

## **When Will God Fix This Mess?**

### **Luke 17:20-37**

This week's text examines a single topic from several different angles: the kingdom – better, the reign – of God. The Old Testament prophets promised a future day when God would intervene in the world, redeem his people, and reestablish his reign over earth, in a restoration of Eden. That dream was widely known as 'the kingdom (or reign) of God'.

In Jesus' time, the dream seemed further from realization than ever. Israel had long-since returned from exile, but instead of the glorious reign of God, they faced struggle and poverty, then brief independence, before descending into civil war. In Jesus' time, the people of God were ruled by infidels, not even masters of their own land or their own religion. Given the depth of longing for the long-anticipated kingdom, inevitably Jesus would be asked for his views on the matter. Throughout this chapter he explores various aspects of the theme.

#### **Day 1: Luke 17:20-21 The reign of God is present in Jesus**

The NIV is generally a good translation, but here commits an egregious error. Jesus would not tell the Pharisees, of all people, "The kingdom of God is *within* you." Without any question, the right interpretation appears in the NIV footnote: "The kingdom of God is *among* you" (that is, in the person and ministry of Jesus). The NIV also muddles another point in these verses: "The kingdom of God does not come *with careful observation*": whatever does that mean?

Jesus corrects three common misconceptions in his time, exemplified here by the Pharisees: (a) that the reign of God is coming at some unidentified future time; (b) that people should look for the signs of its coming; and, (c) that it will occur in a particular place (e.g., Jerusalem). No, says Jesus, (a) the reign of God has already begun; (b) sign-watching is useless; and, (c) the reign of God has begun in and through his ministry. This does not exhaust the full meaning of the reign of God, but here is the starting point: through his ministry, Jesus inaugurates the reign of God through preaching the gospel, casting out demons, healing the sick, and caring for the poor.

What does this say today to us, who already recognize Jesus as Messiah, king of God's reign? Contemporary Christians commonly share two mistakes in common with the Pharisees: (a) focus on a future, second

coming of Christ at some unspecified time; and, (b) preoccupation with discerning signs of that future coming. This text reminds us: (a) to celebrate the reign of God in Jesus, and in our redemption from sin and from futility; and, (b) to avoid speculation about the timing and signs of Jesus' return.

### **Day 2: Luke 17:22-24 The reign of God comes fully when Jesus returns**

Through preaching the gospel, casting out demons, healing the sick, and caring for the poor, Jesus inaugurates the reign of God. But that reign does not reach its peak until some time in the future, when Jesus returns. When will that be? What signs point to its pending arrival? Where will he touch down? How can we know?

Jesus anticipates the days – much like our own – when his followers will long for his return. Charlatans take advantage of this longing in order to make fortunes selling specious books to the credulous. Jesus said clearly: (a) we will long to see it but may not (it may not happen in our lifetimes, any more than it did in theirs); (b) don't study the signs, or chase after the silly hopes, or buy the books; (c) when Jesus does return, there will be no mistaking it, any more than we can miss lightning that splits the sky.

Clearly, Jesus goes to great lengths to warn us against the sort of silliness that preceded AD 2000, and produced a 16-volume best-selling series of *novels* (they did not even purport to be actual historical accounts, but that did not stop millions of Christians from buying them!). One could hope that we will not return to that sort of foolishness until the run up to AD 3000, but the sad reality is that every generation of Christians reserves the right to ignore Jesus' warning, and get sucked into pointless predictions of the timing of his return. As long as we offer to buy this junk, people will happily sell it to us. Yet these distractions cost us more than money and time; we also lose focus on the actual work that Jesus has for us.

### **Day 3: Luke 17:25 The reign of God includes the cross**

Jesus here offers a third reflection on the kingdom of God: God reigns even in the crucifixion of Jesus: "But first he [the Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation".

