

When Jesus Comes

Luke 17:20-37 | May 17, 2020 | Bryce Beale

Everyone believes that this world as we know it will come to an end. There are almost no exceptions.

Atheists who deny God's hand in anything still believe that life on earth cannot continue forever. Most think that in five billion years, because of changes in the sun, the earth will be sucked into that flaming star and disintegrate, with all life having been extinguished well before that.

We who have the word of God know that it will be otherwise—but not far otherwise. Our world will, according to 2 Peter, be burned up with fire after Christ returns. “But the day of the Lord,” he writes, “will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” or “burned up.”¹

Noah's world was destroyed by water; ours will be ruined by flame.

And yet, although we all seem to agree on the barest details of our world's end, we disagree on all the other details. Believers and unbelievers obviously think differently about the end—but believers also disagree with believers about just how the return of Christ will occur, just how our planet will end.

For this reason, we can be glad that we have come today in Luke to the text that we have come to. Here Jesus himself, in eighteen verses, does nothing but correct our misunderstandings about his return, about the new world, the new kingdom he means to establish there. He does not deal with every detail, but he picks out those which he thinks most important for you and I to grasp at this point in Luke's gospel.

Because, as you will see, how you think about the end of the world will affect your life before that end comes, right now and in the near future. You are not allowed to be a “Panmillennialist,” who says, “Well, it will all pan out in the end.” You do have to think about Christ's return, and you have to consider its details.

¹ 2 Pet. 3:10 (ESV).

But you are not cast out into a sea of information on your own, to try to sort out everything alone. Jesus is your captain, is your guide. And today he guides you by correcting perhaps some wrong thoughts which inhabit your mind, concerning the day of the Son of the Man, the day when Christ returns to earth.

Therefore we now look to our captain for guidance. Let's pay careful heed to his words.

LUKE 17:20-37

That which ties together all these teachings on the coming kingdom of Christ is this: they all correct misunderstandings. The Pharisees look for an earthly kingdom to support their love of wealth and power—Jesus corrects their view. Some will try to lead the disciples on a messiah chase, as though his return will be hard to detect—Jesus corrects that view. And others think that, since the kingdom hasn't come yet, it probably never will—and Jesus corrects that view as well.

So we will follow these corrections today, because they must correct our own views, if we hold any similar to the ones in our text. We cannot live properly as Christians now, nor be ready for Christ's return later, unless our ideas about Christ's second coming line up with what Jesus teaches in this passage.

That is why this morning we will consider these corrections under their three headings, one at a time. May Christ's word enter our hearts as we do so.

Not mainly outward

See again then the first correction Jesus gives, in verses 20 and 21:

Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

We are only told the question Jesus is asked, not the assumption that lies behind it. The question is, "When will the kingdom of God come?" That is, when will Christ return, renew the earth, and establish his eternal kingdom upon it?

But when Jesus answers questions like these, he almost always answers the assumption, not the question. He knows what is in man.

I think that is why we are told specifically that these two verses, of all the eighteen, are addressed to the Pharisees and not the disciples. Because we cannot see into the heart like Jesus. But, we are becoming familiar with the Pharisees—enough to guess at least at their motivation, based in part upon Jesus' answer.

They ask when the kingdom is coming because they are lovers of money, lovers of power, lovers of prestige. The Pharisees have proven themselves time and again slaves to the current age—their focus is on all that makes up this world system: “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life.”²

They want a kingdom that is political and immediate, one which ousts their Roman rulers and exalts them to places of greater power and wealth. They assume that is what the kingdom looks like, that it is mainly an external thing, a political thing.

If you keep this in mind, then Jesus' answer makes sense as a correction of their view. “The kingdom of God,” he says, “is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

As we will see in just a moment, the kingdom will come in an outward, visible way one day. There is no doubt of that. So why does Jesus answer in the way that he does here? Because here he is talking, not to his disciples, but to the Pharisees, and he is coming up to their misunderstanding and confronting it.

The Pharisees are fixated on the outward appearance of a great kingdom. But Jesus says, “If that's all you think the kingdom is, then you are missing it. The kingdom is inward first, and it is already here—and if you can't see the inward kingdom now, you won't see the outward kingdom later.”

“How was the kingdom already there?” one might ask. It was there because the king was there. It was present in an early form because already subjects of that kingdom were submitting themselves to the king. The prostitutes, the tax collectors

² 1 John 2:16.

recognized their king, and bowed the knee. They were ever since the preaching of John the Baptist forcing themselves into the kingdom. They were repenting and becoming citizens of heaven.

