
Prayers

To God

Praise God for the light of His Word and the glory of His revelation in the world and to You personally.

For myself

Weekly theme: Going the extra mile

Lord God Almighty, create in my heart a desire to love that is so great I never want to stop. When I am troubled, may I want to overcome problems by love; when I am joyous may I never forget to love those around me; when I have much on my mind, may I be willing to put this aside to love my brother or sister. In these and many other ways, may I demonstrate the truth You have revealed about Your Kingdom, I pray: **AMEN**

For others

Pray about the television programmes that have a significant impact on people's way of life in your country. You may approve or disapprove of them, but seek the Lord's will on whether they reflect the values of God's Kingdom.

Meditation

Our souls are thirsty when they miss out on the water of life;
Our minds become clogged when not inspired by the Holy Spirit;
Our lives are pointless without the direction given by the Father;
Our emotions overcome us unless we allow Jesus to stay close by;
Our hearts remain dry without inspiration from the Word of God;
Our bodies are temples to self unless connected to Christ's Body;
Our eyes wander where they will without being focussed on Jesus;
Our feet walk the paths of this world unless guided by God's truth;
Our time is spent aimlessly if not in submission to the Cross of Christ.

And we carry on ... day by day ... and the world doesn't stop ... as yet ...
But the more we yield to the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
The more we find good purpose both for earthly life and for eternity.

Bible Passage

Luke 17:20-37

²⁰ When He was asked by the Pharisees about when the kingdom of God was coming, Jesus answered,

"The kingdom of God does not come in things you can see; ²¹ nor should they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For the kingdom of God is already among you."

²² Then Jesus said to the disciples,

"The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not. ²³ People will tell you, 'Look there!' or 'Look here!' But don't go, and don't pursue this! ²⁴ For the coming of the Son of Man on His day will be like lightning flashes that light up everything in the sky! ²⁵ But He must first endure much suffering, and be rejected by the people of His generation.

²⁶ "The days of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah; ²⁷ for until the day Noah entered the ark they were eating and drinking, marrying and arranging marriages, and then the flood came and destroyed all of them.

²⁸ "It will also be the same as it was in the days of Lot; they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ²⁹ but on the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all!

³⁰ "This is what it will be like on the day the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day, anyone on the roof of a house who has left belongings behind in the house must not attempt to retrieve them. In the same way, anyone in the fields must not turn back, ³² remember Lot's wife! ³³ Those who try to keep life will lose it, but those who lose life will keep it!

³⁴ "I warn you, of two sleeping in one bed on that night, one will be taken and the other left behind; ³⁵ two women will be grinding meal together, one will be taken and the other left behind."

³⁷ The disciples then asked Jesus,

"Where, Lord?"

And He replied,

"Where there is a body, the vultures will gather."

Review

This is perhaps one of the most difficult of Jesus' sayings. In each of the Gospels, Jesus speaks about His coming again in response to the questions from followers, and His replies are not always easy to understand. In His day, Jewish people expected their prophesied Messiah to establish God's Kingdom of justice and power, and dispatch the Romans from the Holy Land of Israel, along with all other Gentiles who had settled there. They expected a renewal of Israel that would see the state restored to the glorious days of King David, with the

Messiah on David's throne and with restored and unfettered worship of God within the Jerusalem Temple.

While this was what people believed back then, our expectations about the Lord's coming again are now very different. People both within the Church and outside of it speculate about the end of the world, and many Christians look for the return of Christ. However, the subject is obscured by the different ways people interpret the various Biblical texts about His return (Matthew 24, 1 Corinthians 15:24f., 1 Thessalonians 5:1f. and all of Revelations). How then does this passage fit into this minefield of human belief about the end of the world and the return of Jesus?

