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Luke 17:20–37

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# THY KINGDOM COME?

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

*Chasing Francis, A Pilgrim's Tale*, is a novel by Ian Morgan Cron. It tells the story of pastor Chase Falon, who by the age of thirty-nine has already accomplished the impossible, planting a thriving evangelical church in the heart of liberal New England. But after years of managing life in a 3000+ member mega-church, he is utterly spent, empty, and void of meaning. Being on the verge of collapse, his elders encourage him to go away: as far away as possible. He needs to find a new “map” for his life’s journey, one that would serve him for the second half of his life. The book opens with a profound quote from *Dante's Inferno*:

In the middle of the journey of our life  
I came to my senses in a dark forest,  
for I had lost the straight path.  
Oh, how hard it is to tell  
what a dense, wild, and tangle wood this was,  
the thought of which renews my fear!<sup>1</sup>

How many of you can identify with the feeling of being disillusioned when the “map” you were given for your life journey leads you into a dense, dark forest of disenchanted dreams? In his quest to work through his crisis, Chase travels to Italy to visit his uncle who is a Franciscan priest. There he is introduced to St. Francis of Assisi, whose simple and pure way of being Jesus in the world was radically different from his. Following in Francis’ footsteps breathes new life and healing into his parched soul.

In Luke 17:20–37 Jesus is going to rescue his disciples from the bogus “maps” that Israel’s leaders were selling. Though their maps looked promising and were quite popular, Jesus knew if Israel set her course according to their way, they would not only be disillusioned; they would end up annihilated by the Romans.

Before we examine the text, I would have to confess that this is perhaps the most difficult text to interpret in all of Luke (at least for me it is). Jesus’ language is cryptic and ambiguous, so that there is little consensus among scholars as to the precise meaning of the details. The reason for Jesus’ veiled speech is that he is speaking in the presence of his enemies, and if Jesus were to lay all his cards on the table, it could incite a riot. But we need not despair; there is hope in interpreting our map. The first thing we should remember is that whatever else we think the text means, it first has to make sense to the disciples. And when we read Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts, and the letters of the apostles, we realize that they clearly understood what Jesus had taught them and passed it on to the next generation.

Secondly, just as every map has a key or legend that explains the significance of the symbols, so also we have a legend to help us negotiate our way on Jesus’ map. God has not left us to our unsanctified imaginations to interpret the meaning. Every motif and symbol Jesus uses arises out of Israel’s story in the Hebrew Scriptures. And the rhetorical devices Jesus employs to speak about future judgment and salvation are those of the Hebrew prophets.

A common feature of their rhetoric was their use of “end-of-the-world” language to describe political events that had earth shattering significance, whether it be a ruler as proud as Pharaoh (Ezek 32:7–8), a city as great as Babylon (Isa 13:10), or a nation as secure as Edom (Isa 34:4–6; cf. Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15). The reason, explains Tom Wright, is that “end-of-the-world language is the only set of metaphors adequate to express the significance of what will happen.”<sup>2</sup> Our text opens with a question from the Pharisees.

## I. The Kingdom is Present But Hidden

**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.” (Luke 17:20–21 ESV)**

The Pharisees ask Jesus “when is the kingdom of God coming?” What they meant by that question was when was God going to bring an end to Israel’s exile and return to Zion to vindicate his people by overthrowing their enemies. Whenever God chose a king to represent his reign on earth, his anointing was validated by a mighty act of power in defeating Israel’s enemy. After the prophet Samuel anointed Saul, the Spirit rushed upon him and he struck down the Ammonites (1 Sam 11:11); after God anointed David, he slayed the giant Philistine Goliath (1 Sam 17). Victory over their enemies is what the prophets had promised and everyone in Israel longed for it, including Jesus (Isa 52:8; Zech 8:1–18; Isa 54:14–17). Even though “the kingdom of God” has been the major theme in Jesus’ teaching (Luke has used it 18 times up until this point), from the Pharisee’s point of view, there is little evidence that it has arrived, as Tom Wright explains,

If Pilate was still governing Judea, then the kingdom had not come. If the Temple was not rebuilt, then the kingdom had not come. If the Messiah had not arrived, then the kingdom had not come. If the pagans were not defeated and/or flocking to Zion for instruction, then the kingdom had not come.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus dismisses their question as misguided, and coming immediately after he has miraculously healed ten lepers only amplifies their ignorance. Beneath their question Jesus discerns that familiar voice of Satan, once again tempting him to prove that he is the Son of God by some great miracle or sign (Luke 4:9–11). Jesus refuses to play their game and says that the kingdom of God is not going to come in Hollywood style with dramatic displays of pyrotechnics or cosmic signs that will make the national news and draw thousands of curious onlookers to view the spectacle. “No,” he says, “the kingdom of God is *in the midst of you*.” It is present but hidden, like yeast within dough, or a mustard seed planted in the ground. The phrase could also be interpreted to mean, “within your reach, or grasp.” In this case the sense would be, “If you had eyes to

see, you could reach out and take hold of the reality already at work.” Wright goes on to say,

