

Luke 17:20-37
The Kingdom of God Described

For better or worse, we in the United States are rather unfamiliar with kingdoms. We might remember King George III, against whom George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and others revolted in 1776. We probably are familiar with the current royal family of Elizabeth II, or famous kings of the past like Henry VIII or King David. But other than that, most of us are limited in our knowledge and understanding of kings and kingdoms.

Unlike the modern monarchies that still exist in the western world, traditionally a king ruled with absolute authority. That is what it meant to be a king. A king ruled by divine right. In other words, he answered only to God. Remember that when Israel asked for a king, the prophet of God, Samuel, anointed Saul. When God became dissatisfied with Saul, Samuel then anointed David. The point was that God chose the king, and the king served God.

But for the nation of Israel, that was never the ideal. God, Himself, was king. As David triumphantly wrote,

“⁸Who is the King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
The Lord mighty in battle.
⁹Lift up your heads, O gates,
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
That the King of glory may come in!
¹⁰Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
He is the King of glory” (Psalm 24:8-10).

The Jews had long believed that God ruled His kingdom with absolute sovereignty,

“¹²Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance
And the hills in a pair of scales?
¹³Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,
Or as His counselor has informed Him?
¹⁴With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?
And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge
And informed Him of the way of understanding?” (Isaiah 40:12-14).

Job, who had a better understanding of the sovereignty of God than most, acknowledged, “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2), and an unknown psalmist wrote “the counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation” (Psalm 33:11).

Of course, we might ask today that if God is truly a sovereign king, then why is the kingdom in such a sad state? The answer, of course, is sin. Because of sin, the world is in a state of decay, what scientists have come to call the second law of thermodynamics. Eventually, this world will be done away with when “the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10). Then God will create a “new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

But that does not mean that God abdicated His power once sin entered the world. God extended His power through creation in general revelation and the moral law. He has used His angels as well as godly men and women to further His kingdom and His purposes. And most importantly, He sent His Son Jesus Christ to restore the kingdom as it ought to be. But God’s plan for that restoration was different from what most Jews expected. Jesus certainly extended His power and authority over things of this world (disease, weather, even death), but His purpose in coming the first time was to further the kingdom of God in a spiritual sense. That is what the Pharisees could not understand, and that was why they challenged Jesus.

The Kingdom Misunderstood

Jesus was being “questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming” (v. 20). This was to be expected. If Jesus truly was the Messiah He claimed to be, then the Pharisees expected that all that had been promised in the covenants with Abraham and David would be fulfilled. If the kingdom of God had come then,

“⁶the wolf will dwell with the lamb,
And the leopard will lie down with the young goat,
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
And a little boy will lead them
⁷Also the cow and the bear will graze,
Their young will lie down together,
And the lion will eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra,
And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper’s den” (Isaiah 11:6-8).

If Jesus truly was the Son of Man then, “His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south” (Zechariah 14:4). If the kingdom of God had really arrived, there would be peace,

“¹⁷And the work of righteousness will be peace,
And the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever.
¹⁸Then my people will live in a peaceful habitation,
And in secure dwellings and in undisturbed resting places;” (Isaiah 32:17-18)

And prosperity,

“¹³Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord,
‘When the plowman will overtake the reaper
And the treader of grapes him who sows seed;
When the mountains will drip sweet wine
And all the hills will be dissolved.
¹⁴Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel,
And they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them;
They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine,
And make gardens and eat their fruit.
¹⁵I will also plant them on their land,
And they will not again be rooted out from their land
Which I have given them,’
Says the Lord your God” (Amos 9:13-15)

If Jesus truly was all that He claimed to be, then the Pharisees wondered when the kingdom of God would be inaugurated. Theologically, the Pharisees, like all Jews, had a timetable. They first expected a time of tribulation, then a prophet foretelling the Messiah, then the coming of the Messiah to establish His kingdom and destroy the rebellious nations that opposed Him. Then, Jews from around the world would return to Jerusalem, which would be restored to its place as the center of the world. In this context, the Messiah would establish His eternal kingdom. If Jesus was Who He claimed to be, and John the Baptist was, in fact, who he claimed to be, then when was all this going to begin? Certainly the rule of the Romans could be considered the time of tribulation, so everything was set in place for the coming of the kingdom of God.

