

Endorsements of Steve Gregg's
Empire of the Risen Son: Book One—There is Another King

Steve Gregg said it best when he wrote, “Apart from the Kingdom, nothing exists that gives transcendent meaning to world history and human endeavors.” Yet, so few ever take the time to understand the biblical insights that are so profoundly expounded in this book. On every page the author brings deep insight, conviction and clarity about what God’s Kingdom work is all about. He reminded me of the profound privilege it is to be an active part of this eternal Kingdom, and for that I will be forever grateful!

Dr. Leighton Flowers, D.Min., Director of Evangelism and Apologetics for Texas Baptists,
Professor of Theology at Trinity Theological Seminary, Evanville, IN

This is not an academic treatise written for the theological guild, but it reflects an implicit understanding of major theological interpretations. Steve Gregg has explained the nature of God’s kingdom from God’s revelation in the Holy Scriptures. His unfolding of God’s plan is biblically comprehensive and theologically astute. I not only endorse his explanation, but I share his passion. God’s covenant people should be consumed with a holy zeal to see this divine plan advanced. God’s will done on earth is the only hope for humanity. We must commit our lives and our resources to this kingdom agenda. Jesus said this should be our first priority, but too often this zeal only serves to label us as fanatics. Steve not only has zeal, but he has wisdom gained from a lifetime of biblical study. In this book, he merges theory with practice and shows what this kingdom looks like in the lives of ordinary people who are surrendered to the King.

Dr. Vic Reasoner, Pastor, Author, Lecturer at West Africa Theological Seminary
Professor at Southern Methodist College, serving as President from 2012-2019

With his usual deft analysis, Steve Gregg brings clarity to an often-confusing subject that is sure to inform those looking for answers, delight those who are in agreement, and challenge those who are not.

Johnathan Pritchett, DRS.
Vice President of Academic Affairs,
Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary, Evansville, IN

Since I first discovered the teaching ministry of Steve Gregg, I have been his constant student. His precision, and careful exegesis has led to difficult, but necessary changes in my own views of secondary doctrinal issues. This work is a prime example of that precise and cautious study. Never the intentional provocateur, the author does upset some of the most commonly held perspectives on the Kingdom regardless of the stature or popularity of the scholars who affirm them. This, however, is not a mere academic endeavor. The Gospel should result in fruit. Why do we not see more fruit than we do? Perhaps we need a clearer or corrected biblical understanding of THE KINGDOM OF GOD!

Braxton Hunter, DMin, PhD

President, Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary, Evansville, IN

I cannot think of a more important subject for an ancillary study of the Bible than a book about the kingdom of God, and I cannot think of a more suitable author for such a needed work in the 21st century than Steve Gregg. His faithfulness to Scripture and ability to draw out its meaning are rare gems for the church today. Steve’s masterful handling of this subject is eye-opening and transformative. I had to stop underlining significant sentences once I realized that I was marking up more than half of the book.”

Phillip Telfer, Pastor, Living Waters Fellowship, Spring Branch, Texas

Author and founder of Media Talk 101

I am thrilled to endorse Steve Gregg’s latest book on the Kingdom of God.

First of all, because Steve has been my favorite Bible teacher for close to 50 years—ever since the day, as a newly-converted surfer, I beheld this tall, lanky, hippie-looking fellow with horn-rimmed glasses open up his Bible, expound the Scriptures, and awaken in me a hunger for the Word that is with me to this day.

The second reason for my excitement on this close to exhaustive treatment of the subject is the importance that Jesus placed on this topic. As Steve points out in *Empire*, Jesus told us to pray for His

Kingdom to come, to seek His Kingdom first, and to preach the gospel of the Kingdom to all nations. Steve places these three reasons at the front of the book, in order to draw the spiritually-hungry reader into an understanding of that Kingdom that will help us indeed to pray for it, seek it, and preach it!

He exercises an abundant amount of grace to those whom he seeks to correct, and succeeds, as is his custom in his previous books, in being radical without being extreme.

Empire of the Risen Son—There is Another King is not a light, Sunday afternoon read to go along with your lemonade. It requires focus, concentration and I might suggest a box of highlighters in hand that will surely reward you as you study this most crucial of all subjects. You are in for an adventure!

Danny Lehmann, International Dean, College of Christian Ministries, University of the Nations, Youth With A Mission

Empire of the Risen Son

A Treatise on the Kingdom of God—What it is and Why it Matters

Book One: There is Another King

By Steve Gregg

Second Edition

All citations from scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New King James Version

Other books by the author:

Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary
(Thomas Nelson, 1997, 2013)

*All You Want to Know About Hell: Three Christian Views
of God's Final Solution to the Problem of Sin*
(Thomas Nelson, 2013)

Empire of the Risen Son—Book Two
All the King's Men (2020)

Dedication:
To my children and grandchildren

Many thanks to my wife Dayna for her helpful editorial suggestions
and for finding many (perhaps not all) of my typos.

Special thanks to Brian and Esti Williams
for their enthusiastic and palpable assistance with this project!

*At least 75% of the proceeds from the sales of this book will be donated to vetted Christian charities
that feed the global poor and that faithfully spread the gospel of the Kingdom of God*

Empire of the Risen Son

A Treatise on the Kingdom of God—What it is and Why it Matters

Book One: There is Another King

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Foreword

There are fewer and fewer readers these days who can be counted upon to possess a default confidence in any of the propositions of Christianity. I must assume that, while the most likely reader of this book would be one who self-identifies as a believer, there may nonetheless be readers who disbelieve (or who barely believe) everything that this author takes for granted—including the existence of God, the authenticity of the claims of Christ, and the reliability of the Bible.

I offer no apologies for assuming all of these beliefs to be well-justified. I realize that the generations that have come up behind mine are much less educated in the remarkable evidences supporting the claims of scripture, which most western scholars once regarded as indisputable. The irony is that this general increase in skepticism among moderns has not been accompanied or warranted by any modern discoveries, nor the availability of new evidence. The reverse is true. The loss of conviction evident in our day reflects merely a gratuitous change in public mood.

A reader today is more likely to believe unexamined assumptions than to do responsible research prior to adopting a worldview. We live in an age of subjectivity and pragmatism, in which one is more likely to ask, “Does this belief enhance my life and advance my goals?” than, “Is this belief *true*?”

As one who has spent nearly sixty years pursuing an active interest in relevant evidential developments (yes, I actually disputed the question of origins with my second-grade teacher sixty years ago)—and fully fifty years in international public discourse about biblical evidences—I can say with utter frankness that Christian beliefs have suffered nothing from the appearance of any new philosophical, historical, or scientific data in my lifetime. If anything, the increase in secular knowledge has tended to confirm what intelligent people previously accepted on the basis of the data already available in their day. The general ignorance in our time is not altogether surprising, since a diminishing number of people seem to give these most important matters any serious thought at all.

When I was still a young man, the skeptical-leaning weekly *Time Magazine* ran a cover story on the Bible (December 30, 1974), in which the journalist, with surprising honesty, wrote: “After more than two centuries of facing the heaviest scientific guns that could be brought to bear, the Bible has survived—and is perhaps the better for the siege. Even on the critics’ own terms—historical fact—the Scriptures seem more acceptable now than they did when the rationalists began the attack.”

If an objective researcher were to assess the situation today, not a word of this 1974 analysis would need to be altered. G.K. Chesterton wrote, “[Christianity] has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried.” This has been true since Jesus walked in Galilee.

I have written this book in the hopes that it may inspire courage in some, who have previously neither examined or tried the way of the Messiah, to reconsider their life options.

Steve Gregg, 2020

Preface

...since you heard the truth of the gospel which has come to you...and is bringing forth fruit...

(Colossians 1:5-6)

One does not have to be a particularly harsh critic to make the observation that a great many evangelical¹ churches have become largely ineffectual, both in terms of their impact upon the society generally, and of their producing good and lasting fruit in the lives of many of their members.

In the last century, a well-beloved pastor and critic of the modern churches, A. W. Tozer—whom some may have regarded as a curmudgeon, but many others regarded as a modern-day prophet—wrote:

To many observing persons today it appears that conversion does not do for people as much as it once did. Too often the experience passes, leaving the seeker unsatisfied and deeply disappointed. Some who are thus affected, and who are too sincere to play with religion, walk out on the whole thing and turn back frankly to the old life. Others try to make what they can out of a bad bargain and gradually adjust themselves to a modified and imperfect form of Christianity...²

Tozer's remarks were made in the mid-twentieth century, and many evangelicals from his time to ours have read his assessment and nodded in agreement. Unfortunately, at this late date, the problem remains unsolved, and a newer generation of critics has appeared within the evangelical church to raise the complaint afresh. It is discouraging to observe how little has changed, in this regard, since Tozer's day. Some churches are growing, but the depth and permanence of the commitments of those coming in often leaves much to be desired. Tozer, again, wrote:

Were some watcher or holy one from the bright world above to come among us for a time with the power to diagnose the spiritual ills of church people, there is one entry which I am quite sure would appear on the vast majority of his reports: *Definite evidence of chronic spiritual lassitude; level of moral enthusiasm extremely low.*³

¹ Not to be confused with the word "evangelistic." Both words are derived from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning "gospel." The term "evangelical Christianity" is used to describe the sector of the professed Christian community that seeks to uphold a conservative view of the authority and inspiration of the scriptures. Churches are regarded as evangelical if they are Protestant (i.e., not Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox) and believe that the contents of the Bible, including its recorded miracles, the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ are literally true, and that the Bible is the ultimate test of all disputed propositions. Such churches are often contrasted with "liberal" Christianity. This author is unashamedly *evangelical*.

² A.W. Tozer, "We Are Committed to the Whole Message," in *The Set of the Sail*, (Camp Hill, PA: Wingspread Publishers, 1986), 18

³ A.W. Tozer, "The Report of the Watcher," in *Of God and Men* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1960), 7

Too often, those who respond to our “salvation” appeals exhibit no noticeable transformation of their lifestyles, values, or moral character. The general level of commitment to Christ in many churches seems so fragile as to tempt preachers to tread gently on moral questions, and to appeal to the lowest common denominator in the congregation’s spiritual self-interest. This temptation has proven too strong for many in the pulpits.

Those who attend services often act as if the church exists to please finicky consumers. The result is often either a church that competes with the world (poorly) to entertain a self-centered clientele, or one that preaches a gospel characterized by great benefits offered at minimal cost.

How do those professing salvation differ from others, measured by factors such as spiritual zeal, character, conduct in marriage, rearing of children, personal values, the stewardship of time and money, the love of earthly security, comfort, leisure, and entitlement—or any other area that once would have distinguished one as a disciple of Jesus?

Most churching families seem unable to pass along whatever faith they themselves possess, and are losing a shocking percentage of their children by college age to the secular world. Getting young people genuinely excited, and keeping them enthusiastic, about the things of God is considerably more difficult than one would imagine, considering how awe-inspiring Jesus is to those who seriously contemplate and know Him. He has never changed. Those who seek and find Him still find in Him One to captivate their hearts—but why are so few finding Him in that way today?

When reading of the New Testament church and its exploits, one cannot help but be puzzled by the modern church’s lack of spiritual dynamism, by comparison. *Institutionalized Christianity* is widely perceived by the world as a stodgy irrelevance, which long ago exceeded its shelf-life—an institution that resists scientific knowledge, promotes outdated moral standards, and exists largely as a barrier to real societal progress.

This was not the way the early Christians were perceived. Their lives were transformed by the message of Christ and the apostles in such a way as to turn them to an entirely new course of life—new relationships, new values, new goals, new enthusiasm. The dynamic and practical changes in the lives of converts were not always ones that unbelieving observers wished to adopt for themselves, but they could not disregard, nor easily disrespect them. From the beginning, the countercultural lives of Christians, as individuals and as an alternative society, are said to have warranted the favor of all people. Can it much surprise us that God “*added to the church daily those who were being saved*” (Acts 2:47)?

Those who were being added by the Lord were committed disciples of Jesus (a much more rare phenomenon in 21st century churches). They were not simply *religious people*, of which there will never be a shortage.

Among merely *religious people*, there has always been a tendency to view God merely as a means to an end. Typically, the end sought in religion is the promise of a better afterlife. In every religion,

some people are more than ordinarily devout, feeling affection and loyalty to the deity. Apart from this devoted minority, it appears to be the attitude of most to seek divine favor at the lowest possible cost, purchasing (preferably at the deepest discount) fool-proof security for the next life, whether conceived as being in heaven or as the next time around in a world of karmic justice and reward. To the average religiously-minded consumer, the best case scenario would be found in a religion or a god who will deliver big, but require little.

How is it that the early church had such spiritual vitality and social influence? What different circumstance allowed the church in the first three centuries to hold on to their converts, and to instill in them the commitment that led so many to endure torture, rather than to defect, and to sing victoriously in the face of martyrdom?

Some might blame the problems in today's church on an increased level of corruption in the general culture of the secular world, which allures believers into compromise, apathy, and apostasy. However, this cannot be the whole answer, since the early Christians contended with a Roman culture far more pagan, more brutal, and more sensuous, than that to which our own, at this time of writing, has yet descended.

Is it that the internet and electronic media have continually brought the world's distractions right into Christian's homes, thrusting its various temptations, disinformation, and confusion before our eyes and minds? There may be some truth in this, but the problem existed in the modern church prior to the advent of this technological overwhelm, as Tozer's complaints indicate. Believers with disciplined minds have had to fend off the world's temptations and philosophical lies in every age—often in their own domiciles, and at their own dinner tables (think, for instance, of married Christians with unsaved partners, or first-century Christian slaves in pagan Roman homes—or Joseph in the house of Potiphar). To resist the pull of the world via digital media requires only the same kind of determination and discipline as was required of the faithful in every era.

There are some Christians in the technological age who successfully avoid the lure of online pornography, video game addiction, and of squandering hours in distracted web-surfing. This means that the problem, where it exists, must be in the person himself rather than in his environment.

Perhaps the weakness of modern Christianity is due to disillusionment over the large number of fallen preachers and religious leaders who have demonstrated that they, too, are mere men with feet of clay, and have brought disgrace on the people of God through their publicly-exposed moral failures.

Or, could it be that too many rank-and-file believers have simply shown themselves to be untrustworthy, or complete hypocrites? To place the blame here might seem plausible, but such moral failures strike me as more likely to be the fruit, rather than the root, of the church's weakness. After all, there were also some hypocrites in the first century church (though probably not so many as today—especially after that matter with Ananias and Saphira). The failures of weak Christians and weak ministers do not weaken the claims of Christ—who actually warned that we would encounter

such⁴— and do not adequately explain the cause for the problem. Rather, they are usually the result of a failure with roots further back.

A number of Christians assessing the situation have concluded that the problem is not in the people, but in the preaching. Not necessarily in the sincerity of the preacher, but in the message and methods used in our evangelism. The message preached is the seed by which the church multiplies (Luke 8:11). If the seed is bad, the fruit will be bad. A defective gospel will produce defective converts. It's that simple.

In studying the distant history of the church, a Protestant might readily conclude that a major cause of the corruption in the Medieval Church can be traced to the defective nature of the “gospel” that was preached in that time. We rightly celebrate some of the achievements of Martin Luther. As a Roman Catholic monk in a Roman Catholic world, he had the courage to look afresh at the Bible and to question whether the “gospel” he had always heard might not differ from that found in scripture. If we resonate with the recovery of some gospel truths rediscovered in Reformation times, we should be curious enough to inquire: What if Luther's age was not the last to require its Christians to reexamine their message, and to subject it to a vigorous biblical critique? Whatever message we convert people *with* will determine what we convert them *to*.

Tozer, whom we have quoted earlier, was one who thought the blame for the church's impotence lay in the nature and content of the preaching. As he put it:

Something is wrong somewhere. Could it be that the cause back of this undeniable failure of the gospel to effect moral change is a further-back failure of the messenger to grasp the real meaning of his message? Could it be that, in his eagerness to gain one more convert, he makes the Way of Life too easy? It would seem so. In other times it was not an uncommon thing to witness the wholesale closing of saloons and brothels as a direct result of the preaching of the gospel of Christ in revival campaigns. Surely there must have been a difference of emphasis between the message they preached in those days and the ineffective message we preach today.⁵

Tozer's contemporary, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whose credentials as a conservative evangelical pastor are widely regarded as impeccable (and whom no one has ever described as a curmudgeon!), wrote in his book *The Kingdom of God*:

How does it come to pass that, with open Bibles before them, men and women should be wrong not so much about certain details with respect to the Gospel, but about the whole thing, about the very essence of the Gospel? ...it is indeed very surprising that at the end of the twentieth century,

⁴ Matthew 7:15-23; 24:10-13

⁵ A.W. Tozer, *The Set of the Sail*, (Camp Hill, PA: Wingspread Publishers, 1986) 18-19

men and women should still be all wrong about what the Gospel is; wrong about its foundation, wrong about its central message; wrong about its objective and wrong about the way in which one comes into relationship with it. And yet, that is the very position by which we are confronted at the present time.⁶

In his book *The King Jesus Gospel*, evangelical theologian, Dr. Scot McKnight, professor of religious studies at North Park University, in Chicago, writes:

I believe the word *gospel* has been hijacked...I believe we are mistaken, and that mistake is creating problems we are trying to solve. But as long as we remain mistaken, we will never solve the problems. Our system is broken and our so-called gospel broke it...Our biggest problem is that we have an entire culture shaped by misunderstanding of the gospel. That so-called gospel is deconstructing the church.⁷

The above citations come from a variety of respected modern evangelical observers—and there are many others like them. It seems undeniably reasonable to suggest that the preaching of a different gospel from that preached by Jesus and the apostles would produce a different result in the lives of those who embrace it.

As cited at the head of this preface, Paul insisted that the gospel bears good fruit wherever it is preached. At least *the gospel he preached* did. Obviously, not every modification of Paul's gospel could be expected to produce the same fruit that he saw in his respondents.

In general, we are not seeing in our day the kind of fruit that the apostles saw. It is true that most of the problems in our modern church may have found some expression in the early church as well. However, what would have been the exceptional problem—and not long tolerated—in the apostolic churches has become the norm in many of the largest and most influential churches in our times. At the risk of sounding myself too curmudgeonly, I will provide a few examples (a larger number would not be difficult to produce):

1) The notorious fornicator in the Corinthian congregation was dealt with and expelled from the church.⁸ By contrast, today, many a church has made a defense for allowing fornicators (of a certain variety) even to be church leaders;

2) The gnostic heresy of *antinomianism*⁹ that sought (with a measure of success) to penetrate the early Christian assemblies, was roundly denounced by the apostles—and those churches that

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Kingdom of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992 by Bethan Lloyd-Jones), 8

⁷ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 26f

⁸ 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

⁹ *Antinomianism* is the teaching, common among many gnostic groups, that defined salvation as requiring only a proper knowledge or belief, and placed no moral demands upon the believer.

remained faithful to them—who endeavored to purge it from their midst.¹⁰ Yet, in many evangelical circles today, such antinomianism is enshrined as if it is the very gospel itself. To suggest, today, that being a Christian requires obedience and good works is, strangely, regarded by many to be *another gospel*;

3) Jesus warned about the dangers of affluence and materialism more than He addressed any other spiritual challenge.¹¹ The early disciples saw themselves as mere stewards of God’s bounty, and none would claim *“that any of the things he possessed was his own.”*¹² As a result, there were none in their community who lacked, because it was believed that God’s ideal was that *“He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”*¹³ Jesus told His preachers not to charge for their services¹⁴ and the apostle Peter could honestly say, *“Silver and gold I do not have.”*¹⁵ Contrast this with today’s evangelical church in which the disparity of lifestyles and the distribution of resources among members is little different from that found in the secular society. It is common for the very rich to be worshiping alongside those who cannot pay their own rent, and the pastors of many congregations enjoy opulent standards of living far above that of the average church member by whose offerings they are supported.

4) Jesus forbade, and the apostles Paul and John denounced, heavy-handed, authoritarian church leaders,¹⁶ but such leaders are today regarded as the equivalent of successful CEOs in secular corporations, respected by their ministerial peers, and gain large followings. This style of leadership is, to some extent, the norm in the institutional churches, and few think to criticize it. In fact, like Diotrephes, they often will brook no opposition, and outlandishly silence any would-be critics with the egregiously-misapplied rebuke: *“touch not the Lord’s anointed!”*

It seems clear that the gospel preached by Jesus and the apostles has somehow been exchanged for one that allows ancient sins to flourish in even the church leadership—sins which the apostolic gospel plainly condemned. It is not merely the case that a few minor planks have been added or subtracted from the platform of the original gospel. Rather, there is reason to believe that the whole nature of the message commonly embraced among Christians is *other than* that which was expounded and assumed by Jesus and the apostles. A century ago, Philip Mauro, in his book *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, opined:

¹⁰ Revelation 2:2, 6

¹¹ E.g., Matthew 6:24; 13:22; 19:23-24; Luke 12:15-21; 16:10-14; 22-25

¹² Acts 4:32

¹³ 2 Corinthians 8:15

¹⁴ Matthew 10:8; the principle that “the worker is worthy of his food” (v.10), which will be provided by his Master through the voluntary generosity of the Master’s other servants (vv. 11-13). The preacher did not work as a contract laborer for a religious corporation.

¹⁵ Acts 3:6

¹⁶ Matthew 20:25-28; 2 Corinthians 11:20; 2 Timothy 2:24-25; 3 John 9-11

It has long been my conviction that the present day weakness of God's people, their internal disorders and divisions, and the utter failure of their collective testimony to the world, are mainly due to the fact that they are not instructed and established in the great truth declared in the opening verses of Colossians, namely, that when God received those who believed 'the word of the truth of the gospel' (v.5), He delivered them 'from the power of darkness' (a kingdom) and translated them 'into the kingdom of His dear Son'" (v.13)...Now it is most needful for us to observe that...the subject of the Kingdom of God is of the very essence of the gospel of Christ, and is of immediate and vital importance to all mankind.¹⁷

If the reader will continue with me through the following chapters, it will be glaringly obvious that the gospel preached by Jesus and by the apostles—and which Jesus said must be preached in all the world before the end comes¹⁸—is the good news concerning something called *the Kingdom of God*. While every Christian is familiar with this expression, only a tiny minority of those in our churches could give a definition of the kingdom that even approximates the biblical assumptions concerning its nature or its ramifications.

Every Christian in the first century attached a specific meaning to this phrase, *the Kingdom of God*, and knew what its ramifications were. It is my contention that this original understanding of the *gospel of the Kingdom* was that which inspired such enthusiasm, righteous living, steadfastness, peace, and joy in the earliest Christians. As Paul wrote to the Romans: "*The kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 14:17).

In my experience, when modern Christians learn the reality of this gospel of the Kingdom for the first time, it imbues them with vision, purpose and zeal for Christ that they previously had struggled to maintain under the influence of the modern, denatured gospel. This has been my own experience, and conforms to that to which I have heard very many others testify. C. Peter Wagner, a prominent leader in the church growth movement, confessed:

I cannot help wondering out loud why I haven't heard more about [the Kingdom of God] in the thirty years I have been a Christian. I certainly read about it enough in the Bible...But I honestly cannot remember any pastor whose ministry I have been under actually preaching a sermon on the Kingdom of God. As I rummage through my own sermon barrel, I now realize that I myself have never preached a sermon on it. Where has the Kingdom been?¹⁹

¹⁷ Philip Mauro, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Pantianos Classics, 1927), 128, 129

¹⁸ Matthew 24:14

¹⁹ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1981), 2

Pastor and author, John MacArthur, in his book *Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ*, echoes essentially the same point:

After fifty years of translating, studying, teaching, preaching, and writing through the New Testament, I thought I had its truths pretty well identified and understood—especially in the realm of the New Testament theology of the gospel...But through all of those efforts, a profound and comprehensive perspective, one that dominates the New Testament and is crucial to the gospel, escaped me and almost everyone else.²⁰

Another pastor, in his recent book, *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything*, similarly laments:

How could I have spent a lifetime hearing about Jesus yet never studied or paid attention to the one thing Jesus talked about most? The kingdom had no place in my theology, my church life, or my perception of what it meant to be a Christian.²¹

I believe that this testimony can be echoed by millions of modern Christians, including evangelical preachers worldwide. A hundred years ago, this same complaint was raised, and the same diagnosis, was made by Philip Mauro, when he wrote:

But where, it will be asked, are the heroes of faith in our day? My answer is, that the material is here even as it was in the days of the apostles, and that what is lacking is that gospel which was preached by them...the gospel of the Kingdom.²²

It is the Kingdom of God that deserves the highest priority in our conception and communication of the gospel, and it is the apprehension of this truth that promises to fill the individual believer with transcendent purpose in life, and to revive the Church in our day.

²⁰ John MacArthur, *Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 1

²¹ Jeremy Treat, *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 13

²² Philip Mauro, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Pantianos Classics, 1927), 130

Chapter One

What in the World was Jesus Talking About?

