad, have given exact dates for when they think the glorified Jesus shall return. There are too many to count, but let me just give you a couple. A Franciscan theologian named Peter Olivi predicted the second coming of Jesus in 1297. The American Cotton Mather, who some of you may have heard of, predicted it in 1716.

And Harold Camping, a famous American Christian TV radio show host, predicted it would happen in 1994. It's become almost standard fare to hear prominent Christians to predict the date, only for that date to pass with no return. And Jesus says about such people in verse 23, they'll say to you, look there or look here, do not go out and follow them, because the exact date or time of Christ's second coming cannot be predicted. He is discouraging us from trying to calculate the day of His appearance.

We know it will happen, and we know it will be unexpected. Just get on with living a faithful Christian life today and leave the dates of the times with God. But then in the second instance, Jesus tells us that His coming will be public. Public. It won't happen in secret. Every person on planet earth will be its witnesses. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in His day. Everyone will see the dazzling light of the glory of the coming of the Son of Man. Along the road in Finistain, the Amadea mosque has a banner outside announcing to us all, the Messiah has come. According to Jesus, His return will not be announced by a few people. His return will be announced by flashes of lightning in the sky which will stretch from one side of the world to the other. The crucifixion of Christ, while not a private event, was witnessed by only dozens of people in a remote part of the Roman Empire. But the return of Christ will be witnessed by billions of people. Everyone will see the dazzling glory of the Son of Man like so many streaks of lightning across the sky. Every human being will see it, even the blind will see it, and will immediately know what it means. The light of the Lord's coming will dazzle the human eye with its intensity and sheer brightness. But then in the third instance in these verses, Jesus tells us that something must happen before He comes again. First, He says in verse 25, He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. As Patricia read to us, the Son of Man had to be rejected. He had to suffer. He had to go away before He could come again. As we know, Jesus in this passage is on the way to Jerusalem.

[14 : 55] He is going to be rejected by the chief priests. He is going to suffer many things. As we'll see in a moment, the title, the Son of Man, is a title of glory. The glory of heaven will be tortured and crucified. He will be struck with fists and beaten with rods, mocked and flogged, a crown of thorns driven into His head, nails hammered into His hands and His feet, and then lifted up on a cross to die. Never will a human being die in such humiliating circumstances. Never a more painful death. Jesus, the divine Son of Man, the life of the world, dying on a cross. That must come first before He comes again. But it has happened. It has happened.

So nothing now needs to happen before Christ returns. The way is open. It could happen at any time. Everything is ready for the return of Jesus. Everything.

The coming of the Son of Man, the so-called days of the Son of Man, are described with sufficient detail to know it will happen. It will happen and how it will happen, but the dates and the times are left unwritten. The point is this. While being filled with the joyful hope of our Lord's second coming, let's get on now and today with the work of the kingdom of God in our midst. Let's get on with growing in our faith in serving His people, in proclaiming the good news of salvation to a lost world. We don't live in dark days with a hopeless future. Rather, illuminated and filled with hope by the certain return of our Savior. We will love Him, we'll believe in Him, and we'll work for Him now. Christ and Him coming. Well, thirdly and finally, Christ and His judgment. From verse 26 through 37, Christ and His judgment. Jesus' favorite title for Himself was the Son of Man, the Son of Man. Historically, many Christians compared this title with another title that's used for Him, Son of God, and concluded that whereas the title Son of God was a title of glory, the title Son of Man was a title of humanity. But more recently, the table has turned where experts have proved that the Son of Man is the title we are to think of as filled with glory. Bible experts have shown that when we read the Son of Man, we are to think of Jesus as the divine King who comes to condemn the wicked and to rescue the righteous. Again, in the Old Testament, we often read the phrase, the day of the Lord, the day of the Lord, Yom Yahweh, to describe that future judgment.

Drawing an Old Testament background, Jesus now calls it the day of the Son of Man, to describe exactly the same thing. So, we're to read these verses from verse 26 to 37 as referring to a future judgment. That through Jesus, the Son of Man, the wicked shall be condemned, and the righteous shall be rescued.

[18 : 58] Jesus reflects on Old Testament patterns of God's judgment to draw attention to how He will come again and judge the world. So, in verses 26 and 27, He refers to God's judgment on the world in the days of Noah. At that time, you know the world was lost in wickedness. Through Noah, God promised judgment, but the people didn't listen. They got on with the normal activities of life, eating, drinking, marrying. They lived as though they would never be held to account by God for their wicked actions. But then Noah, having exhausted any possibility of persuading the people to repent, entered the ark, and the rain began to fall. The pre-flood world, with all its normality, was destroyed forever. Even though they had been warned of God's coming judgment, it made no difference to the people of Noah's day. They did not turn to God. They did not repent. And then in

verses 28 and 29,

Jesus refers to the judgment upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in the days of Lot, Abraham's relative. These cities were wicked places to live. The people were almost totally depraved.