To begin with, Luke's report in this passage is a comparatively helpful text, because it begins with Jesus' reply to the Pharisees (17:20) when they ask about the coming of God's Kingdom. Of course, they had in mind the picture above, but we notice immediately that Jesus tells them something they would have found difficult to hear; the Kingdom of God had already come (17:21)! Remember, Jesus began His preaching declaring that the Kingdom of God was indeed '*at hand*' or '*touchable*' (Matt 4:17, Luke 4:43, 6:20f.). His message was that God had come to establish His Kingdom on earth through Him and His ministry. It was of course not yet complete, but what was the point of looking for signs when God was '*already among you*' (17:21)? The Pharisees did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, so they did not like this message or His preaching!

Jesus then turns to the disciples, and delivers some firm advice about God's coming Kingdom. Verses 22 to 36 have similar themes to Matthew 24 and Mark 13:21-32, but each Gospel writer delivers a distinct message. While the Gospels report some of Jesus' most dramatic words about the End Times, this passage is perhaps less forthright. It remains dramatic, but by following through each paragraph, we find a consistent and highly revealing message.

The disciples had not asked Jesus anything but were clearly listening as He spoke to the Pharisees (17:21). Jesus then turned to them and said, '*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*' (17:22). This is strange, because we do not think of there being a significant number of '*days of the Son of Man*'; we only reckon on one at the end of time! So the phrase must mean more, and it is in fact a way of describing God's work on earth through the Son. Therefore, one '*day of the Son of Man*' was the day Jesus was born; another was the day of Jesus' baptism, and so on. The disciples had seen many such great days, but they would soon have this privilege no longer. Jesus was speaking prophetically of coming years when the earthly work of Jesus was behind the disciples though His return would lie ahead. Of course, they would long to see Jesus again 'in the flesh', but they should look forward to His return!

Jesus' advice for how to live as God's people in these years ahead was simple. He told them not to believe people who claimed to know what God was doing or when His Son would return; '*people will tell you, 'Look there' ... but ... don't pursue this*' (17:23). Instead, He told them as much of God's timetable as He could divulge. His return at the End of Time would be as obvious and dramatic as lightening ripping through the heavens (17:24), but before that, the saving work of the Christ was yet to take place, '*He must first endure much suffering ...*' (17:25)

Jesus then gives three illustrations of the '*days of the Son of Man*' which reveal what happens when God works in the world through His Son. They also point forward to what God will do when Jesus returns. He chooses the coming of the Flood at the time of Noah (17:26,27) to illustrate the cataclysmic changes that will take place both in people and in all creation. Second, He speaks of the '*days of Lot*' when God acted in judgement of sin, which is more than a hint that when God comes He will judge the earth and everyone in it!

The third illustration is different, because Jesus moves on from speaking about many 'days of ...' (17:22,26,28) and refers to just one 'day of the Son of Man' (17:30). So we may properly assume that Jesus is now talking about His return, and He paints a couple of pictures of the widespread panic this will generate. Like people escaping from natural disaster, there will be no time to rescue personal belongings (17:31,32), and there will be a sharp divide between those who are 'taken' and those 'left behind' (17:34,35). For generations we have assumed that this contrasts those taken by God's judgement and those left to the world's fate, but it is not as clear cut as this. Numerous New Testament passages describe how and why people are made righteous and accepted by God (Rom 5:1-2, Eph 2, Gal 3:6-14 etc.). So His choice at Christ's return is not random; though it appears so in the world.

The disciples wisely do not to ask Jesus 'when' this will happen! Instead, they ask a more subtle question; they ask 'where, Lord?' (17:37), they want to be at the right place! But even this does not impress Jesus, who answers that God will do His work where and when he is ready (17:37). But the most valuable saying of Jesus here is the one He undoubtedly wanted the disciples to heed, which says, 'Those who try to keep life will lose it, but those who lose life will keep it!' (17:33). So instead of spending time speculating about the End of Time, the disciple should focus on the offering of his or her own life in the service of the Lord, who will one day reign triumphant, according to His plan for the final 'Day of the Son of Man', which is as yet secret!