*And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues,
preaching the gospel of the kingdom...*

(Matthew 4:23)

*He said to them, "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also,
because for this purpose I have been sent."*

(Luke 4:43)

*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached
in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.*

(Matthew 24:14)

At the center of Christ's mission is the gospel He preached, and at the center of the gospel He preached is *the Kingdom of God*. His earliest recorded proclamation was, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.*"¹ The *gospel of the Kingdom* is the way Jesus' message is characterized in the Synoptic Gospels. In other New Testament books, various other labels are attached to the gospel—as, for example:

- *the "gospel of peace"* (Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15; cf., Acts 10:36);
- *"the gospel of your salvation"* (Ephesians 1:13);
- *"the gospel of the grace of God"* (Acts 20:24)
- *"the everlasting gospel"* (Revelation 14:6)

These various descriptors draw attention, in the passages where they occur, to certain features of the one true gospel preached by Jesus and the apostolic church. Notwithstanding the legitimacy of other labels, the term of choice for Jesus Himself, and His biographers, was *the gospel of the Kingdom*²—which is sometimes abbreviated in passages where Jesus is said, simply, to "*preach the gospel*" (without a modifier),³ or, alternatively, to "*preach the kingdom of God.*"⁴ It is obvious that

¹ Mark 1:15

² Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14/Mark 1:14 (Textus Receptus); Luke 8:1

³ E.g., Matthew 11:5; 26:13; Mark 13:10; 14:9; Luke 4:18; 7:22; 20:1

⁴ E.g., Luke 4:43; 9:2, 60; 16:16

Jesus' "preaching the gospel" was synonymous with His "preaching the kingdom of God"—or, to put the phrases together, "preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God."

I think that most Christians are aware that the word "gospel" (Gr. *euangelion*) means "good news" or "glad tidings." Such a term, standing by itself, communicates nothing in particular. *Good news* has got to be *about something*. It requires informational content. The good news announced by Jesus was about *the Kingdom of God*. It is necessary then, in order to understand, respond to, and communicate the gospel, that we possess a correct understanding of what is meant by "the Kingdom."

The "Kingdom of God" —A poorly understood priority

Any attentive reading of the Gospels will impress the reader with the frequency with which Jesus spoke on the subject of the Kingdom, and the importance He placed upon it. The term itself meets us almost a hundred and fifty times in the New Testament—almost a hundred of which are in the four Gospels. The "kingdom" is sometimes modified by various descriptors. Thus, we read of the "*Kingdom of God*," the "*Kingdom of Heaven*," or the "*Kingdom of Christ*." You will even find the expression, the "*Kingdom of Christ and God*" (Ephesians 5:5). In scripture, we find many labels for the gospel, and various descriptors for the Kingdom, yet there is only one gospel,⁵ and only one Kingdom, in view in every case. Exploring what "the Kingdom" is, and the content of Christ's teaching about it, will occupy our attention in the remainder of this book.

One would think something as central to the Christian message as *the Kingdom of God* would be relatively unambiguous in scripture, and that there would be unanimity among believers as to its basic meaning, but such is not the case. All who have read the New Testament have encountered the term. Yet, if one should ask any number of Christians at random to give their definition of the phrase, it is likely that half or more would gaze back, like deer in the headlights, realizing that they have never clearly thought about the question. Most of those who would venture to respond would almost certainly present a definition which is entirely impossible to harmonize with the scriptural statements on the subject.

This confusion seems, too often, to be found equally among those who preach and the laity. If this is true, then it raises serious concerns regarding the authenticity and spiritual health of the modern church, the integrity of its message, and the spiritual soundness of its followers.

How important is it that we grasp the Kingdom of God properly? Well, besides the general fact that we cannot otherwise understand what in the world Jesus was talking about, there are three important statements of Jesus that reveal the preeminence of the kingdom in the proper priorities of every believer.

⁵ Galatians 1:7-9

1. In what is often called “the Lord’s Prayer,” Jesus taught us to petition the Father in the following terms: “*Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*”⁶

That a request for God’s Kingdom to *come* is placed first among the petitions in the ideal prayer speaks of the Kingdom’s highest place of priority in the concerns of the one praying.

In the context, this prayer is a model to be contrasted with heathens’ use of “vain repetitions” when praying. Since it is intended to provide an alternative to such meaningless chatter as was employed by the heathen in their prayers, it is ironic that, for Christians, the Lord’s Prayer itself can actually become an exercise in vain repetition.

It seems evident, from the petition that follows, “*give us this day our daily bread,*” that the prayer is intended for *daily* repetition—thus repetition is expected. Not all repetition in prayer is “vain,” but if we do not attach any specific meaning to the things we are requesting, how can it be anything other than vain to constantly repeat what, for us, are empty words devoid of meaning? What is it that we imagine ourselves to be asking for when we routinely petition God that His Kingdom should “come”? If we do not know, our finding out is long overdue.

2. A second indicator of the importance of the Kingdom of God, in Jesus’ reckoning, is found a few verses later, where He commands His disciples: “*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*”⁷

Jesus here identifies the “*one thing needed*” (as He later described it to Martha⁸), and informs us that the concerns of the Kingdom are not only to occupy the highest priority in our *prayers*, but also in our *daily pursuits*.

The great existential need of human beings is for *meaning* and *purpose* in life. In order to thrive, every life needs a chosen direction and purpose to pursue. Though many people seem to survive without having a clearly-defined purpose, *surviving* is not the same thing as *thriving*. Jeremy Treat opens his book, *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything*, with the following profound observation: “The key to life is finding out what matters most and building your life around it.”⁹ He cites a wise statement generally attributed to D.L. Moody: “Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn’t really matter.”¹⁰

According to Jesus, there is one legitimate purpose that gives life transcendent meaning, and that is found in the focused *pursuit of the Kingdom of God and His righteousness*. Every choice or action

⁶ Matthew 6:10

⁷ Matthew 6:33

⁸ Luke 10:42

⁹ Jeremy Treat, *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 11

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

taken in life is a step leading us in a certain direction, toward one destination or another. If that end is anything other than the Kingdom of God, then every step taken is one step further from realizing the meaning and purpose of our own existence. According to Jesus, this pursuit will render all other quests subordinate—or even unnecessary—since “*all these things will be added to you*” in the course of this one pursuit.

But how can one pursue that of which one has but a vague conception in his or her mind? What, exactly, is this “Kingdom of God,” and how is it to be pursued? Again, if we do not know, we should find out right away.

3. The third statement of Jesus underscoring the primacy of the Kingdom of God is found in His mandate: “*This gospel of the kingdom must be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end shall come.*”¹¹

From this we learn that God’s purposes in human history cannot be completed until the nations have had the message of the Kingdom proclaimed to them. The Kingdom must thus be the central subject of *preaching*, as well as proper *praying* and proper *pursuing*! Our prayers, pursuits, and preaching—the principal activities defining our mission as the Church of Jesus Christ—all have the Kingdom of God as their focus and obsession. How can we hope to succeed without a good grasp of what this means?

Common views of the Kingdom of God

Although the Bible is unambiguous about the priority of the Kingdom of God in all the concerns of the godly, I would contend that the concept is broadly misunderstood. George Eldon Ladd observed correctly: “There are few themes so prominent in the Bible which have received such radically divergent interpretations as that of the Kingdom of God.”¹²

There are a great number of opinions held among Christians as to what Jesus was talking about when proclaiming the Kingdom that was “at hand.”

1. The default view of many Christians is that the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven) of which Jesus spoke refers to the heavenly destiny of the believer, into which one enters at death. The assumption seems to be that Christ came primarily to provide a better option for life after death. Generally, this is the way many people view the purpose of religions. Such thinking appears to be oblivious to the purposes for which God created the earth, or humans in this earth. Taking this view

¹¹ Matthew 24:14

¹² George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 15

requires that we almost completely ignore the contents of the parables describing the Kingdom, and the fact that it is always assumed (or stated outright¹³) that the Kingdom is to “come” or “appear” on earth. By way of correction, Jeremy Treat correctly observes: “The message of the kingdom of God is not an escape from earth to heaven but God’s reign coming from heaven to earth.”¹⁴

2. A second view is that the Kingdom refers to a future millennial reign of Christ, here on earth, after He returns at the end of the age. Those taking this view expect the Kingdom to resemble other political states, and possibly to be like an empire that reduces all other nations to vassal status under Christ’s reign from Jerusalem. Many of this camp also believe that this future Kingdom will have a distinctly Jewish character, including a restored temple, a Levitical priesthood, and animal sacrifices reinstated. These latter distinctives are peculiarly those of Dispensationalists—about whom we shall have more to say presently.

In criticism of this view, Philip Mauro observes:

...if the Kingdom our Lord said was then ‘at hand,’ was not at hand at all, but far away, He certainly caused those who heard Him believingly and all who have listened to His words for nearly two thousand years, to believe what was not true.¹⁵

3. There are those who think of the Kingdom of God as referring to an exclusively *interior state* of human consciousness or spirituality, which is either realized through the individual’s becoming conscious of his or her own divinity (the so-called *New Age* view), or, among Christians, simply the personal inward response to the claims of Christ, causing the believer to take Christ’s lordship seriously, and live in obedience to Him. Either version of this view would seem inadequate, owing to the holistic teaching of the Kingdom as a realm encompassing geographical area—e.g., “*the ends of the earth*” (Psalm 2:8; Daniel 2:35, 44). In any case, there is no way to harmonize this definition with the content of Jesus’ parables describing the Kingdom.

4. There is a movement, at the time of this writing, which emphasizes the need for the Christian to manifest the Kingdom of God in the present time through the performing of miraculous signs and wonders. This is the teaching associated with the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement, which emerged in the late 20th century and is currently attracting enormous numbers, especially, of young believers. The main leader of this movement, Bill Johnson, pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California, stated this view as follows:

¹³ Daniel 2:44; Matthew 6:10; Luke 17:20

¹⁴ Jeremy Treat, *op. cit.* 18

¹⁵ Philip Mauro, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Pantianos Classics, 1927), 29

Kingdom culture is how heaven functions. And when we pray this prayer: ‘on earth as it is in heaven,’ it’s not just a prayer about eternity. It’s actually a prayer for right now. It’s God’s intention right now to influence my circle of influence with a manifestation of His presence in such a way that it mirrors heaven. That means: there’s no cancer there; there’s not to be cancer here. So when we pray for someone to be healed, we do it based on the example given us in that prayer. There’s [no disease] there; there’s not to be any here.¹⁶

Critics of this movement point out that it represents an overly-realized eschatology, failing to recognize what many theologians refer to as the “already/not yet” nature of the Kingdom. That is, the Kingdom in one phase relates to the present, while its eschatological phase will be realized at the end of the age. We pray that God’s will would be done “*on earth as it is in heaven*” in this sense: all the inhabitants of heaven are doing the will of God, and it is our desire that the same would be increasingly true of the inhabitants of earth. The final realization of heaven-like conditions on earth must await the “Last Day”¹⁷ of the present world order, when Jesus will return, and the Kingdom enters its final stage.

To pray, “*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” does not mean, “May there be, in this present world, no cancer, no death, no marriage, no succession of day and night, no sea, no predatory animals, no unanswered questions, etc.—just as these things do not exist in heaven.” In heaven, there is no devil and there are no temptations—yet these will remain in this world until Christ returns. In the present age, we are being tested and trained for the final eschatological state. In this training and testing phase, sickness, pain, temptation, sorrow, and many other unpleasant things, which will no longer exist when Jesus returns, play an important role. In this present age, such trials function as instruments of our testing, maturing, and training.¹⁸

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of Germany’s most notable evangelists was Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, who, like his father Johann Christoph Blumhardt, became internationally renowned for the miraculous healings that accompanied his preaching. He never emphasized healing as an end in itself, but was a bold proclaimer of the Kingdom of God. Many hundreds, or thousands, were healed through the ministries of the father and son Blumhardt. Christoph, the son, became very well-regarded among Germany’s respectable theologians of the early twentieth century (like Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Oscar Cullmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer), as well as among those who came seeking healing. However, following a successful crusade in Berlin, in 1888,

¹⁶ Bill Johnson, senior pastor of Bethel Church, Redding, California, On Sid Roth’s *It’s Supernatural*.
<https://www.destinyimage.com/2018/09/02/impact-the-world-through-kingdom-culture/>
(accessed May 30, 2020)

¹⁷ John 6:39, 40, 44, 54

¹⁸ Job 23:10; Psalm 119:67, 71, 75; Romans 5:3-4; 2 Corinthians 4:16-17; Hebrews 12:10-11; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 5:10

Christoph withdrew from public healing ministry (though he continued to minister to the sick in private), complaining that people were coming simply out of a self-interested desire to be healed, and not, as he had hoped, with a godly interest in the Kingdom of God. About this, Blumhardt wrote:

I do not want to suggest that it is of little importance for God to heal the sick; actually, it is now happening more and more often—although very much in quiet. However, things should not be promoted as though God’s kingdom consists in the healing of sick people. To be cleansed is more important than to be healed. It is more important to have a heart for *God’s* cause, not to be chained to the world but to be able to move for the kingdom of God.¹⁹

While it is plain that signs and wonders—especially healings and exorcisms—accompanied the preaching of the Kingdom message by Christ and the apostles (and by some others since then), they served as visible confirmations of the invisible, spiritual core of the message preached (which was not actually a message focused on miracles or healings). A healing might be performed to prove that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins,²⁰ or an exorcism to demonstrate that the Kingdom of God has arrived, and that Jesus has invisibly bound the “strong man” (Satan).²¹ The preaching of the Kingdom was not an announcement of wholesale healing of diseases for all the sick. Signs often “*followed*” the preaching, in order to confirm the word that they preached.²²

5. There is also a common view that the expression “Kingdom of God” simply means the “reign,” “kingship,” or “sovereignty” of God—which leaves one with the vague impression of an intangible abstraction. Does the expression simply refer to God’s invisible governance and providence in the universe, the world, and human history? Has there ever been a time, before or after Christ, when this was not a reality? To render the original announcement as, “The reign, or sovereignty, of God is at hand,” leaves the reader somewhat in the dark in terms of making sense of the Kingdom as a palpable reality emerging in history. Yet, there are many competent scholars who emphasize that this is the meaning of the phrase. Thus, we have the following from George Eldon Ladd: “When the word refers to God’s Kingdom, it always refers to His reign, His rule, His sovereignty, and not to the realm in which it is exercised.”²³ Jeremy Treat also affirms this definition: “The phrase ‘kingdom of God’ could just as easily be translated ‘reign of God’ or ‘kingship of God.’”²⁴

¹⁹ Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt, *Thy Kingdom Come: A Blumhardt Reader*, Vernard Eller, Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), xix-xx

²⁰ Matthew 9:5-8

²¹ Matthew 12:28-29

²² Mark 16:20

²³ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 20

²⁴ Treat, *op. cit.*, 15

Both of these authors, however, recognize the need to bring this concept into the historical realm as a concrete reality. Ladd admits:

A second meaning of a kingdom is the people belonging to a given realm...*A basileia*²⁵ may indeed be a realm over which a sovereign exercises his authority; and it may be the people who belong to that realm and over whom authority is exercised.²⁶

Pastor Treat makes the same concession, bringing the abstract definition into a more relatable reality: “The kingdom is God’s reign through God’s people over God’s place.”²⁷

Such language comes very close to the definition that will be assumed throughout this book, though I hope to put a finer, and entirely practical point on it.²⁸ I hope to demonstrate from scripture that the New Testament teaches the Kingdom of God as a phenomenon such as that explained in the words of the following respected authors on the subject:

N.T. Wright:

[the Christian’s witness concerning the Kingdom] is not a matter of ‘telling people about your new religious experience’ or of informing them that there is now a new prospect of a much better otherworldly destiny than anything the bleak pagan world had to offer. The ‘witness’ of Jesus’s followers is the message that there is now ‘another king, Jesus’ (Acts 17:7).²⁹

John Bright:

[The Kingdom of God] is a new order which even now bursts in upon the present one and summons men to be its people. Its summons demands response, and that response is obedience and righteousness here and now.³⁰

Or, as described by Brian McLaren:

“The kingdom of God, then, is a revolutionary, counter-cultural movement—”³¹

²⁵ The Greek word translated as “kingdom” in the New testament

²⁶ Ladd, *op. cit.*, 19

²⁷ Treat, *op. cit.*, 15

²⁸ As, indeed, the authors cited themselves do in their books.

²⁹ N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 248

³⁰ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 223

³¹ Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 134

If such a concept of the Kingdom is not altogether familiar to the reader, nor yet quite clear, it will be my task in the chapters that follow to elucidate this concept from every angle.

The kingdom preached by Christ and the first Christians

The first event associated with the historical ministry of Jesus was the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist. All four of the Gospels begin the story of Jesus' ministry by describing the prior preaching and baptizing conducted by John. A summary of John's preaching is given by Matthew:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near."³²

John's preaching is, chronologically, the first instance of anyone preaching the gospel that Jesus would also herald. It is surprising to encounter a claim from a significant evangelical writer, saying that what John preached was not the "gospel of the Kingdom." John MacArthur writes: "John the Baptist heralded the kingdom, but not the *the gospel of the kingdom*. Good news as such was not the primary feature in his preaching. His preaching called men to repent of their sins and to prepare themselves for the coming of the King."³³

Yet, when John was imprisoned, Jesus took up the torch that had fallen from John's hand, and proclaimed the same message (which Mark calls "*the gospel of the kingdom of God*"):

Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand..."³⁴

So John and Jesus both announced that the Kingdom was at hand, and that the required response from men and women was to repent. This message is referred to as "the gospel of the Kingdom." If Jesus preached this message (as Mark records), then John certainly preached it also (as Matthew records). Both of them also proclaimed doom to those who neglected to enter the Kingdom. There is no significant difference between the initial preaching of the gospel by Jesus and by John.

Thus, the ministry of the Messiah begins with the announcement—first by John, and then by Jesus—that the Kingdom had arrived, as had been long-anticipated by the hearers.³⁵ The next three years were occupied with Jesus' teaching the multitudes, as well as His disciples, the things concerning the Kingdom of God.

³² Matthew 3:1-2

³³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1-7* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1985), 125

³⁴ Mark 1:14-15

³⁵ This previous long anticipation is implied in the opening words, "*The time is fulfilled.*" In other words, Israel's long wait had come to an end. More on this anon.

In His preaching, Jesus frequently employed a teaching device, which was previously used by some of Israel's prophets, called the *parable*—or an illustrative story. His parables were generally said to be about *the Kingdom of God*,³⁶ which is also called *the Kingdom of Heaven* (a phrase about which we shall have more to say in our next chapter). These parables typically begin with the words, “*The kingdom...is like...*”³⁷ or, “*To what shall we liken the Kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?*”³⁸

Jesus urged His hearers to enter the Kingdom, speaking of the urgency—and for some, the difficulty—of doing so. He sent out two short-term outreach teams—first the twelve, and later the seventy (or according to some manuscripts, seventy-two)—to preach the message of the Kingdom.³⁹ His final conversation prior to His death, speaking with Pontius Pilate, was about the nature of His Kingdom,⁴⁰ and His final forty days on earth, after His resurrection, were spent meeting, intermittently, with His disciples, “*speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.*”⁴¹

After Jesus had ascended and been coronated in heaven—and had sent His Spirit to work through His disciples—the Kingdom continued to be the principal topic in the apostolic preaching.⁴² This was also the message of Philip, the only man in scripture referred to as an “evangelist.”⁴³

The historical narrative in the New Testament closes, as it opens, with an emissary of Christ continuing to strum on this same, one-stringed instrument. In the closing verse of Acts, we find the following summary of Paul's prison activities: “*He proclaimed the kingdom of God...*”⁴⁴ Thus, Paul's preaching, contrary to the opinions of some, was a continuation of the same message that Jesus had been preaching.⁴⁵

³⁶ Mark 4:26-34

³⁷ Matthew 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:14; Mark 4:26, 30-31

³⁸ Mark 4:30

³⁹ Luke 9:2; 10:9

⁴⁰ John 18:33-38

⁴¹ Acts 1:3

⁴² Acts 19:8; 20:25

⁴³ Acts 8:12; 21:8

⁴⁴ Acts 28:31

⁴⁵ See Luke 4:43; 9:2; Acts 20:25; 28:31. Some have argued that Jesus and Paul preached different gospels, applicable to different “dispensations”—the former being the “gospel of the Kingdom,” and the latter “the gospel of grace.” It is said that Jesus's gospel of the Kingdom was a gospel of works-righteousness, while Paul taught a gospel of salvation by grace through faith—and also that Paul's gospel was a declaration of the atoning death and the resurrection of Christ, whereas Jesus preached the immediate appearance of the Davidic Kingdom.

Suffice it to say that such conclusions can only arise from an inattentive reading of scripture, and a poor grasp of the biblical concept of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus, like Paul after him, affirmed justification before God as coming through grace alone without works (Luke 18:13-14; 23:39-43), and also spoke of His atoning death and His resurrection (Mark 10:45; Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

Paul, like Jesus before him, placed strong emphasis upon the need for godly works (e.g., Acts 26:19-20; Romans 6:17-22; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:6, 19-21; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 1:16; 2:14; 3:14). He only placed stronger emphasis upon the death and resurrection of Christ than did Christ Himself, because he lived after those events, whose occurrence had become the means of Christ's enthronement as King. Paul taught that

the resurrection of Christ, and His subsequent enthronement, were the means by which the Davidic promises were fulfilled (Acts 13:32-34; compare Peter's same message in Acts 2:29-36).

There are many references to the Kingdom of God as central in Paul's preaching (e.g., Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31), as well as his epistles (Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 1:13; 4:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; 2 Timothy 4:1, 18). We have no reason to suggest that Paul believed himself to be preaching an alternative message to the gospel Jesus had preached. He was simply able to announce a more advanced development in the Kingdom than had yet come about when Jesus was on earth preaching. Most telling of all is the fact that Paul unambiguously equated his *preaching the gospel of grace* with his *preaching the Kingdom* (Acts 20:24-25)—demonstrating that he believed the two to be identical.

Chapter Two

Gaining Greater Clarity

*When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it,
then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.*

(Matthew 13:19)

*“To what shall we liken the kingdom of God?
Or with what parable shall we picture it?”*

(Mark 4:30)

“Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven”?

Despite the widespread misconception to the contrary, the Kingdom of God is not a reference to heaven, nor to the afterlife. *Heaven* is God’s abode. It is the place from which Christ descended to live among men, and it is where Christ, since His resurrection and ascension, currently sits enthroned, amid the angels, other spiritual beings, and spirits of the departed saints. It is where the spirits of His people go after they die, and where we expect to remain postmortem, until the resurrection of the Last Day. Heaven is the place from which we expect Christ to return to earth, so that He will never again live in heaven, but forever among redeemed men upon a renewed earth. But the Kingdom of God is not identified with heaven in scripture. It is something else. The Kingdom of God is said to be on earth. Heaven is not on earth, and is regularly distinguished from it.¹

The confusion of the Kingdom of God with heaven is a result of a common misapprehension among Christians that the main reason Jesus came to earth is to get as many of us as possible out of this world and into a happy sky palace for all eternity. No doubt most people view this as the main purpose of any religion—the imparting of consolation at the time of death, and an assurance of a future immunity from sorrows in a permanent home “away beyond the blue.”

Perhaps *most religions* do have this as their goal—and if Jesus had been interested in starting a religion, perhaps His preaching would have occupied itself with such concerns. Since His message did not contain such an emphasis, we might legitimately question whether Jesus had any interest in starting a religion at all. If He did, He never mentioned it. His stated intention was not to introduce a new religious system, but to establish a long-awaited kingdom, which (for all we can determine from His statements) is as much a phenomenon in this world and this life as in any other. The Kingdom of

¹ E.g., Genesis 1:1; Psalm 103:11; 115:16; Isaiah 55:9; Matthew 6:10, 19-20; 18:18; etc.

God, as we shall see in Christ's teachings on the subject, is very much a reality in this present world at the present time.

It is true that, on one unique occasion, Paul wrote of his expectation of being preserved by God unto what he referred to as "*His heavenly kingdom.*"² This sounds as if he may be identifying the Kingdom with heaven itself, since, in the context, he is contemplating his impending death. When Christians die, they do go to heaven, but that is not the thing to which the term "Kingdom of God" generally refers, as will become increasingly evident by further examination of the relevant texts.

In speaking of a "*heavenly kingdom,*" Paul may be referring to the fact that the Kingdom over which Christ reigns encompasses both heaven and earth.³ In referring to his inevitable martyrdom, Paul may be anticipating his passing at death from the earthly sphere of Christ's Kingdom, where he was then living,⁴ to that Kingdom's heavenly sphere.

