

Thy Kingdom Come:

The Reign of Christ in a Fallen World

A Five-Part Lenten Sermon Series for Midweek

Grounded in Lenten Scriptures and Luther's Explanation of the Second Petition

Sermon I: The Kingdom Comes to the Helpless

Texts: Ezekiel 18:20–28; John 5:1–15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"The soul who sins shall die."

That sentence from Ezekiel was not addressed to nations or abstractions. It was addressed to people who were trying to disappear behind their families. Who were claiming that inherited guilt explained their condition, or that inherited righteousness would cover it. God strips both arguments away. The son does not bear the father's iniquity. The father does not bear the son's. Each stands alone before the living God. Each is accountable. Each is exposed.

That is uncomfortable. But it is necessary. Because until we know what is actually wrong with us, we will not know what we actually need.

Then we come to the pool of Bethesda.

What John describes there is not picturesque. It is a gathering of the broken — the blind, the lame, the paralyzed — lying around a pool in the hope that God might stir the water and that someone might get them in first. And among them, one man who has been in this condition for thirty-eight years. Almost four decades. Long enough for hope to die quietly. Long enough to stop expecting.

When Jesus asks him, "Do you want to be healed?" the man does not say yes. He explains his circumstances. He describes his limitations. He accounts for his failure. "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me."

That sentence is more than a medical complaint. It is a confession of total inability. I cannot help myself. I have no one to help me. And even if conditions were perfect, I would still be too slow.

This is what sin does to us before God. Not merely guilt — though there is guilt. But helplessness. The inability even to position ourselves for rescue. We are not slow starters who need encouragement. We are unable. Ezekiel told us: the soul who sins shall die. That verdict leaves no room for self-recovery.

And it is into this helplessness that the King walks.

Notice what Jesus does not require. He does not require a statement of faith. He does not require a prior confession of sin. He does not wait for the man to ask. He approaches. He sees. He speaks.

"Rise, take up your bed, and walk."

The command gives what it demands. The man does not rise because he summoned the will. He rises because Christ addressed him. The Word of the King does what it says.

Luther teaches us in the Small Catechism: "The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also." And how does it come? When the heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word.

Notice the direction. The Kingdom descends. It comes to us. We do not climb into it by spiritual effort or moral improvement. The King comes to where we are lying, and He speaks life.

Ezekiel promises that the wicked man who turns from his sin will live. But even that turning is not self-generated. It happens when the Word of the living God finds a dead sinner and calls out, "Rise."

You are accountable. "The soul who sins shall die." That is not canceled. It is answered — in Christ, who bore what we owe, and who now speaks over us the only Word that can raise the dead.

When absolution is spoken, the Kingdom comes. When the body and blood of Christ are placed into your hands, the Kingdom comes. When the Gospel is proclaimed into your helplessness, the Kingdom comes — not because you deserved its arrival, but because the King decided to walk through your particular Bethesda.

He still does. Amen.