

GETTING IN SHAPE FOR WHAT'S AHEAD

Luke 17:20–37

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Luke 17:20–37 (NIV)

“Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is within you. Then he said to his disciples, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men will tell you, “There he is!” or “Here he is!” Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot’s wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.’ “Where, Lord?” they asked. He replied, “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.””

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“Getting in Shape for What Lies Ahead.” Suppose I were to ask you the following question, how would you answer it? What is the central theme of Jesus’ teaching ministry? Perhaps someone might answer “Salvation.” Another might answer “Eternal life.” And still another, “Forgiveness.” But if and when you examine the Gospels closely, you will find that none of these is the central theme of Jesus’ teaching.

The central theme of Jesus’ teaching ministry is this—“the kingdom of God.” Throughout all of His discourses, throughout His dialogue with both His disciples and with the opposition, He is talking about the kingdom of God. Salvation is one aspect of the kingdom. Forgiveness is an aspect of the kingdom. Eternal life is an aspect of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is God’s government; God’s government on earth; God’s government in the age to come. It’s how God is going to rule or reign. This is a particular day in the history of the world where there’s a lot of focus on who’s in control and who’s running the government. Just the last few weeks, we’ve seen a change in the government of the Philippines and in Haiti. And now, President Aquino is head of a government rather than President Marcos and we wish her and the people of the Philippines well. But there’s going to come a day when there’s going to be a change of government all over the earth—all at one time. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of Christ and He will reign forever and ever.

What would it be like for that reign to begin? Let’s say that the Lord decided to use Orange County as a test-model case for how the kingdom of God would be and it was announced that on Wednesday, promptly at noon, all federal, state, and local jurisdictions of government would cease, and the boundaries of Orange County and the government of God—the kingdom of God—would begin. What would that government be like?

I think I can give you some clues.

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The first thing that would go in the new government is death. Death is outlawed. It no longer happens. A part of me goes out for all the morticians that need to earn a living, but there's going to be a rehabilitation job retraining program for them.

Then, there's going to be no need for armaments. There's a walk in LA—and it's in Victorville today—all the way to Washington D.C., protesting war and nuclear armaments. There will be no need for nuclear bombs. There will be no nuclear industry. There won't even be any handguns. Jesus is quite capable of ruling the government with the word of His mouth.

And there's no pollution. They've been getting toxic waste off the Ortega highway. No more toxic waste polluters or toxic waste dumps. And there will be no more smog. In spite of how much we've grown to like it, it will not be here anymore.

And there's going to be no police force and no penal system, because there's no crime. Sheriff Gates won't have to worry about the injunction that was issued against him by a judge this week, which forced him to limit the number of prisoners in the Orange County jail to fourteen hundred at any given time. He won't have to worry about letting prisoners go early. The thing will probably become a luxury hotel. People will say, "This used to be the Orange County jail. Isn't it a nice hotel now?" and they'll fix it up. They'll need to fix it up.

And no more hospitals, because nobody's sick anymore. All the nursing homes are going to be emptied out.

Then there's going to be no poverty. Everybody will have enough. That's going to be great. If you like that and I like that, let's vote for the kingdom of God. Unfortunately, it doesn't have a party label.

But there are going to be some things about the kingdom of God in Orange County that some people aren't going to like at all. We can all identify with the things that are gone that we don't

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want, but the kingdom of God means that there is going to be no more selfishness. And it means that there's no more immorality: no more affairs, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, abortion and pornography. And it means no more cheating or stealing or dishonesty of any kind and it means no chemical abuse: no more drug abuse, substance abuse and alcohol abuse. And it means that no religious systems will exist that do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. That's a part of the kingdom of God.

It would be great, in that day of the kingdom of God, to say, "I'm here. I'll never get sick. I'll never have a terminal illness. I'll never die. I'll never be separated from anyone by death. I will always feel fulfilled. I will always have enough of everything I need. And so will everyone else. I'll never have to worry about anything. I'll never have to worry about money. I'll never have to worry about my health. I'll never have to worry about the Russians. I'll never have to worry about things that go bump in the night. Wonderful!"

Those are the things we can visualize.

I'm convinced that there are some things about the kingdom of God that have not even entered our mind of what it's like. I like C. S. Lewis. He's a favorite author of mine. Lewis postulates that, before the fall of man, the animals could talk. The serpent in the Garden was talking. People just dismiss that as biblical mythology, but what if God made the animals with the capacity to talk?