On the other hand, Paul may be using the word "heavenly" to signify "that which has its origins in heaven." There are, in scripture, numerous things people experienced on earth which originated from heaven, and are thus called "heavenly"—as, for example, the "*heavenly vision*"⁵ that Saul received on the road to Damascus, or the "*heavenly calling*"⁶ that believers have received, or the "*heavenly gift*"⁷ of which Christians are said to have already tasted. In such instances, "heavenly" means "coming to us from heaven." These things, though experienced by people on earth, have their origins from heaven. The New Jerusalem is called "*the heavenly Jerusalem,*"⁸ but it is described, in the end, as descending *from heaven* to the New Earth⁹—so that which is "heavenly" may find its manifestation "*on earth as it is in heaven.*"¹⁰

Jesus told Pilate, "*My kingdom is not of this world,*" but He never suggested that His kingdom was *not in this world*. The word "of" means "originating from." When people referred to Him as Jesus *of Nazareth*, they meant that He came *from* Nazareth. In truth, Jesus was, ultimately, not "of Nazareth," but "of heaven." He was not "*of this world.*"¹¹ He lived here, but He came from elsewhere.

Jesus' Kingdom is not *from this world*, any more than He is. It was called the "Kingdom of God," and the "Kingdom of Heaven"—obviously meaning "from God" and "from heaven." In clarifying that His Kingdom was "*not of this world,*" Jesus was not suggesting that He had no kingdom on earth—any more than His telling the disciples that they themselves were "*not of the world*" was intended to

² 2 Timothy 4:18

³ Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 3:15

⁴ Colossians 1:13

⁵ Acts 26:19

⁶ Hebrews 3:1

⁷ Hebrews 6:4

⁸ Hebrews 12:22

⁹ Revelation 21:2, 10

¹⁰ Matthew 6:10

¹¹ John 8:23

confuse them concerning their cosmic whereabouts.¹² They were in the world, but they were not of it. Christ's Kingdom (like Himself and His disciples) was *in, but not of*, the world.

The common confusion which often leads Christians and non-Christians alike to identify the Kingdom of God with a postmortem destiny in heaven is due, I suspect, not only to a misapprehension of Jesus' mission, but also of His terminology—particularly in the potentially-confusing phrase, “*Kingdom of Heaven*.” This phrase is found frequently—but only in Matthew's Gospel. While the expression “*Kingdom of God*” (or, simply, *the Kingdom*) is used by most of the New Testament writers, Matthew's Gospel alone alternates his phraseology between this and the similar expression—“*the Kingdom of Heaven*.”

The difficulty that this alternative phrase creates is that such wording can mistakenly be interpreted as meaning “*the Kingdom that is called heaven*.” In other words, a reader may assume that “*the Kingdom*” is merely another word for heaven. When we hear of “*the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*,” we correctly assume the words to mean “*the kingdom by the name of Saudi Arabia*.” This is, I believe, the same assumption that has inclined very many readers to imagine that Jesus, when speaking of entering the Kingdom of Heaven, was referring to entering into a kingdom *called heaven*, into which we hope to enter when this life is over. This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus' message.

If we assume that the Kingdom of which Jesus spoke *is the same as* heaven, then we must conclude that He and His disciples, in their obsession with the Kingdom, were concerned, almost exclusively, with conditions in the afterlife. This has been in fact the default assumption of millions of believers, and has often resulted in a tragic miscalculation of Jesus' mission and His stated priorities, as we shall demonstrate.

Those who identify the Kingdom with a celestial sky palace must find it confusing when Jesus likens the Kingdom to tares (children of the wicked one) growing alongside wheat (children of the kingdom) together in a field (the world),¹³ or describes the Kingdom as a fishing net collecting both good and bad fish, with the latter being cast away as refuse in “*the end of the age*.”¹⁴ Will there be children of the devil in *heaven*? If the sorting occurs *at the end* of the age, must not the prior collection of fishes be *during* this age? In what sense could *heaven* be likened to a growing mustard seed¹⁵ or to leaven inserted into a lump of dough, resulting in its rise¹⁶? The Kingdom is likened to these things; heaven is not.

¹² John 15:19; 17:14, 16

¹³ Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

¹⁴ Matthew 13:47-50

¹⁵ Matthew 13:31f

¹⁶ Matthew 13:33

The common tendency to identify the Kingdom with the postmortem glory of the saints simply misses Jesus' point. Jesus' original Jewish hearers would not have made this mistake.

There are some theologians who have sought to differentiate between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven as two separate entities—endeavoring to discover subtle differences between the way the two phrases are applied and to explain the different ranges of meaning applicable to each term. For example, one may be found to say, seemingly without warrant, “The Kingdom of God” is His universal rule over the whole cosmos, while the Kingdom of heaven refers to His Kingdom manifested in the Church. An alternative attempt at identifying such a distinction in terms is given by Myles Munroe, in his book *Rediscovering the Kingdom*:

The Kingdom of God on earth is God’s rulership within the hearts and spirits of believers, and the Kingdom of heaven is when that rulership impacts the human earthly environment.¹⁷

In all such attempts, the distinctions are artificially drawn, and the relevant texts seem to be distorted beyond recognition. The reading of these explanations often leaves the reader as confused as the authors providing the analysis appear to be.¹⁸ In truth, the attempt to distinguish between the terms *Kingdom of God* and *Kingdom of Heaven* is a vain errand.

In scripture, the terms “*Kingdom of God*” and “*Kingdom of heaven*” are used interchangeably, and both refer to the same entity in every respect. They are simply synonymous terms. Matthew alone uses the phrase “*Kingdom of heaven*” (which occurs 32 times in his Gospel). Even though Matthew clearly favors this term, he is not unfamiliar with the synonymous phrase “*Kingdom of God*,” which appears only five times in his gospel.

It is simple enough to prove the interchangeability of the two phrases. Take passages in which Matthew uses the expression “Kingdom of heaven,” and compare them with the same sayings, wherever they are paralleled in Mark or Luke. When this is done, we find that, invariably, the latter two Gospels, use the phrase “Kingdom of God” in place of Matthew’s “Kingdom of Heaven.” Here are a few examples of this practice:

Matthew 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the <i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> is at hand.”	Mark 1:14-15 Jesus came preaching...“the <i>kingdom of God</i> is at hand...”
Matthew 13:31 “The <i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> is like a mustard seed...”	Mark 4:30-31 (and Luke 13:18) “To what shall we liken the <i>kingdom of God</i> ? Or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed...”

¹⁷ Myles Munroe, *Rediscovering the Kingdom: Ancient Hope for Our 21st Century* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2004)110

¹⁸ If the reader wishes to become thoroughly confused, see the explanation provided by a leading theologian of this school of thought here: <https://bible.org/article/kingdom-heaven>

Matthew 8:11-12 “And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in <i>the Kingdom of Heaven</i> . But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out...”	Luke 13:28-29 “... when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the <i>kingdom of God</i> , and yourselves thrust out. They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the <i>kingdom of God</i> .”
Matthew 10:7 And as you go, preach, saying, “ <i>The Kingdom of Heaven</i> is at hand.”	Luke 9:2 He sent them to preach the <i>kingdom of God</i> ...
Matthew 13:11 “...it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the <i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> ...”	Mark 4:11 “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God...”
Matthew 18:3 “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the <i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> .”	Mark 10:15 (and Luke 18:17) Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the <i>kingdom of God</i> as a little child will by no means enter it.”
Matthew 19:14 “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the <i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> .”	Mark 10:14 (and Luke 18:16) “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the <i>kingdom of God</i> .”
Matthew 19:23 “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the <i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> .”	Mark 10:23 (and Luke 18:24) “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the <i>kingdom of God</i> !”

That Matthew uniquely uses “Kingdom of heaven” where others use “Kingdom of God” is undeniable. If we seek an explanation for this difference between Matthew’s Gospel and the others, the answer is seemingly a simple one.

It was customary among the Jews, as a matter of maintaining proper reverence, to avoid over-frequent use of the word “God.” They sought to prevent “God” from becoming too common a word through casual use. Therefore, Jews commonly substituted a variety of euphemisms for the divine name—expressions like *the Almighty*, *the Holy One of Israel*, *the Ancient of Days*, *the Most High*, etc.

One such euphemism for *God* among the Jews was the word *heaven*. A devout Jew would feel that he was maintaining greater reverence for the divine name by saying, “Heaven bless you!” rather than, “God bless you!” A few New Testament examples will serve to illustrate the commonness of this practice among the Jews:

John the Baptist said, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him *from heaven*” (John 3:27), by which he obviously meant “from God.”

The repentant prodigal son rehearsed what he would say to his father upon returning home. His words reflect his Jewish culture: “I have sinned *against heaven*” (Luke 15:18, 21)—that is, against God.

When Jesus challenged the Jews to identify the source of John’s authority, He said, “The baptism of John—where was it from? *From heaven* or from men?” (Matthew 21:25). Again, “heaven” is standing in for the word “God.”

In each of the above cases, the word *heaven* clearly stands as a substitute for God Himself. While it was not forbidden among the Jews to use the word *God*—it was deemed more *reverent*, in ordinary discourse, to choose another word—like *heaven*—in its place.

Jesus was a Jew, speaking to Jews. Though He did not demur from using the word “God” in His public teaching, His hearers would never have found it confusing to hear Him frequently alternate between the terms “Kingdom of God” and “Kingdom of Heaven.”

The books of Mark, Luke and John were written in Greek for Gentile readers—Mark, to readers in Rome, or possibly Alexandria; Luke, to a Greek recipient named Theophilus; and John, to churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). By contrast, it is almost universally acknowledged that Matthew wrote his Gospel to Jews of Palestine. Church fathers relate that he wrote his first draft in Aramaic, the language of the Jews, later to be translated into Greek.¹⁹ This would explain why he would be comfortable preserving the Jewish idioms precisely as they appeared in Jesus’ public discourse—using *Kingdom of God* when Jesus used that terminology, and *Kingdom of Heaven* when Jesus preferred that idiom.

The other Gospel writers opted for a consistency that would not confuse their Gentile readers—who would be less familiar with the Jewish idioms than would be Matthew’s Jewish readers. They knew that Jesus only spoke about one Kingdom, not two, and this was the Kingdom of God.

That Matthew himself saw no distinction between the two phrases is seen, for example, when he relates Jesus’ commenting on the difficulty of a rich man seeking to enter the Kingdom. In this record, Jesus repeats the same information twice, in two successive verses, connecting them with the clause, “again I say...”:

*Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*²⁰

Clearly, Jesus Himself regarded the term *Kingdom of God*, in the second statement as a mere repetition of the *Kingdom of heaven*, in the first. He used them interchangeably. Daniel spoke of a time when “*the God of heaven will set up a kingdom...*”²¹ Such a *Kingdom of the God of heaven* could alternately be abbreviated “*the Kingdom of God*” or “*the Kingdom of heaven*”—one Kingdom; two labels.

¹⁹ Sadly, we do not possess the original Aramaic version.

²⁰ Matthew 19:23-24

²¹ Daniel 2:44

There is only one Kingdom proclaimed in the New Testament, which is called by several terms, including:

- the “*Kingdom of God,*”
- the “*Kingdom of heaven,*”
- the “*Kingdom of Christ,*”
- the “*Kingdom of [the] Father,*”²²
- the “*Kingdom of our father David,*”²³
- the “*Kingdom of Christ and God,*”²⁴
- the “*Kingdom of His beloved Son,*”²⁵ etc.

The scriptures also, quite frequently, simply speak of “the Kingdom,” without the inclusion of any modifier. This would be confusing, if there were more than one Kingdom being discussed—strongly suggesting that the readers were sufficiently familiar with the concept and could be expected to identify, from the simple, unmodified term, the only Kingdom that was in view in every case.

What did Jesus say about the Kingdom of God?

The New Testament story begins with John the Baptist preaching the Kingdom, and closes with Paul’s preaching the same message. These references bracket the ministry career of Jesus and of His first disciples in carrying out the Great Commission. The story depicts Jesus and the apostles as speaking about little else than the Kingdom of God. The dawning of the long-awaited Kingdom provides the rubric under which every other teaching finds its place. But in all of their talking, what was actually said?

Much of what Jesus publicly taught on the subject was in the form of the parables for which He is famous. Most of the parables of Jesus compare the kingdom with familiar things like a farmer casting seed,²⁶ a woman making bread,²⁷ a small seed becoming a large plant,²⁸ a merchant shopping for pearls,²⁹ a landowner leasing his vineyard to tenants,³⁰ or a king’s preparing a wedding for his son.³¹

While the crowds, no doubt, found the parables to be homey narratives with which they could easily relate, the deeper meanings were generally opaque to them when presented without an

²² Matthew 13:43; 26:29

²³ Mark 11:10

²⁴ Ephesians 5:5

²⁵ Colossians 1:13

²⁶ Matthew 13:24

²⁷ Matthew 13:33

²⁸ Matthew 13:31-32

²⁹ Matthew 13:45-46

³⁰ Matthew 21:33-43

³¹ Matthew 22:2

explanation—as was usually the case. Explanations were intentionally withheld from the merely curious hearers on the hillsides and seashores, who must have often returned to their homes somewhat perplexed at how a teacher who only related simple tales about agrarian, social and domestic life, could have gained such a reputation for profundity.

This obscuring of His messages in parables placed seemingly unnecessary limitations on the number of potential respondents to His message—a policy which perplexed the disciples. They asked Jesus why He did not make His meaning more accessible to the public. His explanation was that His hearers were divided into two categories—the curious multitudes, and the disciples. He referred to these two groups as “them” and “you,” respectively:

And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given.”³²

Jesus had earlier told His disciples not to cast their “*pearls before swine*,”³³ and He was apparently determined to suit His actions to His words in this matter. His secrets were not actually intended for public consumption, but only for those, like the disciples, who could be trusted with them. Not everyone would appreciate the things He sought to reveal to His trusted disciples, and anyone spearheading an invasion must not carelessly expose his own strategies to those in the enemy’s camp. The principle upon which Jesus seemed to have acted was that those who are seeking the Kingdom and who love the truth would come to Him seeking further illumination. Those who do not love the truth are not worthy of it. This is how He would cull from the crowds those individuals who would qualify as future disciples.

The explanation of the parables’ meanings was reserved for the disciples—those who had demonstrated a degree of loyalty to Jesus by abandoning their former routines in order to follow and learn from Him. To such disciples, Jesus regularly expounded the meanings of the parables in detail, answering their questions in private conference, as Mark relates:

“...without a parable He did not speak to [the multitudes]. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.”³⁴

The Jews had been expecting the Kingdom to arrive for several centuries, and the disciples, no doubt, initially shared the same default view, which they had learned from the rabbis. Interestingly,

³² Matthew 13:10-11

³³ Matthew 7:6

³⁴ Mark 4:34

the things Jesus said about the Kingdom in His parables did not accord with many of the most commonly held ideas in His day (nor ours) as to the meaning of the Kingdom of God.

For example, the Kingdom (as Jesus spoke of it) was planted, and would grow, in the midst of an evil world,³⁵ like wheat among tares, and would change that world significantly, as yeast changes a lump of bread dough.³⁶ The Kingdom is not a paradise somewhere in deep space to which people may hope to “fly away” when they die. As we have noted previously, the Kingdom is not the same thing as *heaven*—though both exist as separate realities. There is no indication in scripture that we will go to another part of the cosmos in order to inhabit the Kingdom, but, rather, our prayer is that the Kingdom will “come” as a historical development upon earth.³⁷

Further, the coming of the Kingdom, as Jesus described it, is not something delayed until the end of the world, to be inaugurated at the return of Christ. Even while He walked among men, the Kingdom had “come near”³⁸ and was “at hand.”³⁹ As Samuel M. Frost put it: “‘The kingdom of God is near’ means, ‘the kingdom of God is breathing on your neck!’”⁴⁰ Jesus told His contemporaries that the Kingdom had “come upon” them⁴¹ and that it was even then “in [their] midst.”⁴²

Rendering the last reference, “*The kingdom of God is in your midst*,” follows all the major modern translations of Luke 17:21.⁴³ Many may be more familiar with the statement in its older rendering: “*the kingdom of God is within you*” (KJV). The term there translated “within” can also mean “among” or “in the midst of”—that is, *within this crowd*. The more-widely accepted translation, “*in your midst*” better expresses Jesus’ meaning than does the ambiguous phrase “within you.”

Because of the influence of the older translation (“*the Kingdom of God is within you*”), some have concluded that Christ’s kingdom is strictly an interior, spiritual state of affairs—something existing inside of, and to be spiritually apprehended by, God’s people. However, the persons to whom Jesus addressed these words were His enemies, not His followers. Even though Christ’s disciples do experience an inward, spiritual benefit from being in the Kingdom, this would not have been so for the hostile Pharisees to whom Jesus addressed His remark. The Kingdom certainly was not *within them*.

³⁵ Matthew 13:36-43

³⁶ Matthew 13:33

³⁷ Matthew 6:10

³⁸ Matthew 3:1-2

³⁹ Mark 1:15

⁴⁰ Samuel M. Frost, Th.M., *The Parousia of the Son of Man: A Reexamination of the Pertinent Texts of the Coming of Jesus Christ from Matthew to Revelation* (Vigilate et Orate Publishing, 2018), back cover copy

⁴¹ Matthew 12:28

⁴² Luke 17:21 NASB

⁴³ E.g., NASB, ESV, NIV, CSB, NET, NRSV, AMP, NKJV (margin)

While it must be acknowledged that entering the Kingdom of God is a spiritual transaction,⁴⁴ and involves the believer in a distinctive spiritual experience,⁴⁵ the bulk of the biblical statements about the Kingdom (e.g., in Christ’s parables) would preclude our seeing the Kingdom, principally, as a personal, inward experience. The consistent language of scripture speaks of the Kingdom as something that people must *enter*—but never as something that *enters*—or *is realized in*—the person.

These observations, by themselves, serve as correctives to several of the popular views, which identify the Kingdom of God either 1) as a postmortem destination of the departed souls (as in the colloquial expression, “he was blown to Kingdom Come!”), or 2) as an eschatological phenomenon that has been postponed until the second coming of Christ (since such would not actually have been “at hand” when Jesus was here preaching), or 3) as merely some vague aspect of private spirituality.

So, what is the Kingdom of God?

Though Jesus said numerous things about the Kingdom, there were certain things that He did not need to say, because His hearers would likely have already known them. The principal point of His message was expressed in the word “gospel,” or “good news.” This word harks back to a messianic prophecy in Isaiah 52:7—

*How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,⁴⁶
Who proclaims peace,
Who brings glad tidings of good things,
Who proclaims salvation,
Who says to Zion, “Your God reigns!”*

Paul twice quotes from this passage⁴⁷—in both cases citing the Greek Old Testament⁴⁸ in which the phrase “...*him who brings good news, Who proclaims peace,*” is rendered simply, “*those who preach the gospel of peace.*” Paul interpreted this prophecy as referring to the preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom, which Jesus preached, and which Paul himself was preaching.

According to the last line of the prophecy, the content of the Messiah’s “good news” is the announcement that God is enthroned and is reigning—“*Our God reigns!*” This is the gospel, or good news, that the Kingdom of God has come, just as Jesus proclaimed. Thus, when Jesus preached, “*the*

⁴⁴ John 3:5

⁴⁵ Romans 14:17

⁴⁶ In the Greek Old Testament (LXX)⁴⁶ the expression “good news,” in the second line of the prophecy, is *euangelion*, the same word that is translated “gospel” in the New Testament.

⁴⁷ Romans 10:15

⁴⁸ LXX or the *Septuagint*

Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15), the only *gospel* for which His hearers would have had any frame of reference would have been that which is predicted by Isaiah 52:7, which happens to be the same message Jesus preached. Among the features of the gospel mentioned in Isaiah are:

- The proclamation of "peace"—which explains why the New Testament refers to it as "the gospel of peace;"⁴⁹
- The proclamation of "salvation"—explaining why Paul refers to it as "the Gospel [or "word"] of your salvation;"⁵⁰ and
- Its principal proclamation was: "*Your God reigns!*" That is, God has become the King, reigning over the Kingdom—which is why it is called the "gospel of the Kingdom of God." This is why, when Paul preached the gospel to the Thessalonians, they (correctly) understood his message to be proclaiming, "*There is another king—one Jesus.*"⁵¹

The terminology and the concept of the Kingdom meet us as unfamiliar ideas the first time we read the New Testament—unless we have already read the Old Testament. Neither the Old Testament prophecies nor Christ's words were novel or unfamiliar to Jesus' original hearers. His audience had been primed by the prophets to anticipate the arrival of a King and His Kingdom, which is what they would have immediately thought of when hearing the proclamations of John, Jesus, and the apostles. The good news Jesus announced was unambiguously putting Israel on notice: *The time for the long-awaited fulfillment of those promises had arrived.*

The word "Kingdom" (Gr. *basileia*) is an ordinary word that commonly describes a nation or society governed by a king—that is, what we call a *monarchy*. The word was first used in the Bible (in the Septuagint) to refer to the ancient kingdom of Nimrod in Mesopotamia,⁵² and of the Philistine kingdom of Abimelech.⁵³ Later, the term is used referring to the kingdom of Israel,⁵⁴ and the kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome.⁵⁵ Kingdoms were the most familiar model of nationhood in ancient times. Virtually all ancient nations had kings.

Of course, most nations in modern times are not kingdoms, and do not claim to be. More often they are "democracies" or "republics" (or dictatorships disingenuously assuming one of these more

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; Ephesians 6:15; Acts 10:36

⁵⁰ Ephesians 1:13; Acts 13:26

⁵¹ Acts 17:7. KJV

⁵² Genesis 10:10 LXX

⁵³ Genesis 20:9 LXX

⁵⁴ E.g., 1 Samuel 15:28 LXX

⁵⁵ Daniel 2:37, 39,40 LXX

innocuous labels). There remain few actual monarchies in the modern world. It is a disappearing mode of government. Unfortunately, disappearing along with it is the real-life frame of reference for understanding the preaching of Christ.

This was not a problem in biblical times. Throughout most of ancient history, a king was an all-too-familiar kind of governmental leader, to whom absolute loyalty and reverence were owed by his subjects. The king established and enforced decrees and laws, and was expected to be obeyed by all in his domain. Kings were also charged with the national defense and the civic well-being of their territories and people. Unlike most modern government officials and leaders, kings were not elected by a popular vote, but reigned either by hereditary right or by conquest.

In the days of Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets, the powers of sovereign kings were well known by all. Kings, in many cases, had absolute power, and could reign according to their wishes, or even their whims, without being accountable to anyone else. A king often answered to no man or parliament. This is what it means to be “sovereign.”

America was founded by settlers who had been oppressed by monarchs in their European motherlands, and who were determined to prevent the rise of any such sovereign power in their New World. They established a novel, king-free form of government. Eventually, many nations in Europe and elsewhere adopted a quasi-American model of governance. Today, a nation like Sweden is a constitutional monarchy, having a hereditary king as titular Head of State, but whose role is limited to ceremonial and representative functions.

For this reason, most of us, who have only lived in modern democratic societies, have little comprehension of what a king really was, or what it meant to have one in biblical times. While we must be grateful for the increased liberties afforded by the modern constitutional paradigm, it must be acknowledged that this change of historical circumstances has left us at something of a disadvantage when it comes to grasping Jesus’ message. As Jeremy Irons’ character, Father Gabriel, in the movie *The Mission*, corrected the novice Jesuit, Rodrigo Mendoza (played by Robert DeNiro): “*The Kingdom of God is not a democracy.*” The people of ancient societies, who all lived under kings, would more naturally have conceptualized the meaning of a term like “the Kingdom of God” than would any modern person in Western Civilization.

Our historical memory of kings and kingdoms is fast fading from us,⁵⁶ along with the ability to instinctively understand the message of Christ’s gospel. Today, familiarity with kings and kingdoms may be kept (barely) alive as portrayed to us in novels, legends, and movies such as *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Quite apart from their entertainment value, such fiction may actually benefit us,

⁵⁶ Though some of our elected officials seem to be trying to reinstate the concept with themselves as sovereigns.

somewhat, insofar as it accurately portrays the authority and dignity of kings, and the honor given them by their loyal subjects.

The word “kingdom” refers to the reign and domain of a king, including two elements—a king and his subjects. Neither a society without a king, nor a king who has no subjects, can be called a “kingdom,” in the proper sense of the word. The existence of both a king and subjects are included in the word’s definition. A kingdom is properly defined as “a society governed by a king,” so that the simplest definition of the Kingdom of God is that it is a society governed by God (either directly, or through His appointed Regent). A society means *people*. This is why God’s Kingdom is, in scripture, identified as a unique people, and a holy nation.⁵⁷

The good news of the Kingdom of God is simply that God (through Jesus’ mediation) is reigning, and that He has acquired a specific community of people who acknowledge Him as their Monarch in their loyalty, words, and deeds. Many writers, when writing on the Kingdom of God, emphasize only the fact that Christ is King, and regard His “*Kingdom*” as merely a word affirming His *kingly authority*. Of course, it would be impossible to over-emphasize the rightful authority of King Jesus, but the Kingdom will not properly be understood if we fail to place proper emphasis also upon the *people* who comprise His Kingdom—that is, His subject society or community. It is within this community that we can discover our own significance in history.

The very first biblical reference to God having a Kingdom identifies that Kingdom as a people on earth, an alternative society, subject to God as their King, and to His Law.⁵⁸ In the Old Testament, this society (Israel) is contrasted with the nations of the world, all of whom had merely human kings to whom they owed fealty.

