

# Now and Not Yet

Luke: Certainty of the Truth

Luke 17:11-18:8

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## Luke 17:11-18:8<sup>1</sup>

<sup>11</sup>On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance <sup>13</sup>and lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

<sup>14</sup>When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were cleansed.

<sup>15</sup>Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; <sup>16</sup>and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup>Then Jesus answered, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? <sup>18</sup>Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” <sup>19</sup>And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”

<sup>20</sup>Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, <sup>21</sup>nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>And they will say to you, ‘Look, there!’ or ‘Look, here!’ Do not go out or follow them. <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. <sup>26</sup>Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, <sup>29</sup>but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— <sup>30</sup>so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>Remember Lot’s wife. <sup>33</sup>Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. <sup>34</sup>I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. <sup>35</sup>There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.” <sup>36</sup>[Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.] <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, “Where, Lord?” He said to them, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.”

<sup>18:1</sup> And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. <sup>3</sup>And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

This is the Word of the Lord.

I want to begin this morning with the question the Pharisees ask Jesus in verse 20, “When will the kingdom of God come?” Have you ever asked this question? I suspect many of you have. The Pharisees are typical Jews. They expect the kingdom of God to be ushered in with apocalyptic signs

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

and wonders. They're looking for fireworks from the sky. But Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed." In other words, it's not coming in the way you expect it.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the kingdom of God is right here, right now, right in front of you. Jesus says, "Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (v. 21). The problem is the Pharisees don't see that the kingdom of God is present in the person of Jesus. It's there for them to see, but they don't see it. It was seen, for example, when the ten lepers were healed. And like the Pharisees, nine of the lepers didn't get it. Only one of the nine lepers believed that the kingdom of God had come in Jesus.<sup>3</sup> And so he praised God. Jesus wants all people to be like that one leper. He wants us to believe that the kingdom of God came when he came. It's already here. It's now.

And yet at the same time it's not yet. That's why in verse 22, Jesus says to his 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." What does he mean by this statement? Although Jesus came to usher in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God did not come fully when Jesus came the first time. It will only come fully when he returns. And before the kingdom of God comes in full power and authority, there will remain suffering and injustice. In fact, Jesus said that he himself "first must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation." The cross is an obvious sign that Jesus didn't bring the kingdom in its entirety at his first coming. At his first coming, Jesus made it possible to enter the kingdom of God. He dealt with the problem of sin. Through his death on the cross we can be forgiven of our sin and have eternal life, if we trust in Christ.

So Jesus accomplished a lot at his first coming. But the kingdom wasn't fully realized at his first coming. Suffering and injustice will remain until Christ returns. Even Jesus had to experience suffering and rejection. And the same will be true for all of those who follow him. And the suffering and rejection will cause Jesus' disciples to "desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man." This simply means that things will get bad—so bad that you will long for the return of Jesus. You'll long for Jesus to come back in power and to bring justice to this broken world. "One of the days of the Son of Man" is simply referring to the Day of the Lord, when Jesus will return in judgment to bring justice to the earth.

### *Wheat and Weeds*

So there's a tension when we try to understand the kingdom of God. It's now but not yet. All around us we see evidence that the kingdom of God has come. And we see evidence that it has not yet come. In one of his parables, Jesus said that both wheat and weeds will grow together until the harvest (Matt. 13:30). We see evidence of both wheat and weeds.

It's obvious that the wheat is growing when we see the spread and growth of Christianity. To demonstrate this point, Don Carson gives stats that are nothing short of astonishing. Think about China for example. Before communism took over in 1949, there were just over a million Protestants in China. Today there are 80-90 million. The number of Christians in Asia rose from 22 million in 1990 to over three hundred million in 2000. Countries that used to be without a witness are now sending out missionaries. Korea has now sent out between twelve and fifteen thousand missionaries. Latin America has sent out about eight thousand. None of this is to even mention the rapid growth of the church in Romania, sub-Saharan Africa, Indonesia, and other countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Bock, Darrell L. *Luke Volume 2: 9:51-24:53*. Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Bock