When our dog Boomer was dying a few years ago (he'd been with us twelve and a half years), we gathered around his bed to say one last prayer of thanksgiving for him. If you have a dog in your family, that pet becomes an important part of your family. It represents considerable investment, too, of time and money and patience. That dog had meant a lot to us. We prayed. Boomer looked through those hurt eyes. He was hurting. He was in a lot of pain. I just thought,

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“If he could only talk to me.” Maybe in the kingdom of God our pets can talk to us. That would be great. You may not think it’s great and it’s not gospel, but that’s just an illustration of the fact that there are probably some things the kingdom of God consists of that haven’t entered our imagination.

Give me the kingdom of God. Give me that realm of life and light where everything is beautiful and bountiful and where everything is dazzling and a delight. Give me the kingdom of God.

The Pharisees come to Jesus and say, “When is this kingdom coming?” That’s what we’d like to know. Jesus gives an answer. He has a two-part answer. It’s already here and it’s coming.

It’s already here, He says in verses 20 and 21. “The kingdom of God is among you.” Or it’s just as easy to translate that “The kingdom of God is within you.” Actually both are true. The kingdom of God is among us and the kingdom of God is within us.

What does it mean that the kingdom of God is among you? That is Jesus is saying, “I am among you. And I am the king. I am the one who has authority over death. I am the one who has authority over illness, who has authority over nature, who has authority over people’s destiny. I am the King, and I am here. The kingdom of God is among you.”

And also, the kingdom of God is within you. Because Jesus’ coming involves taking a bit of the eternal kingdom, ripping it off, and putting a piece of it in our heart, so that the kingdom of God is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, kindness, longsuffering and faithfulness. It’s something of heaven on earth. It’s God’s rule and His reign and His government in our life, which we voluntarily accept. It’s a foretaste of the kingdom that is coming.

It’s a hidden thing now. It’s not externally visible. You can’t say, “There it is” or “Here it is.”

And it doesn’t come with observation. Or it doesn’t come with visibility. That word “visibility,” or the King James terminology, “observation,” is a particular word in the Greek language which

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is used seven times in the New Testament. Every time it's used, it has the connotation of being used in association with someone who is watching critically—critically and with hostility.

Jesus (talking to the Pharisees) says, “If it's your attitude to look with criticism at Me, the kingdom will not come to you visibly.”

I had a friend in college who locked himself up in his room for three days, fasting and praying that God would do a miracle of some kind in the confines of his room so that he could believe in Him. And if He wouldn't do a miracle in three days, he told God he would go out of the room and he'd never serve Him again. He went out of that room and it's been twenty-five years and he hasn't served God. He was watching the kingdom of God visibly. He was putting God to the test. He was defying God to act. He did not come to God with a compliant heart and a submissive spirit, but with spirit of demand, a spirit that put God on the witness chair and wanted to interrogate Him. God is sovereign and will not allow that to happen.

But Jesus says of those who look for the evidences of His kingdom, “You will see it in My evidence.” He says, “If you're looking for the evidence, you will see it. The kingdom of God is among you, and because it is among you, it is within you.”

Then Jesus, in verses 22–37, goes on to tell us that there is a second phase of His kingdom: a day when the Son of Man will come in His glory. He tells us in these verses that there are some things that we are to have in our consciousness as we wait for that future and final kingdom to come.

I. First, He tells us that things are going to get worse.

You're going to long for one of the days of the Son of Man. And it will not be there; you will not see it. What does He mean here? He's talking about disciples who He knows will later be in prison rooms. They will be in dungeons. They will be tied to stakes where they will be burned

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with fire. They will be in coliseum rooms, waiting to face wild beasts. They will be in those kinds of tight spots of life, and they're going to look back at that moment and say, "If we could just relive one of those days when we were with Jesus in Galilee, on the lake, or when He broke the bread by the shore and fed the thousands. Oh, if we could have one of those days again." But Jesus says, "You can back look with nostalgia in your life, but those times aren't going to come." Who of us at any age of life has not already looked back with nostalgia at some day and said, "If we could just resurrect that day." But life is sort of like one of these people movers in an airport—this conveyor belt. You get on it and it starts taking you. I think of this when I'm in an airport on one of those conveyor belts. It's like life, only I can't turn around and get off. It just keeps moving. And I keep losing hair in the process. It's moving and there's a sign that says, "No return." I can't go back. All I can do is keep going.

Jesus says there's going to be times when you feel that way.

II. Then He says, secondly, that one of the things that's going to happen prior to His return is that people are going to go off on wild religious goose chases.

They're going to follow this person and that person who says, "There He is" or "Here He is."

That is, persons who come to say they have authentic religious truths, to follow their system and "you'll have enlightenment" or "nirvana" or whatever.

