

February 19, 2023

LESSONS ON THE COMING OF CHRIST

Luke 17:20-18:8

*(3 of 16 in a series from Luke 16-24)*

I long for the return of Christ. I think about it and pray for it often. If I've prayed for you recently as you're facing a struggle, I've probably said to the Lord, "Bring them through this difficult time (or surgery or what have you), but you know what would be even better, Lord? You could just return." The idea of Jesus coming back, all of us getting resurrection bodies, and never dealing with sin, death, or the devil again is overwhelmingly glorious. I hope Jesus comes back before I finish this sermon. Again, I long for the return of Christ. But it was not always so.

I was born in 1978 in Paducah, Kentucky, and that moment and place in history led me to have a really warped understanding of Christ's return as an eight-year-old boy that left me terrified. If you didn't live in that period, this might not resonate with you, but the cold war was still going on, and many were fearful that any day the Soviet Union might launch a nuclear attack, which—with our retaliation—would lead to the end of the world. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and even Billy Graham predicted that the Lord would utilize nuclear war as the means to bring about the end of all things in those days.<sup>1</sup> I have no idea why they thought Jesus needed a nuclear warhead in order to judge the world, but somehow they did, and it left me terrified.

What made matters worse is that Paducah, Kentucky was home to a nuclear power plant. Paducah actually advertised itself at one point in history to those entering by saying, "Welcome to the atomic city." And what this meant was that any time there was a list of cities that were likely Soviet targets for nuclear attack during that time, it would contain all the likely cities like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, and it would also include Paducah. And so I just knew that somehow we'd be the object of nuclear attack and (in some way I didn't understand) that would coincide with the return of Christ.

So I don't have to tell you that the return of Christ was not very attractive to me as a kid. It was the stuff of nightmares—literally. I had nightmares about nuclear war and Jesus. Again, I couldn't put it all together, I just knew by the time I was eight years old that I didn't want Jesus coming back. And any time my church talked about the return of Christ, it was always done with charts that I didn't understand. So, I thought, "I can't understand it, don't want it anyway, so I'll just ignore it."

And then I began diving into the Scriptures and found a very different picture. Every time the disciples inquired about the timing of Jesus' return, instead of encouraging them to get ready to draw out their charts with specifics, he would tell them that no man knows and they need to focus on being faithful servants until then. Moreover, I found that Christ's return was extremely

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 137-40.

desirable to the saints in Scripture. The book of Revelation actually ends with the blessed hope that surely Christ is coming soon. The martyrs of heaven are crying out for that day. And the saints throughout history have likewise prayed, “Lord, come quickly.” And, yes, the return of Christ means the judgment of all of his enemies and should be terrifying for them, but if you know Christ, it means our salvation. The creation itself will be made new, and we’ll dwell with the Lord—with no more sickness, pain, death, or sin—forever. That’s why Christians have historically longed for and prayed for the return of Jesus.

So, this morning, I want to hold up some truths for us about the return of Christ from Luke 17:20-18:8 that are very basic because, well, that’s how the Bible consistently speaks of the return of Christ. And my prayer is that it’ll remove layers of confusion you may have—hopefully though not quite as bad as my eight-year-old self—and help us understand how to live as we anticipate Jesus’ return. So, let’s look at what Jesus teaches us about his return in our text. The first thing we can note is that Christ has come and is coming again.

### **Christ has come and is coming again**

Actually the second part of that point—that Christ is coming again—will be fleshed out more in rest of the text, but in the opening couple of verses we see the first part—that Christ has come. Our text begins with the Pharisees asking Jesus “when the kingdom of God would come.” Now, let me explain what they’re asking. The kingdom of God is a reference to the reign and rule of God through God’s human king who would come from David’s line. He would be called the Christ, or Messiah. And the idea was that when God brought his rule into the world through his Messiah, everything would be made right. The enemies of God’s people would be judged. God’s people would be redeemed. Every injustice would be overturned. And, well, you get the picture. So, that’s what the Pharisees are asking about when they ask when the kingdom of God would come.

Now, that’s a funny question to ask Jesus if indeed you understand who Jesus is. He is that promised Messiah who was born of David’s line and is God’s forever king. He’s standing right in front of them. Therefore, Jesus answers, “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” (vv. 20-21).

Jesus is saying, that the coming of the kingdom isn’t taking place in some way that we look at and say, “Look, there it is,” as if it’s descending from the sky. Rather, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you, meaning, it’s in your presence. Jesus was saying, “God’s rule and reign through his human king has already arrived because I am that promised king, standing in your presence.” That’s what he means by “in the midst of you.” He means “standing in front of you.”

So, yes, there’s coming a day when Jesus will come back, and when he comes back all things will be made right. God’s enemies will be judged. God’s people will be saved to sin no more. Satan, sin, and death will be destroyed. We might think of that coming of Christ that we’re all waiting for as the kingdom of God coming *fully*. But what Jesus is saying to the Pharisees is, “Don’t be

deceived, though God’s kingdom isn’t here fully, it is here because God’s king has come and he reigns.” So, we can say that Christ has come—and is right now reigning at God’s right hand—and he’s coming again.

