

Whither there will the eagles be gathered together

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[0 : 00] Let us turn to the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 17, and we want to reflect this evening on a dark saying of our Lord in the last verse of the chapter, in verse 37.

It might be well for us to read some of the context. We'll read from verse 20. And he said unto the disciples, The days will come when ye shall desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and ye shall not see it. And they shall say to you, See here, or see there. Go not after them, nor follow them.

For as the lightning that lighteneth out of the one part under heaven shineth unto the other part under heaven, so shall also the Son of Man be in his day.

But first must he suffer many things, and be rejected of this generation. And as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of Man.

They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also, as it was in the days of Lot, they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded.

[1 : 34] But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be, in the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

In that day, he who shall be upon the housetop, and his staff in the house, let him not come down to take it away. And he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back.

Remember Lot's wife. Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it. I tell you, in that night there shall be two men in one bed, the one shall be taken and the other shall be left.

Two women shall be grinding together, the one shall be taken and the other left. Two men shall be in the field, the one shall be taken and the other left.

They answered and said unto him, Where, Lord? And he said unto them, Whosoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.

[2 : 44] We want to think for a few moments over this statement of our Lord. Whosoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.

There were many of the sayings of our Lord that caused people to look in wonder at one another and say to one another, This is a difficult saying.

Who can understand it? And it's certain that this particular statement is one of those dark, conundrum, puzzling statements.

And not one of us would dare to say that we have at last the definitive explanation. This is what it means and it can mean nothing else.

All that we can do is look at it and look at it in the context in which our Lord delivered it and see some of the situations to which it points.

[3 : 51] Quite obviously our Lord uttered this word on more than one occasion. Matthew records it in the same sort of context as Luke, in the sense that he is foretelling there, as here, a time of divine intervention with providences that are severe and that cause much suffering, what we generally call judgments.

Judgments. I'm a little bit hesitant to refer to them simply as judgments because, you know, if you read in the Old Testament, you will find that the judgment of God and things that are spoken of as judgments are not always spoken of as things that are to be, that are to fill people with terror.

There are many, in many of the Psalms, for example, you find the Psalmist pleading that God will arise to judge the earth because as the Psalmist saw things and as the Prophet saw things, it was only by the intervention of God, by God's intervention, by fearful works in righteousness, that the world could be saved.

And sometimes, as in the chapter we read in Isaiah, you'll find that judgment and salvation are paralleled as though the one was the equivalent of the other.

Certain it is that in the mind of the Prophet, very often there can be no salvation unless there is also an accompanying judgment. The context in which this saying appears is one in which our Lord speaks of judgment in the sense of divine intervention by fearful works in righteousness, the context of judgment both proximate and ultimate.

[5 : 52] That is, there were intervening many different scales and many different times foreseen, particularly perhaps the time of the overthrow of the city of Jerusalem and with all the suffering that accompanied that.

And then, ultimately, there is a forward view to the time when the Lord himself will come in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. There will be that final intervention of God in which all scores will be settled, all injustices will be brought to book before the judgment seat of God and righteousness and peace will prevail for the people of God.

We want then to think as to what the meaning of this saying is. Wheresoever the body is or wherever the corpse is, there will the eagles or the vultures be gathered together.

When we think of tomorrow's world, and I've no doubt that you're all acquainted with a TV program, I don't know whether it's on nowadays, but a program that deals with what it calls tomorrow's world, the perspective is always from the point of view of human technology.

All the wonderful things that man is going to accomplish, and the brave and wonderful new world that will emerge as these technologies are developed, the speed of communication will be increased, the conquest of disease will progress, and so on and so forth.

[7 : 44] And, of course, when we look back over the years and think of the progress that man has made in those terms just in the past century, it is indeed true to say that we live in a different world altogether from that with which our fathers and grandfathers were acquainted.

We don't have to be all that old. I consider myself yet to have a little energy left, sometimes.

But, you know, even in the lifetime of most of us here, we can think back to when even a motor car was something wonderful.

And as for an aeroplane, I can remember when as a boy we would hear an aeroplane in the sky, you dropped whatever you were doing to rush out and see it, and you boasted to your friends for the rest of the week, I saw an aeroplane way up in the sky.

