

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 17:20-37 **“Questions About The End”**

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 17:20-37 "QUESTIONS ABOUT THE END"

Presence Of Kingdom Is Not The Advent Of The End

1) vv.20-25 THE "WHEN" QUESTION ANSWERED (Two 4-Line Stanzas).

Audience Changes

Question 20 Being asked by the Pharisees **WHEN** when the kingdom of God was coming, Assume, "Kingdom will come when X takes place." Rather, Kingdom In Midst

Answer 1, 2: Hostile? Beginning Of New Age?

Teach a he (i.e. Jesus) answered them, 11:20, 4:18-19, 3:22, 7:22, 9:27, 10:9, 12:32 On Present Kingdom

b "The kingdom of God is not *coming* with signs to be observed; 1 Enoch 91, 93, Baruch 53-74, Astronomy Term

21 c nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' // 11:16, 29-32, //Mk. 13:21, Universal Arrival

d _____ for behold, G.T. 3, Near = *in your midst* (Jesus & His Works!)

Present the kingdom of God is in the midst of you (or, "within your reach")." pl., Spirit's Work

Mk. 13:21, No Charts/Calculations, Not "Within You"

22 a' And he said to the **DISCIPLES**, Messianic Age/ Kingdom In Full, Is *Not Yet!* Longing

b' "The days are *coming* when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of man, Pressure/Persecution

Future and you will not see it. //Mt. 24:26-28, Period Of Waiting, Return = Future

23 c' And they will say to you, 'Lo, there!' or 'Lo, here!' No Hysteria! Claim Secret Presence Now!

Do not go, do not follow them. Don't Be Hoodwinked! No Distractions Allowed

24 d' _____ For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, Obvious

so will the Son of man be in his day. Sudden, Cosmic Vindication, Not Secret

25 But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. 24:26, First Suffer

vv.20-27 = Protection Against Over-Realized Eschatology

2) vv. 26-30 TWO GENESIS EXAMPLES OF TOTAL JUDGMENT.

5 PARTS:

Genesis 7: Noah, Flood Story: Water

26 a As it was in the days of Noah, //Mt. 24:37-39, 2 Pt. 2:5-7, 3:20, Wis. 10:9, Biblical Survivor: Noah (a)

b so will it be in the days of the Son of man. Distractions? Saved, Lost, Future Judgment (b)

27 c They ate, they drank/, they married/, they were given in marriage, Normal Life/ Family ©

d _____ until the day when Noah entered the ark, Time Gap, Limit (d)

and the flood came and destroyed them all. Catastrophe, Sudden Disaster (e)

Genesis 19, Ezek. 16:49: Lot, Sodom Story: Fire

28 a' Likewise as it was in the days of Lot— vv.28-30 = (L), Biblical Survivor: Lot (a')

c' they ate, they drank/, they bought, they sold/, they planted, they built, Life/ Money ©'

29 d' but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom Time Gap, Limit (d')

fire and sulphur rained from heaven and destroyed them all. Sudden (e')

30 b' so will it be on the day when the Son of man is revealed. Climax, Future Judgment (b')

vv.26-30 = Total, vv.31-35 = Division + Warning

2') vv.31-35 TWO SETS OF EXAMPLES ON SUDDEN FUTURE DIVISION.

Parousia = Sudden Great Division, No Rapture

31 a1 On that day, let him who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, //Mk. 13:15-16, Two Male Ex.

not come down to take them away; Indifference To Possessions Recommended

2 and likewise let him who is in the field 9:62, Not Cling To Life, Life Is Ahead, Not Behind!

not turn back for the things left behind. (32) Remember Lot's wife! Gen. 19:17, 26

v.33 = How To Think/Live In The Interim

33 b Whoever seeks to gain/hold his life (as a possession) Living Only For Now! For Stuff

will lose it, (Or, a-b//a'-b')Take Action Now! Counter-Cultural Values

but whoever loses his life //Mk. 8:35, Mt. 16:25, Lk. 9:24, Stay Faithful Until He Comes

will preserve it. Point Is Not Chronology But Conversion, Promise From Jesus

Practice Disengagement In The Midst Of Normal Activities

34 a'1 I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed; 1 Thess. 5:2, No Private Rooms, Two Female Ex.

one will *be* taken and the other left. p.v. Taken = Saved, Saving/Losing Life, The Great Division!

