

The Kingdom Come

[Luke 17:20–37](#)

When will Jesus come with the glory of His kingdom? Today, R.C. Sproul continues his expositional series in the gospel of Luke and examines the warnings that Christ has given for His people to be watchful.

This morning we will continue with our study of the Gospel According to Saint Luke, and our text is rather lengthy. I will be reading from [Luke 17:20–37](#), and I would ask the congregation please to stand for the reading of the Word of God:

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”

Then He said to the disciples, “The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Do not go after them or follow them. For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day. But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

“In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife. Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, in that night there will be two men in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left. Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left.”

And they answered and said to Him, “Where, Lord?”

So He said to them, “Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”

I think of all the sayings of Jesus, this is one of the most cryptic and difficult to understand. Nevertheless, it is weighed down with a sense of urgency as it was given to the first-century church and even to us today. This is the Word of God. Please receive it as such and be seated. Let us pray.

Our Father and our God, we are incapable in and of ourselves to do justice to these words that come to us from the lips of our Savior. So, we make our plea and appeal to You this hour for the presence of the Holy Spirit, that He may illumine these things for our understanding and cause them to lodge in our souls. For we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

If you ever go to a seminar on public speaking or attend homiletic classes in seminary, you will learn one cardinal rule taught to all would-be public speakers. That rule is this: never, ever apologize to your audience before you give a speech, because if you do, you will lose all credibility with them. I will break that rule this morning and apologize before I look at this text. I candidly confess that I am not completely sure what Jesus was talking about in this text. I am not sure that I understand this text in its fullness. What you are about to experience, sadly, is the blind leading the blind. You will hear me say, “Maybe, it is this; maybe, it is that.” I wish I could be certain and not leave you with ambiguity. This is not my normal mode of operation, but I must do it in order to be candid with you. Having given my apology in advance, if you want to take a nap, you have my permission; I will not be offended.

Not a Political Kingdom

Let us look at what is written in verse 20. We read, “Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered...” Notice that the first question asked in this text with respect to the kingdom of God is, “When?”

We have learned throughout our study of Luke that the central motif of Jesus’ preaching was the kingdom of God. Parable after parable came from His lips saying, “The kingdom of God is like unto this,” or “like unto that.” The kingdom of God was His favorite subject.

Those who were on the outside looking in, particularly the Pharisees who were hostile to Him, said to Him: “Every time we show up to listen to Your sermons, You talk about the kingdom of God. So, tell us, Jesus, when is the kingdom of God? When are we going to see it?”

Listen to Jesus’ reply: “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”

The first part is easy enough to understand. The Pharisees, like most of the rest of the Jews of the day, expected the kingdom of God to come by means of a military Messiah who would drive the Romans out of Israel. The Pharisees expected something like giant tanks rolling down the boulevard followed by phalanxes of soldiers with steel helmets. Well, maybe not tanks, but chariots coming down the boulevard, followed by legions of soldiers led by the Messiah who would drive the Romans out of their country, liberating them from the tyranny of Roman occupation. It was a political Messiah they hoped for, were looking for, and whose presence would be plain to see whenever He came.

Jesus said: “No, it’s not going to be like that. There will be no columns of troops, nor hordes of chariots. You are not going to be able to say, ‘Look here,’ and ‘Look there,’ and see the outward manifestation of the kingdom of God. For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” This is the first part of the text that I am not sure I understand, as the translation I have read says, “The kingdom of God is within you.” What does that mean?

Where Is the Kingdom?

Some commentators believe Jesus’ statement that the kingdom of God is “within you” means that the kingdom of God is a spiritual reality. It is not of this world, as Jesus later said to Pilate. It is invisible. It is not external; it is internal. It has to do with the internal motives, desires, and hearts of human beings indwelt by the Spirit of God. So, wherever the Spirit of God indwells a human heart, there is the kingdom of God.

At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the issue became this: Where is the true church? Is it in Rome or in the Protestant movement? The Roman Catholic Church answered by saying, "Where the bishop is, there is the church." The Protestant reply was, "No, where the Spirit is, there is the church." So, Jesus was saying, "Where the kingdom is, is in the hearts of people." This is the majority interpretation of the text. I am not at all comfortable with it. I could be wrong, but I do not think that is what Jesus meant. I do not think Jesus was talking about a kingdom that merely existed in the hearts of people.

When I was in college, we had a regular Bible study group and sang hymns, and one we sang all the time was called "He Lives." It began: "I serve a risen Savior, He's in the world today," and then it had line that said: "You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart." I was moved by that until I began to think about it. I thought: "If the only place Jesus lives is in my heart, then I will sleep in tomorrow morning. The Jesus I read about in the New Testament does not just exist in my memory, my feelings, or my heart. His living is not a subjective thing. It is objective and real."

Jesus' resurrection was a real resurrection. He really became alive and came out of the tomb. He really ascended to heaven, and He is at the right hand of God the Father right now, not just in my heart or my memory.

The problem with this particular verse is one Greek word, *hymōn*, which is capable of various translations. One common translation of this word *hymōn* is "within." That is the interpretation my version of Scripture has chosen, "The kingdom of God is *within* you." The other way that word is translated is "among."