But the Pharisees ignored all of that. They only saw the outward forms, only wanted an outward kingdom. So Jesus says, “No, don’t look for an outward kingdom first. First, look among you, look at me right here in front of you. The kingdom is already here, and unless you recognize that and enter the kingdom now, you will not enter it when it does come outwardly.”

There is sadly a way to be so focused on the future return of Christ, and on all of the secondary details about that event, that you numb yourself to the demands which the kingdom is making upon you right now. Actually, in the history of the church, an oddly high percentage of false teachers have made the future, the coming of the kingdom on earth, to be the very center of their message. Many cults make their members excited by talking often of great events in history soon to pass, sometimes setting dates—and very often these same cults neglect the rule of Christ right now. They do not have lives of holiness, of love, of service; they are too busy trying to get an adrenaline high by attaching events on the news with events in the book of Revelation.

The focus, as with the Pharisees, is on the outward events. But Jesus points inward first. The kingdom will have an outward coming, but the kingdom is not just outward, not even mainly outward. It happens now in the hearts of God’s people. As Paul says in Romans 14, “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”³

Some think the kingdom is mainly an outward thing. This is the first view that Jesus corrects in our text.

Not hard to recognize

But now he moves on from the Pharisees to his own disciples, for there are two other misconceptions which he wishes to debunk.

The first we find in verses 22 to 25:

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. And they will say to you, ‘Look,

³ V. 17.

there!’ or ‘Look, here!’ Do not go out or follow them. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

One of the days of the Son of Man would be one of the days when Christ returns to earth to finish all things, to clear away the chaff and burn away all the old, to make all things new. The first disciples no doubt wished to see one of those days—especially when Jesus left and suffering ensued.

But Jesus said that suffering would come before the kingdom did even in verse 25: “But first he [that is, I] must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.” Jesus would suffer first, before the kingdom came; and so would these disciples.

Therefore they would long for Christ to come back and rescue them. That is a good, healthy, Christian longing.

But it bears with it a temptation. Because we so much long for Christ’s return, we believers can be easy prey for wolves who promise us that return now, or very soon. Jesus describes these deceivers like this: “they will say to you, ‘Look, there! Or ‘Look, here!’” They will say, “Jesus has returned, come, he’s over here!” And Jesus warns his disciples not to be tricked: “Do not go out or follow them.”

But why not follow them? How could these disciples know that the deceivers were deceiving them? What if Jesus had returned, they missed it, and now they were being informed? I mean, that is what they so much longed for, so it would no doubt be easy to believe that the persons were telling the truth.

But Jesus undoes an assumption they probably didn’t even know they would have—the assumption that Jesus could return to earth so secretly that few would know about it. Jesus’ first coming was limited to Palestine, and even at his birth his country was asleep to him. But when he comes again, it will not be a secret event.

“For,” he says, “as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.”

This is not to say that elements of Christ’s return at first might not be ignored or reinterpreted—but it is to say that you will know it

is happening. You cannot assume that Jesus' return will be secret. It will be as obvious as lightning.

So if you find some Christians claiming that Christ has returned and he is over here in California, or over there in Africa, do not believe them. In fact, you may extend this principle further for your own protection: any Christian group which prides itself on its secrecy, you should avoid. All through history there have been groups which have claimed a secret knowledge, or a secret understanding of the future, or the past, or the present, disclosed only to them. Some claim revelations from heaven which have given them a knowledge nowhere to be found in Scripture.

And they appeal to our pride. We do not want to be on the outside, we want to be in the know, among the elite few who really know.

Jesus says, "Do not go with them." There will be nothing private or secretive about Christ's return that might make you wonder if it had happened or not. The events just before his return, those may be a bit vaguer—but that return will be obvious.

Not false

This brings us to the final assumption which Jesus confronts. The kingdom will not be mainly outward when it comes, and it will not come secretly. Now, lastly, the kingdom *will come*. It will not prove a lie or an imagination only.

We find this final correction in verses 26 to 37:

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. I tell

you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.” And they said to him, “Where, Lord?” He said to them, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

There are many parts here, but they all point in one direction. So, let’s break this passage into its parts. First, the Lord reminds us of the two most remarkable instances of sudden judgment in all history.

Think of Noah back in Genesis 7. Or better yet, do not think of Noah or his family—Jesus directs us instead to everyone else on earth at that time. What were they doing as Noah built his boat? They were living their lives. Do you eat? They ate. Do you drink? They drank. Have you married? So did they.

In other words, life went on for them year after year in a very normal way. And no doubt they assumed that life would go on in just the same way as it always had. Why did they assume it would go on just as it had? Well, because it always had.