For his contemporaries, this is the most astounding affirmation yet. It was already surprising for Jesus to assert that the reign of God had begun in and through someone so non-descript (he was neither a warrior-king, nor even

a prestigious religious authority). It was even more surprising to hear that the reign of God would not begin all at once, but would develop in stages. This is, after all, God who is reigning; who or what can impede or delay him? But most surprising of all is the idea that God's appointed vice-regent would either suffer or be rejected by God's people, let alone both! The whole point was that God's reign would burst upon our world with glory; but in Jesus' conception, the reign of God entails his gruesome execution.

We can reasonably draw several implications from the fact that the reign of God includes the crucifixion of Christ. For one, it affirms that God is in control at all times, even the worst times, even in the cross, because it was his decree that the cross was necessary. For another, it demonstrates that God sometimes works not through overwhelming success, but through struggle, and even through apparent failure. For a third, it hints that we, too, may have to follow Christ in this path on our way toward glory.

**Day 4: Luke 17:26-30 The reign of God comes as a surprise, and brings judgment on those who do not love and serve him.** A popular children's Bible tells the Noah story, and draws this lesson: Jesus will one day make all things new. Yes, he will. But there's another aspect to the Noah story, one that people – even Christians – shy away from. In fact, it is this other, negative aspect that the New Testament most associates with the Noah story: Just as in Noah's day, the flood came unannounced and destroyed all but God's people, so in the future, Jesus will return unannounced and destroy all but God's people. Just as in Lot's day, destruction came upon Sodom and destroyed all but God's people, so in the future, Jesus will return unannounced and destroy all but God's people.

We do not celebrate this, in some twisted, vindictive glee. Instead, it reminds us why Christ delays so long. As the apostle Peter writes elsewhere, "The Lord ... is patient ... not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). Still, the end awaits, and when he returns, judgment falls on those who do not know him (2 Pet 3:10). As we eagerly await the fulfillment of the reign of God, let us determine to be found blameless, and let us also be eager to share the gospel within our sphere of influence to those who will otherwise be caught out by Jesus' return.

**Day 5: Luke 17:31-33 No turning back on the reign of God!**

Jesus draws another lesson from the Lot story. In addition to the godly

who were saved, and the wicked who were destroyed, there is one more possible outcome, exemplified by Lot's wife: she looked back – apparently longingly – reluctant to leave her old life behind, and, as a result, she was destroyed.

So, Jesus warns his followers, when we come to him, we turn our backs on our old lives; we do not head back to where we earlier fled, we do not even turn back to reminisce about the good things we left behind. We stop for nothing, or no one. Instead, we resolutely, urgently follow Jesus. If we forfeit anything for him, we gain more; if we hold back from serving him to preserve something that we value more, we lose it all. Jesus is the great dividing line in each life. Those who come to him must renounce their past way of life, whatever its former attractions: “Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it” (17:32).

#### **Day 6: Luke 17:34-35 The reign of God divides eternally**

A popular megachurch pastor pens a book arguing that in the end, God's love wins out; even those opposed to him at death are ultimately and eventually won over by his love, enter heaven, and live happily ever after. Jesus seems not to have gotten the memo. Instead, he insists, his coming divides people into either of two categories, and divides them eternally. Two are in bed; one rises with him, the other is destroyed. Two are grinding grain; one rises with him, the other is destroyed. The second coming of Christ marks the eternal division between those who love God and live for him and those who do neither, between those who luxuriate in his presence forever and those who are destroyed.

Despite the popularity of this pastor, and the enjoyment many receive listening to his sermons, his position is directly opposed to Jesus' teaching. As unpalatable as the topic of judgment may be, Jesus does not shy away from it. To the contrary, he underscores its horror in a graphic metaphor: “Where there is a dead carcass, there the vultures will gather” (17:37). Those who do not love and serve him become those gruesome carcasses ... carrion gnaws their bones.

Ultimately, it is God – not love – who wins. God wins in the hearts of those who love him, and he wins against those who oppose him until the end. Jesus clearly affirms this unpalatable truth; so must we, or else we deny him.