

## **Luke's Gospel**

### **The coming of the kingdom, Luke 17:20-37**

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

"If God exists, why doesn't He just come down and show Himself to us?" That would make things so much easier wouldn't it. Or so we might think! I was asked a question like this once, when I was telling someone about the reasons why I am a Christian. It strikes me as an odd question because the Bible tells me that God has already visited earth in the form of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. The man I was speaking to seemed to reject this coming of the Lord, and wanted some fresh sign today. But the thing is, people rejected Jesus in His day. Why do we think it would be any different today? When the Lord was here, many people were oblivious to who He was. Would we be any more enlightened today?

This ignorance about who Jesus was is evident in Luke 17:20-37, which forms the next part of our series in Luke's Gospel, and the verses we'll consider today. If you want to remind yourself of what has come before in this series, why not visit the Truth for Today website to listen to, or read, the previous messages in this series.

The passage starts with the Lord Jesus being questioned by the Pharisees. They are quickly answered and Jesus shows the error of their thinking. Then for most of the verses we'll think about today, the scene changes to a more private conversation between Jesus and His disciples in which the Lord gives His closest followers a more detailed account of things that will come to pass in the future.

Over the course of the programme today, we'll read the whole of verses 20-37 of Luke 17, but we'll read it in small chunks as we go along. Let's start by considering the conversation between the Lord and the Pharisees in verses 20 and 21. Listen to what Luke records:

"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."

The Pharisees had a question for the Lord about the future. When would the kingdom of God come? This was a great desire of the Jewish nation. Perhaps this desire was all the stronger as a result of the years they had spent under Roman occupation. They longed for the day when God would set up His kingdom and rule in righteousness. But the Pharisees were mistaken as the Lord's answer revealed. The Pharisees were hoping for signs. Some clues that the kingdom of God was near. But Jesus had some surprising news for them. He says "the kingdom of God is within you" or perhaps "the kingdom of God is in your midst." According to the Lord Jesus, the kingdom had already come!

What did Jesus mean by this? The kingdom of God had certainly not come in the way that the Pharisees had expected. The Messiah was not reigning on a visible throne, with all the nations in

subjection under Him. There was no visible rule in the kingdom of God. But Jesus had something to teach the Pharisees. In fact, the kingdom of God is a frequent theme in Luke's Gospel and a quick look at the references to this phrase will show us that God wants to teach us two features of the kingdom of God.

Luke teaches us that the kingdom of God has two aspects. There is a present aspect to the kingdom of God, a sense in which the kingdom of God has come. As examples of Jesus using the phrase "kingdom of God" in this sense, have a look at Luke 10:9-11, Luke 11:20, Luke 18:16-25. But there is also a sense in which the "kingdom of God" is something that has not yet come, or not yet been fully revealed. There is a future aspect to the kingdom of God, that hasn't happened yet. Luke speaks of the kingdom of God in this way in Luke 19:11, Luke 21:31 and Luke 22:16-18. When the kingdom of God is used in this sense, the anticipation is of a day when the Lord will reign as the King of kings and be seen to be ruling in glory. What a day that will be! That's no doubt the impression of the kingdom of God that the Pharisees had in mind when they question the Lord in verse 20 of our passage for today.

So why did the Lord not talk about the kingdom in this sense? Surely He knew what the Pharisees were asking about? For the Pharisees, and perhaps for us today too, the most important thing we need to know about the kingdom of God is not so much how and when it will be manifest in the future, but how we are responding to the present aspect of the kingdom. Think about the reply of the Lord. He starts by saying "The kingdom of God does not come with observation." That is, the kingdom of God isn't something you can watch out for in the way that a doctor might watch for symptoms and be able to recognise a disease. In fact, the Lord says, "the kingdom of God is in your midst." It had come. This was the great irony. There were the Pharisees asking about the kingdom and when it would come. Who were they asking? The King! The King of the kingdom was there standing next to them and they were blind to it! They didn't need to be worrying about when the King would be seen to reign in power and glory. They needed to worry about the fact that they were rejecting the King!