35 2 There will be two women grinding together; //Mt. 24:41, Two Sisters? Mother, Daughter?

one will *be* taken and the other left." Not A Reference To So-Called Rapture!

v.36 Omitted, Assimilated From Mt. 24:41

1') v.37 THE "WHERE" QUESTION ANSWERED.

//Mt. 24:27-28, Job 39:26-30, "where the slain are..."

Question 37 And **THEY** (i.e. the disciples) said to him, Obvious! Senseless To Ask For A Map Or Timetable

Answer: "WHERE", Lord?" Not Here Or There (v.21), No Timetable (v.20), No Map Either! (v.37)

Proverb He said to them, Taken With The Risen Lord Into Kingdom

"Where the body is, 22:19, 24:3, 23, 26, When? = Hidden In Midst Now, Where? = Everywhere At End

there the eagles will be gathered together." Or, Carrion + Scavengers, Easy To Spot!

Kingdom Of God Is Wherever People Are Gathered By God's Word

Large Time Line = Jesus Ministry → Ascension/Rule → Interim Period → → → → Son of Man's Revelation = New Age/Kingdom of God

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 17:20-37

With this unit we move from the healing of ten lepers and the salvation of a lone Samaritan (17:11-19) to a question about *when the kingdom comes* (v.20a) and *where* (v.37b). Jesus' answer is that it's not coming with preliminary fireworks but in a sudden event of destruction (vv.26-30) and rescue (vv.31-35). It brings a division (vv. 31-32//vv. 34-35) by revealing where loyalties lie (v.31), with Lot's wife as a sober example (v.32). The arrival of the new world is not localized (*here* or *there*, v.21) but sudden and universal (v.24). Between now and then is inevitable suffering, first for Jesus (v.25), then his followers (v.22). To be prepared is to live as a disciple who does not cling tightly to the stuff of life (v.33a) but loses his life in Jesus and his work (v.33b). We live in the difficult present by the power of a healed future. We welcome signs of the *already* and wait for the culmination of the *not yet*. The question is one of alignment and hope: Who am I following, and where are we headed? That previews of the kingdom are now present does not mean history's end is near, only that God gives glimpses of the transformation that's ahead, but eyes must be opened (vv.20-21). What does not match expectations is easily dismissed (v.21b). That the kingdom remains future is indicated by our frustrated longings to see it come and all be well (v.22). The church is to resist all prognosticators who claim their leaders and movements are where the kingdom has landed (v.23). There is no secret knowledge. When the end comes, it will be clear since everything changes. Teaching and discernment are needed; people under pressure are distracted by false promises of relief.

The surface structure is a 4:2 concentric pattern (1-2 // 2'-1') with two examples of judgment from Genesis (2. vv.26-30) and two examples of sudden division (2' vv.31-35) at the center. The two outside paragraphs (1. vv.20-25 // 1' v.37) are formed around a question and answer, the contrast between *when* and *where*, and references to disciples. The answer to the initial question is directed to two audiences: the Pharisees (vv.20b-21), then the disciples (vv.22-25), the second (v.37b) to the disciples alone. While there are some parallels found in Matthew (Q) in each of the paragraphs, they are fragmentary. Most of the material is from Luke's special source (L); it is his hand that shaped the unit in its present balanced format. Repeated use of the word *day(s)* serves as a link word (vv. 22, 24, 26 [2x], 17, 28, 29, 30, 31). The theological issue is resistance to either an *over-realized* or an *under-realized* eschatology, the question being, How much of the future kingdom is available now, and how much remains to be revealed at the end? Signs and pain, hope and frustration are now, full transformation and undiluted joy only at the end.

To the *when* question Jesus answers the Pharisees who asked it (vv.20b-21), then the disciples (vv.22-25). Both answers have the same four parts : a. *coming*, b. *lo here/there*, c. *for*, d. *kingdom/son of man in his day*. The rule of God and its preliminary effects are now *in the midst*, but fulfillment comes only at the appearing of the Son of man like a mighty flash of lightning across the night sky. We follow no other teaching (v.23b). The two examples of judgment from Gen. 7 (Noah) and 19 (Sodom) are cast in a four part format (a-b-c-d) which is varied in the second example (a'-c'-d'-b') to place the *day of the Son of man* in the end position (v.30). The normal structures of culture (i.e. parties, marriages, commerce, agriculture, construction) were all in place till their unaware participants were suddenly overwhelmed by flood or fire and destroyed. Only those *taken* into the ark or *taken* out of Sodom by Lot were saved. So, when the Son of man appears, the final separation will be effected as some are *taken* (by God) and others *left* to judgment (vv.34-35). In that moment to look for security in possessions reveals the wrong loyalty, as happened with Lot's wife (v.31) who was pointed towards her past and not the future. This division will cut through the closest of human relationships (vv.34-35). The insertion of v.33 between the two examples of men (v.31) and two of women (vv.34-35) forms an a-b-a' pattern and offers a warning (v.33a) and alternative (v.33b). We are to invest in following Jesus and *sitting light* with everything else. Luke ends with a gruesome image. The end is a visible as when scavengers swarm to carrion (v.37b). Be aware!