The wheat is growing. The kingdom of God has come. And yet the kingdom of God has not yet come. The weeds seem to be growing at the same pace. Carson continues. In Europe, which used to be largely Christian, evangelicals constitute less than 3 percent of the population. In France, there are three times as many Muslims as Catholics. In Vienna, there are more registered prostitutes than evangelical Christians. In Brazil alone, there are at least twelve million children living on the streets. Bangkok has become proverbial for its tens of thousands of child sex slaves. The rise of militant Islam is catastrophic. In America, we see pervasive evil, terror, and injustice—the shootings, poverty, political corruption, AIDS, abortion, crime, and racism. The evidence of weeds is all around us. But it's also seen in the church. The number of evangelicals who are genuinely converted is a matter of enormous doubt. Many professing Christians live no different from the world.<sup>4</sup> The weeds are growing. The kingdom has not yet come. So Jesus says, “The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man.” I’d say that’s an understatement.

In Revelation 22:20, Jesus says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” To which the church replies, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” And in these days when we long to see the return of Christ, when we long to see justice and peace kiss, we’re easily thrown off track. In verse 23, Jesus says that during these days many people will say to you, “‘Look, there!’ or ‘Look, here!’” There will be many predictions of Christ’s return. But Jesus says not to 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.” Later in verse 37, Jesus’ disciples ask Jesus where Jesus will return. To which he replies, “Where the corpse is, there the vultures gather.” His point is it will be obvious. We don’t need to wonder when Christ will return. It will happen. And it will be plain. So what should we do, as we await his return? What should we do *now* while we wait for the *not yet*? How should we live our lives in this world that is full of weeds? Jesus gives us the answer. It comes out in the rest of our passage this morning. We’re called to do at least two things in light of Christ’s return. These are drawn out in the examples of Noah and Lot and the parable of the persistent widow.

## **NOAH AND LOT (17:26-37)**

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Let’s begin with the first. Judgment is coming, so we shouldn’t live as though this world is all there is. To make this point Jesus draws on two examples from Genesis, the days of Noah and the days of Lot. These are like the days we are in now.

In the days of Noah, there was knowledge that judgment was coming. But people were living their lives in denial of this reality. They were simply going about life, business as usual. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage. None of these things are bad. They’re the basics of life. The problem was people were going about their lives without a view of coming judgement. They were going about their lives as though the basics of life are all there is to life. And the judgment of the flood came upon them like a thief in the night. And they weren’t ready, so they were all destroyed.

The same was true in the days of Lot. Judgment was coming on Sodom and Gomorrah. But the people were simply going about eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. Again, these things aren’t bad. As we’ve seen in other sermons, our work matters and is integral to being created in the image of God. So buying and selling, planting and building are good things. But we’re in trouble if we live our lives as though these things are all there is.

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<sup>4</sup> Carson D. A. *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, p. 121-122.

So, if the people in the days of Noah and the people in the days of Lot were not ready for the impending judgment, how can we live our lives in such a way that we are ready? This comes out in verses 31-33. We need to keep our eyes fixed on the coming of the kingdom of God. Don't worry about hanging on to the things of this world. Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you." Or in the words of verse 31, "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." One day judgment will come. And some people will be taken away to judgment and others to eternal life. On that day we won't be able to take anything with us. If we're trying to hang on to the things of the world that shows that we probably don't value the kingdom of God. If we value the kingdom of God we need to be willing to let go of the things of the world knowing that we will take hold of the things in the world to come.

So many people in the church today have one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom of God. We experience the difficulties in this life and long for things to be made right. But instead of patiently enduring the difficulties with confidence that one day Christ will return and make things right, we start to capitulate to the world. We want to have our cake and eat it too. We *think* we're pointed in the direction of eternal life and the kingdom of God, but we're constantly looking over our shoulder, like Lot's wife. We don't want to give up our life in Sodom.