This reading is backed up by the following verses (17:22–37). Judgment is coming, and the presence of the kingdom does not mean automatic benefits for those who presume upon them as a right. Rather, it means there is an opportunity to be seized while there is still time.<sup>4</sup>

Though the kingdom of God is present, yet hidden in Jesus, it still awaits validation. Jesus now turns to the disciples to address this very important issue. It is critical that they know there will be an unexpected interim period between his departure and the public vindication of his life’s work and ministry. In the text that follows Jesus outlines a map, or timeline, that is designed to give his disciples a broad but accurate picture of exactly what to expect as they follow Jesus to the cross and beyond.

## II. Vindication is Delayed, but Certain

**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, 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.” (17:22–25)**

Jesus speaks of the interim period in the terms of “the days of the Son of Man.” The title “Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite self-description and evokes the prophecy from Daniel 7 that captivated the hearts of Jewish exiles as they looked forward to the coming kingdom.

I saw in the night visions,  
and behold, with the clouds of heaven  
there came one like a son of man,  
and he came to the Ancient of Days  
and was presented before him.  
And to him was given dominion  
and glory and a kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one  
that shall not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13–14)

As the chapter opens Daniel sees Israel’s enemies as wild beasts looming on the horizon. First a lion, then a bear, then a winged leopard, and a fourth too terrible to describe (Dan 7:3–8) rise up out of the sea with ravenous appetites seeking to devour God’s people. But the threat is put to rest by “one like a son of man” who, like a new Adam, is able to tame these wild animals. He kills the terrible beast and disarms the others and takes away their dominion. Having defeated Israel’s enemies on earth, he “comes with the clouds” to heaven and where he is enthroned and given “dominion and glory and a kingdom” that is everlasting. In Daniel’s terms “the coming of the Son of Man” is not his coming to earth, but his ascension into heaven.

Though Jesus is enthroned in heaven as the Son of Man and the disciples will share in his dominion, he doesn’t want them to be naïve regarding what following him will mean after his departure. Just as he did not enter into glory without the necessity of going

through suffering, neither will they. Days are coming when Jesus will no longer be in their midst and they will undergo severe suffering. During those dark days they will long for the day when Jesus will destroy his enemies, but they will not see it. The wait will make them vulnerable to other voices tempting them to abandon the way of suffering and follow imposters, who claim to be messiahs, but promote violence and revolution. But they must remain strong and not give up, for there will be a future victory and vindication, and when it occurs it will be unmistakable, like lightning flashing across the night sky.<sup>5</sup>

What event is Jesus referring to? Luke doesn’t tell us here. But in chapter 21, when his enemies are off stage and he is alone with his disciples, he repeats his instruction with much more detail, assuring them that though the wait will be long, they will see it within their lifetime—“Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (21:32), and leaves no doubt about the event he has in mind. It is the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near” (21:20).

In a shocking turn of expectation, Israel and her rulers are viewed like one of the beasts in the book of Daniel, who violently opposes the rule of God and will be overthrown by the Son of Man, who is enthroned in the heavens. When the “Son of Man” is vindicated over his enemies there will be no question, for it will be clear as day to the whole world when Jerusalem lay in ruins.

## III. Preparing for the Day

### A. Faith when life appears uninterrupted

**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. (17:26–30)**

To encourage the disciples to stand firm in their faith until the end, Jesus reminds them of the days of Noah and the days of Lot. Apart from God’s word, there were no special signs of imminent disaster; life just went on as usual. As we listen to a staccato string of ten verbs strung together with no conjunctions to interrupt their cadence, the impact is riveting.

*They were eating, drinking, marrying, being given in marriage,  
they were eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building*

It’s as if everyone is so immersed in their daily occupations and pleasures, planning and arranging their lives, no one even takes time to come up for air, to pause, to think, to ponder, to reflect, or even consider. Life just goes on unimpeded and uninterrupted, as if God had never spoken. If we prefer not to listen, God doesn’t shout, he simply allows us to go deaf. In the days of Noah and Lot, it was life uninterrupted.