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE END

“The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed....”

No Hollywood extravaganzas or grand openings before the kingdom comes.

LUKE 17:20

During the 1960 Presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, Speaker of the Connecticut House:

“On May 19, 1780 the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling the clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and spoke, ‘The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore I wish that candles be brought.’”¹

Davenport got it right. Living in the light of Christ’s return ought to make us faithful and attentive to our daily duties, not distracted. We live each day in hope, in faithful service, without fear. We know who dwells on the other side of the last tomorrow, but all are not so wise or sober as Colonel Davenport.

On November 2, 1992 the *Mission For The Coming Days Church* disbanded after a tough weekend. Lee Jang-rim, the Korean church’s founder, was in jail and the embarrassed congregation returned to their homes and places of work. The central message of the church had been Christ’s imminent return on October 28, 1992. Hundreds, and possibly thousands, sold property, left families, quit school and jobs, even deserted military duties. They should have checked the pastor’s finances before banking on the rapture date. Pastor Jang-rim had swindled \$4 million in donations and had \$380,000 invested in bonds that would not mature till May of the next year!

¹ “Second Coming of Christ,” sermonillustrations.com, 7/4/00.

I guess he'd never preached on the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:26, "But of that day and hour *no one knows*, not even the angels of heaven, but the Father only,"² or from Acts 1:4, "It is *not for you to know* the times or seasons the Father has fixed by his own authority." So why is church history littered with such stories from near the beginning till our day? Because people are curious about the future, because people want to be insiders to privileged information, because naive people are subject to deception from authority figures, and finally because for most of history people did not have access to Bibles and did not know what it said. And every time this happens, and it will continue because human nature has not changed, it brings scorn on the church and its leaders since outsiders lump us all together- the wise and the foolish. Bad theology is ultimately cruel to people, and nowhere more so that when some claim as expertise what Jesus said was not for our knowing. Don't trust anyone with a chart and dates! It's that simple

Colonel Davenport got it right; Pastor Jang-rim got it wrong. And since church history is littered with the disasters of those who set dates, from Montanus in the second century to William Miller in the nineteenth, our Korean colleague had no excuse. Apparently he hadn't read his church history, or instead discovered there how naive and gullible God's trusting people can be, how easy for the picking! So beware of end time prognosticators. Oh, they will always gather a crowd with their fantastic projections, sell loads of books and tapes and make a splash on TV with their end-time spin on the news, but in the end they and their over-wrought followers look like fools. They are agents of fear, not of faith, agents of cheap distraction instead of costly discipleship. They abuse people and misuse the church. They are the fringe of the Christian movement, and those who've read church history will always be leery of them. Which is precisely why I chose not to read the *Left Behind* novels so popular a decade ago that made their authors such a bundle. Is it because it's bad fiction? No, from those who've read them I hear that they are keep-you-up-late-page-turners. Why then? Because the fiction is based on bad theology and ultimately a misreading of the New Testament. The whole premillennial scheme, including the rapture of the church, what I call the *go-up-before-the-blow-up*, is wrong. I can't find it in the Bible, and there's good reason. It's not there! It's not historic Christian teaching but was dreamed up in England only in the first part of the

² Raymond McHenry, *The Best Of 'In Other Words,'* (Houston, TX: Raymond McHenry, 1996), 222.

nineteenth century.³ It's a novelty, and a destructive one. That it has found such a ready audience and is a weed hard to keep out of our garden demonstrates just how attractive it is as an *escapist scheme* that claims the church is rescued from trouble before things get really bad. No. We endure through the troubles to the return of Christ and resurrection of the dead. No escapism, no easy out, no *go-up-before-the-blow-up!* We are not rescued from the battlefield; we occupy until he comes to fulfill the promise of his resurrection that he is Lord and it all belongs to him! History has a glorious goal, and we await it together with no easy outs. We remain as witnesses.