I thought, and all these things are just commonplace now. So technology has developed, and man's outlook on the world has changed radically.

[8 : 58] We can get to the situation where we look down upon the earth. People have been up in the moon, looking down upon the earth. It all spells progress.

It all seems to suggest that man is bound on a progressive course toward greater and greater achievements. And a great and brave new world is coming, just round the corner.

But when the Lord speaks, or when from the perspective of Scripture, we begin to reflect upon human progress, and begin to try to peer into tomorrow's world, we've got to ask different questions.

The questions we then ask are, not what is man doing with his hands, what progress is man making with his examination and scrutiny of the microscopic powers and the macroscopic powers of nature. Not that. But how does man live? What is his sense of values? How does he relate to God, and how does he relate to his fellow man?

[10 : 21] Is there evidence of progress? Is there the same inevitable onward stride in the realm of the moral and spiritual? Well, when we start asking questions like that, they're highly embarrassing, because we find that today's world, by comparison with yesterday's world, cannot claim to be any better.

Indeed, there may be evidences, if we were to look over and try to make a graph of the moral odyssey of mankind, we'd find that it went up and down. There were times, no doubt, of spectacular achievement.

There were times when there was, at least in certain parts and in certain countries, there was development of godliness, there was an acquaintance with the truth as it is in Jesus, and the love of it.

But then we look again, and you find that within a short time, there's a great declension, following up, falling away. There is a corruption of moral life. things are not in a direct line of progress, from

good to better to best.

In many respects, as we look about our own, in our own contemporary world, our own civilization, we are amazed and sometimes aghast by the moral corruption.

[11 : 46] by the moral corruption that's all around us, in terms of the laxity of life, the way in which moral standards have been cast aside.

And we ask ourselves, what can be the outcome of this? What our Lord tells us is that when things reach, when things in a country that has known the revelation of God, when things reach such an abysmal depth of corruption and decay, there's only one thing that can bring about improvement. And that is the inter... God's direct intervention in what we call judgment. judgment. Judgment then comes as a clean-up operation.

The final judgment will come at a time, Jesus tells us, the final judgment will come at a time when people least consider it likely, when there is the least, hardly the slightest, credence given to its possibility.

But when judgment comes then, it will vindicate God's righteousness. judgment. But we, we should think of judgment in this situation, not merely in terms of the punishment of wickedness.

[13 : 21] That's, I think, the mistake that we often make when we think of divine judgment. We think of it solely in terms of God's punishment of human wickedness.

righteousness. We ought to get into the way of thinking of judgment as God's vindication of righteousness.

It is an intervention on God's part which secures and makes certain of not merely the survival of the church, but the survival of the human race.

judgment but it is only when things have been morally and spiritually cleaned up. Judgment in this sense is what we might describe as God's operation clean up.

And that's what our Lord has in view. It is one of the elements of the truth which our Lord is teaching us here when he tells us, wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will be gathered together.

[14 : 30] It's very likely that the word the bird described here as the eagle is the bird that we know as the vulture. Micah describes the eagle.

He says, enlarge thy boldness as the eagle. And that's almost certainly a description of the bird that we call the vulture. One of most whose most notable features is the baldness on the neck.

And when you see, if you see those birds, they're not, of course, common, they're not native to this country, but when you see them sitting on a branch or circling overhead, you know they look menacing, but when you see them circling about like that, you know that they are waiting for their prey.

The vultures seem to sense where there is decay and corruption. And wherever there is decay and corruption, they will gather in order to gorge themselves upon the decaying body.

Now, it's a horrible thing to reflect on. And you might say, that's a horrible picture. The vultures coming and tearing at the flesh of a dead animal or a dead human for that.

[15 : 55] But, you know, in a tropical country, if you were to take, I've seen this, for example, in India where the cow is sacred, nobody will touch it.

I've seen the traffic in Delhi, in the capital city of India, the traffic held up just to allow a cow, a gay poor specimen of a cow at that, meander across the road.

Nobody dare touch them. But the cow maybe falls dead some of the, they fall dead here and there and nobody will touch them. And in a tropical country like that, you can imagine how heated the air will become within a short time if decaying bodies are just left.

