

WHEN WILL THE KINGDOM OF GOD COME?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

During our prayer time last Sunday morning we were asked to pray for a Christian man named Joe who was dying of cancer. Two of his brothers were at the service, during which communion was served. After the service they asked me if I would go with them to Stanford University Hospital that afternoon to serve communion to their brother. At the hospital, Joe's wife and children, his mother, father and his four brothers and their families gathered around his bed. We were standing in the presence of death. The only sound breaking the deafening silence came from the medical support systems hooked up to his body. I read a passage on communion from the scriptures, and I offered the elements to Joe. We prayed for him and for the whole family. Then the silence descended again. Suddenly, his mother began to pray: "Our Father who art in heaven..." Everyone in the room, believer and non-believer alike, joined in: "hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." The cry of her confused and pained heart was to the God of the universe to come and rid the earth of sin, death and decay. Christians and non-believers alike hungering for the loving, righteous King of heaven to invade the earth, defeat the evil one's kingdom of darkness and death, and set up his own kingdom of righteousness.

In our passage today, Luke 17: 20-37, the Pharisees ask Jesus the same question that was prayed by the grieving family in that hospital room: When is the Kingdom of God coming?

I. The Kingdom is in your midst

Luke 17: 20-21

Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom was coming, He answered and said to them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

Jesus was on his way to the Holy City where he would be finally rejected as the Messiah by the chief priest (John 19:14,15) and crucified. Since chapter 15 verse 1, he had been ministering to both open-hearted sinners and closed-hearted Pharisees. According to the Harmony of the Gospels, between Luke 17:19 and 17:20, Jesus and his disciples crossed the Jordan River to Bethany, and there he raised Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. This caused fear in the hearts of the chief priest and Pharisees in Jerusalem. They thought, "If we let him go on like this, all men will believe in him. Then the Romans will take away both our place and our nation." Caiaphas, the high priest, prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation and for the children of God who were scattered abroad . . . "So from that day on they planned together to kill Him." (John 11.) Jesus then went from Bethany, northward to Ephraim, then east again to Perea. There he was confronted by more Pharisees who asked him a very important question, one that was crucial both for themselves and Jesus' disciples. "When is the Kingdom of God coming?" they wanted to know.

Let's begin by trying to understand what exactly the Pharisees and the Jews meant by these words "the kingdom of God." The OT declares that God, the eternal King of the Universe, watches over the whole earth and all the kingdoms of men. Kings and kingdoms rise and fall at his command. As the Judge of all the world, God reigns in righteousness and justice over the affairs of mankind. And he is the King of Israel, a people whom he chose to be his special possession in order to offer salvation to the Gentile nations who were living in spiritual darkness. In time, as the nation of Israel multiplied, they were allowed by God to select a human king who would represent God's rule over them. Eventually David, a man after God's own heart, arrived on the stage of world history. Around 1,000 BC, he united the twelve tribes of Israel into a nation. Israel

continued to prosper under the leadership of his son, King Solomon, and it become the jewel of the nations.

Then, because of their rebellion against God's kingly rule, the nation went into decline. For the next 1,000 years, the Jews were ruled by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks. (In this context in Luke, they were under the rule of the Romans.) But, based on the foundational prophecy of 2 Samuel 7:1-17, their hope lay in the words which God uttered to Nathan the prophet, addressed to King David: "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant (seed) after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom....and your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever." This promise of God, which was reinforced by the prophets over the next thousand years, motivated many of Israel's spiritual leaders to build theological models of what that kingdom would look like. The leaders of the conservative Qumran community who lived on the western shores of the Salt Sea (they were the keepers of the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls) hoped that God would come in kingly power to lead them to victory over their oppressors (1 Qm. 6:6; 12:7).

The Pharisees had several models for what this kingdom would look like. One was that the Messiah, who would come from the seed of David, would arrive on the world stage with the power of a great army behind him. He would bring the Roman Empire to its knees and then establish his political and spiritual kingdom in the center of Jerusalem; and from there would flow righteousness and justice to the nations of the world. This was how some of the Pharisees thought the promise of God's eternal rule would be fulfilled (see Ps. 146:10; Dan. 2:44; Psalms 86: 35-37). Few were looking for the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. George MacDonald, the famous Scottish pastor and writer of the last century, put it simply:

They were all looking for a King
To slay their foe and lift them high.
He came a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.