The great, central tradition of the church has been very reserved in this matter of the last things or, to use the technical term, *eschatology*.⁴ The Nicene Creed climaxes with these words, "He shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end."⁵ Beyond that we simply do not know more details. As United Methodists we are committed to the orthodox teaching of the return of Christ and the full establishment of God's kingdom here as the new heaven and new earth. It's in our official statements, and binding on the conscience of every pastor.⁶ It is our hope, and without it the whole organic scheme of Christian doctrine goes nowhere, literally. But we do not enter into the reckless and deceptive speculations of those who from time to time claim to know more than God has revealed in order to satisfy public curiosity. So when some naive soul with an arm

³ On Darbyism, the Anti-Christ and Millennium, see James M. Efird, *End-Times* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1986). For a depth treatment, Arthur Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1993), Chapter 5, "The Revival of Millenarianism," 67-103. Also Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2004), Chapter 2, "The Invention of the Rapture," 19-46; Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), "A Brief History of the Rapture in the United States," 3-19; Jonathan Kirsch, *A History of the End of the World* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2006).

⁴ For a summary of classic teaching on the end, see Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1992), "Part IV: Human Destiny," 767-856. For a systematic summary of John Wesley's teaching, see Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings: Vol. 2: Christ and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 281-305.

⁵ *U.M. Hymnal*: 880.

⁶ *The U.M. Book of Discipline*, "Article III- Of The Resurrection of Christ" (The Articles of Religion, 64); Article II- Jesus Christ" (The Confession of Faith, 71).

load of popular prophecy books asks, “Pastor Phil, do you think Christ is coming back soon?” I whisper back with great solemnity, “Oh friend, it’s closer than it’s ever been!” And if they continue to press, I tell them that I’m on the welcoming, not the planning committee. I’m frankly leary of such folk, because even when I reason with them based on careful study of the passages they’ve misread, they’re not convinced. Perhaps it’s because I’m not on TV, don’t have a wife with *poofy* hair or send them alarmist mailings each month begging money. And frankly, I don’t often find them much involved in missions or evangelism or justice issues. They’re *so special*, such insiders to God’s plans they alone have the details. Please! I laughed when I heard one of their prophecy conferences was cancelled *for unforeseen circumstances!*

Yes, this ungovernable world will one day be governed, this violent world made peaceful, this deceptive world a place of truth, this hateful world a place of love; the great division of humanity into two piles will be accomplished, and it will prove a disaster for those for those who do not love the God whose face is seen in Jesus Christ. *One taken and one left*, said Jesus. Life not in harmony with him and pointed in his direction will be judged; the truth will be told; there will be no court of appeal. The rule of God, even now at work in our midst, will no longer be held back but let loose in its fullness to rupture the routines of this world and call history as we know it to a swift, decisive close. Fully five thousand of Charles Wesley’s seven thousand hymns mention the Second Coming of Christ, as we just sang:

“Rejoice in glorious hope!
Jesus the Judge shall come,
and take his servants up to their eternal home.
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;
rejoice; again I say, rejoice.”⁷

It’s a neglected teaching in our ranks today. This world has a troubled past and pained present but an amazing future. God’s going to fix it all, renew the whole creation, set it to rights and blow our minds with the beauty and joy and adventure of it all. We will come home to a world we have known and yet not know till we see it fully alive and us within it with marvelous new powers because of resurrection bodies like that of Jesus. Life as it was meant to be, and more. And we will see it arrive, all of us, whether from the grandstands of heaven or from field level on earth. Jesus Christ shall be fully vindicated and his rule of love the only allowed rule. All the

⁷ “Rejoice, the Lord Is King,” *The U.M. Hymnal*, No. 716.

residual goodness and achievements of human culture will be welcomed into the new world; nothing good or innocent will be lost, but what is incompatible with him will be done away with, and you do not want to be declared *incompatible with the new reality*. We are to live in light of that reality now. Since that is our future, what kind of persons ought we to be in the present? Since our glorification is ahead, how much love can we spread around now? If we're ultimately safe, why not take big risks for God now? I love what Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, once said, "If I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant a tree."⁸ Why, because all that is good will be preserved. We do not bring the kingdom; what we do is build for it, knowing nothing good will be lost.