If that's where you find yourself today, Jesus says, "Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it." Lot's wife wanted to hang on to her things in Sodom. So when she was being taken out of Sodom to safety, she looked over her shoulder; she looked back to Sodom. And she was turned into a pillar of salt. She tried to hang on to her life and lost it. Jesus on the other hand, didn't cling to this world. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

### *Living in wartime*

John Piper uses an illustration that's been very helpful to me. Most people here this morning under 60 have never lived through wartime. But your grandparents or great-grandparents did. And if you talk to them, they'll tell you that the way people lived during WWII or even Vietnam is different than the way we live in peacetime. In wartime everybody's perspective and priorities change. The newspapers carry headlines about how the troops are doing. Families talk about sons and daughters on the front lines and write to them and pray for them with heart-wrenching concern for their safety. In wartime, we're on alert. We're armed. We're vigilant. In wartime, we spend money differently—there's austerity, not for its own sake but because there are more strategic ways to spend money than on a new car. The war effort touches everybody. We all cut back. The luxury liner becomes a troop carrier.<sup>5</sup>

During times of peace, we don't have this same perspective and we don't have the same priorities.

Here's the thing. We're at war. The spiritual forces of evil are at work full time to blind the eyes of unbelievers and to throw believers off track. A day is coming when Christ will invade this world, and his campaign will be successful. Some will be taken to eternal life and some to eternal judgment. In verses 34-35, Jesus says, when he returns, "...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."

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<sup>5</sup> Piper, John. *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007, p. 47-48.

But few people in the church today think that we are in a war that's greater than WWII or any imaginable nuclear war. Few acknowledge that Satan is a much worse enemy than any terrorist organization. Few realize that the conflict is not restricted to the Middle East, there's a battle in every town and city in the world. Who considers the casualties of this war? People won't merely lose an arm or an eye or an earthly life, but lose everything—even their own soul—and enter a hell of everlasting torment?<sup>6</sup> Friends, we're living in wartime. But to look at the church, who could tell!? Is this war affecting what we talk about, what we pray about, how we spend our money, how we spend our time? Or is our life simply business as usual?

Jesus wants us to know that he's returning. Judgment is coming, and we need to be ready. We need to fix our eyes on the things of his kingdom and stop looking over our shoulders. We need to declare the gospel. To pray for the lost. To conduct our lives in a manner that is worthy of the gospel. To give our lives and our resources away for the cause of the kingdom, knowing that we have a great reward in the kingdom of heaven. Judgment is coming, so we shouldn't live our lives as though this world is all there is. That's the first thing Jesus calls us to do in light of his return.

### **THE PERSISTENT WIDOW (18:1-8)**

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Let's now look at the second thing. Justice is coming, so we should persist in faith evidenced by prayer.

To make this point, Jesus tells the parable of the persistent widow. We're not given the specifics, but the widow in the parable has experienced injustice in one way or another. And so she takes her case to a judge in the city. But the judge in the city neither feared God nor respected man, so he refused to do anything about her plight at first. But eventually he gave in. Even though he didn't fear God or man, the woman kept beating him down with requests for justice.<sup>7</sup> The parable is a lesser to greater parable. The point is that if an ungodly judge eventually responded to this widow's persistent pleas for justice, how much more will the gracious God of the universe respond to his children's persistent pleas for justice? The widow is a picture of how we should respond as we live our lives in the now-but-not-yet. As we look around, we see injustice all around us. And we face suffering and rejection for our faith, just like Jesus did. We see evil growing like a weed.

But we know that Jesus will one day return. And we know that when he returns justice will roll down like a river. The saints will be vindicated. All things will be put to their rights. In view of this reality, what type of people ought we to be? If we believe this is true, we should pray and not lose heart. We should pray "Let your kingdom come, let your will be done so that everyone might know your name."