When John the Baptist arrived on the scene as prophesied by Isaiah 40:3, he announced to Israel that he was the forerunner of the Messiah. He had been called by God to prepare their hearts for the long-promised Messiah: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," said John (Matt 3:2). The Jewish people came out to the Jordan River by the hundreds to confess their sins and be baptized by John (an outward symbol of an indwelling readiness to receive their long-promised Messiah who would soon arrived and baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire). Jesus himself was baptized by John and was immediately taken into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for 40 days and nights. Following that trial, Jesus moved up to Galilee and settled in the city of Capernaum, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 9:1-2. Matthew comments, "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" (Matt. 4:17.) During Jesus' ministry, his message contained a genuine offer to Israel to bring in the kingdom if they would accept him as their Messiah. They rejected him as their king, so his literal kingdom was postponed to a later day. But his spiritual kingdom remained among the Jews, and then the Gentiles, and continues up to this very day. "The kingdom of God is among you."

Now, as we have seen in our text, Jesus responded to the Pharisees' question concerning the kingdom of God by saying, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!'" The kingdom he was speaking of was unlike any kingdom the Pharisees were familiar with. They were always looking for some prophetic sign, and yet when our Lord did signs and wonders, most of the Pharisees missed or rejected the fact that he was the Christ. But they were still hoping he would show them something they could see and touch: a marching army, a political party, a citizen uprising, something observable. But they missed the King, and they would certain miss seeing the kingdom.

And no one would announce the location of the kingdom. Jesus went on to say, in effect, "Don't sit around hoping someone will tell your that the Messiah and his Messianic kingdom have arrived on earth; that they know who he is and what city he is in. That will never happen because "the kingdom of God is in your midst." This spiritual kingdom, which our Lord had already announced in Luke 11:20, was not predicted by the OT prophets. This prompted some of the spiritual leaders of Israel to declare that Jesus was casting out demons in the power of Satan, so they rejected him as their Messiah. Our Lord, of course, answered this charge by

saying, "But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Luke 11:14-20.) But not all the Pharisees were hardhearted. Earlier, Jesus said to a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews who was seeking to discover who Jesus was, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Now the way one becomes "born again" is to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, for "whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3.) Failing to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Jews would be unprepared for the coming of the future physical kingdom even if they saw it coming. The kingdom was not in the unbelieving Pharisees' hearts, rather it was in their midst, standing in front of them in the form of Jesus.

Ray C. Stedman in his book on the gospel of Mark, *The Servant Who Rules*, defined the kingdom of heaven in these words:

"...we are surrounded by an invisible spiritual kingdom with great forces, both of evil and of good, playing upon us. In that kingdom, Jesus is Lord: Jesus reigns supreme. And that kingdom governs all the events of history—all the events of our daily lives and circumstances, so that when we are related to the kingdom of God, we are related to the ultimate force which governs everything we are and have, and thus we are related to reality...Jesus came to announce that the King is at hand, the One who can master a life, put it in order, bring peace and harmony into it, and supply a power which will produce a character no one else can rival...The kingdom of God is at hand."

The rule of God in heaven was now about to take place on earth because the King had arrived in the flesh and was standing before his questioners. All who willingly confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as the Messiah, allowing him to rule over their hearts and lives, would receive all the benefits of the kingdom. This was why, very early in our Lord's teaching ministry, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, the people heard him say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5). This again was confusing to many of the Jews because they thought the kingdom would be a physical, powerful entity, but Jesus was speaking of a spiritual, invisible, kingdom within the hearts of believers.

The first coming of our Lord and his kingdom was spiritual, invisible, powerful, and it came with an offer for salvation to all those who placed their faith in him as their Messiah. Paul would later remind his spiritual family in Rome that "...the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Rom. 14.) The second coming of the risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be in the form as predicted by the OT prophets. He will come in great glory so that every eye will see him. And once he sets up his kingdom of earth, he will begin to judge all those who rejected him throughout the generations since his first coming.

Time magazine chose Ted Turner, President of CNN, as their Man of the Year last year. The magazine published the past and recent glories of his TV company and the story of Turner's life. His father was a successful millionaire businessman who committed suicide at 53 years of age. When Ted Turner reached 53, he felt that as his father had died tragically, it was his duty to die tragically also. For Turner, life has been a struggle to master what he calls his greatest fear—the fear of death. But he is alive and well, having been stabilized by medication and psychiatric counseling, and loved by his third wife, Jane Fonda. Once he was a practicing Christian, and planned to be a missionary. But when he was 20, he watched his sister die a horrible death from a crippling disease and that death "killed his faith in God," according to the story. This man has a "locked-in" view of God. Now the Pharisees also had a locked-in view of what the kingdom of God would look like. When Jesus appeared in the form of a Servant instead of a powerful king, they rejected him, just as Ted Turner rejected God when God didn't correspond to his ideals during his sister's sickness and death. He rejected the one and only living God and his gift of salvation in his Son Jesus, thereby leaving himself open to the judgment of God.