It is only at the end that the world will understand why the church never quite fit into its schemes and always seemed to be marching to the echo of a distant and different drum. Many will regret that they dismissed the church and postponed a decision for Jesus and the path of holy living. The world as we know will be overthrown and superceded by a new heaven and a new earth as what happened to Jesus in resurrection on that first Easter happens to the whole cosmos; it will pass through the final birth canal and be reborn into a new and greater life beyond the corrupting influences of sin and evil. Space and time will not be the limits they now are. We, and all creation with us, will fulfill the dream of Dr. King and be free at last.

This kingdom will not come because of gradual human development, moral progress or technological achievement. The wars and horrors of our two centuries make that hope a lie. I believe in providence- God's guidance of affairs, but I do not believe in *progress* in the popular sense of constant improvement from below towards a utopia. I believe in the hand of God over history keeping things from being as bad as they might; I believe in a grace which continually restrains sin and evil and promotes good, but I do not believe we human beings have the power to turn this world back to Eden or forward to heaven through grit and effort and good will and smarts. Things are not getting a little better every day in every way. When one war is ended, another breaks out. When one problem is fixed, another takes its place. Get rid of polio; now we have AIDS and ebola. All our human projects contain within themselves the seeds of their own destruction from their inception. How can it be otherwise when those who create them are fallen creatures like ourselves? Only *The Great Interruption* of God's kingdom will finally end the long pain and chaos of history. So we wait, we work, we watch, we hope, we are patient, we celebrate

⁸ Ibid., 1.

victories and grieve defeats, we build families and businesses and learn peace-making and music, and we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” as an imperative. It’s a cry from behind enemy lines for relief and rescue, and one day it will be answered.

And as much as I love it, the end will not come because of the perfection of the church. Only when it’s all over will we be the virginal bride without spot or blemish. Despite periodic revivals and renewals, the church will forever be a rag-tag band of followers, seeing always in ourselves the very sins we name in the world. God is not waiting for the church within history to get its act together so the curtain can be closed and the drama done. Only God knows when the end comes, and when God chooses to unleash heaven’s rule, Jesus said it will be swift and revealing as a lightning bolt that lights up the night sky and as decisive and devastating as Noah’s flood and the fire and brimstone that rained upon Sodom. The door to the ark of salvation will be closed; the last train out of Sodom will blow its whistle as it leaves the station; the last soul will be saved, and the end will come as the Son of man, the risen Jesus, is revealed in a glorious flash of universal revelation. Our privilege as Christians is this:

- to know him ahead of time,
- to worship and praise him ahead of time,
- to meditate on his life and words ahead of time,
- to align our wills and our habits with him ahead of time,
- to expose evil and do justice ahead of time,
- to be his people ahead of time,
- to pray and hear from him ahead of time,
- to practice distrust in our possessions and their claims ahead of time,
- to serve others in his name ahead of time,
- to carry his name and increase his fame around the world ahead of time,
- to stand in tension with this world and its illusions ahead of time,
- to know through him the Father and the Holy Spirit ahead of time.

So until the end we will always be a people who are *ahead of our time* and living by the power of God’s future in an uncertain present. We hang all our hopes on Jesus Christ: his life in the past as witnessed in the four gospels, his hidden rule in the present as experienced by the church in the mystery of the Holy Spirit, and his public rule at the end of the age to which we unapologetically point. We are hung in these last days between two great events, his first and second comings, his coming in weakness and his coming in power. The resurrection of Jesus is the first installment

of the end of the world and a preview of coming attractions.⁹ So I believe Colonel Davenport was right, “The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore I wish that candles be brought.” Being about Christ’s work in all its forms is the best way to stay prepared. Following him now will loosen you from the entanglements of this life that numb even Christians to God’s presence.

I can look at your life and tell whether you believe the last line of the Creed or not. If you are busy about his work as well as your own, then you believe it. But if you are busy with only your own work as in the days of Noah and Lot: eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage and buying and selling and planting and building, if your life can be reduced to survival and pleasure and money and stuff with little time for the needs of others or the spiritual cultivation of your own soul, it’s time to reconsider your investments.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

1) vv. 20-25 Two Equal And Opposite Errors.

The kingdom of God and the God of the kingdom were the central theme of Jesus’ ministry. Perhaps it was true earlier, but few in Jesus’ day believed the kingdom would come within the normal movement of history. Evil was just too radical and deeply interwoven within history for such a hope. Only God breaking into the old age with the new age is sufficient. We can’t work it out, even with help from God’s prophets; God has to come in person to fix what’s wrong! And just before the arrival, it was thought, there would be a number of cosmic signs. This was the common expectation which helps us make sense of the Pharisees’ question, “Since you speak so much of kingdom, tell us Jesus, *when is it coming?*” The answer Jesus gave was not inside but outside the box they offered. They assumed Jesus shared their framework and were asking for his read. When is it? Tell us the preliminary signs.”