Then, after answering the Pharisees, Jesus turns to his disciples and begins to tell them about his second coming. It’s as if the Pharisees weren’t worthy of him answering their question because they didn’t even acknowledge that Jesus is God’s Messiah. But he does want to teach his disciples about the issue the Pharisees were asking about, so in verse 22, he turns to his disciples and begins to share details with them about his second coming. And as he does so, he starts by telling them that his coming will be obvious.

### **Christ’s coming will be obvious**

As Jesus turns to his disciples he says to them, “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” (v. 22). Jesus here is telling his disciples that though he’s present with them now, one day he won’t be, and they’ll long to see his return. That is, there’s going to be a delay from the time he ascends into heaven (in Acts 1:6-11) until he comes back again. And we know that not only will there be a delay, but while they are waiting for Jesus’ return, his followers will be persecuted. Jesus mentions his own coming suffering in verse 25, and he’s made clear to his followers that if they treated our Master poorly, so they will treat us—his followers—poorly.

We know this to be true, don’t we? Christians have been persecuted across the globe from the time of Christ’s ascension on. Dale Ralph Davis tells the story of Suzan Der Kirkuor, a sixty-year-old Syrian Christian retired school teacher who remained in her desolated village to continue to pour into her pupils until one day when some Islamic militants took her, raped her repeatedly, tortured her, and stoned her to death. The post-mortem examination indicated the ordeal had gone on for about nine hours.<sup>2</sup> And though we might not be able to stomach it, we could tell stories of Christians being persecuted with those same painful details for days on end.

Well, Jesus tells his followers that in these days when he’s gone and we’re suffering, we’ll desire his return. We’ll long for the day when he will bring justice and salvation. And it may well create enough desperation in us that we’ll be prone to being led astray. People will begin to tell us that Christ has already returned in this place or that, saying, “Look, there!” or “Look, here!” but Jesus adds, “Do not go out or follow them” (v. 23). Why not? Jesus’ answer is that his coming will be obvious. He says, “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” (v. 24).

You and I don’t have to worry that Jesus will come back and we’ll miss him. It’ll be as obvious as when everyone is standing outside and lightning lights up the sky from one end to another. Later, the disciples will ask him where his coming will be, and Jesus will answer, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (v. 37), meaning, I think, that we’re as sure to see the

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<sup>2</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *Luke 14-24* (Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2021), 78.

appearing of Christ on that day as vultures are of finding a corpse. I mean, do you ever think about how amazing that is? You can kill some rodent, toss it in a field, and magically—so it seems—vultures gather around it within a day or so. I don't know how they find it, they just do. And so it will be with the coming of Christ, we're as certain to see him as vultures are to see that corpse. Jesus' coming will be obvious. And Jesus also tells us that he'll come back while people are carrying on with normal life.

### **He will come back while people are carrying on with normal life**

That seems to be what Jesus is telling us in verses 26-30 and 34-35. He mentions that on that day he returns, it'll be like the days of Noah or of Lot. He says, "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 it will be when the Son of Man is revealed" (vv. 26-30).

Let's think through this imagery of Noah and Lot. Jesus is speaking of two times when he brought great judgment. One was with the world-wide flood in Genesis 6-9. Man was wicked and violent and the Lord sent a flood to destroy everyone but Noah, his wife, his sons, and their wives, who survived the flood on the ark. The other event was the judgment of Sodom (Genesis 18), where Lot and his family lived. The Lord brought out Lot and his family and then brought fire from heaven and destroyed that wicked city. So, Jesus is telling us that his coming will be like it was in those days.

But note the events Jesus parallels from those stories with his coming. Jesus describes the days of Noah as a time when people were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage. And he describes the days of Lot as a time when people were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. In other words, Jesus is mentioning things that aren't inherently evil. He's mentioning things that are just a normal part of life. We eat and drink, we marry, we plant, we build, we buy, and we sell. That's just normal life. You'll do more than one of those things today. Jesus tells us that on the day he returns, it'll be like those days. Everyone will just be going about normal life.

In other words, it doesn't seem like the days around Christ's return will really stand out in an odd way. There'll continue to be sinful rebellion against and believers will be obeying the Lord, and we'll all be in this world, carrying out normal life, and then Christ will come. Just as he rescued Lot and rescued Noah, he will come and rescue his people, and just as he flooded the world and poured out fire on Sodom, he will judge his enemies. And it'll all happen in a moment when things seem to be going on as normal.