Until... **the day**, and it all changed in an instant. It was **the day** Noah entered the ark, **the day** Lot went out from Sodom, **the day** when judgment broke in inescapably, surprisingly, abruptly. Without knocking or asking for anyone’s permission it simply “destroyed them all.” So will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. Jesus

is telling us that history has coherence and earlier events pre-figure later events. The way God works in the future is consistent with the way he worked in the past. You can count on the faithfulness of his word. It is backed by a holy God who says what he means, and means what he says. It does not need a secondary witness or oath to prove its authenticity. To remember what God did in the past isn't merely an intellectual recall, but a total participation with all your imagination, heart and emotion the same way you engage in a great film. When you exit the theatre you feel as though you were living the movie and it radically impacts the way you re-enter your life. When you know the end of the movie, you live your life differently.

#### B. Faith when its time

**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.**" (17:31-35)

Jesus tells them that when that *day* of judgment arrives there will be no time to waste. When your house is on fire, you don't have time to rescue the goods inside. If your attachments are too strong, it could cost you your life. Tom Wright observes,

Only those who got out and fled—Noah in his boat, Lot and his daughters running away—were saved. Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Jesus did not want his disciples to be caught in the coming destruction. They were not to stay for sentimental reasons, or out of mistaken sense of national or familial solidarity or loyalty. To do so would be to run the risk of being overtaken by the judgment. There is no hint, here, of a rapture, a sudden supernatural event which would remove individuals from *terra firma*. Such an idea would look as odd, in these synoptic passages, as a Cadillac in a camel-train. It is a matter, rather, of secret police coming in the night, of enemies sweeping through a village or city and seizing all they can. If the disciples are to escape, if they were to be 'left,' it would be by the skin of their teeth.<sup>6</sup>

**And they said to him,**

**"Where, Lord?"**

**He said to them,**

**"Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."**

**or "Where the body is, there the eagles will gather." (17:37)**

The disciples final question "Where, Lord?" is presumably an inquiry into "where" those who are judged are "taken." Jesus' cryptic answer, "Where the body is, there the eagles will gather," is most likely a reference to the Roman legions, whose well-known insignia was the eagle brandished on their shields. They "would gather round the carcass and pick it clean."<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. A Map for Life

Jesus' map of the future proved authentic, and gave the disciples the proper expectations for what lay ahead. It didn't lead them astray with false hopes. They understood that Jesus was enthroned as the Sovereign Ruler, but that his public validation would be delayed. As Jesus predicted there were many false messiahs promising freedom through revolution. All those movements only added to the bloodshed and ended in dismal failure. But the apostles had to have

faith in the promise of God and to wait for God to fulfill his promise like David gave voice to in Psalm 13:

**How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?**

**How long will you hide your face from me?**

**How long shall I take counsel in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?**

**How long will my enemy be exalted over me?**

**But as for me, I trust in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.**

**I will sing to the LORD,**

**because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Ps 13:1-2, 5-6)**

And they came to see through their own experience that they could hang their life on the word of God, even when the whole world stands against them. AD 70 taught them that God's word will prevail, as David affirmed in Psalm 12:

**The words of the LORD are pure words,  
like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,  
purified seven times. (Ps 12:6)**

Like Jesus, they began to see that history has coherence, understanding that the way God works in the future is consistent with the way he worked in the past. With great insight from the Holy Spirit they saw that what God did in the 40 years between his ascension and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 was a type of world history. In hindsight they came to see that the delay of Christ's vindication, though it caused intense suffering for them, was an act of God's grace and compassion, giving Israel forty years to repent (one complete generation). Judgment is the strange work of God. He takes no delight in it, for his delight is salvation, and therefore he carries judgment out with extreme reluctance.

Furthermore they learned that suffering and opposition do not contradict or impede the gospel, but actually work to promote the progress of the gospel. As Paul says,

**For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. (2 Cor 4:11-12)**

Such an understanding actually led them to take joy in their sufferings, as they experienced the fruit of many coming to Christ through their loving sacrifice. After Jerusalem was destroyed, Rome would follow through the loving sacrifice of thousands of Christian martyrs. The apostles lived faithfully until the end and lived as if the end was always near, encouraging their disciples with a radically new orientation:

**The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:7-11)**

1. Ian Morgan Cron, *Chasing Francis, A Pilgrim's Tale* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 11.
2. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 208.
3. *Ibid.*, 223.
4. *Ibid.*, 469.
5. These thoughts are adapted from Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 208.
6. *Ibid.*, 366.
7. *Ibid.*

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