Surely this is significant, and an important lesson to us! As we'll see in the rest of the chapter as we get to the verses in a minute, when the days of the Son of Man do come, the days when the Lord will reign as the King of kings, this day will be characterised by the Lord judging wickedness and evil. The Lord is about to give two Old Testament pictures or examples of God's judgement to help us understand what it will be like in the day when the kingdom of God in its future aspect does come. It will be characterised by judgement. And so in His answer to the Pharisees, the Lord tells them about the kingdom of God in its present form. It was here. The King was in their midst. And they needed to respond to Him!

As we read the rest of the Gospels, we discover that the Lord came in order to provide a way for men and women to enter the kingdom of God. He died on the cross to bear the punishment we deserve for our sins. Paul explains in the book of Romans that the Lord was punished for our sake so that God could righteously forgive our sins and give us a place in His kingdom. It's these truths that the Pharisees, and we also, need to learn and accept before we need to worry about the details of the kingdom of God in the future.

The Pharisees didn't believe that Jesus was the Son of God. They didn't recognise Him as the King of the kingdom of God. They didn't believe He was the Messiah, the Saviour sent by God. And so they were blind to the fact that the kingdom of God was in their midst. As a consequence, no matter how intelligent they were in regards to God's future plans, they had a big problem in that they would face judgement when that day came.

How about us today? It's easy to get caught up in the prophetic parts of the Bible. There's lots of interesting things to learn there as we try to piece together God's plans for the ages. But if we fail to see that the King has already come and provided a way of entrance into the kingdom for us

now, then we'll have missed the point! Don't make that mistake! Don't be like the Pharisees and reject the King. Instead, be like Nicodemus and so many others. See Jesus for who He really is and be born again to enter the kingdom of God.

So, we've seen in verses 20 and 21 of Luke 17 that Jesus gives the Pharisees a fairly short answer to their question and tells them nothing about God's future plans for His kingdom. Until they were clear about who Jesus was, and had come to trust Him, there was no point telling them more. But as we move into the rest of the verses in chapter 17, we find Jesus revealing more details to His disciples. This reminds me of the Lord's explanation to the disciples about why He spoke in parables. We can read it in Matthew 13:11:

“It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”

The Lord graciously reveals more to the eyes of faith. That's an encouragement to us. We might understand so little about the Scriptures. But if we truly trust the Lord, He will increase our understanding, perhaps little by little, and show us more about who He is, what He has done and what He will do in days to come.

In verses 22-25, the Lord moves on to explain to His disciples about the future aspect of the kingdom of God that we were mentioning before; the day when the King will reign on the earth. That's what I think He has in mind by the phrase “the days of the Son of Man” in these verses. Let's listen to what the Lord said.

“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.”

In these verses, the Lord explains that as time goes on the general conditions on earth will get worse. We don't get a description of how this will be here. The details are not the important focus for the Lord in these verses. But the Lord does say that as things get worse on earth, people will start to claim that the Lord is coming here or there. Perhaps people will even claim to be the Messiah come again! Jesus warns us not to believe these claims. When the Lord does come to set up His kingdom, it will be quick and unexpected. But until that day, Jesus says that the Son of man “must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.”

Just a few chapters later in Luke's account, we read that the Lord did indeed suffer all the agonies of crucifixion on the cross. More than that, He suffered as He bore the weight of our sin in His body on the cross. Truly He did have to suffer many things. Never forget that He suffered many things for your sake. For my sake! How humbling is that? May the Lord help me to always be grateful to Him for all He suffered that I might be right with God and enter the kingdom of God.

The Lord says in these verses that He would be rejected by this generation, whether that means the generation of those who were alive at the time, or the generation or “age” or “time period” between then and when the Lord comes again. Many of the Pharisees and other people of the day rejected the Lord Jesus, and today it is not much different. The Son of Man is rejected by this generation.