“The kingdom of God,” he replied, “*is not coming with signs to be observed* so that someone could point to one of them and say, ‘Look, here it is,’ or, ‘Look, there it is!’” And then, having removed the idea of cosmic signs as a two-minute warning before the game ends, Jesus shifted the focus from the then-and-there to the here-

⁹ See my *Resurrection: A Pastor’s Reading of the Major New Testament Resurrection Passages* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol, 2014).

and-now: “For behold, the kingdom of God *is in the midst of you.*” Within their reach at that very moment, already making a difference everywhere Jesus showed up.

Jesus is the outlet for the kingdom, so where he is, there the kingdom is. The kingdom of God was not just off in the future somewhere; it was standing in front of them! His healings and exorcisms were signs the kingdom was having its effects in the present. The Holy Spirit was pouring kingdom realities through Jesus for those with eyes to see. The sun had not yet risen, but light was beginning to pour over the horizon. The error of the Pharisees was to be so focused on the future that they missed what was going on right in front of them. God is at work now!

Since the time of Jesus the kingdom of God has been in our midst. If you were to see all that God’s been doing in Greenwood this week, it would shock you in awe. People healed, people lead to repentance, people hearing the voice of God, people having prayers answered, divine appointments arranged, deliverances from the demonic, acts of justice and mercy, thousands of deeds of Christian service, sins forgiven and removed, new ministries begun, the presence of Christ in the sacraments. All this week the kingdom has been quietly breaking out in place after place, and we knew it not! All the goodies of the kingdom are not future; many of them are *now*, which is a lesson we are learning from the Pentecostals and Charismatics with their emphasis on the supernatural and bold faith. The full banquet is later, but the appetizers are *now*. The full inheritance is future, but *now* we receive an allowance. The consummation of the marriage is later, but even *now* we receive hugs and kisses from God. “When is it coming?” they asked. “Now,” he said, “the kingdom of God *is in the midst of you.*”¹⁰ Which makes the prayer, “Open my eyes to see that you are doing,” such a good prayer. And when I catch a glimpse in this city it makes me giddy. God is a work everywhere for those with eyes to see!

But there is an equal and opposite error when it comes to the kingdom and its powers, and that is to believe we can *have it all now*. There is a glorious *already* to the Christian life; there is also a frustrating *not yet*. Most are not healed. Evil still has a measure of freedom. Many remain spiritually blind. Ignorance limits us all. Sin shames everyone, and suffering stubbornly refuses to go away. The world around us groans, and we with it. We live in spiritual frustration and unfulfilled

¹⁰ The eschatology of Jesus was realized, but not over-realized. To the *already* of v.21 is added the *not yet* of vv.22-25. On the problem in the first century and beyond, see Charles Talbert, *Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 166-169.

longing, and that is precisely how Jesus said it would be all the way to the very end, “And he said to the disciples, ‘The days are coming when *you will desire to see* one of the days of the Son of man, *and you will not see it.*’” You will want it and long for it, but you will not have it! You may dream it, but it will not happen yet.

Such *holy frustration* is not a bad thing; it stretches our faith and creates in us space for patience and deeper prayer. It keeps us humble and dependent on God. So when people claim that the fullness of the kingdom of God has descended upon them or upon their church or movement and they have an inside track with God, *do not go*, said Jesus, *and do not follow them*. It’s a false hope. The arrival of the kingdom will not be a localized thing so that someone could say, “Look, here it is,” or “Look, there it is.” When it finally comes it will be universal, as when a bolt of lightning flashes across the night sky; everything you could not see in the darkness is revealed in a moment. “So will be the Son of man in his day.” But until then there will be pain and frustration and injustice and suffering. So it was with Jesus, verse 25, “But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.”