Jesus fleshes out the picture a bit in verses 34-35, saying, "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.”<sup>3</sup> Again, he’s just picturing normal life—two people sleeping in the same bed or two women grinding out grain—and one will be taken and the other left. What’s unclear is whether the person taken is taken in judgment or salvation. It could go either way. You might argue that just as those in the flood were snatched away by the rising water and those in Sodom were snatched away by the raining fire, so the Lord will come and take people in judgment. Or, you could argue that just as the Lord took Noah into the ark and brought Lot out of Sodom as he was about to pour out his judgment, so it will be with his people. He’ll come, we’ll rise to meet him in the air, and then he’ll judge the world. I tend to lean toward that latter imagery since Jesus speaks in Matthew 24:31 of sending out his angels with a loud trumpet call to “gather his elect from the four winds,” but it makes no difference—one is saved and the other judged.

Jesus’ is coming back, his return will be obvious, and he’ll come while people are carrying on with normal life. That’s what Jesus wants us to know from Luke 17:20-18:8 about the specifics of his return. But he also tells us what we should do in light of it. He gives us two exhortations. The first is that we should set our hopes not on this life but on eternity.

### **We must then set our hopes not on this life but on eternity**

In the midst of teaching about the nature of his coming, Jesus gives us a number of images reminding us not to set our hopes and affections on this world. He first says in verse 31, “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.” In that culture, one oftentimes went up on the housetop, just so that makes sense to us. But the picture Jesus is painting is one where we hold the things of this world loosely instead of making them the objects of our affection. I don’t think it’s going to be literally possible at the return of Christ to run back into your house to get your stuff or run back in from the field to make sure you’ve got your possessions in tow. But Jesus is telling us, don’t love this world more than Christ. Don’t cling to this life and treasure it more than the life to come.

He tells us in verse 32, “Remember Lot’s wife.” This is a reference to what happened to her in the escape from Sodom. I’ve mentioned that the Lord brought Lot’s family out of Sodom before the destruction, but as they were fleeing the city, Lot’s wife looked back, and the moment she looked back she turned into a pillar of salt (Gen 18:26). I don’t know why the Lord judged her in that specific way, but the message was clear. The follower of Christ must turn toward him with our lives and never look back. We cannot long for the things of this world more than we long for Jesus. And so Jesus adds in verse 33, “Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.” We must not love our lives more than we love Jesus. And if we have set our focus on Jesus and eternity with him, we’ll hold to this life loosely, with a certain

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<sup>3</sup> Some manuscripts of the New Testament add, “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.” And that appears as verse 36. However, the oldest and best manuscripts don’t contain that line, but it wouldn’t change anything about the meaning if it were present or absent.

detachment, knowing this world as it is isn't our eternal home. And the final word of exhortation is that we must endure in faith, knowing the Lord hears our prayers.

### **We must endure in faith, knowing that our Father hears our prayers**

So, here's the picture painted for us so far. Jesus has come, and he's coming again. When he comes, it'll be obvious to everyone. No one will miss it. And he'll come at a time when everyone is just carrying on with normal life. Therefore, we need to hold to the things of this world loosely, treasuring Christ more than everything here—even our own lives. But also he's made clear that as we live our lives here, we'll long for his coming. He's already noted in verse 25 that he must suffer and be rejected before tasting the glory of the resurrection and exaltation. And it's a reminder that we will as well. We'll desire to see his coming, and days will pass where it feels like we can't make it. We'll hear stories like the one I shared earlier of gruesome persecution and may experience days like that ourselves. And even if we don't experience severe persecution, we will endure the effects of Satan, sin, and death in this world. We'll lose loved ones, watch sin ravage people's lives, and see the onslaught of the devil against the Lord's people, and so we'll find ourselves longing for Christ's return, crying out again and again for Jesus to come, save us, and make all things new. And Jesus has a message for us in that. He tells us to endure in faith, knowing that our Father hears those prayers.

Jesus tells us this in a parable. Thankfully Luke tells us the purpose of the parable in 18:1, as he says, "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." And the parable itself is about a wicked judge who neither feared God nor respected man. Well, there was a widow who had been wronged, and she asked the judge to give her justice against her adversary. But he refused because he didn't care about justice. But she just kept asking him again and again. And finally, she wore him down so that he finally said, "Fine, I'll give you justice." And so Jesus notes that if an unrighteous judge will finally respond to a widow who cries out for justice, how much more will our righteous God bring justice to his elect as we cry out to him to send his Son and bring justice to this unjust world. Jesus says, "I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily" (18:8).

Now, with that, we must remember that our timetable is different than the Lord's as 2 Peter 3 reminds us. And the fact that 2,000 years have passed since Jesus uttered those words to his disciples doesn't feel that God is acting "speedily." But Jesus will come. He isn't ignoring our prayers. He hears them, and he will answer. He'll one day come, and we'll be with him forever.

And until then, we need to endure in faith, keep praying, and not lose heart. Jesus ends the section asking when he comes, "Will he find faith on the earth?" He's asking them that question to show them what is required as we wait. We must keep believing, keep trusting, keep praying, and keep enduring, knowing that his coming is certain. It may be today. I pray it is. It may not be in our lifetimes. But either way, may we live lives of faith and faithful obedience, longing for his return, and holding loosely to this life as we long for the life to come. And may we remember the certainty of that coming day as we come to the table this morning. Amen.