Was Jesus saying, "The kingdom of God is within you," or was He saying, "The kingdom of God is among you"? I am not certain, but it seems to me that Jesus was saying: "You want to know where the kingdom is? It's right in the midst of you," because standing in the midst of them was the King of the kingdom. Where the King is, there is the kingdom. I think Jesus was saying: "The kingdom of God is in your midst. It has been in your midst since I have been walking among you, and you've missed it because you missed Me."

Missing the Real Messiah

Jesus began to speak, not to the Pharisees, but to the disciples, and He said to them: "The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Look here!' or 'Look there!' Do not go after them or follow them."

In this text, I think Jesus was referring to His imminent departure. After His death and resurrection, He will ascend into heaven. He said to the disciples, "Yet a little while and I will leave you." When that happens, of course, what will the disciples do? They will yearn for the days where they enjoyed His physical presence among them. The disciples will talk to each other by a campfire: "Do you remember when He healed the paralytic? Do you remember when He raised Jairus's daughter from the dead? Will we ever forget the night He walked on the sea? Were you there when they crucified Him at Golgotha?" Jesus was saying, "You will miss Me. And people will come and say, 'Oh, but He is here,' or, 'No, He is over there.'"

We know after the departure of Jesus from this world in the thirties, that between the thirties and the year AD 70 when Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed, there were multiple false messiahs who appeared on the landscape in Palestine claiming to be the Messiah. As Jesus warned elsewhere in the Olivet Discourse, such events would come to pass. Perhaps that is what He referred to in this passage. Jesus said, “If anybody claims to be the Messiah,” or, in our own day, “If anybody claims to be an Apostle, run for your life, do not go there.”

Like a Flash of Lightning

“For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day.” Let me ask you a trivia question. In the United States of America, what location has the most lightning strikes in a year? Those present here today are living in it: Central Florida. When Jesus talks about a flash of lightning that seems to go instantly from one side of the heavens to the other, that is a phenomenon you can understand. You have seen it again and again here in Central Florida, and it is frightening.

Jesus was saying that His coming in that day will be like a flash of lightning, a lightning bolt, not a gradual turbulence that works its way slowly across the earth. It will be like the lightning that flashes across the midnight sky—that quick, that instantaneous.

Jesus was referring to the Son of Man in His day. Here is the biggest question in this text: When Jesus was talking about His coming, was He talking about His coming at the end of the age, His final return in triumph when He consummates His kingdom? Or was Jesus talking about His judgment that would come in that same century, within that generation, before many of them would even see death or go over all the cities of Palestine? If the latter, it would refer to the crushing judgment that came upon Israel in AD 70, when the temple was destroyed and Jerusalem was besieged and annihilated by the Roman invaders.

The Destruction of Jerusalem

The invasion of Jerusalem began with Vespasian. The conquest of the land came suddenly. Entire villages were annihilated in one battle. There was one survivor in one town, and he alone was left to write about it—the historian, Josephus.

Vespasian’s campaign was interrupted when messengers came from Rome because the emperor had died. There was a senate locked in conflict as to who the successor would be. They pled with Vespasian to return to Rome, which he did, and he was made emperor.

Vespasian turned the task of the destruction of the Jews over to his son, Titus, who then marched his troops to Jerusalem to set siege to the Holy City. Many of the troops camped on the Mount of Olives. While they were encamped for weeks, they were cold, so they cut down all the olive trees. These trees often were three or four hundred years old, but the Romans completely stripped the Mount of Olives for the sake of firewood.

It reminds me of the story of a man who was five foot four inches tall and only weighed ninety pounds, and he applied at a camp of foresters in Washington to be a lumberjack. The foreman looked at the little man and laughed. The foreman said: “You want to be a lumberjack? You can’t be a lumberjack, you’re too small. What experience do you have?” The man said, “I was a lumberjack in the Sahara forest.”

They said: “The Sahara forest? The Sahara is a desert.” The little man said, “Now.” I had to get some relief from this text, forgive me.

The whole land was stripped before the final attack on Jerusalem, and Josephus tells us that in that conflagration, 1.1 million Jews were killed. This was the first-century Holocaust. It also was a time in history that marked a distinction that would go on in perpetuity between Jews and Christians. Christians were thought to be a subset among the Jews until the Jewish nation and the temple were destroyed.

A Sudden Catastrophe

Maybe Jesus was talking about the destruction of Jerusalem, or maybe He was talking about His final coming at the end of the age. I am not certain which one He was describing, but listen to what He said: “But first He (the Son of Man) must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.” That refers to the cross. He went on to say: “And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.”

Jesus was saying that a colossal, catastrophic event would come suddenly, when people least expected it. Life would be going on in normal categories, just as when Noah spent years warning the people of the impending disaster to come, and they mocked and ridiculed him as he built the means of rescue from the flood. People just kept living business as usual. People were marrying, giving in marriage, eating, and drinking. Nothing was wrong with any of those things until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed every one of them.

Jesus continued: “Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built”—everything was normal, business as usual—“but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.” If you do not like fire and brimstone preaching, you would not enjoy the preaching of Jesus. You get fire and brimstone right here in the New Testament. “Even so it will be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.”