So this is the key. The signs of the kingdom that are even now in our midst are not meant to fully satisfy us; they are to create in us a sharper appetite for what is ahead. God is awakening in our deadened souls desires that we only be fulfilled when we see him face to face. This unquenched thirst and unfulfilled yearning is a sure sign more is ahead. So the Methodists who are ever-busy with good works but who habitually ignore the supernatural signs of the faith need to hear the word of Jesus to the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God *is in the midst of you.*” Whereas the Pentecostals, who sometimes claim God is doing more than he actually is doing, need to head the word of Jesus to the disciples, “You will desire it, *and you will not see it.*” We need each other. Left to ourselves we will fall on one side or the other. Together in the body of Christ we create a dynamic, lively wholeness.

2. vv.26-30 The Devastating Intrusion.

Life was on cruise control in the southern Italian cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum when Vesuvius blew. The May 1984 *National Geographic* included color photos and drawings of what was uncovered by the archaeologists. The destruction was so swift and total people were caught in the middle of daily activities. Some at the market, the rich in their luxurious baths, slaves at toil, men at one of the forty-six brothels. An enormous explosion, and they were engulfed in pyroclastic flow and superheated gasses. This was A.D. 79, nearly fifty years after the death of Jesus, but when Jesus

wanted to teach the sudden and devastating effects of the kingdom's arrival he reached back into Genesis for two parallel examples, Noah and Lot. How God has acted in the past in mercy and judgement is a clue to how God will act in the future. In obedience Noah built the ark, and Lot left the corruption of Sodom. But the rest of the people continued with mundane living, totally unaware life as they knew it was about to end. Eating and drinking, the pleasures of marriage, commercial and agricultural activity. Busy people. Daily life. Getting ahead and assuming tomorrow will be an extension of today. But when the door of the ark was lifted like a drawbridge, and when Lot was out of range of the divine artillery, sudden destruction fell, once with water and once with fire *and destroyed them all*. For emphasis Jesus applied it twice, "so will it be on the day when the Son of man is revealed."

God has some scores to settle with this world that claims self-sufficiency and lives in the pride of its own wisdom. The wrath of God is not something to joke about. One day God will lance the pussy boil of this world, and all that is corrupt will drain away. Those inside the ark were saved; those outside lost. Those with Lot survived, with one exception; those not in his company were lost. Jesus rules out the false hope of last minute preparations. A life of sin will not likely culminate in a glorious repentance moments before death. The thief on the cross is the exception and not the rule; we do not know the story of how he was prepared for that moment. The only way to be saved is to obey God now.

While the world laughed, Noah built. And while the world ignores us, the church will be built in its very midst. And when Lot walked out of town, no one noticed. So we will quietly gossip the good news and call people away from ungodly to holy living while we sing, "Oh won't you come and go with me, I am bound for the promised land." And then one day it will all end in a sudden, unexpected, and devastating judgment without extra warnings or notice. And if that scene sends a shiver of sobriety into your life, then good. Because the habits and priorities of this world will drug you into a spiritual sleep from which you may never awake until it's is too late. Why should we be surprised that the whole earth as we know it could end in a moment when the lives of people we know can end with such speed and with no advance warning? "So it will be on the day when the Son of man is revealed." Swift, total, devastating, no appeal. These are not my words; they are the words of Jesus, and if you can find some other way to read them that makes them easier to swallow, please let me know; I need some relief!

2' vv.31-35 How Shall We Then Live?

But where does that leave us? And how are we to live in the structures of this world while we stay acutely aware of the next? We can't quit eating and drinking, buying and selling, marrying and giving in marriage. We're not angels but human beings. How do we live in the structures of a fallen creation even while we do not give them the idolatry they often demand? Life is full of necessities and obligations.

First by a holy indifference. We refuse to be defined by what we own or control. We use money, but are not seduced by it. We own houses and hold jobs and make plans and engage in civic and cultural affairs, but *with a light touch*. They are important but not ultimate. We daily contemplate our own death and how it will strip us of all but a naked soul that will stand transparent before God. If more things come, we are not better, and if they go, we are not the worse. Because on that day if we run back to the house for our stuff or back from the field for our possessions our very posture will show our true loyalties, and we will be found facing in the wrong direction. So if when trouble comes you run to the bank or your lawyer before you run to God in prayer; and if a new car is something more than reliable transportation, if it enhances your self-esteem; and if you live in fear of someone messing with *your stuff*, take it as a warning you are not yet ready to meet God. Still much too attached to your stuff and the security it affords. So while her feet were on the road out of reach of judgment, her heart was still back in the security and pleasures of Sodom. Lot's wife looked back and was turned to a pillar of salt, just as God warned. "Remember her," said Jesus. Not everyone who starts the trek to salvation will make it. She started well; she ended poorly. If you cannot give to God's work joyfully, take that as a sign and symptom you are over-invested in the wrong markets!