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V20 '... in things you can see'

Other translations:

'... with your careful observation' (NIV)

'... with signs that are easily noticed' (NRSV)

The best way to get to the bottom of this sentence is to read more than one translation! To do this will help us expand our sense of what Luke reports in this important saying of Jesus. He means that the Kingdom of God is not defined by things and objects to be observed or watched for. It is a rebuke to people who are always looking for signs of Christ's coming, who have forgotten that Jesus has already announced that it has come - see study.

V27 'marrying and arranging marriages'

Other translations:

'marrying and being given in marriage' (NIV, NRSV etc)

All the major translations have the same phrase reported by the NIV, which is close to the Hebrew. But unfortunately, this literal translation does not help us much, because these words describe the practices of arranged marriage, not the expression of free will within love. This is not a major theme of this passage so I feel free to paraphrase here, and use my translation to explain more accurately what was meant by these words in the first century.

Further Comments

The presence of Jesus

The 'days of the Son of Man' best describe the presence of Jesus on earth. The very specific use of the term 'Son of Man' to refer to Jesus here cannot be ignored. The phrase was generally used in the first century to refer to any individual, however, Jesus uses this as a spiritual title. It is marvellous to find that He can take a term that in normal literature simply means 'man', and use it as a title for Himself as Messiah. This shows that Jesus was happy to be identified as a man as well as the Messiah.

The gathering vultures

This rather gory picture offers us just one message, which is that Jesus will return when the conditions are right. Now if we want to explore what those conditions are, we do best to look more broadly at the Gospel itself and the various statements in Scripture about the completion of God's work, there is no information about this here. Good places to look are Matthew 24, Mark 16, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-5:8, 1 Corinthians 15:24-58, and the different themes of the book of the Revelation of John.

There is one brief mention of a vulture in the Old Testament that may have a bearing on this use by Jesus. Hosea, berating Israel for her sins says this, '*one like a vulture is over the house of the Lord because they have broken my covenant and transgressed my Law.*' (Hosea 8:1). In this picture, the vulture is the Assyrian empire, poised to invade the northern kingdom of Israel, an event prophesied by Hosea as the judgement of God. With this in mind Jesus' reference to the vulture may indicate that God's judgement will come through the violence of invasion and war as a form of punishment on the nations for their sins. However, this idea itself needs further interpretation.

Discipleship

Application

Speculation about the second coming of Christ

History, including the history of the church, is littered with people who have attempted to work out the date of the second coming of Christ, as if God delights in a mystery religion with such secrets hidden away for us to discover. One or other book will always be found to promote the idea. However, Jesus always warns against such speculation.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus warns the disciples to be ready (Matt 24:44), and insists this is a sufficient preparation (see Matt 25:1f.) for the coming of the Saviour in victory. Luke's Gospel here calls the disciple to remember what it means for God to come amongst people; He comes suddenly (17:24,25), in judgement (17:28f.) and people will have no time to respond because it will be like a natural disaster (17:31f.).

Luke also warns the Christian not to believe those who say that the Kingdom of God is something to be waited for, and expects that the church will understand that it is the Kingdom of God on earth, and the place of God's divine authority; '*the Kingdom is already among you*' (17:21)

Ideas for what to do

- Look carefully at verse 33, and ask yourself how this applies to your own life. This is not a straightforward matter and there are no 'pat' answers, but it is important.
- Pray for people of God's church and those outside of it who feel they must give time and effort into working out when Jesus will return, or who feel they must promote some date or other conviction about this that is not found directly in Scripture.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Why do people constantly want to know when Jesus will come again, and what does it matter?
2. What does this passage tell us about the second coming of Christ and how God's people should be ready for this?
3. What part of this passage speaks most clearly to you of your spiritual responsibilities and discipleship?

Final Prayer

Lord God; You have set the time for all Creation, and You have decreed its beginning and its end. Help us who long to know the secrets of the universe both control our natural inquisition, and refrain from the temptation to pursue what we cannot know. Rather, make us disciples who are constantly giving of ourselves in the service of the Kingdom You have established, through which You already do amazing work in the world. **AMEN**