In the practical context of the time of Jesus, the Pharisees and those like them anticipated a kingdom similar to that of the great Israelite kings Saul, David, and Solomon. That is, they expected the kingdom of God to begin with the removal of Roman authority, and the reestablishment of a Jewish nation-state with hegemony in the region of Palestine. They had looked forward to this for nearly one thousand years. But that clearly was not what was happening with Jesus. He did not look like a king, and He did not act like a king. His birth was humble, His upbringing undistinguished. To be sure He performed miraculous signs, but even these left the Pharisees unconvinced. That was why they demanded an explanation.

The Kingdom Explained

Jesus “answered them and said, ‘the kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed’” (v. 21). Jesus began with the fundamental misconception of the Pharisees. Jesus was coming twice. The kingdom He had come to establish the first time was a spiritual, not an earthly kingdom. He explained that people would not be able to say “look, here it is!” or, “there it is!” (v. 21). The idea of “here it is” implies a visible kingdom with a king, an army, and an empire. But the kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. Jesus explained that the kingdom of God was spiritual, not physical in nature (though naturally it impacts the physical world). Jesus tried to teach that the kingdom of God of which Jesus spoke was within individual believers, “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). But Jesus was speaking to Pharisees and “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised”

(1 Corinthians 2:14). The kingdom of God began in a manger in Bethlehem noticed only by shepherds and a few learned men from far away. It appeared in the temple but gained the attention of only two (Simeon and Anna). Some thirty years later, only a handful of fishermen and other equally prosaic characters recognized the kingdom of God when it had come. The religious and political leaders of the day did not see the kingdom. The kingdom of God was not what they expected, so they could not see it.

And in all fairness to the Pharisees, we must acknowledge that things have not improved. The Simeons and Annas are as few in our own days as they were in the time of Jesus. Most men are deceived in their expectations of what the kingdom of God will look like. It will not be world conversion. It will not be social reform. It will not be self-fulfillment.

Since the Pharisees could not understand, Jesus turned His attention to His disciples, “He said to the disciples” (v. 22). He spoke to His disciples for the purpose of briefly outlining five characteristics of the coming kingdom of God. Though even their understanding was incomplete at best, still Jesus wanted to tell them about the kingdom He would indeed established when He returned.

First, this coming kingdom will be hoped for. Jesus said, “the days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it” (v. 22). “The days of the Son of Man” refers to the Messianic era at the close of world history,

“¹³I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
¹⁴And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14).

This second coming will be longed for. That is, there will be a driving passion that consumes those who wait for the Lord. Believers want to see this age because the days leading up to it will be dark and full of oppression and turmoil. Jesus was clear, though. The disciples “will not see it” (v. 22). Instead they, and all believers who live on this earth before the time comes, must “⁷be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord . . . ⁸be patient; strengthen your hearts” (James 5:7-8). Believers must also be on their guard so as to not fall for the seductive arguments of false teachers who “will say to you, ‘Look there! Look here!’ Do not go away, and do not run after them” (v. 23).

Second, the coming of the kingdom will be visible; it will be “just like 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” (v. 24). In his account, Matthew gave a more detailed and vivid description, “²⁹but immediately after the tribulation

of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰And 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” (Matthew 24:29-30). When the kingdom of God comes in all its glory, there will be no doubting its arrival.

Third, there is a prerequisite for the kingdom of God to be fulfilled. The Son of Man must suffer first. He “first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation” (v. 25). This suffering was twofold. Jesus must be rejected by the unbelieving generation to whom He preached and for whom He performed so many miracles. That may have been obvious enough to the disciples, considering the confrontations with the Pharisees they had witnessed. But He also must be rejected by God. This required deeper understanding. The sacrificial and substitutionary death of Jesus as the Messiah was required to bring the kingdom of God to fulfillment. Without Christ’s death, the final coming of the kingdom of God would be something to be dreaded, not hoped for.