Think again of Lot—no, not Lot, but everyone around him in Sodom. They ate and drank—more, they bought and they sold, they planted and they built. They did normal human things, just like you and I do every day. And they assumed they would go on doing normal human things for many years.

Here you and I are on earth, and we do normal human things every day, don’t we? We eat, we drink, we work. Not once have we experienced a worldwide, cataclysmic event. COVID-19 is probably the closest we have gotten. But it is not the flood, and it is not the fire that rained down on Sodom.

Because life has always gone on like this for us, we assume it will always go on in the future, just the same, with only minor changes.

Noah’s neighbors thought the same “until,” says the end of verse 27, “the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.” Lot’s neighbors assumed nothing major would change until, verse 29, “on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all.”

And twice Jesus says that the day of his return will be just like those days—days of sudden judgment, of sudden change, ready or not.

Jesus follows this with two urgent commands concerning his return: “On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back.”⁴

There is a question about how these verses relate to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. We do not have time to discuss that question here, though it is a good one. In any case, the thrust of this verse is just the same as what came before, and what follows after. If you’re on your housetop in Palestine, run down the outside stairs and do not go into your house to get your things. Don’t get caught up in your old and ordinary items, your old way of life. That way of life is done. Don’t hold onto it. If you’re in the field, don’t run back to your house to get your goods. You will not need them. When Jesus returns, nothing will ever be the same again. This is not an invention of the ancient world, this is a fact.

“Remember Lot’s wife,” Jesus throws in. She looked back as they fled Sodom, and was turned to a pillar of salt and perished with everyone else. We assume she looked back longing for her old way of life. She wished things to be as they always had, but they could not be.

And so Jesus adds in verse 33 his summary of discipleship: “Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.” That is, if you try to hold on to life as it is now and are not willing to part with it, you will be destroyed with it. You cannot assume that this life will continue unchanged—it must change when Christ returns. It must be destroyed. So even now we relinquish our hold on all we have, and are ready any moment to part with it.

The text leads us to yet another pair to make the same point, beginning in verse 34: “I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.”⁵

⁴ V. 31.

⁵ Vv. 34-35.

When Jesus returns, he will snatch up his people—the apostle Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Thessalonians:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.⁶

The point once more is that the return of Jesus will be sudden and will be obvious, and after that return nothing can be as it was.

Believer, this is your comfort. Paul says, “encourage each other with these words.”⁷ There may be some details about the return of Jesus that you cannot seem to understand from Scripture—the timing, the order of events. Keep studying, and may the Lord give you understanding in everything. But whatever else you may not understand, you can understand this: that when Jesus returns, nothing will ever be the same.

You may be deep into a trial this moment, with no end in sight. But there is an end. Christ will come and he will not delay. He will bring justice on the earth swiftly. This very passage reminds us of this fact, for there are two together grinding grain or in a bed, when all of the sudden one disappears. Judgment will come swiftly—but that means on the other hand that your deliverance will come swiftly, suddenly.

If you die before that day, no worry—you will actually precede those who are still alive, and you will go first up to the sky to meet Jesus.⁸ In either case, your life is moving along in a normal manner now—now you eat and drink and fight sin and wrestle with difficulties of all sorts. But suddenly, dawn will break. Suddenly there will be an end to pain, and you will shed the final tear you will ever shed. All the bad will be undone.

Conclusion

Yet I must add as we close this message the other side of Jesus' words. For Jesus means these words as a warning as well, to any who would be his follower. The day of the Lord will be rescue for

⁶ 1 Thes. 4:16-17.

⁷ V. 18.

⁸ V. V. 15.

those who know Christ; but for those who do not, it will be judgment, sudden judgment, and nothing will be good again after that.

You see this in the final verse of our passage. The disciples ask “Where, Lord?” which seems to mean, “Where will you be when you come back to earth? Where should we look?” His answer is this: “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

That is, you will know that Christ has returned, and where he has returned, because that will be a place of slaughter. All the enemies of God, all those who have refused Christ in this life and have chosen unrighteousness instead, within or outside of the church, will be corpses upon the field, with the birds of the sky gathering around them.

These are sharp words, and this is an unpleasant picture, but it is meant for your good. It is meant to frighten any who resist Christ and chose sin in his stead. It is the warning of a prophet who foretells judgment, war, death.

But it is a warning meant to give you life. For the kingdom will come with violence, but it is here already, because Jesus is here already. And now he accepts any who bow before him. He pardons, he forgives, he saves from the wrath to come.

So, in the words of the second Psalm:

Now therefore...be wise;
 be warned...
Serve the LORD with fear,
 and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son,
 lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
 for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.⁹

⁹ Ps. 2:10-12.