When we face suffering in this life, it's easy to wonder why God allows it. The Bible doesn't tell why. Graham Cole once said, "The Bible is not so much concerned with the arrival of evil. It's more concerned with the survival of evil."<sup>8</sup> We don't know why God allows evil. But we know that he won't allow it forever. Justice is coming.

When we face suffering in this life, it's also easy to wonder why Christ is delayed in returning. But we know the answer. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that "the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some

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<sup>6</sup> Piper, 48.

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Luke*. The pillar New Testament commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Cole, Graham A. *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” The reason the Lord tarries is because he wants people to come to know him.

We really shouldn’t question God. He’s given us adequate answers. The real question has to do with us.<sup>9</sup> Jesus says, “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (18:8). The real question is do we believe that Jesus will bring justice to earth? And does that belief drive us to our knees to pray? Does it cause us to pray that people would come to know Jesus before he comes?

The persistent widow prevailed as she continued to ask the judge for justice. Did you know that God wants to use your persistent and patient prayer to bring about his kingdom? God wants to use your persistent prayer to bring people to faith in Christ. George Mueller knew this. And so he persisted in prayer. Listen to what he says in his autobiography:

*I am now, in 1864, waiting upon God for certain blessings, for which I have daily besought Him for 19 years and 6 months, without one day’s intermission. Still the full answer is not yet given concerning the conversion of certain individuals. In the meantime, I have received many thousands of answers to prayer. I have also prayed daily, without intermission, for the conversion of other individuals about ten years, for others six or seven years, for others four, three, and two years, for others about eighteen months; and still the answer is not yet granted, concerning these persons.... Yet I am daily continuing in prayer and expecting the answer.... Be encouraged, dear Christian reader, with fresh earnestness to give yourself to prayer, if you can only be sure that you ask for things which are for the glory of God.<sup>10</sup>*

This is an example of someone who always prayed and didn’t lose heart.

We know that God uses our prayers. And some of you have actually experienced seeing a loved one come to faith in Christ, or return to the Lord, after years of prayer. So isn’t it amazing that studies show that most Christians today, even leaders and paid workers, don’t spend regular time in daily prayer?<sup>11</sup> God wants us to persist in prayer, believing that he will use our prayer to accomplish his purposes. The most practical way to do that is simply to set aside time each day to pray. May the persistent widow and George Mueller encourage you to do just that.

When we realize that we’re in a war, then we’ll pray. Piper says that “Prayer is a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. We can call headquarters for everything we need as the kingdom of Christ advances in the world.”<sup>12</sup> And we must do this. For we are completely dependent upon God for help. We live our lives now in the not yet. We face trouble and we’re in trouble. The question is do we realize our need for God’s help until Christ returns?

Eugene Peterson illustrates this point well in his book on the Psalms. I know I’ve used this quote before, but it’s so helpful that I couldn’t resist using it again. This is what he says.

*The human condition teeters on the edge of disaster. Human beings are in trouble most of the time. Those who don’t know they are in trouble are in the worst trouble. Prayer is the language of the people who are in trouble and know it, and who believe or hope that God can get them out. As*

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<sup>9</sup> Blomberg, Craig. *Preaching the Parables*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007, p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Piper, p. 69

<sup>11</sup> Blomberg, p. 171

<sup>12</sup> Piper, p. 45

*prayer is practiced, it moves into other levels and develops other forms, but trouble—being in the wrong, being in danger, realizing that the foes are too many for us to handle—is the basic provocation for prayer. Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, “I only pray when I am in trouble. But I am in trouble all the time, and so I pray all the time.” The recipe for obeying St. Paul’s “Pray without ceasing” is not a strict ascetical regimen but a watchful recognition of the trouble we are in.<sup>13</sup>*

We live in a world where the weeds are growing right alongside of the wheat. This makes us long for Christ’s return. But we can have confidence that Christ will return. This confidence should lead us to live our lives now in view of eternity. And it should drive us to prayer. Let your kingdom come. Let your will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.

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<sup>13</sup> Peterson, Eugene H. *Answering God: The Psalms As Tools for Prayer*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.