When is the kingdom of God coming? It has come and is among us in the form of Jesus, the Son of God. He came to offer eternal salvation to all who place their faith in him, in a spiritual salvation incorporating all the blessings of the kingdom: righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you reject that person, and the

gift of salvation, then you will discover that when Jesus comes again, for you he will be coming in judgment.

II. The Son of Man is coming

Luke 17:22-37

And He said to the disciples, "The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Look there! Look here!' Do not go away, and do not run after them. For just as the lightning, when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day. But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it shall be also in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let not the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house go down to take them away; and likewise let not the one who is in the field turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life shall preserve it alive. I tell you, on that night there will be two men in one bed; one will be taken, and the other will be left. There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken, and the other will be left. There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken and the other will be left. And answering they said to Him, "Where, Lord?" And He said to them, "Where the body is, there also will be vultures be gathered."

Here Jesus gives seven warnings to his disciples concerning his second coming.

1) There would be difficult days ahead. Verse 22: "The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man and you will not see it." In a brief stroke, just as an artist paints a line across a clean canvas, here Jesus lays out for his disciples the scenario for the Age of the Spirit, the tribulation, and the second coming. In Matt. 24:29-31, Jesus gathered together all the prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos and Zephaniah to explain the days of the Son of Man. He was referring to the day when he will come back to this earth as King of kings to set up his earthy kingdom as promised by God to David in 2 Samuel 17: "But immediately after the tribulation... then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds from one end of the sky to the other."

All of his disciples would face heavy persecution and eventually their own untimely death by the sword of Rome. They would find themselves longing to experience just one of the many wonderful days that the Son of Man would bring to this wicked and fallen world, but during their lifetime they would not see the coming of the the Kingdom as prophesied in the OT. Christians also in every generation in the Age of the Spirit, or the Church Age, will face many difficult days before the second coming of the Son of Man in all his glory.

2) Watch out for false prophets. Verse 23: "And they will say to you, 'Look there! Look here!' Do not go away, and do not run after them." In light of our longing to see our Lord's return, we will be open to be deceived by false prophets. It is interesting that Jesus told the Pharisees that the no one would tell them that the spiritual kingdom was coming because it was spiritually present in him. But the second coming will be visible, powerful and literal. In light of that reality, many false prophets will claim that Jesus and his kingdom have come to earth. But, says Jesus, "See to it that no one mislead you. For many will come in My name saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many." (Matt 24, Luke 21.) Don't chase those elusive, prophetic butterflies.

3) No one will miss the Lord's second coming. Verse 24: "For just as the lightning, when it flashes out of one

part of the sky, shines on the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day." When the Son of Man does come in all his glory and power, it will be as sudden and alarming as lightning racing across the night sky. No one can predict that streak of lightning, but every eye will see it and be amazed at its power and suddenness.

4) They needed to stay within God's plan of redemption. Verse 25: "But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation." The kingdom of God would not be established on this earth, according to the promises of God to David, within a few months of our Lord's life on earth. Why? Because Jesus would tell his disciples in even more graphic detail after he had finished his sermon on the Mount of Olives: "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be delivered up for crucifixion." (Matt 26:2.) After his death, burial and resurrection, Jesus laid out his plan of redemption in and through his disciples and every believer until the Father tells him when to come again: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

5) As in the days of Noah (26-27). Jesus continued to teach his disciples that his physical, literal and visible kingdom would come to earth at a time when men and women would not expect it. Just as in Genesis 6, the whole world was absorbed in wickedness, yet they continued doing all the normal events of daily life-eating, drinking, marrying etc. That wicked generation was so self-absorbed and corrupt that God said he "...was sorry that He had made man on the earth and He was grieved in His heart. But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord, for he was a righteous man, blameless in his time, and he walked with God."

So Noah was commissioned to do two things over the next 120 years: Preach a message of warning and hope to a wicked generation, and build an ark so that the righteous would be rescued from the coming worldwide judgment of the flood. All who placed their faith in God would be saved, but all who rejected his warning would perish. The people of Noah's generation mocked his message and his ark, but then came the day when God closed the door of the ark and the flood destroyed that wicked generation. Peter wrote to his flock, "For if God ...did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly ...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment" (1 Peter 2.) Peter went on to encourage believers who were surrounded by mockers of the Lord's second coming by saying, "Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking...saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming?'" They failed to remember that God keeps his word. He did so with the flood, and he will do so with our Lord's second coming. So as God's people we are encouraged to continue to walk in godliness in the midst of a mocking world, knowing that Jesus is coming again in glory, judgment and righteousness to set up his kingdom on earth.