Jesus doesn't have a naïve view that, because He has come, everybody's going to fall down at His feet and worship Him. People are going to continue to believe in error. Here He is and there He is. That's the kind of spirit of our age.

I like the illustration of the university classroom, where the professor of comparative religions is demonstrating to his students how difficult it is to ascertain religious truths. He's lined up a

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number of people to come in and give a testimony of what their faith means to them, and they're all of different faiths.

The first guy comes in the room. He's real happy and snapping his fingers, he's got a bright sports coat on. He's asked to give his experience and he says, "I was really living down and out and I was miserable in my life. One morning, I got up to cook breakfast and, as I put the spatula underneath the egg to turn it over, I accidentally flipped the egg too high and it landed on my head. And a feeling of warmth came over me. Suddenly, I felt congruent and I have been congruent ever since. I feel wonderful. And I'd recommend to you, class, if any of you are down and out, feeling bad and disassociated from your inner self, put an egg on your head. And you'll feel congruent too."

Then the second guy comes in and he's got a saffron robe on. He says, "Since I learned my mantra and learned respect for my master, I've come into enlightenment. I'd recommend you try that."

Then a guy comes in and says, "I've got a religion that teaches me to pray five times a day and teaches me that my basic mission in life is submission to Allah. I take a journey in my lifetime to Mecca. That religion is to be commended."

Then some guy comes in and says, "Hey, man! Since I started snorting coke and dropping acid, I've felt groovy! And if you want an extraterrestrial experience on earth, try this!"

Then the Christian comes in and says, "Since I gave my life to Jesus Christ, everything's been different. I recommend you try that. Jesus lives. He lives within my heart."

Then the final guy comes in and he looks at all the other people in the line up and he says "I'm glad that what these other people have is working for them. They need a crutch, but there are some of us in life who don't need a crutch. So I don't believe in any God. I believe you need to

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get a hold of your own self and use right mental processes. You don't need any religion. Religion is within you. Your god is whoever you choose it to be, and my god is myself. I am the captain of my fate, the master of my soul."

You're sitting in the class and you're supposed to decide who's right. The problem is, you're being asked to decide on the basis of subjective testimony. Who's to say one's testimony is of more merit than others? All are saying, "This changed my life."

"The difference is not our testimony," Jesus is saying, "The difference is the objective reality of His life, His death and His resurrection." The whole Christian faith lies not towards validity in our testimony. It lies in His resurrection. You can say, "I don't feel that the law of gravity exists," but I would urge you not to try to see whether or not it does by jumping off a ten-story building. You will find out quickly that it does exist.

Jesus grounds His reality in His resurrection. So Jesus says, "After I've risen from the dead and validated My teaching by My resurrection, don't go looking for this view or that view. You won't find enlightenment anywhere else." But people are going to go off comparing various religions. Then Jesus says a third thing about getting ready for that day.

III. Human life is going to go on normally, as it always has, until there will be sudden judgment.

It's going to go on normally. He uses phrases or illustrations from the days of Noah and the days of Lot. In those days, they were eating, drinking and giving in marriage. That's not sinister. It's not sinister to eat. It's not immoral to eat. It's not immoral to drink (depending on what you drink). We are not told here they were boozing it up. We're told they were eating and drinking. Those are normal human activities. And they were giving in marriage and they were planning and building. Those are things normal societies do. Jesus says, "That's exactly how it's going to

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be until the time when I come. People are going to be living normal lives. And there's going to be, in the midst of that normalcy, this message coming: "The world is coming to an end. The Son of Man will come like lightning from east to west. In the midst of that normalcy, this warning is going to come. Give heed to it. Don't let the normalcy lead you to a false conclusion that things will always continue as they are now."

A few weeks ago, on January 28th, I'll never forget that morning, nor will anybody here. For me, that particular morning, I was driving to work and, as usual, I had my radio on the news. The United States was getting ready to send up one more space mission—the Challenger. They had had delays on that flight, if you remember. As I listened to the final moments of the countdown, I was thinking, "I wonder if they're going to get this one off too." As I pulled into my parking space, they had about thirty seconds left on the countdown. Sending something up in space has become such an ordinary event for me, and probably for most Americans, that I wasn't even going to listen to the finish of the countdown. I assumed that they would either cancel it or it would go. Either way, it will be ok. They never goof-up on one of those things. But there's something about a countdown that attracts me. I can't stay away from a countdown. So it was thirty, then down to ten, then five, four, three, two, one. "We have lift off!" The minute they said that, I said to myself, "America is going into space again. Everything's alright." I turned the radio off and went up to my office. A couple of minutes later, Jewel, my wife, calls me on the phone, and it's not like Jewel to be falling apart emotionally. She is on the phone, emotionally undone. Weeping. She said, "Something has happened to the space shuttle. It looks like it's blown up." Of course, then we all saw it later.