To preach that the Kingdom of God has come (in the light of Old Testament prophetic expectations) as Jesus did, is to proclaim that God has now exalted the Messiah to be the actual Ruler over a specific society of people in this world, who eagerly embrace Him in this role. Jesus referred to such people, who have entered this society, as “*disciples*”⁵⁹—the willing and loyal subjects of Christ as King. The collective of all disciples (those who comprise the Kingdom) came to call itself “the Church”—a term that, in the Old Testament, had formerly been used to speak of the gathered congregation of Israel.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9

⁵⁸ Exodus 19:5-6

⁵⁹ Acts 1:15; 6:1, 2, 7; 11:26; 14:20. The biblical definition of this term will be considered in a later chapter.

⁶⁰ See: Matthew 16:18; 18:17; Acts 5:11; Ephesians 1:22; 5:24. The Greek word *ekklesia* had, in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), referred to the congregation of Israel, who also were called to be God’s Kingdom. By applying this word to the community of the disciples, Jesus indicated that they had taken over the status previously assigned to Israel. He stated this unambiguously when He announced to Israel, “*The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it*” (Matthew 21:43). We must be careful not to assume that the word “Church” originally had the meaning that it came to have in later centuries, when the term has come to refer to a religious institution, rather than to a Body defined by genuine discipleship.

So, is the Kingdom just another name for the Church?

There is a determined effort, on the part of some writers, to distinguish “the Kingdom” from “the Church.” This appears to be due to the fact that the Catholic Church has tended historically to identify itself with the “Kingdom of God,” whereas the writers making the distinction are Protestants who recognize that neither the Catholic Church, nor any Protestant communion, can rightfully be identified as the Kingdom of God. Thus, one recent writer suggests:

The church is not the same as the kingdom, but it serves as a preview, an outpost, and an instrument of the kingdom today...The church is the signpost and foretaste of the kingdom of God, advancing God’s kingdom purposes and giving the world a sneak preview of the future.⁶¹

George Eldon Ladd, in an attempt to similarly place distance between the Church and the concept of the Kingdom of God (which he had earlier claimed “always refers to His reign, His rule, His sovereignty, and not to the realm in which it is exercised,”⁶²), seems to involve himself in a self-contradiction:

Do we not therefore have the Scriptural precedent to identify the Church with the Kingdom of God? Only in this sense: the redeemed are a kingdom *because they shall reign upon the earth*. They are not a kingdom because the members of the Church are the people over whom Christ exercises His reign...The Kingdom of God which in the Old Testament dispensation was manifested in Israel is now working in the world through the Church.⁶³

So, the redeemed (is this not “the Church”?) “*are a kingdom*” because they shall reign, but “*are not a kingdom*” because they are reigned over? Why are those who are reigned over by a king “not a kingdom”? What else would one call such a society? Israel, because they were reigned over by God were said to be the Kingdom of God. That is, in fact, what constituted them as God’s Kingdom. They were the people who had God as their King. Thus, Ladd seems to be confused in his definitions. Given the actual statements of scripture on the subject, it is confusing to read him suggest:

...those who begin with the idea of the Kingdom as a people base their definition upon the identity of the Kingdom with the Church, and for this there is very little scriptural warrant.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Jeremy Treat, *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 24, 44

⁶² George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 20

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 117

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19

Actually, to identify the Kingdom as “a people” (as the Bible does) is not, initially, based upon the identity of the Kingdom as the Church, but begins with the identification of the Kingdom with Israel (a people), and with the Church as the New Israel, and “*a Kingdom of priests.*”⁶⁵

The confusion may lie in the defining of “the Church” in institutional terms—as in the organizations identified as “Catholic” or the “Protestant” churches. We may heartily agree that such institutions must never be confused with the Kingdom of God—but, scripturally, neither is any of them, in the fullest sense of the word, “the Church.” In scripture, the Church is not identified with any such organizations that have mortals as their respective “heads.” The global Church is comprised only of those who have Jesus as their Head, who possess His Spirit, and who follow Him. There is no significant distinction between referring to Christ as a “Head” or as a “King.” Both suggest the twin concepts of sovereignty and subjection. All who have Christ as *Head* comprise the Church, and are the same people who embrace Him as their *King*. Thus, the true Church is certainly the Kingdom.

Thus, Ladd’s statements may be regarded as true only if they are understood in the manner explained by John Bright: “The Church is indeed the people of the Kingdom of Christ, *but the visible church is not that Kingdom.*”⁶⁶

We can find nothing in scripture to contradict the definition given by Philip Mauro:

The Kingdom of God is (and was then, and ever will be) that spiritual realm in which the authority of Christ risen from the dead, is acknowledged, and His law ‘obeyed from the heart’ (Rom.6:17) by a people who have believed on His name, have been washed in His blood, and have been regenerated by the Holy Ghost.⁶⁷

It would be hard to find a better description of the true Church than as “a people who have believed on His name, have been washed in His blood, and have been regenerated by the Holy Ghost.” This may not correlate perfectly with the membership of any organized church group or communion, but it certainly defines the true Body of Christ. The gospel of the Kingdom, then, can be summarized as it is so well in the words of Bright:

This, then, is the good news which the New Testament with unanimous voice proclaims: that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, fulfillment of all the hope of Israel, who has come to set up the Kingdom of God among men...to make that assertion remained at the very heart of the church’s gospel.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Exodus 19:5-6; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 1:6; 5:10

⁶⁶ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 236 [italics mine]

⁶⁷ Philip Mauro, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Pantianos Classics, 1927), 4

⁶⁸ Bright, *op. cit.*, 187f, 190

It should be noted that the term *Kingdom of God* (whether referring to Israel or to the Church) is never, in scripture, applied to anything other than an entity with an earthly footprint. The Kingdom (indistinguishable from the true Church), is an alternative society on the earth—a global colony of King Jesus, who reigns over the personal and corporate lives of His citizens (or disciples)—having designs on the conquest of every soul until every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God. Thus, we are not saved, primarily, for our own eternal enjoyment of happier conditions, nor to swell the ranks of some religious institution. We are saved to become serviceable members of a global corporate Body, loyalists to the rightful King in a world of rebels, and participants in His conquests over the hearts and minds of all the inhabitants of the world. Our prayers, our preaching, and our efforts, all have as their goal that God’s Kingdom will “come”—that is, be fully realized as a victorious phenomenon in history among the people subject to Christ—and that the Father’s will be done “*on earth as it is in heaven.*”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Matthew 6:10, 33

Chapter Three

The Roots of the Final World Empire

....And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.

(Daniel 2:44)

*And there were loud voices in heaven, saying,
“The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ,
and He shall reign forever and ever!”*

(Revelation 11:15)

It is often speculated whether there will ever be a single, one-world government. The biblical answer is: Most certainly! It has already begun, and it is destined to be glorious beyond all imagination. This was the hope that God placed in the hearts of faithful Israel in the Old Testament, and it is that which the New Testament describes as having been inaugurated by Christ when He was here among us.

The first word in the recorded preaching of Jesus was, *“Fulfilled!”* It doesn’t read quite like that in our English translations, which generally translate His first sentence as *“The time is fulfilled.”*¹ However, in the Greek, it more literally reads *“Fulfilled the time.”* The word order in Greek sentences suggests emphasis. The emphasis of Jesus’ first public utterance was that fulfillment had come of a long-awaited expectation: *“The Kingdom of God is at hand.”*²

The statement represents the gospel preached by Jesus. John the Baptist had preached the same message to prepare the way for Christ’s ministry. In His opening line—*“the time is fulfilled”*—Jesus makes it clear that He was not introducing a complete novelty that had never been anticipated by His Jewish hearers. Much of what He would subsequently teach about the Kingdom would surprise them, and run counter to their presumed *mode* of fulfillment, but Jesus was clear that His Kingdom was the fulfillment of the promises that God had given long ago. The exact expression, “Kingdom of God,” does not occur in the Old Testament, but the concept of God being King and reigning over a people of His choosing went all the way back to the birth of Israel.

The Kingdom is God’s response and remedy to a global problem that arose much earlier still. The original parents of the human race, having rebelled against God’s rulership, had brought unintended

¹ Mark 1:15

² Ibid. “at hand” can also be translated “drawn near.”

consequences upon themselves and their descendants—including every disaster, sin, and death. *Yahweh*, as Israel came to know Him, originally created the world to be governed by the people that He created, to whom He had given dominion over the plant and animal kingdoms.³ It was their assignment to exercise such dominion as subjects, themselves, under His own rule. The obedience required of them was not particularly difficult. They could do whatever they wished, so long as they did not steal what was not theirs—and there was only one thing, one particular tree, that God had withheld from them. This withholding was intended by *Yahweh* as a test of their loyalty, which would prove, or disprove, their qualification to rule under Him. Foolishly, they revolted against their Creator’s authority and defected to the dark side. This is where the problems of the human race began.

As the descendants of the first rebels migrated across the habitable earth, they formed *ad hoc* cooperative societies to make their lives easier. Some of these communities grew large and leaders arose among them. These groups eventually multiplied to (according to Jewish tradition) seventy ethnic entities⁴ called, in Hebrew, “*goyim*” (Greek: *ethne*). This is the word translated in scripture as “nations” or “Gentiles.” These nations, having been spawned by rebellious parents, also chose to live in rebellion against God (who, as Creator of all, properly owns all people and all things).⁵ Instead of acknowledging Him, they established rival religions honoring grotesque, demonic gods, represented by images carved from wood or stone. This, understandably, was taken by God to be a deliberate affront—a blasphemy that caused Him to withdraw His self-revelation, so that they might be left to their own errors.⁶

In response to the Gentile nations’ idolatry, *Yahweh* determined to establish an alternative society, a distinctive nation of His own people who would properly recognize and honor Him. In the midst of one of the rebellious nations, Babylonia, there was a man named Abram (later renamed as *Abraham*), to whom *Yahweh* chose to reveal Himself, and whom He called to a special mission. God promised Abraham that, if he would leave Babylonia, God would resettle him in a fruitful land that would later be inherited by Abraham’s numerous descendants. Although Abraham was, at that time, childless and advanced in age, and his wife Sarai (later, *Sarah*) was infertile, Abraham’s confidence in this promise marked him out as a man uniquely regarded by *Yahweh* as His “friend.”⁷

Notwithstanding the hostility of the *goyim* to Him, *Yahweh* chose to use His friend Abraham to recapture the world—not personally, but through his offspring. God promised that He would make Abraham’s descendants into a great nation (many nations, actually), and that all of the nations of the

³ Genesis 1:26-27

⁴ The number 70 comes from their reading of the “table of nations,” viz., Genesis 10.

⁵ Psalm 24:1

⁶ Genesis 6:3; Romans 1:18-28

⁷ Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23

earth would eventually receive benefit as a result of him.⁸ The nation Israel, through whom Yahweh would fulfill these promises, were the descendants of Abraham's son Isaac, his grandson Jacob (later renamed *Israel*), and Israel's twelve sons—whose descendants became twelve tribal clans.

It was never promised to Abraham that his descendants would all be personally *saved*, in the sense that Christians usually think of that term. The promise was not that Abraham's descendants would all be individually righteous, or on good terms with God as individuals, but that their nation would fulfill the earthly mission of bringing into the world the One to restore the world—“*all the families of the earth*”⁹—to the proper relationship with Yahweh.

We find, in the later developments of this plot, that such a restoration would require the making of an atonement for sin and the persuasion of the *goyim* to voluntarily bring themselves back under submission to Yahweh. To accomplish this purpose, God would assign an individual Descendant of Abraham, to whom the Jews would later refer as the *Messiah*.

Thus, the promise to Abraham was associated with this earthly mission: to bring into the world that one Descendant, the Messiah, through whom restoration of the *goyim* to Yahweh would be realized. Paul tells us that this reconciling of all nations to God is the blessing that was promised to come through Abraham's “Seed.”¹⁰ Though the word translated “Seed” can be seen either as singular or plural, the *Seed*, Paul tells us, is not a reference to the many *descendants* of Abraham, but to the one *Descendant*—Christ.¹¹ The “blessing” promised to all nations refers to justification, reconciliation, and privileges that are found in returning to God through Him.¹²

If the blessing of the nations through Abraham's Seed (Christ) would be their restoration to a proper relationship of submission to their Maker, this means that Yahweh would again be ruling the peoples of the earth, some of whom would share with Him in His reign. The reconciled remnant of both *Israel* and the *goyim*—those happily submitted to God in the Messiah—would be adopted as His new nation, His distinctive people, His Kingdom among the nations of the earth. This Kingdom would expand to include more and more of the earth's population until the day would come when “*the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.*”¹³

In the meantime, there was Israel

Although this promise pertained ultimately to all nations, the particular nation descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was granted the first opportunity to become the charter member of this multi-national empire, and to enjoy the privileges of the Kingdom prior to all the other nations.

⁸ Genesis 12:1-3

⁹ Genesis 12:3

¹⁰ Galatian 3:8

¹¹ Ibid., v.16

¹² Ibid., v.14

¹³ Revelation 11:15

This privilege was offered to the nation of Israel, conditionally, at Mount Sinai. Yahweh had rescued a large, multi-ethnic¹⁴ (though primarily Israelite) company of former slaves out of Egyptian bondage. Counting on their gratitude for this great deliverance, God brought them to Mount Sinai in Arabia, and established them there as a special nation for Himself. Through the mediation of Moses, God contracted with them in the following terms:

“...if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”¹⁵

Yahweh’s contract (or *covenant*) with Israel involved both promises and stipulations:

1. The stipulations involved simple and exclusive loyalty and obedience to Yahweh, and to the covenant He was establishing with them.
2. The promises were magnanimous. Of all the nations of the earth, Israel would be His people in a sense different from all others. He would treasure them above all the other nations. They would be a “holy” nation—a word that means separated out from ordinary nations, in that Israel would enjoy unique interactions with Yahweh that would, for the time being, be withheld from other nations. It was also promised that they would be a Kingdom of priests. This means that, as a special nation ruled uniquely by God, Israel would mediate the knowledge of God to the other nations—just as priests in any religion do with the common people.

This is the first time, in scripture, that God is said to desire a “kingdom” of His own, in contrast to the kingdoms of the earth. Note that the word “kingdom” does not refer to a *place*, but to a *people*. The *place* of God’s Kingdom, His *people*, would be right here on earth, among the other nations.

The stated qualifications for being in this Kingdom were actually *not ethnic*. The nation Israel, established at Sinai, was comprised of an ethnically “mixed” multitude.¹⁶ There were non-Israelites in the group when God struck this covenant. Individual Gentiles had the same opportunity as Israelites to be part of the “chosen people,” Israel.

While there was no ethnic requirement to being God’s Kingdom, there were *covenantal* requirements. The stipulations of the covenant were delineated in the body of legislation (containing

¹⁴ Exodus 12:38

¹⁵ Exodus 19:5-6

¹⁶ Exodus 12:38

613 specific commands) called “the Law” (Hebrew: *Torah*), handed down to Israel through the prophet Moses.

Many people who read the Bible carelessly conclude that “Israel” is a designation identical to, and coextensive with, the Jewish race. This was never the case, though it is true that the twelve tribes descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were among the first to be given the privilege of being Yahweh’s nation, or Kingdom. From the beginning, the qualifications for inclusion were the same for ethnic Israelites and for Gentiles: 1) obedience rendered to God as to a King, and 2) covenantal loyalty, similar to that of a wife to a husband.¹⁷ The corporate entity was God’s nation. Personal inclusion or exclusion was a matter of individual loyalty or disloyalty to the covenant.

To worship idols, or to break the covenantal laws given at Sinai, would exclude even a natural-born Israelite from being part of Israel, the covenantal Kingdom. Thus, the law repeatedly says that any individual Israelite who violates these stipulations will be “*cursed*”¹⁸ and “*cut off from Israel*”¹⁹—no longer to be included in God’s chosen people. This is why Paul would later write, “*They are not all Israel who are of Israel*” (Romans 9:6). Ethnic Israel is one thing; *faithful Israel*, to whom the promises apply, is another. True Israel is comprised of the relatively few people, in Old Testament times, who actually remained true to God’s covenant. This faithful company is often referred to as “*the remnant of Israel.*”

By the same token, any Gentile could be welcomed into Israel and regarded the same “*as a native of the land.*”²⁰ This would require that one adopt the covenant stipulations and live by them. In the case of a male, he would need to submit to the covenantal mark of circumcision. Rahab and Ruth are among the most famous female examples of Gentiles becoming part of Israel—the chosen nation. Such Gentiles, who became part of Israel, were called *proselytes*.

Thus, even though the majority of the population was always comprised of people descended from Abraham, the privilege of being in *Israel*, or in *God’s Kingdom*, was never strictly defined by physical parentage or race. From the beginning, the nation was multi-ethnic, and the covenant stipulations guaranteed that it would remain so. After the Exodus, and the transactions at Mount Sinai, the word “Israel” was to be a label defined by the people’s loyalty to the covenant.

Through their subsequent checkered history, the nation was often disobedient, and was technically vulnerable to being disowned by Yahweh. Despite this fact, He continued to forgive and

¹⁷ Lacking kings today, marriage provides the closest analogue to the nature of a relationship defined by a covenant.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 27:15-26

¹⁹ Exodus 30:33, 38; 31:14; Leviticus 17:14; 18:29; 20:18; 23:29; Numbers 9:13; 19:13 (cf., Genesis 17:14; Exodus 12:15)

²⁰ Exodus 12:48

work with them as His own people. He faithfully gave them the land which He had earlier promised to Abraham, and the land itself, like the people occupying it, also came to be called *Israel*.²¹

Israel was, from its founding, unique among the nations. The most important distinctive was that they had no mere human occupying the role of “king” in their kingdom. All other nations needed to have such, because they did not have Yahweh reigning directly from heaven over the affairs of their societies. In answering directly to Yahweh as their only Monarch, Israel was uniquely “the Kingdom of God.”

Their society differed from others in that they had no centralized government or political system. Israel, in those days, had no standing armies, nor anyone to command them. No state authority, other than God Himself, dictated laws to restrict Israel’s social and family activities. They were a *tribal league*,²² where interpersonal disputes would be settled by local, tribal elders or priests, rather than by federal courts, or an earthly king residing in a national capital. There was no national capital. The central place of worship was a portable structure where the chest containing the stone tablets of the covenant was kept. It moved from place to place—first to Shiloh,²³ then to Kirjath Jearim,²⁴ later to Nob,²⁵ then back to Kirjath Jearim,²⁶ and, finally, to Jerusalem.²⁷

A common refrain in the Book of Judges reminds us that “*In those days there was no king in Israel*”—sometimes adding, “*and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*”²⁸

In modern preaching, it is common to hear this described as a bad arrangement. “When everyone does what is right in his own eyes, there is moral chaos”—so goes the familiar commentary. This is true, when the thing that is “right” in a man’s eyes is contrary to what is “right” in God’s eyes. However, Israel had the *Torah*—*God’s Law*—to teach them what is right in God’s eyes. It seems that, for most of the period described in Judges, what is right in God’s sight was what was deemed right in the people’s eyes as well. The period of nearly four centuries was punctuated by relatively brief periods of general rebellion and idolatry, for which God disciplined His people and restored proper order.

When the Bible says, “*everyone did what was right in his own eyes,*” the contrast is not between this policy and that of doing what is right in the sight of God. The contrast is between having personal

²¹ At this point, Israel was a word that had already come to have numerous meanings: 1) a man’s name; 2) the descendants of that man; 3) the covenant nation in which those descendants formed the ethnic majority; 4) the faithful remnant who truly kept God’s covenant; and 5) the defined territory controlled by the nation. The potentially-confusing ambiguity of the term, in many contexts, should cause us caution in our interpretation of passages about “Israel.”

²² A similar arrangement, found in ancient Greece, was called an *amphictyony*, defined by Webster as “an association of neighboring states in ancient Greece to defend a common religious center.”

²³ Joshua 18:1

²⁴ 1 Samuel 7:1

²⁵ 1 Samuel 21:1

²⁶ 2 Samuel 6:3

²⁷ 2 Samuel 6:12

²⁸ Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25

and qualified liberty of conscience, on the one hand, and having an earthly king, on the other, being forced to do what is right in *his* eyes. As Israel's later history proved, having a human monarch is the more disastrous arrangement of the two. The biblical comment tells us that liberty of personal conscience prevailed, rather than domination by a human (and therefore corrupt) earthly ruler. The former is what God desired for the society of His Kingdom—individual liberty of conscience, under God. For citizens to do what is right in their own eyes is certainly preferable to them doing what is wrong in their own eyes. According to these verses, the alternative is to have a government under an earthly king—which God saw as undesirable. He found it offensive (bordering on treasonous) when Israel later asked for a change in this arrangement (1 Samuel 8:7).

Freedom to follow one's own conscience in the fear of God is the highest biblical standard.²⁹ Later in Israel's history, when they actually did have earthly kings, oppressive rulers often interfered with such freedom of conscience (the biblical examples of Ahab and Manasseh come immediately to mind—as do the tyrants of Babylon, Syria and Rome, who governed and oppressed Israel at later times).

For everyone to do what is *right* in his own estimation means to follow the dictates of individual conscience. There is nothing bad about this, so long as one's conscience is informed by God's revealed moral norms. This was precisely Yahweh's ideal when He set up and governed His Kingdom in Israel during the period of the judges. Through most of this period, it was quite acceptable, and things went smoothly. It was only on the occasions when Israel disregarded God's Law and compromised with idolatry that things turned bad.

Whenever Israel did stray into idolatry, their True King would step in and discipline them, allowing foreign invaders to overtake and oppress them. When they had learned their lesson, He would likewise bring deliverance in the persons of certain individuals who served as military leaders and judges. These judges served in these emergencies for the remainder of their lives, but, upon their deaths, did not leave their offices to successors. Their passing was not viewed as leaving a vacuum to be filled. There was no permanent family of hereditary leaders, since God was the only permanent governing official. He proved Himself quite capable of keeping, or restoring, order in His Kingdom.

Under the oversight of the judges, when there was no earthly king in Israel, the years of Israel's obedience to Yahweh exceeded those during which they strayed by a factor of three to one.³⁰ This means that Israel was obedient three-quarters of the period when they had no earthly king. Things were far worse, during the later monarchy era—a period of almost 500 years—during which the kingdom of Judah had very few faithful kings after David, and the northern tribes of Israel had none.

²⁹ Acts 23:1; 24:16; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 4:2; 1 Timothy 1:5, 19; 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3

³⁰ According to the tally of the numbers given in the Book of Judges, Israel was obedient a total of 340 years and disobedient 114 years.

The tribal league, prior to the monarchy, served to allow Israel to maintain Yahweh as their only direct Ruler. The obligations laid upon them by Yahweh were simple: they must worship none but Him, doing so in accordance with the Levitical practices, and live harmlessly toward one another.³¹ Apart from these things, they were a completely free people. They had previously suffered oppression for hundreds of years under a cruel king in Egypt, but now, under Yahweh's rule, they had become the most liberated people on earth.

This uniqueness of Israel among the nations was their boast, though they often did not fully understand or appreciate this. When God had used Gideon, one of the judges, to deliver Israel from the Midianite oppression, the people expressed their gratitude by offering to establish his family as the first hereditary dynasty in Israel:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian." But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you."³²

Gideon may have been flattered—even tempted—by the accolades and gratitude being heaped upon him by the people, but he knew that it would be sacrilege for Israel to replace Yahweh's direct rule with that of a human king and royal family. This would be to deprive God of His rightful place, and to deprive Israel of her unique status.

Israel's revolt against Yahweh's rule

Nonetheless, at a later time, the elders of the tribal league again succumbed to the temptation to throw God over in favor of having a human king. This occurred in the time of Samuel, who turned out to be the last of the judges, and the first of the prophetic order that became so common in later history:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "...make us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." So Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them."³³

³¹ Romans 13:10

³² Judges 8:22-23

³³ 1 Samuel 8:4-7

Though displeased with their request, God dignified the free choice of the people to reject Him as their direct Ruler. He warned them that this would not turn out well, but He would nonetheless allow them, if they wished, to exchange the liberty of His direct rule for the often-oppressive system of human monarchy. As He had done in the wilderness, when they had petulantly demanded greater variety in their diet, Yahweh “*gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul.*”³⁴

Though Yahweh viewed the decision of the people as a rejection of His kingship (thus ending the ideal phase of the Kingdom), He only allowed this upon the condition that Israel’s new king must himself remain loyal to Yahweh,³⁵ allowing God to continue His rule indirectly through Israel’s monarch. Yahweh would send His prophets to instruct and correct the kings, who would be expected to obey the voice of the Lord through these prophets.³⁶

The first king that Yahweh selected for the people was handsome and considerably taller than the rest of the men of Israel—just the type of man calculated to command the loyalty of the public. His name was Saul, which significantly means “asked-for.”

Saul seemed, at first, to be a man of modest temperament and not eager to accept his assignment as king. However, when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, at a moment of national crisis, he was suddenly filled with indignation at the cruelty of an invading force and rose to the challenge of leading an *ad hoc* militia to victory against Ammonite intruders. The success of this mission increased his popularity with the people, and silenced some who had been slow to accept his earlier appointment as their king.