6) As in the days of Lot (28-29). The Lord then placed before his disciples a second well known but often forgotten example of God's judgment and mercy. The wicked people of Sodom (Genesis 18-19) lived as if there was no God. They thought they would never be held accountable to anyone for their sins. However, there is a God, and he said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave." God judged their evil, but just before he rained down fire from heaven, he sent two angels to rescue Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family. We discover 2,000 years later, in the letter of 2 Peter, a commentary on Lot's heart, which is not revealed as clearly in Genesis account: "And if God...condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds)" (2 Peter 2). It will be the same setting when Son of Man is revealed. Conditions in this world will be the same as in the days of Noah and Lot because, as the prophet Jeremiah said, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds." (17:9-10.) So it doesn't matter which generation you live in. Each human being is given the opportunity to accept God's gracious gift of salvation, offered through his Son Jesus, or else face the judgment of God at his second coming.

The second coming of Jesus Christ involves 1) an invisible coming to the world for his church just before the great seven-year tribulation (1 Thess.4:17). This is symbolized by God's rescue of Noah and Lot and their families before the judgment of the world by the flood and Sodom by fire. 2) At the end of the seven-year tribulation, the Lord will come in power and glory and all the world will be able to see him. At that time he will judge the sheep (new believers during the tribulation), and the goats (unbelievers) (Matt.25:31-46), and Israel will be judged, as well as restored to serve and worship Jesus as their Messiah for a thousand-year reign on earth.

7) On that day . . . Verses 30-36: "...let not the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house go down to take them away; and likewise let not the one who is in the field turn back." At the end of the Great Tribulation, that day in time when mankind will be living just as if Jesus were never coming back, despite the many warnings in history, prophecy, preaching and spiritual signs, the Lord will return and bring them to judgment. Believers are encouraged to not be weighed down with the things of this world, but to have a heart to meet him as their Lord and Savior when he comes again.

Then comes the warning: "Remember Lot's wife." When she turned back towards Sodom, in the midst of the destruction of that city that had captivated her heart, she turned into a pillar of salt. "For whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it and whoever loses his life shall preserve it alive." On that night when the Lord appears in the heavens and every eye shall see him and every lip shall confess him as Lord, it is then that the judgment will begin. Only the Lord knows the heart of each man, woman and child. If two men are sleeping in one bed, for example, or two women are grinding grain, when our Lord returns, he will take the believer to be with him and the unbeliever will remain on earth to face the judgment.

Our Lord's conclusion (verse 37). "And answering they said to Him, "Where, Lord?" And He said to them, "Where the body is, there also will the vultures be gathered." The disciples wanted to know when all this world judgment would begin, and our Lord replied, "Where you see a dead body you will find the vultures gathered to eat it." Jesus had come to the spiritual conclusion that Israel was now a lifeless corpse, so it was time for the judgment on that nation. That judgment began in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Judgment will continue against Israel and the nations through the persecution in the tribulation; then Jesus will come again in power and glory to set up his physical kingdom on earth. Israel will be restored (Rom.9-11). He will reign for a thousand years as King of kings in justice and righteousness. The great White Throne Judgment will follow, then the first earth and the heavens will be destroyed by fire. Following this will be the creation of the new heavens and the new earth prepared for all who love him (Rev. 20-21).

On Monday I will be sharing the good news of Jesus Christ at a memorial service for the family and friends of Joe Collins. Joe's physical life on this earth was cut short last Thursday because of cancer. But he did not fear death, because he had established a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Now he lives in the very presence of God. Joe's life on earth was a gift from God and his physical death was a gift from God. God will use it to sober all who attend that memorial service and remind them that we all must walk through the valley of the shadow of death one day. And one more time, our Lord will say to all who attend, "The Kingdom is among you. Receive me as your Lord and Savior and receive the gift of eternal life now."

When will the Kingdom come? Fortunately, the "Kingdom is still among us" in the form of our risen Lord Jesus Christ. He offers the gift of salvation to all who desire to have him become their Lord and Savior. This invitation is open until the very moment when he will come again and set up his physical kingdom on earth. Then all who have rejected him will stand before him as their Judge and be sent into the second death, hell forever. "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:2.) Don't put it off. Remember the days of Noah and the days of Lot, and especially remember Lot's wife. Accept God's gift of salvation as presented in his Son Jesus Christ before he comes again as the Judge of all the earth.

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