The second way we live in this world is by being spiritually selfish. It's my desire to be there when the saints go marching in. I want to live in the fullness of the kingdom. I want you to go with me, but if you choose not to, I'm going anyway! God has placed in me a desire to preserve my life and has shown me the path. It is to lose my life according to this world's values that I may keep it for the next. I hope Lori and Daniel and Ellen go with me, but I cannot guarantee their futures. Each has to walk with God; no one enters on the coattails of another. My number one priority is the salvation of my own soul, and if I forget to attend to that, I'm no good to anyone. I cannot *show the way* unless I'm *on the way*, and if I am not *on the way* as a pastor then I am *in the way*. "Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life *will preserve it*." It is the kind of selfishness Jesus blessed.

The third way we are to live in this world is the most sobering of all. Our

normal consciousness is to see everyone as fundamentally like ourselves, that we are in *this thing called life* together. It's OK so far as it goes, but that's only the visible surface. Deeper down is a clear division, and in some homes it cuts between one spouse and another. A lost husband sleeps every night with a woman who has a different destiny than his own, "I tell you," said Jesus, "in that night there will be *two in one bed*; one will *be taken* and the other left." Same at your work. We sweat beside people who have a trajectory either towards God or away from God, "There will be two women grinding together; one will *be taken* and the other left." Side by side, doing the same work, but living in fundamentally different worlds with different destinies. This is not the rapture as some teach in which the church is rescued before the end; *this is the end and what it involves*, which is a great division. The *one taken*- and the passive voice indicates *taken by God*- is the one who is saved, just like those inside the ark and outside the city limits of Sodom. That's how I read it. Either way, it's a clear division to two different destinies, just as our doctrine teaches. All your family may not make it; all your friends may not make it; you may not make it if you are counting on anything for security other than the strong grace and mercy of God. God will make a division among our loyalties based on his loyalty to Jesus who will be displayed and vindicated before every person who's ever lived. Easter was his personal vindication; he alone rose. The appearances to his disciples was his creation of the church to embody and tell his story to the world, but at the end, at his return, it will be his universal vindication.

The return of Jesus means the division of humanity into two camps and only two. There is no neutral turf, no place to stand as an outside observer; all are participants and no one is exempt. The Christian who lives with this awareness will be always alert for divine opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ with persons that they may be saved, now and later. "Oh won't you come and go with me, I am bound for the promised land." A husband to a wife, one coworker to another. Across the web of kinship and friendship the gospel spreads. So if you really believe in the return of Christ you won't trust in your stuff, you will make your life with Christ a priority, and you will live with the haunting awareness that many people you know and love are lost. It will add an edge to your prayers and urgency to your witness. You will not want to live in a way that makes it harder for people to believe.

1' v.37 A Second Question Dismissed.

All our questions about the end are not answered. The *when* question of the Pharisees is not answered as they wished. Instead Jesus gives an answer to questions they did

not ask: the *how* question - to which the answer is *universal* and *unexpected* and *instantaneous*, and the *who* question - to which the answer is *everyone*. But the disciples had one question left. Jesus had not given a timetable; perhaps he would give them a map, “And they said to him, ‘*Where, Lord? Where?*’”

Now if they’d been listening they would already have the answer. “Here it is,” or “there it is,” are *where questions*, and Jesus has already twice ruled these out. It will not be hard to find or spot, said Jesus. It will be as obvious as when you see vultures circling overhead and know something dead is down below. “Where the corpse is, there the vultures (or eagles) will be gathered together.”¹¹ So the Son of man will appear suddenly and publicly, and no one will have to ask *where* or *when* or *how* or *who* or *why* any longer. It will all be clear, as in the lyrics of Julia Ward Howe, when another great division was played out across our nation:

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting our the hearts of men before his judgment seat;
Oh, be swift my soul to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.”

CONCLUSION

“We believe,” confesses the great church in one hopeful voice across the ages, “We believe... that he shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end. Amen.” Jesus wins. Jesus rules. The whole creation is restored, and with it all who are turned towards him. Day by day and week by week we gather and pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth.” One day that prayer will be answered. Are you ready? Are you living in the light of his coming now? Where is your life and heart invested?

¹¹ This proverb’s meaning in high contested in the commentaries. Some count as many as twenty different interpretations. After evaluation, I have chosen this one.