Initially, Saul was keen to follow God’s instructions through the prophet Samuel, but as he began to feel more comfortable in his role as ruler, he became careless in his obedience. Twice, he disobeyed God’s specific instructions, thinking he knew a better way to do things. As a result, Samuel announced that Yahweh had now rejected Saul, in favor of a better man—who turned out to be David.

Samuel the prophet secretly anointed David as king in his father’s house, without Saul’s knowledge. Just as the Spirit of God had previously rushed upon Saul, so the Spirit now departed from Saul and came upon David. As if to fill the void, an evil spirit now entered Saul, tormenting him and driving him mad. Upon seeing David’s military prowess, personal charisma, and consequent rise in popularity, Saul deduced that David was the one who threatened to replace him. Having, by this point, come to enjoy the status of king, Saul had no interest in leaving his position to a rival. He resented David and sought to kill him.

In order to avoid being killed by Saul, David had to flee but was joined by a rag-tag group of four-hundred men who were dissenters against Saul’s erratic reign.³⁷ They made David their “captain” and

³⁴ Psalm 106:15

³⁵ Deuteronomy 17:14-20

³⁶ 1 Samuel 13:13; 15:23

³⁷ 1 Samuel 22:2

followed him at their own peril while Saul's armies relentlessly pursued them in the mountainous desert. The danger to David and his men ended when Saul became engaged in a different campaign, against the Philistines, and was mortally wounded in battle—ultimately falling upon his own sword to end his misery. David mourned Saul's death, partly because it coincided with the death of his own beloved friend Jonathan, one of Saul's sons who also died in the same campaign.

Reflecting back on the career of Saul, Yahweh, through another prophet, would later lament: *"I gave you a king in my anger, and took him away in my wrath."*³⁸

The Kingdom of the house of David

Upon Saul's death, David became king—first, over his own tribe Judah, and eventually over all Israel. God described David as *"a man after my own heart."*³⁹ David's love and devotion for God were unbounded, as we find expressed in over seventy-five Psalms that bear his name as author. Yahweh was so pleased with David, that He sent Nathan the prophet to make a special promise concerning his progeny:

*...the Lord tells you that He will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son.*⁴⁰

The word "house" at the beginning of this prophecy refers to a "dynasty." Unlike Saul, who had no long-term scion to his throne, David would have a line of successors leading up to one who would be the eternal Messiah, who would reign forever over God's Kingdom as God's own Son and Regent. This is how the Jews would forever afterward interpret the prophecy (with the later agreement of Jesus and the Church). From this point onward, it was understood that the Messiah would not only be a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but also of David. *"Son of David"* became a messianic title in later Israel.⁴¹

David was a mighty and, mostly, good king. He did commit a notable violation of *Torah* later in his life, but his subsequent repentance prevented Yahweh from removing him (as He had previously removed Saul),⁴² or withdrawing the messianic promise concerning his "house." Gentile nations were

³⁸ Hosea 13:11

³⁹ 1 Samuel 13:14

⁴⁰ 2 Samuel 7:11-14

⁴¹ E.g., Matthew 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30; 21:9

⁴² 2 Samuel, chs.11-12

conquered and brought under tribute through David's heroic leadership. When he died, he left Israel in the wealthiest and most prestigious circumstances that the nation would ever know. Israel, under David's reign, had transitioned from being a small nation, repeatedly oppressed by a variety of foreign invaders, into an international empire and unbeatable military power.

David's significance must not be underestimated. Due to the promise of the prophet concerning David's house, the twenty successors who ruled his kingdom of Judah were called, collectively⁴³ and individually,⁴⁴ "the house of David." A descendant of David reigning in his place might even be called "David."⁴⁵ In fact, the Messiah, as a King of David's lineage, is occasionally referred to as "David" by the prophets.⁴⁶

We will see that David was not only the *ancestor* of the Messiah, but a *type* foreshadowing the Messiah, as well. Many of David's statements about himself in Psalms are understood to be, ultimately, the words of the Messiah. We will have occasion to remember this in a later chapter.

⁴³ 1 Kings 12:19; 14:8; Psalm 122:5; Zechariah 13:1

⁴⁴ Isaiah 7:2, 13; Jeremiah 21:12

⁴⁵ 1 Kings 12:16

⁴⁶ Hosea 3:5; Ezekiel 34:23; 37:24-25

Chapter Four
The Emergence of the Final World Empire

*'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.
Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance,
And the ends of the earth for Your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron;
You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.' "*
(Psalm 2:7-9)

For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet.
(1 Corinthians 15:25)

Israel's loss of the Kingdom

After David's death, his son Solomon took the throne and, through his extravagant building projects, considerably diminished the wealth and morale of the nation. Upon Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam found himself faced with an angry mob insisting upon fiscal relief, which he foolishly refused to grant them. This refusal caused the northern tribes to rebel against the house of David, and to create a separate sovereign state to the north, which they called "Israel," due to its inclusion of ten of the twelve tribes. Only the tiny tribe of Benjamin, and David's own tribe Judah remained loyal to the scion of David in Jerusalem. This southern nation was therefore named Judah, after the larger of its two tribes.

The erstwhile "Kingdom of God," was thus irreparably divided, if not completely shattered. The northern nation appointed kings of its own, unrelated to David. They had nineteen altogether, and not a good one among them. They all worshiped false gods and ignored the prophets sent to warn them, including Elijah and Elisha. The whole nation had to be judged, at last, by the devastating invasion by Assyria, which brought the northern kingdom to an end in 722 B.C. All that remained of the original twelve tribes resided in Judah, to which many individuals from the northern tribes had defected, prior to Israel's downfall.

The southern kingdom of Judah survived the Assyrian threat, through the good fortune of having Hezekiah, under the counsel of Isaiah, as king. Hezekiah stands out as one of a handful of kings of David's line who feared Yahweh and attempted to keep the Judeans loyal to the true God. Hezekiah's

prayers spared his nation from the same destruction that their sister nation to the north had suffered at the hands of the Assyrians.¹

Hezekiah's devotion to Yahweh was only too rare among the succession of kings to the throne he occupied. Few Judean kings before or after him were interested in stemming the tide of abominable idolatry among the Jews, and some of the kings proudly sponsored the worship of the most demonic deities. The house of David had all but fallen to the corruptions of the pagan nations. Prior to the reign of Hezekiah, Isaiah's older contemporary, the prophet Amos, referred to the "house" of David (that is, David's dynasty) as a dilapidated "booth" which had fallen down, but would someday be restored to its former glory in the Messiah's reign.²

Hezekiah's successor Manasseh was the worst (and longest-reigning) king Judah ever had. He introduced the vilest corruptions into Judah's society and religious practices that could be imagined. Even though he later repented,³ his remorse was too little, and too late, to save the nation.⁴ Manasseh's own son continued in the worst vein of his father's former idolatry. Through the sins of the remaining kings of Judah, with the exception only of Josiah, the nation was driven into idolatrous ruin, bringing the judgment of Yahweh upon them. This judgment came in the form of the Babylonian invasion and exile, in 586 B.C. After that, there remained nothing of the nations of Israel or Judah. At that time, the temple, the symbol of God's kingship among them, was razed to the ground. The visible Kingdom of God, for the time being, had completely vanished.

The messianic hope of the remnant

Someday the Messiah would come. This was the promise upon which the devout in Israel and Judah placed their hopes for the restoration of the Kingdom of God among their people. The Messiah would rule as God's regent over a righteous Kingdom having no end. Anointing with oil was the installment ceremony for a king of God's choosing. The title *Messiah* (meaning, as we have noted, "the anointed one") referred to one whom God would someday anoint as Israel's King, *par excellence*. The disciples of Jesus, being themselves Jews, verbalized this messianic hope. After He arose from the dead, they asked Him, "*Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*"⁵

Most of the writing prophets in the Old Testament had something to say about this coming King. Micah said He would come from David's hometown of Bethlehem.⁶ Malachi predicted that God would

¹ 2 Kings 19

² Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:16-18

³ 2 Chronicles 33:10-17

⁴ 2 Kings 24:3

⁵ Acts 1:6

⁶ Micah 5:2er

send a special forerunner similar to Elijah to announce His arrival.⁷ Zechariah described the Messiah as presenting Himself to Israel as King and Savior while riding on a donkey.⁸ Hosea said that the disillusioned children of Israel would seek God through their submission to the Messiah.⁹ Joel said He would save those who would call upon Him, and pour out the Spirit of God upon the faithful remnant of Israel.¹⁰ The major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had much to say about the reign of the Messiah, who would gather the remnant of Israel to Himself¹¹ and shepherd them like a flock of sheep.¹² He would make a new covenant with them to replace the covenant that defined His people at Mount Sinai.¹³ The Messiah would rule over them in justice, bringing about secure conditions of peace and rejoicing for the faithful remnant.¹⁴

Four of the Psalms are devoted to describing the Messiah's reign. Two of these were written by David.¹⁵ One may have been written by Solomon,¹⁶ and the remaining one by the sons of Korah.¹⁷ These four are recognized by Jews and Christians alike as predictive of the coming Messianic Kingdom and the subjection of all nations to Him. Psalm 2 speaks of the throne of the Messiah being established by God, despite the futile efforts of the nations to resist Him. Psalm 45 speaks of the marriage of the Messiah to His bride (His people), extolling His personal charm and His victories over His enemies. Psalm 72 speaks of the worldwide reign of the Messiah and the homage paid to Him by the other kings of the earth. Psalm 110 describes the Messiah as seated at the right hand of God, subduing all His enemies, and serving His people as a high priest "*after the order of Melchizedek.*"

There are also references in the Psalms and the Prophets that speak of the Messiah's suffering, death and resurrection,¹⁸ but, important as these topics are to us in retrospect, they did not dominate the thinking of the Jews, as they anticipated only a victorious and glorious reign of the Messiah.

Of particular interest are the things God revealed to Daniel through his own, and through Nebuchadnezzar's, dreams and visions concerning the timing and the consequences of the Messiah's coming.

The prophecies alluded to in the other prophets did not give any indication of when they might be expected to be realized in history. This makes them non-falsifiable, since anyone who questions their accuracy could be met with the (legitimate) answer that their fulfillment remains to be fulfilled

⁷ Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6

⁸ Zechariah 9:9

⁹ Hosea 3:5

¹⁰ Joel 2:28-32

¹¹ Isaiah 10:20-21; 11:12; 27:12; 43:5; 49:5; Jeremiah 23:3; 29:14; 31:8; 32:37; Ezekiel 11:17; 20:34; 34:13

¹² Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 3:15; Ezekiel 34:22-24

¹³ Isaiah 55:3; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 37:26

¹⁴ Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-9; 42:1-4; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:26-29

¹⁵ Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25) and Psalm 110 (Mark 12:36)

¹⁶ Psalm 72

¹⁷ Psalm 45

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:3-5; e.g. Psalm 16:9-11; 22:11-18; Isaiah 50:5-9; 53:4-12

in the future. This is, in fact, the position taken by Orthodox Jews about these prophecies from the time of Christ to this day.

The predictions of Daniel, however, cannot be explained away in this manner, because he gives time-sensitive data revealing the timing of their fulfillment. Fortunately, their fulfillment can be identified within the very window of time that they mention—only in Jesus of Nazareth. Looking for another Messiah at some later point in history can only be done by ignoring or doing violence to these messianic prophecies.

One night, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had a dream from which he awoke in great perplexity. When his pagan counselors, his wise men, and astrologers proved themselves incapable of describing the dream to him (which he required them to do in order to establish their credibility as interpreters), he decided that all such wise men were frauds, and ordered their execution. This order would also impact Daniel and his three friends, who, though they were Jewish captives taken against their will to Babylon, had been selected to be trained as, and included among, the king's counselors.

When Daniel learned of the king's sentence of death, and what had precipitated it, he offered his services to satisfy the king's demand for an authoritative interpretation of his dream. Of course, this could not be faked, because the challenge included a retelling of the dream's contents to Nebuchadnezzar prior to attempting an interpretation. Daniel was granted the opportunity he requested and a date was set. He and his friends set themselves to pray, seeking from God the revelation of the king's dream and its interpretation—and God delivered.

When Daniel appeared before Nebuchadnezzar, he gained the king's confidence by correctly relating the contents of his dream:

"You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth."¹⁹

Nebuchadnezzar was stunned. The recitation of the dream was accurate in every detail. He was now fully attentive as Daniel volunteered the divinely-inspired interpretation of the symbols in the dream:

¹⁹ Daniel 2:31-35

*“This is the dream. Now we will tell the interpretation of it before the king. You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory...you are this head of gold. But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron...And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.”*²⁰

Note that the prophecy places its own time of fulfillment within a particular, limited window of historical time. The four kingdoms represented by the gold, silver, bronze, and iron are the succession of empires that were to rise and fall from Daniel’s time to that of the Messiah. The first is identified as Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom—the Babylonian Empire. The remaining three metals symbolically represent the three empires that would successively follow the Babylonian. History has proven that these three were the Media-Persian, the Grecian, and the Roman empires.

For our present purposes, what is significant here is the prediction that the God of heaven will set up an unshakeable Kingdom—which can hardly refer to anything other than the Messianic Kingdom—in *the days of these kings*. It is obvious that “*the days of these kings*” cannot refer to the concurrent reigns of these kings, because they did not reign simultaneously. He is saying that the Messianic Kingdom would come before the total period called “*the days of these kings*” has expired. This locates the fulfillment and the appearance of the *stone* within the tenure of the last of these kingdoms, or the period of the Roman Empire. This remarkable prophecy revealed that the Final World Empire—the Messiah’s Kingdom—would arise during the times of the Roman Empire, which is, of course, the very window of time during which Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God had arrived.

A new, but not improved, view of the Kingdom

In the last two centuries, there has arisen a novel theological system which has become influential throughout the entire evangelical world. Its official label is *Dispensationalism*, and its most striking characteristic is the not-so-humble claim that it is the correct, but long-lost, interpretation of all scripture. This understanding, they assert, had been lost by the Christian Church after the death of the apostles, and had only been rediscovered in the nineteenth century.²¹ This system is characterized by its total reinterpretation of the concepts of the *Kingdom of God* and *Israel*, in

²⁰ Daniel 2:36-44

²¹ Many readers may note that this was the exact same claim that Joseph Smith made, around the same time, for his new revelations written in the Book of Mormon.

scripture. It relegates the fulfillment of most Kingdom-related prophecies to the time of the second, rather than the first, coming of Christ. Dispensationalist teachers suggest that when Jesus came He offered the Messianic Kingdom to Israel but they rejected Him and His offer. The result, so it is alleged, is that the Kingdom that was “*at hand*” when Jesus preached, was actually *postponed* until the time when Jesus will return to fulfill the Kingdom prophecies.

The original innovator of this viewpoint, as near as we can tell, was John Nelson Darby, who wrote:

“...the Lord was crucified, and the kingdom presented in Him, and by Him, was rejected by Israel. By-and-by it will be set up visibly and in power. Meanwhile the church is set up, because the kingdom is not set up in this manifested way.”²²

Another famous advocate of this “*Postponed Kingdom*” idea was C.I. Scofield, annotator of the best-selling *Scofield Reference Bible*, who also wrote:

“...Christ came preaching ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’ ‘But His own received Him not.’ Israel would not have her King ‘meek and lowly’ (Zech. ix: 9; Matt. xxi: 1-5), and so...the kingdom was postponed, and Christ announced the mystery, the Church.”²³

More recently, this notion is confirmed by Charles Ryrie:

“Because the King was rejected, the Messianic, Davidic kingdom was (from a human viewpoint) postponed...Though Christ is a King today, He does not rule as King. This awaits His second coming.”²⁴

Since the Kingdom of God is such a central concern throughout the New Testament, and such a postponement would be a momentous development in progress of God’s purposes, it is remarkable that no such postponement was recognized by any of the biblical writers, nor by the apostles in their preaching. The Bible nowhere actually hints at any such imagined delay in the coming of the Kingdom after it was introduced as “*at hand*” by Jesus. This gratuitous scenario allows its advocates to reassign the fulfillment of every prophecy relevant to the Kingdom of God, including Daniel 2, to some much later time.

In an attempt to maintain that the Kingdom did not actually take root at Jesus’ first coming, Dispensationalism postulates a future, *revived* Roman Empire, represented by the feet and toes of the

²² Darby, *Collected Writings* 25:47

²³ C. I. Scofield, *Addresses on Prophecy* (Greenville, S. C.: The Gospel Hour Inc., n.d.), 17

²⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1986) 259, 398

image, which (they say) will arise in the end times under the Antichrist. We are therefore being asked to accept the thesis that the legs of the image in the dream represent the ancient Roman Empire (which fell over 1500 years ago), but that the feet and the toes depict another, a *revived* Roman Empire, which has yet to arise in the future. This way it can be argued that the Kingdom of Messiah, smashing like a stone into the feet of the image, will be established when Jesus returns, spelling the end of the Antichrist's new Roman Empire.

This theory falters on at least five points:

- 1) This interpretation places a historical gap of at least 1,500 years between the legs (the ancient Roman Empire) and the feet (a theoretical "revived" Roman Empire that has not yet come). The prophecy does not hint at such a gap of any length occurring at the ankles, between the legs and the feet—much less a gap that is longer than the careers of all four empires combined.²⁵ Nor is there any reference in scripture that clearly anticipates any "Roman Empire" beyond that which was ruled by the ancient Caesars.
- 2) The New Testament never mentions any *postponement* of the Kingdom that Jesus announced, and we find the same announcement of the Kingdom continuing in the preaching of the apostles, in the Book of Acts, long after the Jews' rejection of Christ. This gives the distinct impression that the Jews' rejection of Christ had no detrimental impact on the fulfillment of the prophecy.
- 3) To say that Jesus announced and intended to establish the Kingdom at His first coming, but failed to do so, is to suggest that Jesus' coming was a failure in terms of His primary mission. It becomes inexplicable, then, why Jesus, in His prayer at the end of His life, said to God, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do."²⁶ How could He view His mission as accomplished if He had, in fact, been thwarted by the Jews?
- 4) The New Testament speaks of the Kingdom as a present reality into which Christians have entered.²⁷ There is a future development of the Kingdom anticipated,²⁸ but the establishment of Christ on His throne as Ruler over the Kingdom was not postponed, and occurred at His ascension.²⁹
- 5) There is nothing in any sense implausible about the more natural reading of the passage in Daniel 2 (recognizing only one Roman Empire in history)—to say nothing of the fact that the course of subsequent history has conformed to the plainest meaning of Daniel's prediction. Jesus

²⁵ From the rise of the neo-Babylonian Empire (605 B.C.) to the fall of the Romans Empire (476 AD).

²⁶ John 17:4

²⁷ E.g., Romans 14:17; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:28; Revelation 1:6; 5:10

²⁸ Matthew 13:31-33; 25:34

²⁹ Acts 2:33, 36; Ephesians 2:20-22; Philippians 2:9-11; Revelation 3:21

established His Kingdom during the reign of the fourth kingdom in the dream, which was the Roman Empire. Ever since then His empire has been expanding to fill the earth just as the prophecy anticipated.

There is irony in this, insofar as the camp which promotes this novel and artificial insertion of a secret “gap” at the ankles of the image, repeatedly claims to be uniquely committed to the “literal interpretation” of the scriptures! Clearly, no *literal approach* to this prophecy, or any other, will support the theory of the Kingdom of God being postponed, nor of an end-times revival of a Roman Empire.

Even if we could not properly decipher the dream of Daniel 2, we could conclude, from one of the earliest messianic prophecies, that the Messiah’s Kingdom must have come during the time of the ancient Roman Empire. Jacob, on his death-bed, prophesied concerning the tribe of Judah, his fourth son:

*The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor a lawgiver from between his feet,
Until Shiloh comes;
And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.³⁰*

The Jewish rabbis and the Targums interpreted this prophecy³¹ as predicting that the scepter— a symbol of sovereign authority—would not pass from the Jews prior to the coming of Messiah (here, called Shiloh). Shiloh is said to mean “he to whom it (*the scepter*) belongs.” It is the Messiah to whom the royal authority belongs. It is interesting that the ancient rabbis believed that the taking away of the scepter from Judah refers to the Romans’ decision to take from the Jewish courts, for the first time, their right to enforce the *Torah’s* mandate of capital punishment. Some authorities say that this happened in AD 7, when Jesus was about twelve years old. Others claim that this right was stripped from the Jews about forty years before the fall of Jerusalem, in A.D. 70.³² About forty years prior to that date would place us at the time of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension.

The story is told by Rabbi Rachmon: “When the members of the Sanhedrin found themselves deprived of their right over life and death, a general consternation took possession of them; they

³⁰ Genesis 49:10

³¹ Rightly, we think!

³² “The *Talmud* itself admits that ‘A little more than forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the power of pronouncing capital sentences was taken away from the Jews.’ (*Talmud*, Jerusalem, Sanhedrin, fol. 24, recto.) However, it hardly seems possible that the ‘*jus gladii*’ [the right to execute capital punishment] remained in the Jewish hands until that time. It probably had ceased at the time of Coponius, 7 A.D. (*Essai sur l’histoire et la géographie de la Palestine, d’après les Talmuds et la géographie de la Palestine, d’après les Talmuds et les autres sources Rabbinique*, p. 90: Paris, 1867.) 21/28-30” Cited from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1991), 168-169

covered their heads with ashes, and their bodies with sackcloth, exclaiming: 'Woe unto us, for the scepter has departed from Judah, and the Messiah has not come!'"³³ This suggests that, if the prophecy is genuinely inspired, then Shiloh (Messiah) must have come around that time.

Daniel also provides another statement indicating the timing of the Messiah's coming, in his famous prophecy of the "seventy weeks." At the beginning of Daniel 9, the prophet records that he had been reading the prophecy of Jeremiah 25:11-12, which predicted the seventy-years of the Jewish exile in Babylon. Daniel himself had been taken from Jerusalem to Babylon as a captive in 605 B.C. He was now, sixty-six years later, reading the prophecy (given by Jeremiah in the very first year of Daniel's exile). Thus, Daniel was encouraged in discovering that the release of the exiles was near. He set himself to pray and repent, on behalf of the people, in order to precipitate the upcoming restoration of Israel to their own land.

As he prayed, an angelic messenger arrived with a message that the expiration of the seventy-year exile would only reset the clock to begin another, even longer, period of God's dealings with the reborn nation. That period would not be seventy, but seventy-times-seven—or 490—years. This period, apparently beginning in or around Daniel's time, would extend until the end of God's unique dealings with Israel—concluding in yet a second destruction of the temple by heathen invaders, in A.D. 70.

The analysis of this prophecy is very complex, leading to numerous theories as to the starting and ending points of the seventy "weeks"—that is, seventy "sevens" of years. Three starting points are defended by their respective advocates, with the earliest being in 539 B.C., and the latest in 444 B.C. Likewise, the end of the period is variously advocated to be A.D. 26, A.D. 30, A.D. 70, or even (by the new school) the final year of a future tribulation at the end of the world as we know it.

Some readers might appreciate my canvassing and evaluating the various theories, which I cannot do here.³⁴ In the final analysis, it doesn't matter which specific theory may prove to be correct, because, upon the reckoning of any of the them (except the last³⁵), the Messiah must come prior (but not very *much* prior) to the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Apart from Jesus of Nazareth, is there any other credible candidate for "Messiah" who is known to have arisen anytime within a century prior to A.D. 70? Not one.

³³ LeMann, M.M. *Jesus Before the Sanhedrin*. Translated by Julius Magath (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1886) 28-30

³⁴ My analysis of this prophecy, and the various theories of its fulfillment, may be heard at, or downloaded, free at this link: https://thenarrowpath.com/audio/verse-by-verse/daniel/07_2012_Daniel_9.24-9.27.mp3

³⁵ The Dispensational view inserts yet another "gap" (as was done in Daniel 2) into this prophecy, which, for all the world, appears to describe a run of 490 consecutive years. Dispensationalists (without any warrant in the passage) suggest there is a gap of nearly 2,000 years between the 483rd and the 484th years of the prophesied period. The total absence of any biblical evidence for such a long gap renders this view unworthy of serious consideration.

We will have more to glean from Daniel's prophecies, but we can draw this chapter to a close with the recognition that, according to Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream, the Messiah would appear and establish His Kingdom in the era of the last of four great pagan empires—Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome. This Messianic Kingdom would ultimately bring about the downfall and final disappearance of every rival kingdom and power.

The Kingdom of God, itself, would be the fifth, and final, World Empire. It would differ from others in that it would encompass the entire planet. It would never be conquered or replaced by any successor empire, but would continue eternally. This description corresponds, in every detail, to the Kingdom that was announced and inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth, and which has continued and expanded globally ever since His time. This correspondence must be regarded as more than coincidental.