Unless the vultures come. But when the vultures come within a short time, they will strip the bones bare and the air will become fresh and clean again.

It's an operation clean up. Not pleasant to reflect on, but highly necessary and amazingly thorough.

[17 : 10] And this is what our Lord is telling us or part of what our Lord is telling us here. The time and place of intervention by God by fearful works and righteousness, whether you think of this in local or in universal and cosmic terms, whether you think of it as proximate or final, the time of judgment is where there is moral and spiritual decay, where there is degradation and corruption in the earth that, as the scriptures themselves describe it, caused the earth to stink in God's nostrils.

then the eagles or the vultures of judgment come. It's natural, it's necessary, it's saving, for life itself is threatened.

And it's only as pollution is dealt with, only as pollution is dealt with and overcome, that God will assure in a new heavens and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness. Only by this means will God's people survive. Only by this means will humanity survive. Only by this means will the pure air of righteousness and truth be restored.

Those who are interested in political philosophy will know that Marxism has a rather grim side to it. [18 : 58] The Marxist thinks of revolution and the necessity of revolution, even of bloody and violent revolution. He will tell you he's not interested in revolution as such.

He's not interested in violence just as an end in itself. But he will tell you that if the brave new world that he anticipates is ever to be brought about, then violence, the sword, will have to be unsheathed, violence will have to be resorted to so that all the obstacles that are in the way of this great new achievement will be overcome.

And the Christian faith also has its stern and disturbing element. It lays great emphasis on the need and certainty of divine intervention in certain situations.

An intervention that is more, that is sore and terrible, an intervention that is sore and terrible and cleansing and purifying, the clean up of moral and spiritual pollution.

It has happened before, it has happened many times in the history of the world, and our Lord tells us it will happen again and again until the final intervention come.

[20 : 33] this is tomorrow's world from the perspective to which our Lord invites us here. A world in which God intervenes to overcome the pollution and the decay, the wickedness and the corruption that is rife in human affairs.

The body politic is ready to die. Already it is gangrenous and corrupt and where the corpse is, thither will the vultures be gathered together.

What we want to do for a moment or two now is to reflect upon some examples that the Bible itself brings before us of the kind of situation of which we have been speaking.

Then we will try to identify some of the features of the divine intervention as demonstrated in those particular cases.

We will reflect briefly on the aftermath. Think of some of the examples that scripture brings. In fact, some of the examples are cited in the very context of this statement of our Lord in the passage that we read.

[21 : 57] most obviously there springs to mind the judgment that overwhelmed the world in the flood. The earth was corrupt.

The record in the book of Genesis tells us that God saw that the imagination of the thought of man's heart was only evil continually.

Now that's a fearful build up of an accusation against the whole race of mankind that the imagination of the thought of his heart was only evil continually and it repented God at his heart that he had made man.

It was a time when true religion was almost at vanishing point. The sons of God had seen the daughters of men that they were fair and they had intermingled with them.

The passage seems to suggest that there was a carelessness on the part of the church, a carelessness on the part of the covenant people, a carelessness with regard to their uniqueness and the separation that they ought to maintain between themselves and the world that lies in the wicked one.

[23 : 16] But voices of warning were raised. God commissioned Noah to be a preacher of righteousness. God commissioned Noah to bear testimony to his generation that their way of life, that their conduct was such as was bringing down the wrath of God, that the wrath of God would soon be revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men.

But Noah seemed to be, he was indeed a lone voice. They mocked at him. They regarded him as just something, no doubt, they regarded him as something of a madman.

He had an obsession. He was obsessed with this topic of judgment. He couldn't see any, people would say he couldn't see any good anywhere. He always had to go about condemning.

See that man Noah with a long face, always telling people and accusing people of their sins and building that ark, building that boat on dry land, far from water.

Well, man, got to make allowances for him. He's been out in the sun too much. He's just, don't pay any attention to him, don't pay any attention to him.

[24 : 36] Let's go on the way things have always been. And the way things have always been, the way things have developed is that the earth stinks in God's nostrils.

But God determined upon a clean-up operation. God determined on an intervention in judgment. Noah and his family were invited into the ark.

God closed the door of the ark upon them. the heavens were opened and the foundations of the deep were disturbed and the flood came.