Do Not Turn Back

As the passage continues, it gets even more complicated: “In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife.” She turned back.

Lot could not have been in more of a hurry to get out of Sodom. Lot’s wife left with him, but she hesitated. He who is on the housetop has goods in the house, but it is so urgent that he does not have time to go down to the house and pack his things.

In 1993, the Amtrak train company had the worst wreck in its history, killing more people in that one accident than all the rest of Amtrak accidents combined. It happened in Mobile Bay, Alabama. The *Sunset Limited*, headed for Florida, left the tracks and plunged into the water. The fuel that drove the train ignited and caused a column of flame seventy-five feet in the air.

When that train crashed, I was in it, and Vesta was in it. She was caught by the netting that guarded her part of the bunk; I was thrown into the wall. I knew this was a serious accident, but I assumed we had

simply hit a car at a crossing. I looked out the window and saw that column of flame seventy-five feet high. The power was out, it was pitch dark, and I thought we must have hit an oil tanker. But as it became clear, it was even far worse than that.

I said to Vesta, “We have to get off this train now.” She said, “Honey, I have got to find my shoes.” I said: “You don’t understand me. Forget your shoes. We have to get off this train *now*.” “Honey, I have to find my suitcase.” “Forget the suitcase. *Now*, we have to get off!” When we got off the train, she looked around and knew why we had to get off the train at that moment.

I must confess to you that later I snuck back on the train and found her suitcase and brought it out. The next day there was a picture on CNN News of people pulling body bags off the train, and then one woman, perfectly dressed, stepped off the train carrying her suitcase. My wife was on the news. But Jesus was saying, when this happens, do not be like Vesta: “Get off the roof and get out of there. Run for your life.”

Some Will Escape, Some Will Not

“Likewise, the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife. Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, in that night there will be two men in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left. Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left.”

People often see this text as a reference to the rapture. One will be left behind of the two women, and one will be left behind of the two men, and this gives credence to a particular eschatology. However, the point is that one will escape and one will not.

In the ancient world, when the messenger came and announced that an invading army was coming, what did the people do? Where did they go to escape? It did not matter whether it was Palestine, Germany, England, or anywhere else. In the ancient world, when hostile invaders crossed the borders, the people fled to walled cities. The cities were walled to be protection against invaders.

Jesus told His disciples, “When the enemy comes, flee to the hills, to the mountains.” That is exactly what happened in the first century. The Jewish population of Israel rushed to Jerusalem because it was the safest place to be. The Christians, however, did not go to Jerusalem. They went to the mountains and were spared the Holocaust. Those who listened to Jesus fled immediately and did not wait around for confirmation. Those left behind were slaughtered by the Romans, while the others found refuge in the mountains.

The Sign of Vultures

At this point, the disciples asked Jesus another question. This passage began when the Pharisees said, “When?” Now, the disciples asked Jesus, “Where?” Jesus said, “Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.”

You may have a different translation. The word translated in my version by “eagles” is translated in other versions by the English word “vultures.” Vultures gather to devour carrion; eagles do not devour carrion. When there is roadkill on the highway, you may see many vultures or buzzards gathering, but

you will not see eagles pecking away at the carcasses. Jesus said, “You want to know where this is going to be?” One translation would say, “It is going to be where the vultures are circling over the carcasses of human bodies.”

I used to hunt on the Mormon Ranch with some friends. We would go down there every fall for wild boar, deer, and turkey hunting. I used to boast and laugh at my friends in the camp. I would say, “As soon as my car goes through the gate of this place, the vultures start to circle because they know they’re going to have a feast.” Maybe Jesus was saying: “You will notice where this catastrophic event will take place by looking up in the sky and seeing the vultures circling. That will be your signal.”

One of the worst things that can happen to a deer hunter is to shoot a deer and fail to take its life but leave it severely wounded. That is the ugly part of deer hunting. Any deer hunter with a conscience will pursue all day, if necessary, to put the wounded animal out of its misery. One of the basic clues regarding how to find the animal is not only to look at the ground and track blood but to look at the sky and watch for the buzzards to gather.

Watch and Be Ready

The common interpretation of this text is that where the buzzards or vultures are circling, there you will find the judgment of doom taking place. My translation says, “Where the eagles are gathered.” There are many New Testament scholars who believe that the reference to eagles is to the assembly of the legions of Rome, whose standards bore the symbol of the eagle. So, if you want to know where the destruction will take place, watch for the eagles, the Romans.

I said at the beginning that I am not sure. I am at the end, and I am still not sure. But what I hope I have given you now is sort of a reconnaissance over the options that attend this text. In any case, one message comes through, whether it refers to the destruction of AD 70 or the final coming of Christ and the consummation of His kingdom. This message is plain: be ready.

At any second, when you least expect it, our Lord is coming. Like the lightning that flashes across the sky, He will come with such rapidity as to leave us stunned and amazed. For many, that day will be the day of ultimate glory, but for others, it will be the worst day in history, the worst day they could ever imagine. Jesus said, “Remember Noah, remember Lot, and remember Me.”