Fourth, the future coming of the kingdom of God will be unexpected, “²⁶and just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: ²⁷they 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. ²⁸It 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; ²⁹but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed” (v. 26-30).

I wonder if the disciples were curious as to why Jesus chose these particular examples, since both Noah and Lot had their noticeable flaws (Genesis 9:20-21; Genesis 19:30-38). Perhaps He chose them because in both examples, the earth was filled with the basest of depravity at the time. Also, in both cases there had been warnings to the people of the earth. Additionally, in both cases, the believers were redeemed from the disaster that came. And finally, in both cases, the men obeyed God.

Given those examples, we can see that the picture of the world at Christ’s second coming is not a flattering one. The condition of the world will not have improved. Man will not have become more godly. Evolution teaches that humankind is on a continuous upward path of progress. Scripture teaches differently. It teaches that man began in perfection and has descended fever further into depravity. At the time of Christ’s return, men will be given to self-indulgence and little else. Things of the flesh will be all they have minds for. Believers must be different from the world. We must flee to the ark and run from Sodom without looking back.

We know that there was nothing wrong with the eating and drinking and marrying, etc. The issue was that those actions had taken first place in the hearts of those involved. Materialism, false security, complacency, and selfishness were the disease, of which the activities mentioned were only the symptoms. The point Jesus made was that the suddenness of the second coming requires preparedness and vigilance. We “²know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. ³While they are saying, ‘peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape” (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3). Believers must not let

the things of this world so engage us that we are not looking forward to the coming kingdom of God. We do not know the precise day or hour. Therefore we ought always to be ready. What will you be doing when Christ returns?

Fifth, the kingdom of God will bring an eternal separation. Jesus continued, “³¹on that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back. ³²Remember Lot’s wife. ³³Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. ³⁴I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other will be left. ³⁵There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken and the other will be left. ³⁶Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left” (v. 31-36).

The man on the flat roof of his house might come down, but he ought not take time to go inside to get his belongings. The labourer, dressed only in his tunic, ought not to return home to get his cloak. The tragedy of Lot’s wife was that she valued her worldly life more than absolute obedience to God. She remains the epitome of false profession. Though connected with the faithful and though acting in part as if she believed, her heart was not wholly invested.

We must admit that a certain portion of religion will not do. To speak the language of the locals is not enough. Outward professions are insufficient if not accompanied by sincere inward faith. We cannot serve Christ to please those around us. All of our actions ought to be based on what brings God most glory at any given moment. Our thoughts and words must give Him preeminence. Our goal must be to move His kingdom forward. While we cannot flee the second return of Christ, each one of us can be prepared by surrendering to Him wholeheartedly. We must place Christ above any human or worldly interest. At the return of Christ humanity will be divided (Matthew 25:31-46), and physical proximity will not save anyone. This is the time of wheat and tares; sheep and goats. That people have worked together and slept together will be of no account. That they have attended church together and ministered together will be unimportant. Earthly partings are difficult, but eternal separation will be even more so.

Overwhelmed by what they were hearing, the disciples wondered where this great event would take place, “they said to Him, ‘where, Lord?’” (v. 37). Jesus, knowing that this was a worldwide event, and not an isolated or geographic-specific event, answered with what was probably a Jewish proverb, “where the body is, there also the vultures will be gathered” (v. 37). That is, wherever there are the unsaved, there the scavenging birds will be. The coming of the kingdom of God will exclude no one.

The Kingdom Required

The return of Christ is required. Among other reasons, if it does not happen then,

God is a liar, since more than 2/3 of the prophecies about Jesus found in Scripture are yet to be fulfilled.

Jesus is a liar, since He repeatedly insisted that He would return, “be ready; for the Son of Man is

coming at an hour that you do not expect” (Luke 12:40).

God’s plan for the Church is invalid, “¹⁴for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ¹⁵For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17).

Sin goes unpunished and Satan wins, “⁷when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

Christ is not exalted, “³¹but when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:31-32).

Takeaways

Let us look forward to, and prepare, the fulfillment of the kingdom of God by living lives that are in alignment with the truths of Scripture and sharing the gospel with those yet outside the family of God.