This was the judgment of God. This was God's way of cleansing the earth from its own pollution. This was God's way of securing that an environment would be restored in which godliness could exist. God's way of procuring that there would be an environment in which a people covenanted to serve him could grow up and develop and a witness of godliness be maintained again.

[25 : 56] Or you can move forward in to the time when God's judgment came upon the cities of the plain upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

Again, life appeared to be rich and people were having what they would call good times. Again, there was evidence that the church had become careless with regard to its own particular distinctives.

Life was corrupt. Sexual perversion was rife. I think hardly until this present time was there such shamelessness with regard to sexual perversion.

And it's one of the sad features of our own age that there is such shamelessness with regard to the kind of conduct of which the apostle says it's a shame even to speak.

There was a time, you know, people are very ready to say all this sort of thing was going on in the past. At least there was some sense of shame and some recognition that this sort of thing was the sort of thing that should be kept out of sight.

[27 : 17] That it wasn't fit for the light of the day and now people are boasting about what they used to be ashamed of. Were they not ashamed, the prophet Jeremiah asks, were they not ashamed when they had committed such abominations?

Nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush. And we seem to have come very much, very much alongside the way of life of Sodom and Gomorrah in our own nation in these days when the blush of shame can hardly be raised, when unspeakable things are done and boasted about.

But what was the consequence then? God rained down. If it was water that cleansed the earth in the days of Noah, it was fire that purged the land of the cities of the plain in the time of Lot.

And you can think also of the time when God sent the Israelites, when he fulfilled his promise, he gave them the land of Canaan and God gave a commission to the Israelites concerning the inhabitants of Canaan.

They were to be exterminated. God's mandate to the Israelites when they took possession of the land of Canaan was that they were to exterminate the native population.

[28 : 46] Canaan. Now there are people who read this in the Old Testament and they stand back horrified. What is that thing? What sort of God is this?

Do you believe in such a God as this? Do you believe in a God who sent these tribes of Israel into the land of Canaan and was displeased with them, not because they had killed off so many of the Canaanites, but because they didn't make a thoroughgoing job of it and kill every one of them?

Do you believe in such a God as that? I think we have to ask another question. We have to ask, do you believe in a God who will tolerate, who will close his eyes indefinitely and for centuries bear with a people whose manner of life is totally depraved and corrupt.

There in Canaan, the land religion was debased, the religion that was practiced was the religion of the Baals, the worship of the fertility gods, with all the perverse and immoral practices that always characterized the worship of fertility gods.

God knew very well that if the people of Israel went among those they also would be debased, they would catch the contagion and God's plan and God's instruction was, here is an abscess, here is a community, here are tribes and a nation that is like a moral abscess in the life of the world unless it's cut out, unless the pollution, unless the rotteness is cut out, there will be widespread and universal decay.

[30 : 55] God's operation, clean up, required the vultures of judgment. judgment. Same sort of thing came with the, although we have a different situation when we think of the, in terms of the overthrow of the city of Jerusalem in the early years, the first century of the Christian era.

Our Lord speaks about the fearful suffering that would accompany that time. The Romans had no mercy upon the people. The situation was that there had been a repudiation of God's Christ. The real accusation against the Israelites here was that of unbelief. They did not believe the word of God. Their hands were red with the blood of the Son of God.

Unbelief showed itself to be an attempt to deicide, an attempt to murder, an attempt to do away with God himself. death, and this is the accompaniment of decay and corruption and pollution, and God intervened, and the vultures of judgment came.

these are some of the examples that the scriptures afford us of how from time to time God has intervened to clean up a situation that man himself could not and would not improve.

[32 : 33] move. Let's ponder just briefly one or two of the features of God's intervention. What our Lord tells us about these is that God's intervention when it comes is on a scale and of a nature that is open and unmistakable.

there's no need, indeed, there's no possibility of argument about it. It's not a situation where people will say, here, no, no, not there, there.

As the lightning lighteth from one part out of, as the lightning that lighteth out of the one part under heaven shineth unto the other part under heaven, so shall also the Son of Man be in his day.

The coming of God in this intervention in judgment and especially the final judgment will be open and unmistakable and incontrovertible, seen by all and recognized for what it is.