A normal day in America. Suddenly, our pride and our hopes and the lives of seven people are gone. It turns out, as the investigation has been proceeding, that there were people who were

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giving a warning. The people who made the shuttle booster rockets were warning, “Don’t fly that thing!” While the commission has not yet established for sure the cause, there is sufficient evidence, at least, that the managers did not listen to the warning of the engineers. And because the warning of the engineers was not heeded, we had the tragedy that occurred with the Challenger.

That’s helped me understand what Jesus is saying here. Because, so often when you talk about judgment, it comes across as so threatening. And often preachers who preach judgment, if you take a picture of their faces, look like they couldn’t wait for God to act next. That’s not the case. You see, the engineers were like Jesus. They were trying to get a warning through and nobody in a place of management that could do something about it would listen to them. Jesus is saying to the planet, “There’s going to be a blowup. It’s all going to go up one day. I’m coming back and it’s going to happen on a normal day, just like January 28th. It’s going to be a normal day. It’s going to happen so quickly, you’ll never have time to do anything more about it. It’ll be like two are in one bed. How close can you get to a person than to share the bed with them? Two people so close together. One will go and the other won’t. Why won’t the other go? Because there’s no time to change. Two will be working together. One will be gone and the other won’t. Why can’t the other go? Because there’s no time! It’ll happen that quickly! Therefore, if you’re up on the roof of your house and think that there’s something inside, don’t go down to get it. There’s no time. If you’ve left something in the field, don’t think you’re going to go get it. There’s no time. It will happen just like that.”

What Jesus is really saying to us is, instead of being involved in the blowup, you can go up. He wants to take that teaching of the future and move it into the present and say to us, “Knowing that that’s how it’s going to be, knowing that the Son of Man’s return is going to happen on a

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normal day, knowing that it's going to happen that way, what kind of things are in your life now?

The teaching of Jesus boils down to a simple question on this matter of a future kingdom. Are you ready to meet Him if He should come this moment?

I know, coming from the church background I came from, I was never sure I could answer that question—even though I had given my life to the Lord. So, many times, I got re-saved. We smile at that, those of us who came from that kind of a background. We recognize now that our salvation is by the grace of God and not by our own works. At the same time, it is inconsistent with our faith and with grace if we're pursuing a lifestyle that is not like that which the Lord wants in our life—if we are living our life in rebellion, against the kingdom which the Lord has established in our life.

So we ask anew in our life, with a kind of new innocence, as we come to the Lord, “Am I, Lord, ready to meet You if today—this very normal day—if this day, You should come?” “Am I ready?” It'll be too late to heal a hatred when He comes. It'll be too late to back out of an affair. It'll be too late to correct a lie. It'll be too late to deal with bitterness and unforgiveness. So Jesus is saying to get ready now so that, in that day, you will be ready.

It's difficult for people who fill a pulpit, such as I do, to talk about judgment. Our society isn't excited about hearing it. And I would much rather talk about light and airy things that will help us be better people, but the engineer is sounding a warning in life and saying, “It's not always going to be this way. Are you ready? Are you ready for the change when it comes?”

Closing Prayer

Father, we all want to be ready. We don't want to be like those in Lot's day or Noah's day that didn't heed the warning. We don't want to be like Lot's wife who tries to stay attached to things that You've told us to let go. We want to live for You. And we want to be ready. You've taught

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us that there's going to be a major malfunction in the planet. And that, if we die before that major malfunction, death is a major malfunction for us. All of us are headed for that major malfunction. Help us, Lord, to be ready. If we're holding anything against anyone today, help us to let go. As difficult as it may be for us, may we, from our heart, forgive. If we're attached to any relationship which is not of You, if we're involved in any immorality, I pray that there will be a repentance of that. For neither adulterers nor fornicators nor liars shall have their part with You in the kingdom of God. Judge, Lord, in our hearts. Separate us from the cancer of our sin. Help us to deal with life while we have life and to live holy lives for You, that we might be ready. If there are affections that we have that are not of You, if there are attachments to this world in regard to finance and pleasure that You're not pleased with, we pray, Lord, for the strength and the help of the Holy Spirit to make the corrections that need to be made. For we want to listen to You, the great engineer of the planet, the Son of Man. Help us to be ready. In Jesus' name. Amen.