Chapter Five

The King Has Landed

Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have...come to worship Him.
(Matthew 2:2)

Then Pilate...said to Him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"...
Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would
fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from here."
(John 18:33, 36)

The expectation of the coming Kingdom, which devout Jews cherished, was connected to the promised arrival of a courageous and charismatic King. Samuel had installed Saul and David by anointing with oil, resulting, in each case, in the Spirit of Yahweh "rushing upon" them. So also the *Messiah* ("the Anointed One") would likewise be filled with the Spirit, and specially empowered to save and lead His people.

Christians, in retrospect, may tend to think of the principal function of the Messiah as the atoning for the sins of the world by His death, and saving people for heaven. The first messianic prophecies that spring to the minds of many would be Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, which speak of the death of the Messiah. This is the feature of His story that has come to be most lauded and proclaimed throughout subsequent history.

This is not the picture that Israel had in mind in their longing for the coming of the Messiah. Even if the idea of a Messiah who would suffer was not entirely unfamiliar to the first-century Jews,¹ the Messiah's mission was thought of more in terms comparable to that of David who, a thousand years earlier, had led Israel to a status of liberty, prosperity, and prestige among the nations. Since David's time Israel had known very little of such circumstances. The Messiah would fix everything, would drive out the Roman oppressors, and establish an eternal order of justice, peace, and joy on earth—the Kingdom of God.

For many in Israel, this longing was an ache and an obsession. Many pretenders, exploiting this burning desire for liberation among the Jews, had claimed to be the Coming One. Some of them had rallied popular support and raised expectations, but had been crushed like bugs by the Roman occupiers who had no patience with such freedom fighters. There were many who suffered silently,

¹ This is disputed among scholars

like the elderly Simeon and Anna, who frequented the temple, and who were continually looking for the “consolation” and the “redemption” of Israel.²

One day, as these two elderly saints came to the temple, they encountered a peasant couple from Galilee, bringing their newborn baby there to fulfill the requirements of the Jewish law that every firstborn, male child be presented before God, along with a sacrifice, on the fortieth day after birth. Nothing about this family appeared remarkable, and they may have been standing in a line of similar-looking couples, who had brought their infant sons on the same errand. The Holy Spirit revealed to the elderly Simeon that this Galilean couple were holding in their arms the long-awaited Messiah. The old sage took the child in his own arms, declaring that in Him lay the “*salvation*” of his people, who would be “*a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.*”³

Speaking of *light to the Gentiles*, within less than two years, a group of noble Gentile visitors, probably from Persia, arrived in Jerusalem, inquiring, “*Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.*”⁴ By some means,⁵ they had interpreted a certain astral phenomenon to be an indicator that the Messiah had been born in Israel. Hence, they had made the long journey to pay their homage.

As Saul had resented David’s presumed aspirations to the throne, so Herod, the current “King of the Jews,” felt threatened by the coming of a rival. He sought to kill the child, whose family had settled in Judean Bethlehem. To save the child’s life, the family fled to Egypt. By the time they returned to Judea, after Herod’s death, all the fuss over His birth had died down, and no one knew Him from any other Jewish peasant child. Thus, He matured in obscurity, patiently hammering out a living as an apprentice in a carpenter shop.

When, at age thirty, He became publicly known, it was not initially of His own doing. He came, as most Jews did, to be immersed in the Jordan by the man who was the religious phenomenon of the day, John the Baptizer. Although John and Jesus were related on their mothers’ sides of the family, it would appear that, due to John’s hermit lifestyle, they may never have previously crossed paths. However, John was a prophet and Yahweh had told him that he would someday baptize a man who would usher in the Kingdom of God, which (as the earlier prophets had predicted⁶) would be the age of the Holy Spirit’s transforming power. John had been informed that he would recognize this Individual by the visible sign of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove upon His head. This manifestation of the Spirit occurred and was witnessed by John when he baptized Jesus, so John bore

² Luke 2:25, 38

³ Luke 2:30, 32

⁴ Matthew 2:2

⁵ Possibly from Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks Daniel 9:24-27, which had been written down and preserved in Persia.

⁶ E.g., Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-32

public testimony to this fact.⁷ It was through this testimony of John that some of Jesus' earliest disciples discovered and began to follow Him.

The Shepherd is the Lamb

The metaphor chosen by John to speak of Christ was no doubt surprising to many. He did not speak of Him as the conquering King, but as the sacrificial victim: "*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world*".⁸

One of the things that the Messiah was expected to do was to gather the Jewish *diaspora* back to the Land of Israel. The diaspora were the distant descendants of Jews who had been scattered and resettled throughout the Gentile nations centuries earlier, due to the conquest of Judah by Babylon in 586 B.C. Many of these Jews had not responded to the call to return and rebuild Jerusalem in the days of Zerubbabel—nor subsequently. Instead, they had settled comfortably in foreign lands, and half a millennium later, in the time of Christ, remained there.⁹

To Israel, such a restoration of the diaspora to the land would be the definitive signal of God's having fully forgiven her of her national sins, which had been the original cause of her dispersion among the *goyim*. Through His prophets, Yahweh had promised that He would someday pardon them and would remember their sins no more.¹⁰ To the Jewish mind, "forgiveness of sins" or "justification" carried the idea of God's expunging the ancient record of idolatry and restoring Israel to former glory under the ideal Davidic King—*Messiah*.

The idea that such pardon would be acquired through the atoning death of the Messiah had not been clearly grasped by the rabbis. By calling Jesus "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*," John was alluding to Christ's sacrificial role. It is probable that John, like the prophets before him, was speaking beyond his own grasp of the matter,¹¹ since he would later wonder if Jesus, by failing to take the militaristic course, might not be neglecting His mission.¹² John himself seemed not to understand that *taking away the sins of the world* was the means through which the Messiah would *conquer the world*, and recover humanity for God. Before traitors can be restored to their proper role of subjection to the King, they must obtain a responsible amnesty with regard to their former desertion.

It seems that it was hard for the Jews to grasp that the forgiveness of sins did not merely refer to a corporate restoration of the nation to Yahweh's good graces, but represents the principal need of

⁷ John 1:32-33

⁸ John 1:29

⁹ In fact, the *diaspora* remain, to this day, scattered globally, and Orthodox Jews, like those of Jesus' time, still expect the Messiah to come and to regather them to *Eretz Israel*.

¹⁰ Isaiah 33:24; 40:2; 55:7; Jeremiah 31:34; 33:8; Micah 7:18

¹¹ 1 Peter 1:10-11

¹² Matthew 11:2-3

each person individually. Entering the Kingdom is a personal, spiritual transition requiring forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Such reconciliation would usher one into the *Age of the Spirit*, spoken of by the prophets.

The Age of the Spirit

The coming of the Holy Spirit was a more prominent feature of the prophesied Kingdom than many Jews apparently realized. In speaking to Nicodemus about the need to be “*born of the Holy Spirit*”¹³ in order to enter the Kingdom, Jesus was astonished to discover that the esteemed “*teacher of Israel*”¹⁴ struggled to comprehend the concept. The ministry of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus, was the proof that the Kingdom of God was at that moment emerging in the midst of the Jews.¹⁵ The Pharisees thought that the Kingdom of God, whenever it would come, would be realized in the overthrow of the Roman occupiers, as is the case with any other regime change. Jesus surprised them in saying the Kingdom isn’t quite so ostentatious: “*The Kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the Kingdom of God is in your midst.*”¹⁶

At the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus publicly drew attention to the fact that the people’s unfulfilled longing—the “thirst” for the Kingdom—was at root the sign of a spiritual need. Their craving could be satisfied only by their coming to Him, and having their thirst quenched by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

*On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*¹⁷

The spiritual, rather than political, nature of the Kingdom of God was later affirmed by Paul, who wrote that Christians have already been “*delivered...from the power of darkness and conveyed...into the kingdom of the Son...*”¹⁸ In Romans, Paul again emphasized this spiritual aspect of the Kingdom: “*for the kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*”¹⁹

¹³ John 3:5

¹⁴ John 3:10

¹⁵ Matthew 12:28

¹⁶ Luke 17:20-21

¹⁷ John 7:37-39

¹⁸ Colossians 1:13

¹⁹ Romans 14:17

“In the Holy Spirit”! This is the novel emphasis of the Kingdom presented in the New Testament. The prophets had often spoken of the Messianic Kingdom in terms of its bringing justice (righteousness), peace, and great rejoicing to God’s people. Such predictions formed the basis of Jewish expectations of a new political order under a virtuous and heroic Head of State.

To their chagrin, Jesus taught that these features were to be experienced in the spiritual realm—not in the outward circumstances of His followers. The Jews were seeking peace on the national scale—the elimination of hostile enemies oppressing them. Jesus said that this peace was not to be had immediately. In fact, hostilities would increase, right down to the microscale of family relations:

Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.²⁰

There would certainly be a great peace, as the prophets had foretold, but this would not be the worldly peace of tranquil external circumstances:

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.²¹

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.²²

In the world—*tribulation*. In Christ—*peace*—peace unlike the worldly peace that the Jews had always associated with the prophetic hopes of the Messianic Age. Would the Messiah conquer the world? Yes, in fact, He had virtually done so (“*I have overcome the world*”), but not in the militaristic manner the Jews had anticipated.

Becoming King—Israel’s way Vs. God’s way

One year prior to His crucifixion, a crowd of many thousands of the Jews, having become convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, made a spontaneous move to forcibly make Him King.²³ They obviously anticipated that to accomplish this would require a successful military campaign against

²⁰ Luke 12:51-53

²¹ John 14:27

²² John 16:33

²³ John 6:15

the Romans, who would fight mercilessly to prevent their success. There would be much bloodshed, and a high body-count, but to that crowd this was seen as the unavoidable cost of freedom. To their perplexity, Jesus, not sharing their aspirations, dismissed the crowd preemptively, beating a hasty retreat to a private place to pray.

When modern theologians of the “*Postponed Kingdom*” variety tell us that Jesus actually came offering Himself to Israel as a Davidic-type ruler, but that the Jews rejected Him in this role, causing His announced Kingdom to be postponed, they seem to have the case precisely reversed. The Jewish masses were at one time very prepared not only to accept Him as their King, but to force Him into just such a position against His will. It was He, not they, who rejected this idea.

In order for the Messiah to assume the position of King over the world, it would be necessary, first, to unseat the world’s existing king. This king was not Caesar, but Caesar’s master—Satan. There is no way to properly grasp the nature of Christ’s conquest of the world without understanding the nature of the world which He came to conquer. The real world exists in two parallel dimensions. We apprehend only the physical reality with our natural senses, but Jesus also perceived the spiritual dimension. In that realm, Satan had long exerted a hegemony over the *goyim*, and to a very large extent, over Israel as well. Satan was, in that sense, the ruler of this world.

Regardless which human figure was enthroned in Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, or Outer Mongolia, the real “ruler of this world” (as Jesus called him²⁴) was the devil. Worldly rulers were mere dupes, serving unknowingly as vassals in a global hegemony that Jesus identified as Satan’s “kingdom.”²⁵ Satan is seen as the one who tempted mankind to sin, and who has, as a consequence, brought the whole race under “*the veil that is spread over all nations*”²⁶—death. Satan is described as he “*who has the power of death*”²⁷—and “*the sting of death is sin.*”²⁸ *The wages of sin is death*, and, since *all have sinned*, all have this wage awaiting them at the end of the long workday of this life.²⁹

The realm of death, as the just consequence of sin, is Satan’s kingdom. Whoever has sinned has inadvertently surrendered to his mastery. So long, and so far, as sin and death maintain their universal grip on the human race, Satan is in his element, retaining control over those subject to him. Humans may rise in rank above their peers, and may even be enthroned over nations, but they never rise above the realm of sin and death, and all remain hopelessly under the power of *the ruler of this world*.

This ruler’s overthrow could only be accomplished by a Hero who was not personally subject to the power of sin or of death. Successfully living a sinless life would uniquely qualify one to rule

²⁴ John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11

²⁵ Matthew 12:26

²⁶ Isaiah 25:7

²⁷ Hebrews 2:14

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:56

²⁹ Romans 3:23; 6:23

creation—a privilege first offered to Adam, who fumbled and lost it by his rebellion. If our first parents had lived without sin, they would be ruling the world that God gave them to this day—and we with them. A sinless person would be exempt from the claims of death upon him, since it is only *the soul who sins* that must die.³⁰ This is why the Bible emphasizes the fact that Jesus successfully made it through life without sinning.³¹ In the end, He could boast, “*the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me.*”³²

Christ had never sinned and was therefore not subject to the sin’s penalty, death. What if such a one were to subject Himself to that undeserved penalty, nonetheless? Seemingly this would leave him with an unclaimed exemption—that is, an exemption from penalty of death, which He had deliberately not claimed for Himself. Suppose, then, that God was willing to credit that unclaimed exemption to the account of undeserving, but repentant, sinners. That would seemingly cancel the death sentence against all of those to whom that credit was accounted. Further, since Christ’s death was itself entirely unwarranted, He was apparently free to leave the realm of death at will.

Death, by unjustly seizing one over whom it had no rightful claim, is thus itself condemned. By overstepping its proper authority, it has lost its right to claim those whom God justifies. Where does this leave the former *ruler of this world*, who had *the power of death*? It would mean his involuntary abdication. All that remained to be done then would be for God to fill the office of “World Ruler” with a new Occupant—naturally, the one who had dethroned the predecessor.³³

Do the last two paragraphs make your head spin? It is not necessary for our rational minds to comprehend this, so long as God does! There is mystery in it—too deep a mystery for Satan (and, possibly, for us) to grasp the nature of the sting operation. The devil thus fell into God’s trap by engineering Christ’s crucifixion—and caused his own defeat in the process. The “*rulers of this age*” did not understand the strategy.³⁴ It was by the willing self-sacrifice of Christ’s untainted life as the sacrificial Lamb, and by His resurrection, that Jesus would save His people from the tyranny of their sin and the penalty of death. This strategy of conquest and liberation through Christ’s death is summarized by the writer of Hebrews:

“Inasmuch then as the children [the ones needing rescue] have partaken of flesh and blood [that is, they were human beings], He Himself likewise shared in the same [He became a human also], that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”³⁵

³⁰ Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23

³¹ Hebrews 4:15

³² John 14:30

³³ See Revelation 3:21

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:7-8

³⁵ Hebrews 2:14-15

The dark side meets the Light of the world

The demons who serve Satan were no more informed of the Messiah's mission than were the Jewish people. However, the demons knew, better than did the people, exactly who it was that had stepped ashore on planet earth having designs of global conquest. They also sensed that it was they, not the Romans, who were in peril as a result of His arrival.

We read very little of demons in the Old Testament. There is the occasional mention of mediums, who *"have a familiar spirit,"*³⁶ and the rare case of an *"evil spirit"* coming to torment or confuse individuals like Saul.³⁷ However, from the beginning of the New Testament, things seem to have changed. The demons seem to have come out in force. Israel was experiencing a veritable infestation. Demon possession was suddenly a common phenomenon in Israel. Everywhere Jesus went, He was called upon to deliver people from demons,³⁸ along with healing the sick. People seemed to be very familiar with demon possession, speaking of it as a recognizable condition.³⁹ They were able to distinguish the condition from ordinary illnesses requiring medical cures.⁴⁰ When preaching to the household of Cornelius, Peter described the ministry of Jesus, summarizing His activities as *"[going] about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil."*⁴¹

In the arrival of Jesus the demons could see that the True King had landed upon what had heretofore been their undisputed territory. They had no doubt that it was in His power to "torment" them, if He chose to do so.⁴² Their common reaction to being in His presence was to shriek in terror.⁴³ They knew that even thousands of them together were no match for Him, and sheepishly begged Him to not send them where they did not wish to go.⁴⁴ They were at His mercy, and they knew it well.

Even their lord Satan knew Jesus was more than his match. He had sought, unsuccessfully, to eliminate Jesus at infancy, through Herod's murderous attack on the infants of Bethlehem.⁴⁵ He had met the adult Jesus in the wilderness, only to find that his strongest temptations struck out against His unconquerable resistance.⁴⁶ He could see that Jesus was plundering his own domain in casting demons out of his former prisoners. Satan's ability to resist was zero—like a man securely bound in his own house watching with chagrin as home invaders methodically gather up for themselves his

³⁶ E.g., Leviticus 19:31; 20:6

³⁷ Judges 9:23; 1 Samuel 16:14

³⁸ Matthew 8:16; Mark 1:39

³⁹ E.g., Matthew 15:22; Luke 9:38-39; Mark 1:27

⁴⁰ Matthew 4:24

⁴¹ Acts 10:38

⁴² Matthew 8:29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28

⁴³ E.g., Mark 1:23-24; 5:7

⁴⁴ Mark 5:10

⁴⁵ Matthew 2:16

⁴⁶ Matthew 4:1-10; Luke 4:1-13

former possessions.⁴⁷ Like a one-man invasion force, Jesus had stormed the citadel of Satan, confronted the dark lord on his own turf, and stripped him of his armor.⁴⁸ Imagine the terror and desperation of the devil as he found himself disarmed and in the presence, for the first time, of One who was infinitely more powerful than himself!

This is how Jesus Himself described His own power over Satan. He said that he had bound and disarmed the “*strong man*” and was plundering his house. Jesus pointed to this very activity as proof that the Kingdom of God had arrived with Him, when He said: “*But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.*”⁴⁹

This being so, imagine Satan’s surprise when Jesus at a certain point, as if on cue, seemed to halt His juggernaut campaign against Satan entirely, rendering Himself totally vulnerable to being taken by His enemies and being put on trial for His life! Though no one had seemingly understood His meaning, Jesus had earlier mentioned this plan when He said:

*“I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.”*⁵⁰

Nothing short of the command of His Father could have stopped His progress. The gospel campaign of the previous three years had been unrestrainable by any opposing power, and would have continued to be so had there not been a secret strategy to be implemented. While no one could take Jesus down apart from His own willful surrender, His strategy was to strike the final blow against Satan’s throne by making the ultimate sacrifice of Himself. As He put it, addressing those who came to arrest Him: “*When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.*”⁵¹

The crucifixion can be seen as the power of darkness having its “hour,” but it would be the last hour that Satan would ever have occasion to relish. Because Jesus, by His death, cancelled the record of sins and reconciled the world to God. His resurrection was the establishment of the New Order, and the first fruits of a future general resurrection of all mankind. Jesus, by this stratagem, stripped the devil of all legitimate power and authority over humanity. As Jesus Himself put it, after His resurrection, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.*”⁵²

⁴⁷ Matthew 12:29

⁴⁸ Luke 11:21-22

⁴⁹ Matthew 12:28

⁵⁰ John 10:17-18

⁵¹ Luke 22:53

⁵² Matthew 28:18

Chapter Six
The King on the Throne

*So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven,
and sat down at the right hand of God.*

(Mark 16:19)

*These who have turned the world upside down...are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar,
saying there is another king—one Jesus.*

(Acts 17:6-7 KJV)

The authority given to Jesus by the Father is the royal authority of the Messiah, and after He arose from death, all that remained was for Him to be formally enthroned at the right hand of the Father, as the Psalm had declared:

*The LORD said to my Lord,
“Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”¹*

Once again, we meet with the objections coming from the “*Postponed Kingdom*” school of thought. We are told that the Messiah must sit on David’s *literal* throne in Jerusalem.² Since Jesus was denied that position by the Jews (so it is alleged), such predictions of His sitting on David’s throne must be fulfilled in the future when Jesus returns. He will then set up His literal earthly throne in the literal city of Jerusalem, and thus occupy David’s former position for a thousand years (often referred to as the Millennial reign). John Walvoord, a champion of this position, wrote:

It is also clear that Christ is not reigning on earth in any literal sense. Jerusalem is not His capital nor are the people of Israel responsive to His rule at the present time. To attempt to find fulfillment in the present age requires radical spiritualization and denial of the plain, factual statements related to the kingdom. ³

Likewise, Dwight Pentecost wrote:

¹ Psalm 110:1

² Isaiah 9:7; Luke 1:32

³ John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 108

David's son, the Lord Jesus Christ must return to the earth, bodily and literally, in order to reign over David's covenanted kingdom.⁴

Yet another teacher of this view, Charles Ryrie, put it this way:

Though Christ is a King today, He does not rule as King. This awaits His second coming. Then the Davidic kingdom will be realized (Matt. 25:31; Rev. 19:15; 20)...The church is not a part of this kingdom at all.⁵

However, H. A. Ironside, a famous advocate of this view, admits:

... until Mr. J.N. Darby...[the idea of a *Postponed Kingdom*] is scarcely to be found in a single book or sermon through a period of sixteen hundred years.⁶

It would be more accurate to place the length of that period at eighteen hundred years, since Darby introduced this idea in the 1830's, and none is known to have taught it previously. There are several reasons that the Church failed to advocate such an idea for its first eighteen centuries. For example:

- The apostles preached that these very promises that God made to David had indeed been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus and His exaltation by God (Acts 2:29-36/13:32-34). They knew of no postponement.
- The promise made to David predicted that his scion would sit on his throne while David was “sleeping with his fathers”—i.e., while David was dead (2 Samuel 7:12). Peter pointed out that this very condition prevailed at the very time that he was preaching, and that Jesus had fulfilled the promises. “[David] is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2:29). The prophecy cannot await the second coming of Christ for its fulfillment, since, when Jesus comes, all the dead (including David) will be raised.⁷ David, at that time, will no longer be “sleeping with his fathers.” Thus, the stated conditions for fulfillment will no longer exist.
- The “throne” of David does not have to be the literal chair upon which David sat. David’s immediate successor, Solomon, who was said to have sat on David’s throne (1 Kings 2:12, 24), did not himself reign from David’s *literal* throne. Instead, he had his own royal chair built (See 1 Kings 10:18-20), replacing the one upon which David sat. Likewise, the kings of Jeremiah’s

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958), 114

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1986) 398-99

⁶ Harry Ironside, *The Mysteries of God*. (New York: Loizeaux Brothers. 1908), 50,51

⁷ John 5:28-29

time, 400 years later, were still said to “*sit on David’s throne*” (Jeremiah 13:13; 22:2; 29:16), though his literal throne had been long discarded.

- At Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the people proclaimed “*Blessed is the kingdom of our father David, that comes in the name of the Lord.*” (Mark 11:9-10). They clearly recognized this as the time that David’s Kingdom was being restored through the Messiah. Were they mistaken? Jesus apparently agreed with them, because He said that if they failed to say these things the rocks themselves would cry out to proclaim this to be so (Luke 19:39-40).
- The term “*the throne of David*” is also referred to as “*the throne of the kingdom of the Lord over Israel*” (1 Chronicles 28:5) or “*the throne of the Lord*” (1 Chronicles 29:23). In other words, “the throne of David” is simply a reference to the throne of the one ruling over God’s Kingdom—the position which Jesus the Son of David now occupies in heaven (Psalm 110:1; Matt.28:18; 1 Cor.15:25-26; Eph.1:20-22; Revelation 3:21).

Though the Kingdom Jesus established would remain on earth, the King, for the time being, would reign over it from His throne in heaven. But why? If Jesus has purchased the world as His sphere of rulership, why did He leave again, seemingly abandoning His hard-won planet?

The answer is, He has not abandoned the planet. Just prior to His departure, Jesus assured His disciples that He would remain with them forever. At this time, He is present through His indwelling Spirit, who has incorporated Christ’s followers into His Body as His flesh and His bones, His hands and His feet here on earth. Though He had, at first, “tabernacled” among us in the body of one man for a short time, He now continues to be eternally embodied in the community of His people, who comprise the corporate Body of Christ, the Kingdom of God, or the global Church. Through His corporate Body, Christ still has His feet (us) on earth, though our Head is in heaven.

The reason for His doing things this way can only be appreciated by understanding the goal implied in the Father’s words: “*Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.*” The head of the serpent’s kingdom has been crushed, but there are still many of his underlings to be individually subdued (which will be the subject of our next chapter). Speaking of Christ’s present session on the throne in heaven, Paul explains, “*For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet.*”⁸

Jesus once spoke of the Kingdom of God being like a nobleman who “*went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.*” The parable⁹ focuses on the fact that the nobleman distributed his assets to trusted servants to manage on his behalf in his absence. The climax of the

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:25

⁹ Luke 19:11-27

story is the rewarding of these servants for their good management when the master returned to fully possess his kingdom. A secondary plot in the parable speaks of some of his subjects rejecting his rule over them in his absence and their receiving their due punishment upon his return.

The scenario of a government official going abroad to be assigned a domain in his home country and returning as undisputed king would have resonated with the experience of Jesus' hearers. The most obvious case in their own time was when Herod Archelaus had also gone to Rome in 4 B.C. to be confirmed by the Emperor Augustus as *ethnarch* (a lesser kind of king) of Judea.¹⁰ The people of Judea had sent a delegation to Rome complaining about the appointment, just as the nobleman's critics did in the parable.¹¹

The parable thus presents a familiar idea that, in order to become a king, one needs to have an appointment from the highest authority—in the case of Archelaus, from the Emperor. Similarly, in order to reign over God's Kingdom, Jesus had to be enthroned by the Father, which is what Jesus meant by saying that all authority had been "given" to Him.¹² This parable differs in detail from the historical case of Archelaus, in that the latter received his royal title in Rome and returned immediately to reign in Judea. By contrast, the nobleman in the parable, having received his kingdom, stays away for some period, leaving his servants in charge of his affairs at home.