But the Lord will come suddenly to set up His kingdom. In verses 26-32 the Lord uses two Old Testament examples to teach us something about the coming of the days of the Son of Man. Let's read first about Noah in verses 26-27.

“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.”

I think the main point here is that the people in Noah’s day were not expecting God’s coming judgement. They ate and drank and married wives and were given in marriage. In other words they did normal family things. They went about life looking out for their families and just eating and drinking like normal people do. They didn’t know judgment was coming. They weren’t ready for it. And then suddenly God shut the door of the ark, and the rains came and only Noah and his family were saved. You can read more about this account in Genesis 6-9. Let’s now read verses 28-32 to hear about Lot.

“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.”

If in Noah’s day the people were busy with family matters, the Lord uses the example of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah to show that the people were busy with business life. They bought, they sold, they planted, they built. Again, they were busy doing normal things. But they had left God out! As you read the account in Genesis 19, you’ll discover that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were wicked and sinful people. God was about to judge them, but they didn’t listen to Lot’s warning. They were busy going about their lives oblivious to the coming judgment. And then God rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Judgement came and they weren’t ready!

Why does the Lord use these two Old Testament stories? Well, I think that the Lord teaches here that although the Pharisees and the disciples might want to know the details of the coming of the kingdom of God, when that day does come it will be characterised first by judgement. This judgement will be fierce and severe, in a similar way to the flood or the fire and brimstone on Sodom. The Lord sums this up in the remaining verses of Luke 17. Let’s read verses 33-37.

“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.”

In these verses, Jesus describes the time when the Lord does come to set up His kingdom. It will be a time when the Lord will separate people out for judgement. I think the reference to eagles being gathered together is a reference to the fact that this is a time for judgment. The eagles, or perhaps this could be translated vultures, are hovering about to finish off the remains of those who are judged. Did you notice that these verses speak of some who are separated during night time whilst in bed. Others are separated in the fields during the day presumably. This teaches us that when the Lord does come to set up His kingdom and judge the wicked, it will be seen by all people, all over the world, whatever time of day it is for those people in their respective countries. All will bow to the Lord’s rule.

But the sad fact is that most people will be painfully unprepared for this coming day of judgement when the Lord sets up His kingdom. Most will be like the people in Noah and Lot's day, concerned with family matters or business matters, and won't have given God any thought. That's why the Lord's answer to the Pharisees is so crucial! Be ready for that day by realising that the kingdom of God has already come. Accept the King now, so that we won't have to fear judgement when the Day of the Son of Man comes.

As we read the rest of the New Testament and try to piece together the various prophecies about the future, I believe we'll find that just before the Lord comes to set up His kingdom, and just before the very worst of the conditions on earth, the Lord will come again to take all Christians to be with Him in heaven. So we won't be on earth to be fearful of the events of Luke 17. Christians will have been taken to be with the Lord in heaven, and things on earth will go on as normal, as they were in the days of Noah and Lot, for perhaps a period of about seven years before the Lord comes to set up His kingdom and judge the world.

So if Christians won't be here, what are we to learn from these verses? First we need to take the warning of them very seriously. Are we so caught up with the matters of life, however legitimate, that we have missed the opportunity to be saved now? Don't let that be true of you if you are listening to me today. Trust in Jesus today, and be sure you're right with Him! Secondly, we can be encouraged that, although our lovely Saviour, who is so precious to us, is rejected now in the main, there will be a day when He is acknowledged as the "King of kings and Lord of lords." Don't we long for Him to have the praise He deserves.

Finally we can be encouraged that God will one day judge sin and put right all that is wrong about the world. We can perhaps become discouraged by the sense that everything is not as it ought to be. Well, one day God will put it right. One day the King will reign in righteousness. May that thought encourage our hearts as we wait for Him to come!

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on "Luke's Gospel: The coming of the kingdom, chapter 17:20-37" talk number T1147.

---

**Please Note:**

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.