God warned judgment upon them through Lot, but the people didn't listen. They went about their normal lives, eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. They got on with the normal activities of life, choosing to ignore Lot's warnings. They lived as though they would never be held to account by God for their wicked actions. But then when Lot and his wife and family left Sodom, fire and sulfur began to rain down upon these cities and destroyed them completely. God wiped them from the face of the earth on account of their wickedness. We do not even know with any certainty where these cities were. So great was the destruction. Even though Lot had warned them of God's coming judgment, it had made no difference to the men and women of Sodom and Gomorrah. They did not turn to God.

They did not repent. Well, in the remaining verses of our passage, Jesus is talking about people engaging once again in the normal activities of life. There's someone on the housetop. He's sunbathing.

There's someone in the field and he's working. And there's someone in bed and he's fast asleep. And there's another person and he's grinding grain with one of these huge millstone things. The normal activities in which we engage every day. Working, resting, sleeping, providing for our families. Getting on and engaging in the same activities as the people in Noah's day and the people in Lot's day. And then the judgment comes. Entirely as unexpectedly and severely as it did before. [21 : 59] All the while, through the church's proclamation, Jesus is warning the peoples of the nations of coming judgment. But rather than listening, they ignore the message. They do not turn to the Lord.

They do not repent. They get on with living as they always have. And as a result, they face the judgment of the Son of Man. Their interest is not in what the Son of Man says, but in their earthly attachments to wealth and prosperity. The one on the housetop, sunbathing perhaps, I don't know about those things back then. When he sees the lightning of the Lord's return, he's more concerned about running into his house to collect his goods. And the one in the fields, when he sees the Lord's coming, he runs back to his house to make sure that he's turned the key and locked the door. Like Lot's wife, who looked back because her home and possessions were more important to her than fleeing God's judgment. People will be so attached to what they have here and now, they'll put these things before their eternal well-being.

They're trying to preserve their earthly life, their worldly possessions. They're putting what they have here and now first, but in so doing. They will lose their eternal life.

By contrast, those who put Jesus first here and now, even though they may have little in the way of this world's possessions, will save their eternal lives. We'll come back to this in a moment in our conclusion. The passage ends with the Pharisees asking Jesus the question, where, Lord? Where should all this happen? And Jesus mysteriously replies in an Eric Cantona-type way, where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. You see, vultures feast on dead things, carrion. Wherever there is spiritual deadness, where there's spiritual deadness, there one should look for judgment. Where people only live for what they can get out of this life and ignore God, there the judgment will strike the hardest. Where people close their ears to the warnings of Christ's judgment, that's what it's going to strike. The Pharisees should heed Jesus' warning.

If people do not listen to Him, if they ignore Him, and if they reject Him, they should expect to be judged.

[24 : 38] Now, all this talk of judgment, it seems very dark, and what we're trying to do is to let the light of Christ's return shine into our hearts to give us hope. Here, then, is the hope.

If you were a Christian in first century Israel, to whom this letter was originally written, in all likelihood, you were someone who had lost everything you had on account of your faith.

You'd been persecuted, you'd lost your job, and your home had been forcibly repossessed. This is the way it is for many Christians in our world today, in places like Nigeria, Pakistan, and India. To be a Christian means that you lose your job, you are persecuted, your home is burned down.

We're going to link this passage with next week's passage in Luke chapter 18 from verse 1 to 8, because in truth, they belong together. If you're a Christian who is struggling today with all the evil going on in our world, and if you're crying out to God saying, how long, O Lord, must I continue to suffer like this?

The words of Jesus in our passage bring indescribable comfort to you. The darkness of our sinful world will come to an end, even as the glorious Son of Man will return in judgment.

[26 : 19] All the evil and depravity, all the wickedness and suffering, all of it will end once and for all.

The day is coming when those who put Jesus first of their lives here and now shall be rescued and vindicated. They might live in social, physical, and mental darkness here and now.

They might be denied justice and discriminated against by a world which hates Jesus. But a day is coming when the glorious Lord shall return, and the majestic light of His presence will make all that darkness a lost memory.

The key question is this. Are you ready? Are you ready? Is Jesus first in your life here and now, so that when He does unexpectedly return and with great glory, you are ready for Him?

As I'm getting older, I'm thinking, I'm trying to make sure that I've got enough money to retire. I'm preparing for the future.

[27 : 35] Well, trying to, anyway. In the light of Jesus' return, are we putting as much thought into whether we are prepared for His coming?

How can we do that? Well, to return to the beginning, by understanding that Jesus is among us today.

By putting Him first in our lives. By living for Him. In doing the normal things everyone else does. Working.

Relaxing. Living. But doing them with the cross of Jesus behind us. And the coming of Jesus before us.

It is refusing to be ground down and destroyed by this world. But living in the light of Christ's return. Which for us as Christians suffering in today's world is the best news possible.

[28 : 42] That's all.