Similarly, Jesus, having gone away to heaven, has now received His Kingdom. This is in fulfillment of another vision in the Book of Daniel. Daniel sees Christ ascending through the clouds to heaven, where He is given a Kingdom and a throne at the right hand of God:

*I was watching in the night visions,
And behold, One like the Son of Man,
Coming with the clouds of heaven!
He came to the Ancient of Days,
And they brought Him near before Him.
Then 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 the one
Which shall not be destroyed.¹³*

¹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.9.1-3 (17.206-23, 318) and *Wars* 2.2.2; 2.6.3 (2.18, 94)

¹¹ Luke 19:14

¹² Matthew 28:18

¹³ Daniel 7:13-14

It is common for readers to carelessly assume that this is a prophecy of the second coming of Christ. The reference to “*coming with the clouds*” seems to be a dead giveaway. However, if we actually pay attention to the words of the passage, Daniel is viewing from a heavenly perspective. He sees the Son of Man *coming to heaven*, to God, and being brought near to Him. This is a heavenly scene, not an earthly one. Jesus ascended from earth through the clouds¹⁴ and is viewed, from the heavenly side of those clouds, as coming to heaven and being enthroned. It is in heaven, at the right hand of God that Jesus now reigns, having been “*given dominion, glory and a kingdom.*”

This is His present status ever since His ascension. He has received a Kingdom, like the nobleman in the parable—but, instead of immediately returning home to His subjects, He has accepted His Father’s invitation to sit next to Him, and to reign over earth from His throne in heaven. This arrangement will be prolonged only until all His enemies in heaven and earth are subdued. This vision in Daniel is the Old Testament’s counterpart to Jesus’ story about a man going far away “*to receive a kingdom.*”

Daniel’s vision tells us that, since Jesus is King, it is incumbent upon “*all peoples, nations, and languages*” that they “*should serve Him.*” Psalm 110:1 guarantees that Jesus will remain on His present throne until all His enemies are “*under [His] feet*” (i.e., subject and submitted to Him). Based upon this promise, Paul tells us that the reign of Christ will continue in its present phase until all His enemies, including physical death, have been subdued and made subject to Him.¹⁵

Christ (unlike the rulers of the Gentiles¹⁶) does not exercise force, but rather love, to persuade His enemies to repent¹⁷ and surrender to His grace, which means that He must be patient, as many are slow to be persuaded, and others have not yet even heard the name of the King.¹⁸ Paul describes himself and all Christians as having once been among the enemies of Christ,¹⁹ but having now been subdued and brought willingly under His rule.²⁰

According to Paul, this present mode of Christ’s reign from heaven will only last until this present mission is accomplished, after which, “*the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.*”²¹

The Kingdom of God, during this phase, is “*the kingdom of Christ,*” or the “*kingdom of the Son.*”²² God has placed Christ in charge and given Him the assignment (if I may paraphrase): “*Rule here until you have recovered every last thing that was lost to us in the human rebellion. When you have done so,*

¹⁴ Acts 1:9

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:25-26

¹⁶ Matthew 20:25

¹⁷ Romans 2:4

¹⁸ 2 Peter 3:9

¹⁹ Romans 5:10

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 2:14

²¹ 1 Corinthians 15:28

²² Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 1:13

we shall move to the next phase.” Someday, Jesus, with the nations subdued, will turn over the finished project to His Father and say, “I have a gift for you. Here is your world back, just as it was when you created it—no, better!”

David, again.

We have observed that David was the most important Old Testament pattern (or *type*) of Christ with respect to the Kingdom. David’s reign follows a pattern like Christ’s in certain respects. The incremental rise of David’s kingdom is one such parallel.

In his youth, David was privately anointed by Samuel at a secret ceremony in his father’s home. At that time, the Spirit of Yahweh, which had previously fallen upon Saul at his anointing, now came upon David. At the same time, the Spirit departed from Saul and was replaced in him by a demonic spirit. David was now the real anointed king of Israel, though few knew it. Saul was the demonic king. Most in Israel continued to habitually follow Saul, regarding him still as the king. However, as far as Saul was concerned, Israel was not big enough for both kings, so David had to flee into the wilderness as Saul brought his armies against him, attempting, as Herod would later attempt, to eliminate any rival.

David spent some years exiled from his nation and people. He was followed only by a small, but growing, band of extreme loyalists. Their number was four-hundred, though it later grew to at least six-hundred. These were individuals who were not pleased with Saul’s management, and who recognized that David was God’s actual choice as king of Israel. They fled with him, slept in the desert, hid in caves, and sometimes did death-defying feats of heroic loyalty to his cause, though their natural prospects of eventual vindication, or even survival, seemed slim-to-none. Saul never laid a glove on David. He was divinely thwarted every time he even seemed to be getting close to his target.

When God, through the Philistines, brought Saul’s reign to a disastrous end, David was called upon by his own tribe of Judah to reign over them. This he did, for seven-and-a-half years, from a throne in Hebron, while the rest of Israel briefly and half-heartedly served Saul’s son Ishbosheth. After Ishbosheth’s death, the entire nation came over to David’s side, making him the king of all the tribes of Israel, reigning from Jerusalem. After his accession to the throne as universal king, he also conquered all the surrounding Gentile nations, bringing them into his empire and exacting tribute and loyalty from them.

There is a general parallel between these events and the rise of the Kingdom under the Messiah Jesus. Jesus became the anointed King at His baptism, when the Spirit came upon Him, and the voice from heaven endorsed Him. From that moment on, like David after his private anointing, Jesus has held status as the “real” King of God’s earth. Like Israel under Saul, most of earth’s inhabitants still tend to follow the old ruler Satan, either through ignorance or by preference. Thus, the majority still

are on the side of the evil pretender, who (like the demonized Saul) irrationally and desperately seeks to neutralize the prospect of losing everything to God's Chosen One.

During the present time, like that of David's exile, there are those who follow Jesus at the risk of their lives. This may sound melodramatic to those of us who live in conditions of security and comfort. However, around the world, Christ's loyalists suffer persecution and martyrdom, and there is never any guarantee that such will not break out without notice wherever Christians currently live in peace.

*For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.*²³

*Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*²⁴

None of David's men, as far as we know, were actually killed in their years of loyalty to the persecuted king, but they were willingly facing that prospect daily. As David said to Jonathan, "*there is but a step between me and death*"²⁵ For all we know, it is the same for all who enroll in Christ's service in the present hostile world. This is the vocation to which the gospel calls men and women—to live, to endure hardship, to brave persecution, and possibly to die for the love of God's appointed King.

When David rose to universal power, he brought to power with him those who had been loyal to him in his exile. Similarly, the day will come when all recognize Jesus as King. *Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess Him as Lord.*²⁶ At that time, those who already recognize Him as the True King, and have suffered for their loyalty to Him during this phase of His kingship, will rule with Him in His universal reign. "*If we endure, we shall also reign with Him.*" (2 Timothy 2:12).

The throne in the Apocalypse

The Apostle John was caught up in a vision from the prison island of Patmos (where he was incarcerated) into the heavenly realms. There he was permitted to view the workings of certain historical developments from a vantage point behind the scenes, and to see the divine purposes that lay beyond the events occurring on the world's stage.

When caught up, the first thing that dominated his view was the throne of God, the Sovereign of the universe. The image of the throne dominates the Book of Revelation, being mentioned 34 times throughout the book. In the remainder of the New Testament books combined, the word *throne*

²³ Matthew 16:25

²⁴ 2 Timothy 3:12

²⁵ 1 Samuel 20:3

²⁶ Philippians 2:9-11

occurs less than half that number of times. The Apocalypse thus places deliberate stress upon the sovereignty of the heavens over events on earth.

In Revelation, God is always seen to be on the throne, which is sometimes also called “*the throne of God and the Lamb*” (Revelation 22:1, 3). Thus, Christ is also reigning there. In Revelation 3:21, Jesus says to the church of Laodicea: “*To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.*” In this statement, Jesus declares that He is currently enthroned with His Father as the reward of His having “overcome”—a conquest that is elsewhere said to have been accomplished at the time of His death.²⁷

John’s vision of Christ enthroned is accompanied by further visions depicting specific actions that proceed from the throne, behind the scenes, impacting historical events. Consequently, the Book of Revelation, whatever else it may be telling us, is emphatically declaring that the great national powers that rise, that engage in battles, that persecute believers, and that fall under God’s judgment, all carry out their activities under the overarching purposes of the sovereignty of God and of Christ. Christ’s sovereignty over the planet and its petty rulers is affirmed in the name, “*King of kings and Lord of lords,*” which is repeatedly used of Him (Revelation 17:14; 19:16).

This need not be taken to mean that humans have no free will, or that every occurrence on earth is directly decreed to happen by Christ in heaven. It does mean, however, that nothing can happen on earth if Christ does not at least *allow* it to take place. The fact that He gives limited power to men and women to choose their courses, even to the detriment of themselves and others, does not mean that He has surrendered His option of vetoing any outcome that they may pursue contrary to His will. God has an overarching purpose in history which Christ is carrying out from heaven. No power on earth, including the devil (as we shall see in our next chapter) can even hope to thwart it.

Meanwhile, back on earth...

In the meantime, Christ mediates from heaven God’s rule over the earth, through a Kingdom comprised of His subjects in both heaven and earth. Some have now died and are gone to heaven, but they will return to earth when He does,²⁸ to take their places among the glorified saints inhabiting the renewed earth.²⁹ Heaven is no permanent home for mankind, as the Psalmist declares, “*The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord’s; but the earth He has given to the children of men.*”³⁰ Since Christ is the Son of Man, reigning over the sons of men, the restored earth is the rightful venue for His Kingdom in its final phase.

²⁷ John 16:33

²⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:14; Daniel 12:13

²⁹ Romans 8:19-22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1ff

³⁰ Psalm 115:16

Like the servants in the parable, our instructions in the King's absence are: "*occupy until I come.*"³¹ This is not merely a vague charge meaning "find something useful to do while I am gone." As we shall see, our occupation is a wartime engagement. In His absence, the King's enemies are to be subdued and brought under His feet. That is the task left for us to accomplish in His absence, and no one said it would be easy.

³¹ Luke 19:13 KJV

Chapter Seven
The Clash of Empires

*Now is the judgment of this world;
now the ruler of this world will be cast out.*
(John 12:31)

*Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great
wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.*
(Revelation 12:12)

The Kingdom of God has been planted in the hostile territory of a rebel planet. Jesus ascended to the throne in heaven in order that He might govern and guide the advance of His Kingdom on earth, until all of His enemies here have been subdued. That this is the end in view has been established by reference to Old Testament prophecies, like those found in Psalms 2, 72, 110, and Daniel 2 and 7.¹ Paul clearly affirms that this is the goal:

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.²

Revelation 12, in words borrowed from Psalm 2, speaks of Christ's destiny, "to rule all nations with a rod of iron."³ However, the context of this statement emphasizes the opposition that the devil brings in his desperate, but futile, ongoing attempt to prevent this inevitable outcome—and of the warfare waged between Satan and the people of God before the final goal is realized. There is no uncertainty concerning outcome. The followers of Christ ultimately defeat Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death" (v.11). This final line speaks of the battle becoming so fierce, at times, that it results in Christian martyrdom. This is no sham battle or war game. Unlike videogame battles, we are engaged in a life and death struggle to rescue the souls of the lost. Paul, mixing the metaphors of an Olympic competition and natural warfare, wrote to encourage his co-worker Timothy to persevere:

¹ More such prophecies could be appealed to.

² Philippians 2:9-11

³ Revelation 12:5

You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.⁴

Speaking of his own behavior with reference to such matters, Paul employs the same two metaphors of running a race and of fighting an opponent. He writes to the Corinthians:

All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.⁵

Although the victory of Christ's Kingdom is assured, there remains, as Paul says, a genuine risk of loss to those individual participants who do not take their commission seriously. Peter, too, speaks of the need for self-discipline, sobriety, and vigilance in the warfare of the Christian who values his own soul's security:

Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul...Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.⁶

Having established that the world is not a playground, but a battleground, it is necessary that we grasp the nature of the battle in which we are engaged, and the reason why it even exists.

The back story behind a familiar conflict

Jesus' victory two thousand years ago was the decisive step in the restoration of all that was originally lost by God. "*The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.*"⁷ The thing that was lost was man's original dominion over the world while in submission to Yahweh. It was as the Son of Man (the *last Adam*⁸) that Jesus recovered this dominion, on behalf of our race. The first Adam, as our representative, had lost this privilege for us. We know that God's original intention in

⁴ 2 Timothy 2:3-5

⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:25-27 NLT

⁶ 1 Peter 2:11; 5:8-9

⁷ Luke 19:10

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:45

creating the earth was that it should be inhabited by creatures sharing in His decision-making capacity, so that He could entrust to them the rule over a perfect creation. A man who has built up a business enterprise with the desire to leave its management ultimately in the hands of his own children may be able to relate to God's motivations in creating us. Yahweh's intentions for mankind were stated prior to the creation of the first humans:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."⁹

God had already made all plants and animals to delight Himself and His future children but a man cannot leave the oversight of his business to his cat or his canary. Yahweh desired to create responsible bearers of His own image, possessing rationality, creativity, and volition, like Himself. Therefore, he made our first parents and commissioned them to bear many offspring who would cultivate and fill the earth. Their first assignment was to take over the care and maintenance of a special region that God had pre-cultivated for them, the Garden of Eden.

God's ideal was that humans would be loyal children in His household and would appreciate the privilege of being entrusted with so great a stewardship. If they had remained faithful and obedient to their Creator, there is every reason to believe that this perfect planet would have been their home without interruption and without death—and our venerable first parents would still be living among us today! God never intended that mankind would live in heaven with the angels. The heavens are the Lord's, *"but the earth He has given to the sons of men."*¹⁰

Have you ever wondered why God placed a forbidden tree in this perfect garden with the potential of stumbling His children—or why He placed them in a garden inhabited by a malicious serpent? Wasn't God aware of the serpent's presence and intentions? Couldn't God have destroyed or removed the devil in order to prevent the fall of our first parents? The answer is actually quite simple. God did not wish to entrust full dominion over His creation to children whose trustworthiness had not yet been tested and thereby established. This required that our first parents be subjected to a test of loyalty before they could be entrusted with complete control. The serpent was a creation of God,¹¹ and it was no mistake or oversight on God's part that it was placed in the same corner of the universe as were the first humans. The serpent had a purpose for being there. He and the tree with the forbidden fruit were intentional features of the perfect creation, providing humans with a constant alternative to test their required obedience and loyalty.

⁹ Genesis 1:26

¹⁰ Psalm 115:16

¹¹ Genesis 3:1

A surgeon, who has built a prestigious practice and wishes to leave it in the hands of his own children, will first place them in medical school. As part of an education, they would be required to sit for the proper exams, to determine their qualifications to do surgery so as to eventually take over his practice. By requiring that they be tested is he setting them up for failure? No, just the opposite! He wants them to pass the exams and prove themselves qualified—but only if they have mastered the requisite knowledge and surgical skills. While he wants to see them pass every test, he does not wish them to do so if they are not qualified. In the selection of those who will reign with God, the thing that qualifies the candidate is complete loyalty to God. It is in this qualification that our first parents, and all of us since, have had to be tested. Satan is the appointed “tester.”¹²

Our first parents failed the loyalty test. As a consequence, they were not permitted to eat of the tree of life¹³—which would have allowed them to live forever as permanent regents of the planet. Instead, they would live out their finite lifetimes under the rule of that malevolent spirit who had animated the serpent. Satan gained and retains his control over mankind through deception.¹⁴ Had He wished, God could have accepted the results of the experiment as a failure, and just folded up the cosmos as one does with a checker board after losing the game. He could have abandoned “Project Earth” to try again with another planet, and then another, and another, until He received the results He was seeking.

This is not what God chose to do. Despite the treason of His children, God loved them too much to abandon them to their fate. When they had first disobeyed, He told them that He would stage a rescue operation for Planet Earth. He, in the person of a human being—a descendant of theirs—would personally conquer the enemy who had deceived them¹⁵—thus liberating them to follow Him once again.

The entire Old Testament is the story of the general failure of mankind under the control of the enemy. It is also the story of a special family—that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the nation of Israel which arose from them—whom God chose for a special mission. Yahweh’s dealings with that nation began with the divine promise of global restoration through His future search-and-rescue operation. This would be accomplished by the Messiah, whom their nation would bring into the world.¹⁶

Revelation 12—a panorama of the warfare of the ages

¹² The Greek word *peirasmos* translated “tempter” also means “tester” or one who assays or proves.

¹³ Genesis 3:22-24

¹⁴ Revelation 12:9

¹⁵ Genesis 3:15. In this statement I do not intend to suggest that this entire plan, as stated, was clearly communicated in this one verse. The details were to unfold through later revelation that He would provide to chosen messengers.

¹⁶ E.g., Genesis 3:15; 12:3; Psalm 2:8; 72; Isaiah 11:9; 42:1-4; 43:6; 45:23; 49:6; 52:10; Habakkuk 2:14; Zechariah 14:9; Malachi 1:11.

The twelfth chapter of Revelation distills this message into a dramatic story of a woman, a dragon (or serpent), a male child, and a company at war with the serpent. Revelation is the most debated and potentially confusing book in the canon of scripture.¹⁷ Its ambiguity, in some parts, has intimidated many readers, discouraging them from any hopes of mastering its message. However, many of the truths revealed there are far too valuable to allow us to simply surrender to confusion in the face of the controversy. The twelfth chapter is such a section. There is no more complete and succinct summary in scripture of the Kingdom's warfare throughout the ages than that provided in John's vision. Happily, the chapter contains all the necessary clues, found in its frequent allusions to clearer parts of scripture, to allow us to confidently decipher its message.

There are three distinct scenes to this drama:

- Scene 1: on earth. The first six verses describe a pregnant woman about to give birth, and the hostile intentions of a dragon/serpent to kill her child in its infancy. Then follows the birth of a male child, and his subsequent ascension to heaven, after which, his mother flees into the wilderness.
- Scene 2: in the heavens. Verses 7 through 12 speak of a war in heaven and the downfall of the persecuting dragon, who is cast out of heaven to carry out his hostile intentions upon the inhabitants of earth.
- Scene 3: back on earth. In verses 13 to 17 the woman's flight into the wilderness is rejoined, and an ensuing warfare between the serpent and her other children is described.

It is necessary that we free our minds from the notion that everything in the Book of Revelation is about the so-called "end times." Some parts, at least, clearly look back on past events. This will be seen to be the case, in particular, in this chapter. We shall see that it begins with the birth of Christ and declares the coming of salvation and the Kingdom of God through His resurrection victory. It then summarizes the ongoing battle between His people and the kingdom of Satan—the warfare in which we find ourselves embroiled even to this day. That this is the scope of the passage will become clear as we examine each of its scenes individually. The first scene is comprised of verses 1-6:

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth.

¹⁷ See my book *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997, Revised and updated, 2013).

And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Scene 1 introduces the reader to the main characters: a woman in labor, a dragon determined to destroy her Child at birth, and the Child Himself. The latter is born safely and ends up enthroned in heaven. The woman then flees to the wilderness where she is preserved by God for a stated period.

The proper interpretation of the story in the vision will depend upon the correct identification of the characters portrayed in it, but this will not present us with too great a challenge. The parties are identified for us fairly unambiguously.

First, the dragon is plainly identified as the devil (v.9). The text leaves no room for controversy over this point.

The most important character is the Child born to the woman at the beginning of the chapter. It is clearly Jesus the Messiah. This is unmistakable due to three features of His description:

- *First*, His birth is anticipated with dread by the dragon, who seeks His destruction from infancy, as we know was manifested in Herod's slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem.
- *Second*, He is to rule the nations "*with a rod of iron*,"(v.5), which is an unambiguous messianic phrase taken from Psalm 2:9.
- *Third*, He is "*caught up*" to the throne of God (which is how Jesus ended His earthly career) and mentions His present session at the right hand of God.

The main character who remains to be identified is the woman, who is identifiable from the various things said about her. She is first of all the mother of the Messiah. Roman Catholics have historically identified this woman with Mary (reasonably enough, since she was Jesus' mother). However, in the Book of Revelation, women are commonly symbols, not of actual women, but of greater entities, like Babylon¹⁸ and Jerusalem¹⁹—both of which are described as *women* but both are also said to be *cities*.

¹⁸ Revelation 17:18

¹⁹ Revelation 21:2, 9-10

There are excellent reasons to identify the woman with Israel—or, more precisely, with the faithful remnant of Israel. According to Old Testament imagery, Israel was God’s wife and His Son was brought forth from within the faithful remnant community (of which Mary and Joseph were a part).

This woman flees into the wilderness (vv.6, 14) and has other children there (v.17). These details do not correspond to anything in Mary’s known history—though the remnant of Israel—the Jewish church in Jerusalem—is historically known to have done this just prior to A.D. 70.²⁰

One other fact connects the woman to Israel: she is “*clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars* (v.1). Though this imagery may be obscure to those unfamiliar with the Old Testament, the sun, moon and twelve stars are first seen in Joseph’s dream, where they represent the family of Jacob (i.e., Israel).²¹

Having thus identified the principle characters in the drama, an outline of the story can begin to be recognized. The scene opens with the travail of the faithful remnant of Israel just prior to the birth of Messiah. Her labor pains, no doubt, refer to the tribulations that the faithful in Israel, especially the *Hasidim*²² and the *Maccabees*,²³ endured under Antiochus Epiphanes—and later, under Herod and Rome—while retaining their messianic hope.

Satan, the instigator of those woes was very concerned that the Messiah’s mission should not succeed, and desired to kill Him immediately after He was born. There is one such attempt on record,²⁴ and there may have been others. Nonetheless, the Messiah survived (or, rather, came back from His eventual death) and ascended to heaven to assume sovereign rule on the throne of God.²⁵ It is interesting that the vision passes over the entire life of Jesus, omitting even His death and resurrection. This deliberately places the emphasis of the vision on Jesus’ ascension to the throne and assumption of His reign over the Kingdom.

The devil then turned his wrath upon the woman, or the faithful remnant, who fled to safety and was preserved by God from the Jewish holocaust that followed, in A.D. 66-70. The period of time of her sojourn in the wilderness “*one thousand two hundred and sixty days*”—coming to three-and-a-half years—may be symbolic, or it may be intended to refer to the length of the Jewish War (A.D. 66-70), prior to which the Jerusalem church, by fleeing, had escaped from immediate danger.

Scene 2, consisting of verses 7 through 12, turns the reader’s attention to another dimension:

²⁰ According to Eusebius: “*The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, given to men of approved piety there before the war, removed from the city, and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan, called Pella.*” (*Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3; Chapter:5)

²¹ Genesis 37:9-10

²² Devout Jews who suffered persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C.

²³ The Jewish guerrilla band that overthrew Antiochus Epiphanes at the loss of many of their lives.

²⁴ Matthew 2:16

²⁵ Revelation 3:21

And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time."

In this scene, the venue cuts away from earth to heaven. Heavenly events are described—first a battle between good and evil angelic forces, followed by the victory of Michael's forces. The warfare of angels against demonic adversaries in the spiritual realm was also depicted in Daniel 10, where Michael is also seen engaging in battle on behalf of God's people against demonic principalities in Persian times.

The dragon is seen as cast out of heaven, where he had previously been permitted to accuse the righteous, like a prosecuting attorney, in the presence of God (as seen in Job 1:1-12; 2:5; Zechariah 3:1). Then a heavenly announcement is heard concerning the significance of this victory. Satan is depicted as particularly angry over his expulsion from heaven, so that he engages in fierce conflict with the people of the Messiah—though they manage ultimately to defeat him *by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony*, combined with their death-defying fortitude.

The time frame of this casting out of the dragon has been variously identified. There are essentially three very different views:

- It refers to the fall of Lucifer prior to his appearance in the Garden of Eden; or
- It is a future development very near the end of the world, in the midst of the tribulation period; or
- It refers to an event that fits the context of the chapter.

By observing the context, we can determine the errors of the first two options with relative ease. First, the setting of the story is neither prior to the fall of humanity nor at the end of the current age, because it falls within a narration about first-century events. The only time period alluded to in the text is that of the birth and ascension of Christ.

Also, the casting out of Satan corresponds to the angelic announcement: *“Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down”* (v.10). The three things mentioned, *“salvation,” “the Kingdom of God,”* and the *“power [Gr. exousia-meaning authority] of His Christ,”* are all the immediate results of the ministry and especially the ascension of Christ. This was the last event related in the chapter, before cutting away to this heavenly scene.

The casting out of Satan, depicted here, is an event earlier identified by Jesus as being about to happen at the end of His ministry. Anticipating His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus said, *“Now the ruler of this world will be cast out.”*²⁶ John, as author of this gospel, and also of Revelation, would naturally have connected these two statements. In other words, this salvation, authority and Kingdom, which are said to have come at the casting out of Satan, were the immediate results of Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

We saw, in verses 5-6 that the woman’s flight into the wilderness was associated with the ascension of the Messiah to the throne—whereas, in vv.13-14, her flight was said to be caused by Satan’s being cast out of heaven.