And our Lord tells us, when this intervention of God comes, it cuts through every human program.

[33 : 58] it regards no man's appointments as sacred and not to be interfered with. As in the days of Noah, they were eating and drinking and giving in marriage, so shall it be in the day of the Son of Man.

People can be deceived by the very normalcy of life. They were in the early New Testament age. They heard the apostles speak of the coming of the Lord, and they pooh-poohed the whole idea of Christ's coming again.

They said, where is the promise of his coming? Since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of time until now. They're ignorant of this, Peter says, that the world that was preserved by God until the day of judgment is still being preserved against the fires of judgment that are to come.

The fact that things go on normally, that people are able, in spite of the difficulties that are all around us, in spite of that, that they're able to put up notices saying business as usual, deceives many into thinking that no intervention of God will ever take place.

it's not a time, our Lord reminds us, it's not a time to be obsessed with material riches, to be obsessed about the things of this life.

[35 : 33] Remember Lot's wife. And what then of the aftermath of it all? Why does our Lord speak like this?

Is it not in warning that we may be ready against the day of his intervention? Is it not that we may hear his voice today if you will hear his voice hard and not your hearts as in the provocation?

I know the thought will arise in many of us in our hearts, that's not, surely, surely that's not the God of the New Testament.

That's not the God who commends his love to us in Jesus Christ, in that whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. I can't be reconciled to the idea of a God who will cut people off in their sins, a God who will overwhelm people with his condign and sudden and unmistakable judgment.

No. I don't think any of us can emotionally accept that at this particular time in our experience we can emotionally adjust to this picture.

[37 : 03] I can't and I doubt if any of you can't, really. but just think of this. None of us can really emotionally adjust to the prospect of the death of anyone we dearly love.

It's a thought we put from us. It's not a thought to be entertained that we want to give any room in our minds to let it come, it will come, inevitably, but we're not emotionally adjusted to it.

I can't. None of us can really adjust here and now to the thought of burying somebody we love. No, not while that somebody is alive.

But when it comes that death has taken place and decay follows upon death, then we have to say like Abraham, and I'm sure it hurt Abraham, he had to say it.

I must, he says, bury my dead out of my sight. Because there's something that's worse than the actual article of death.

[38 : 19] There's something that's worse, there's the decay and the corruption that follows, that we cannot bear to look upon. And that's what God is telling us.

There is something worse that only his operation clean up can deal with. Let us wait upon him, because when God comes to judge the earth, he will judge the world in righteousness.

Thou justly people judge, the psalmist says, on earth rule nations, all let people praise thee. see how the psalmist rejoices in the thought about God, who will clean up, who will set things to right, who will clear the atmosphere and make it possible for the spirit of godliness to survive.

And that's what we've got to ask ourselves. How is godliness, indeed not only mere godliness, but how is the human race itself to survive.

If corruption go on, if pollution, if all the invasion of life by moral corruption, by drugs, and all the degeneracy that this brings with it, we all in our inner heart of hearts know that that's all hostile to life, and that God's intervention, intervention, by fearful works in righteousness, so far as necessary, will make it possible for humanity, and for a godly humanity, to live in his presence.

[40 : 10] For never forget, that whatever the scriptures speak about, the dreadfulness, and the awfulness of final judgment, judgment. That's not the end of the story.

The end of the story is life, life in the presence of the glory of God, life in the fellowship of the Father and of his Son, Jesus Christ, continuing in perfection, because in the glory to which God will translate his people, there is no decay, there is no corruption, there is nothing that defiles, or that works abomination, or that makes a lie, enters in.

This is purity, this is truth, and this is life. Let us seize hold upon it. Let us seek our refuge, while still there is opportunity to seek a refuge.

Let us seek our refuge in Jesus Christ, and in him have the guarantee of that life that will endure unto everlasting life.

Let us pray. O Lord, do thou teach us to humble ourselves under thy mighty hand, to acknowledge that thou art God rich in mercy unto all that call upon thee, and do thou graciously purify our hearts, for we recognize each and all that the germs and viruses of corruption are within ourselves.

[41 : 50] Do thou in thy goodness and mercy cleanse us, sprinkle us with hyssop, and we shall be clean. Wash us, and we shall be whiter than the snow.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.