...her Child was caught up to God and His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness...²⁷

Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman...But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness...²⁸

This means that her flight (a specific historical fact of the past) was occasioned by the ascension of Christ (v.6), and the casting out of Satan (vv.13-14)—leaving us no option but to see these two events—Christ’s ascension/enthronement and Satan’s expulsion—as concurrent events. Both are said to have precipitated the woman’s flight. This means that Satan’s being cast out of heaven was simultaneous with—and the result of—Christ’s ascension and enthronement.

But if the resurrection and ascension of Christ correspond to the downfall of Satan at the end of a heavenly battle, then the heavenly battle itself, which preceded his expulsion, must have taken place before Christ’s death and resurrection. There seems no conclusion to be drawn other than that the heavenly battle was occurring during the lifetime of Christ, and was concluded in His death, resurrection, and ascension to the throne. The victory of Christ over Satan was the victory depicted as Michael’s angels conquering Satan’s forces.

Thus, the heavenly vision pulls back the curtain to reveal what was going on in the unseen realm while Christ lived, died, arose, and ascended. It explains why people saw Jesus as a gentle and

²⁶ John 12:31

²⁷ Revelation 12:5-6

²⁸ Revelation 12:13-14

harmless sage, while the demons were in sheer terror upon encountering Him. They lived in the spiritual realm where the battle was raging. When Christ ascended and Satan was cast out, the inhabitants of heaven celebrated the fact that salvation, strength, the Kingdom of God and the authority of Christ had finally come (v.10)!

In Scene 3 (vv.13-17), the venue shifts back to earth:

Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

An observant reader will notice that, when Scene 3 begins, the narration returns to the same chronological point where Scene 1 (vv.1-6) left off, and resumes the story from that point onward. This point is made clear by the repetition, in verse 14, of the same information given in verse 6, at the end of Scene 1—*viz.*, the woman's flight into the wilderness, and the length of time that she is divinely sustained there.²⁹

Thus, Scene 1 ends, and Scene 3 begins, with the same event—the flight of the woman into the wilderness to be sustained by God for three-and-a-half years. The two statements are separated by the description of the heavenly scene in vv.7-12, which must be seen as a parenthesis. The whole chapter tells one continuous drama of earthly history, but is briefly interrupted by a cutaway section describing parallel events occurring in the heavens.

So, this final section returns our attention to the woman's flight into the wilderness and describes the ongoing warfare between the dragon and the people of God, who are identified as those *who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (v.17)*. This is an unambiguous reference to those in Christ's Kingdom, and to their successful, ages-long warfare against the devil's hostile resistance—continuing even until today.

We find Satan using two principal weapons against the Church—corresponding to the two great challenges the Church has faced throughout history. The first is deception, like a flood of water pouring out of the dragon's mouth—which the world swallows, but from which the Church is preserved (vv.15-16). The devil's second ploy is the violence of physical persecution. In the following

²⁹ This time is referred to as "*a time and times and half a time*"—another reference to three-and-a-half years—equivalent to "42 months" and "1260 days" (compare Revelation vv.6 and 14).

chapter of Revelation, we are introduced to certain allies (depicted as beasts) that the dragon summons to assist him in his warfare against the saints—the first, a persecuting governmental entity,³⁰ which carries out the activities of political persecution, and the second, a false religious phenomenon which is Satan’s instrument of continuing deception.³¹ The devil’s warfare against the Church has always been fought on two fronts—those of physical persecution and spiritual deception. Nonetheless, despite the resistance of imposing foes, the victory of God’s Kingdom over the opposition is assured (12:11).

³⁰ Revelation 13:1-10

³¹ Revelation 13:11-15

Chapter Eight

The Continuing Warfare

*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers,
against the rulers of the darkness of this age,
against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.
Therefore take up the whole armor of God,
that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.
(Ephesians 6:12-13)*

Since the battle between the dragon and the Church continues after the defeat of Satan, and continues into the foreseeable future, we can summarize the message of Revelation 12 as follows: During the lifetime of Christ, there was a war in heaven between Satan's forces and God's, represented by Michael's armies. That battle ended with the passion events and the vindication of Christ. However, the battle, though already concluded in heaven, continues under our hands upon earth.

If the battle isn't actually over, and continues through us on earth, what advantage can be said to have come by the victory of Christ in heaven? Is Satan defeated or not? What Christ has accomplished is definitive and irreversible, and has changed everything about the trajectory of history. In terms of our activity as His agents, this conquest of the ruler of this world has conferred incalculable advantages.

First, the victory in heaven assures future victory on earth. The former is accompanied by the announcement, "*the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down*" (v.10). This is the only place in scripture that refers to Satan as "*the accuser of the brethren*" (though the word *Satan* itself refers to an *accuser* or *adversary*). This speaks of the specific change in the heavenly administration that Christ accomplished on our behalf—namely our justification, or acquittal.

Our *real* enemies have always been our *sins*, which both enslave and condemn us. Thus, Micah the prophet spoke of our salvation in these terms, reminiscent of the overthrow of Pharaoh's armies in the Red Sea:

*He will again have compassion on us,
And will subdue our iniquities.
You will cast all our sins*

*Into the depths of the sea.*¹

As Israel required deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, so mankind languishes under bondage to our own iniquities and sins. Like a prosecutor, Satan gained power over the race by being able to (rightly) condemn us for our sins. This ability has now been stripped from him and the accuser is depicted as having had his case thrown entirely out of court due to the arrival of an Advocate who brings, in evidence, the blood of an effectual atoning sacrifice.² To mankind's advantage, the Advocate is also the King and Judge! Paul rhapsodizes over this unspeakable advantage:

*Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.*³

John (who also wrote Revelation 12:11) wrote elsewhere:

*But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin...If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness...if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He is the propitiation⁴ for our sins, and not for ours only but for the whole world.*⁵

This is what is meant in the victorious statement: “*And they overcame him [the accuser] by the blood of the Lamb...*”⁶ How are the indictments of the accuser defeated? By appeal to the blood of Christ. “*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.*”⁷ When one is accused in a court of law, the judge typically asks, “How do you plead—guilty or not guilty?” In our case before God, we can confidently answer, “Both—and neither! We plead the blood of Jesus as our defense.” As we have often sung,

*Just as I am without one plea
But that thy blood was shed for me...
O Lamb of God, I come.*

¹ Micah 7:19

² 1 John 1:1-2

³ Romans 8:33-34

⁴ Propitiation (Gr.*hilasmos*) the one who appeases or reconciles

⁵ 1 John 1:7, 9; 2:1-2

⁶ Revelation 12:11

⁷ Ephesians 1:7

The accuser's attacks are directed against the consciences of believers. He can defeat us, if he can demoralize us due to our many sins and failures, stripping us of our confidence to approach God with our requests. That advantage has been stripped from the accuser, so that, as John elsewhere writes:

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him...⁸

This is the first way in which the victory of Christ in heaven equips us for battle on earth. His blood confers to us the confidence of a clean conscience (which is the basis of all courage). *"The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion."*⁹

The second advantage of Christ's victory and enthronement is that His kingship has become the true testimony of the Church. Satan is defeated by *"the word of their testimony"* (v.11). Here, the word *testimony* does not refer to telling people the story about our conversion—valuable as that may be, at times. In the Book of Revelation, the "testimony" of the followers of Jesus refers regularly to the gospel preached, or testified to, by the people of the Messiah¹⁰—which is, of course, the *gospel of the Kingdom*. Because of the enthronement of Christ in heaven, as proclaimed in Revelation 12:10, the Church has a testimony to present to the world that *"there is another King."* Serving Satan and sin is no longer mankind's only option.

As the blood of Christ is the disciple's *defense* against accusations in this battle, so testifying to the victorious kingship of Christ is the unimaginably powerful *offensive* weapon against Satan. The warfare is being waged over *turf*. Satan and Christ both desire the same territory, namely, the loyalty of the whole world to their respective kingdoms. Before Jesus established His Kingdom, Satan had controlled the world by default. No one could effectively challenge him. However, after rising from the dead, Jesus declared His universal authority over heaven and earth, and followed this announcement with the commission to His disciples to bring the nations under that authority, making disciples of them and teaching them to observe all things that He has commanded.¹¹

As the Church penetrates every corner of the world with the message that Jesus is now the Universal Ruler, and that all people are now under obligation to surrender and swear fealty to Him, all people have to make a choice between the two kingdoms. Some do surrender and follow Christ. This is enough to threaten Satan's hegemony. Others do not surrender immediately, but the testimony that *"there is another King—Jesus"* has been announced to them, nonetheless. It must ring in their conscience, as the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness and judgment.¹² In time, its

⁸ 1 John 3:21-22

⁹ Proverbs 28:1

¹⁰ See Revelation 1:9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:17; 19:10

¹¹ Matthew 28:18-20

¹² John 16:8

working upon their minds and hearts will either bring them into repentance or into greater condemnation. This is how the Kingdom spreads—through the declaration of the existence of another King who insists upon the loyalty of all people.

Jesus must not be depicted as a petitioner sheepishly knocking on the door of the heart, asking the favor of an invitation inside. He is the Mighty Conqueror and Sovereign, commanding from the throne that all men and women submit to Him. The gospel does not plead with the sinner to give Jesus a break, but rather, *“commands all men everywhere to repent.”*¹³

Christ’s Kingdom expands at the expense of the kingdom of darkness. Every new disciple of Jesus is one who has been rescued from the power of darkness and been incorporated into the Kingdom of Christ.¹⁴ Paul encourages every servant of the Lord to communicate this message to unbelievers in the hope that *“they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.”*¹⁵ The kingdom of Satan thereby diminishes as the Kingdom of God increases. This is what terrifies Satan. He puts up a resistance, but it is the desperate resistance of one who knows that his cause is hopeless. This is why the *“demons believe and tremble.”*¹⁶

A new lesson from a familiar story

The victory of Christ over Satan is like that of David over Goliath. Many Sunday School children have been regaled by the heroic account of how the young shepherd boy was menaced by the big, mean giant. He was assisted by God to defeat the monster, so that he could return safely home to his sheep. This is not exactly the way it was. This episode in Israel’s history is not primarily about God’s protection of a faithful youth against insurmountable odds. Rather, it is a story involving the respective fates of two kingdoms.

David confronted Goliath in response to the giant’s challenge to the Israelites that they settle in a single contest what had been a decades-long conflict between Israel and the Philistines. Israel was God’s Kingdom, and the Philistines were the enemy’s kingdom. Much blood had been spilled, from the time of Samson to that of David, in various skirmishes and battles between the rival kingdoms. Goliath was presenting an opportunity to put a final end to the indecisive series of bloody conflicts. The Philistine champion offered to fight Israel’s champion (if one could be found) for the final mastery of one kingdom over the other. The challenge was worded thus:

¹³ Acts 17:30

¹⁴ Colossians 1:13

¹⁵ 2 Timothy 2:26

¹⁶ James 2:19

“Am I not a Philistine, and you the servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.”¹⁷

This seems like a very reasonable way to settle military conflicts with minimal bloodshed. Instead of one whole army clashing with another, resulting in thousands of deaths, why not settle the matter with just one man against one man? The conflict would thus be settled as decisively as it would have been through conventional warfare but only one man would actually die instead of many.¹⁸ This would be a desirable alternative to ordinary warfare—so long as the good guys have the better champion!

This was the problem—Israel had no champion at all, and simply trembled at both the prospect of taking up the challenge and that of remaining indefinitely under the oppression of the Philistines. This is where David comes into the story. Incensed by the blasphemy of the Philistine against Yahweh and His people, David marched out to confront and defeat the challenger. With what appeared to be unmitigated *chutzpah*, David announced to Goliath his intentions, and predicted the outcome:

“You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.”¹⁹

David was not simply a boy fighting for his own life. The stakes were much higher. At risk was the glory of God and the victory of God’s Kingdom in the world. David’s own death would have consigned Israel to permanent servitude to their foes. He was fighting for the very survival of the Kingdom of God—and, of course, he won. But what happened next? With the demise of the giant, the matter was officially settled. According to the terms of their own proposal, the Philistines had become Israel’s servants. Did they graciously surrender, lay down their arms, and say, “We are your servants; do with us as you will”? Well, not exactly. According to the historian:

¹⁷ 1 Samuel 17:8-9

¹⁸ It seems that Joab may have intended to attempt a similar solution to the conflict between Judah, under David, and Israel, under Ishbosheth, in which twelve warriors from one side would compete with twelve from the other. In this case, nothing was settled, because all twenty-four men died in the contest, and war continued. (2 Samuel 2:12-17).

¹⁹ 1 Samuel 17:45-46

...when the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. Now the men of Israel and Judah arose and shouted, and pursued the Philistines...Then the children of Israel returned from chasing the Philistines, and they plundered their tents.²⁰

In one sense, the fall of Goliath ended the war. At least there was no more power in the enemy to resist—only to flee. This is where David’s people became involved. Previously terrified of their oppressors, the Israelites were now confident of victory and pressed their advantage boldly. It took the rest of the day, but they did not quit pursuing the terrified Philistines until they had fully conquered them and seized their possessions.

Though there remained fighting to be done by the Israelites after Goliath fell, theirs was merely a mop-up operation. There was never any question, after the death of the giant, as to what the outcome would be by the end of the day. David had struck the decisive blow for the Kingdom. Officially, the battle was won and the Philistines were defeated. Israel needed only to press forward and enforce the victory of David, seizing all that had been formerly in the enemy’s possession.

This provides an excellent parallel to the warfare in which we find ourselves as servants of the King of David’s bloodline. The decisive contest between the kingdom of Satan and the Kingdom of God was fought by a greater David. The undefeatable foe, the champion of the oppressive spirits, was himself defeated and stripped of his power. However, the demonic forces are not eager to surrender, though they really have no hope of recapturing what they once controlled. Their only valid option is flight. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”²¹ Our warfare is not accomplishing the victory. Christ has done that. Ours is simply to move out into the conquered world, and to enforce the victory already accomplished by Jesus. The enemy knows this, and *trembles*.²²

The superior effect of persuasion over compulsion

Unlike Israel, in their wars, “*the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.*”²³

Conversion at sword-point, or gunpoint, is not an option. Those who are to be added to Christ’s empire must be persuaded to surrender *happily* to their compassionate Liberator, and to forsake their former ruler, who never loved them or anybody else. Those who want neither the benefits (righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit), nor the responsibilities of citizenship in Christ’s

²⁰ 1 Samuel 17:51-53

²¹ James 4:7

²² James 2:19

²³ 2 Corinthians 10:4-5

obedient society, cannot be forced to come in against their will. Our weapons, as Paul said, are the weapons of persuasion, and intend to bring men's "thoughts" into obedience to Christ. Physical weapons can enforce outward obedience, but they cannot create a heartfelt eagerness to serve the King. As Dale Carnegie's famous adage puts it, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

The two mightiest of the weapons of persuasion are the Word of God (which Paul likens to a sword)²⁴, and prayer²⁵ (for which Paul is unable to find any metaphor in ancient weaponry—perhaps a nuclear missile would provide an approximate analogy). In Medieval times, the Institutional Church abandoned its dependence upon the mighty weapons of Christ, and resorted to the use of the carnal weapons of worldly warfare. This approach seemed to consolidate their political power, for a while, but it could not capture the hearts and minds of dissenters. The Crusades and the Inquisitions only brought a blot on the reputation of Christ's Kingdom, which remains to this day in the minds of many. The burning of Tyndale and Hus did not save that corrupt institution from the loss of its hegemony in the West. When the Church ignores the commands of the King, much ground is lost and Christ's reputation is soiled.

The uncompromised preaching of Jesus' lordship had a powerful impact upon the world of Paul's day,²⁶ and whenever such is faithfully proclaimed today, it continues to transform hearts and minds. It is not always the case that the gospel has the powerful impact of which it is capable. Paul distinguished between the coming of the gospel to hearers "*in word only*," on the one hand, and coming "*in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance*,"²⁷ on the other.

Our weapons are not merely "intellectual" or "mental"—they are *spiritual*—"mighty through God." Any person can verbally *inform* another person about the good news of the Kingdom of God, or, perhaps, even win a debate with an unbeliever. However, for the message to strike the heart with *power, assurance, and the Holy Spirit*, more is required than the mere transmission of *information*. It demands the power of the Holy Spirit operating through a Spirit-filled disciple of Jesus. It requires the work of the Spirit upon the heart of the hearers. Anyone can make another person *know* the truth of the gospel; only the Spirit of God can make one *care* about it.

In order to create *hunger and thirst* for the Kingdom of God in the heart of the unbeliever, there must be more than preaching. There must be other means of making an impact. Two, in particular, are the most effective:

²⁴ Ephesians 6:17

²⁵ Ephesians 6:18-19

²⁶ Romans 1:16

²⁷ 1 Thessalonians 1:5

1. *Prayer.* The promises associated with prayer are too numerous to mention. However, suffice it to say that the fervent prayers of a believing community, or even a righteous individual, “*avails much.*”²⁸ Since prayer moves the hand of God—a hand of limitless power—it is foolish for anyone engaged in this warfare to neglect this resource. Fervent prayers preceding and accompanying the proclamation of the gospel of the Kingdom imbue such preaching with spiritual power, and can penetrate the blindness and resistance in the hearts of many. God is capable of employing extreme measures with the stubborn (like Jonah, or Saul of Tarsus) if He is asked and chooses to do so. Christ’s inheritance of the nations as His possession is tied to the Father’s being asked:

*Ask of Me [says the Father to Christ], and I will give You
The nations for Your inheritance,
And the ends of the earth for Your possession.*²⁹

While it is acknowledged that Jesus is the one invited by God to make this request, Jesus Himself authorized the disciples to make such requests *in His name*³⁰—that is, on His behalf.³¹ Our prayers, in Jesus’ name, are viewed in heaven as Christ’s own prayers to the Father. The nations await the impact of our full obedience in this area. It is a warfare activity, because the enemy greatly resists our efforts to pray, tempting us to apathy, discouragement, doubts, etc. We may be sure that the intensity of Satan’s resistance to our praying reveals the level of fear he has of our faithful perseverance in prayer.

2. *The testimony of a changed life.* While the gospel is the general announcement of the fact of Christ’s kingship, the message can easily fall on deaf ears if it is not “adorned” (as Paul put it)³² by the impressive and arresting lives of the believers. This was one thing that made the apostolic preaching as effective as it was. The changed lives of the disciples in Jerusalem, especially in their relationships with each other, could not be ignored. This *visible testimony* provided a powerful platform from which the apostles could preach the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom, as an alternative society of the King’s followers, was undeniably on display before their eyes.

A community of believers is a colony of the Kingdom planted in a world still largely loyal to the opposition. It is a society of lives lived under, and transformed by, the authority of Jesus. When we fail to live as the King’s subjects we send the world a false message as powerfully as if we were preaching a false gospel. Why should anyone take our message seriously if our own disobedient

²⁸ James 5:16

²⁹ Psalm 2:8

³⁰ John 16:23

³¹ See further discussion on acting in Jesus’ name, in chapter ten

³² Titus 2:10

lives prove that we do not believe it, or that it has no effect on those who do? How can we bring the thoughts of others into obedience to Jesus Christ if they can easily see that we are not particularly interested in being obedient ourselves?

The most convincing evidence that Jesus was sent from God, and that we are His disciples, is the unity and mutual love exhibited in the relations of the King's colonies here on earth.³³ Many people have been damaged by trusting professed believers, and others, who did not prove worthy of such confidence. They have drawn into their shells, as the only imaginable safe haven from suffering the injuries of further betrayal. Even the "Christians" they have known have often proven themselves not to be "safe people." When one has surrendered to Jesus as Lord and truly entered the Kingdom of God he or she should find in that society people committed to serving Christ through self-sacrifice for each other. Jesus said, "*inasmuch as you did it unto one of these my brethren, you did it unto me.*"³⁴ Perhaps not everyone will be drawn to such a loving, self-sacrificing community, but without that visible witness there are few things that can equally commend the Kingdom and make the gospel attractive to outsiders.

So, what hinders us?

It is ironic that so many Christians, when they think of a confrontation with Satan or demons, feel some degree of fear and intimidation. This is the devil's only hope of delaying his inevitable loss of every last inch of territory to the true King. If we have a firm grasp of the truth, we have nothing to fear from Satan. I have always enjoyed a story (which I assume to be fictional) about the famous evangelist, Smith Wigglesworth. It is said that Wigglesworth was once awakened from a deep sleep by the violent shaking of his bed. Waking with a jolt, his first impulse was to panic, imagining that he was experiencing an earthquake. Looking to the foot of his bed, he saw the devil himself perched on his footboard and leering at him. Upon recognizing him, Wigglesworth rolled over, mumbled, "Oh, it's only you," and returned to his sleep. I am assuming many of my readers will not believe that is a true story, but even if it is not, it is a great example of the attitude Christ's disciples should have toward Satan—namely, *unimpressed*.

The warfare of the Kingdom of God is a war for the souls of men and women, requiring the dissemination of the true gospel of the Kingdom to the entire planet. The loyalties of the people of earth are the prize of the battle. Most today are unwittingly loyal to Satan—not because he has any rightful claim upon them but by default. If all authority has been given to Jesus, then none is left over

³³ John 13:35; 17:21

³⁴ Matthew 25:40

for Satan. However, as long as people can be kept in ignorance and deception, the total conquest of Christ is not realized *“on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Those who know that there is another King are charged with declaring this fact to all who do not know it. This is merely the mop-up. It is enforcing the victory of Christ over the former ruler of this world. Satan can keep people obedient to him out of intimidation, so long as they do not know he has been stripped of all of his power and authority.

In 1980, Disney Studios released a movie, *The Last Flight of Noah's Ark*, in which several Americans in an amphibious plane find themselves lost somewhere over the South Pacific. Just as they are running out of fuel they discover and become marooned on a small, uninhabited island—well, *almost* uninhabited. They find there two elderly Japanese holdout soldiers who had been stationed there during WWII and had never been demobilized, because they had been long forgotten in their remote outpost. In fact, they had not even heard that the war had ended over thirty years earlier. When Americans landed at their tiny island, these elderly officers thought that they were seeing the first action of their deployment! To their chagrin, they had to be informed that they had no basis for resistance, because their kingdom had been defeated by the Allied Forces decades earlier. Once they acknowledged the truth, the former soldiers were able, with the help of the Americans, to escape the island that had been their virtual prison most of their lives.

Many people on the planet are in the same position as these elderly holdouts. They remain loyal to the losing side only because no one has yet informed them that their emperor has fallen, and there is now another Emperor—the Lord Jesus Christ. Such people remain imprisoned by their cruel master until the liberating gospel reaches their corner of the world.

It is illegal, most places, to drive on public roads without a valid driver's license. Nonetheless, there are many people driving cars whose licenses have expired and are no longer valid. It is possible for them to continue driving illegally indefinitely, unless an authorized agent of the law stops them and forbids their continued driving on the public roads. Satan is in the same circumstance. His license to rule the world has been revoked. He knows this, but has no motivation to stop his activities until he is confronted by an agent of the King, who forbids his ongoing mischief. There is no need for Christians to be intimidated by him. The shoe is now on the other foot. You may be sure that Satan, like the unlicensed driver, breaks a sweat when he looks in his rearview mirror and sees an agent of the Kingdom of God in pursuit.

But why should our involvement even be necessary? If Christ has defeated Satan in heaven, what does He need us for? We just seemingly slow things down by our laziness and distracted apathy. Wouldn't the whole thing be cleaned-up much faster if Jesus would take it on Himself to complete the job without us? Perhaps a majestic appearance in the sky would do the trick, or maybe angelic evangelists flying around proclaiming the Kingdom of God...

As the Israelites pursuing the fleeing Philistines had a personal stake in the rout of their oppressors, so they also had a role to play in it. It seems that, as we are to have a share in the future ruling of this earth, we are also given a role in its conquest. It is not to angels, nor to Jesus alone, that the prize goes, but to those who, as joint-heirs with Christ, will reign with Him.

Chapter Nine

The Authority of the King

*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying,
“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”
(Matthew 28:18)*

*And they said to Him,
“By what authority are You doing these things?
And who gave You this authority to do these things?”
(Mark 11:28)*

Authority is a much-misunderstood subject. Its nature, source, and application are commonly misapprehended. The dictionaries and lexicons tend to include, in their definitions of the word, the idea of *power*.¹ This is also the word that the King James Version of the Bible often used to translate the Greek word *exousia*, which in more modern versions is typically translated as *authority*. The use of the English word “power” in the definition of this word can be misleading. The older translation of Matthew 28:18 reads: “*All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.*” While not wishing to detract from the actual dynamic power of God exhibited by Christ’s miracles and such, the actual meaning of the statement has more to do with *royal authority*.

The word “power” may refer to the faculty of sheer strength, force, or capability. Thus, the difference between the power of God and that of any other entity, or force, would be greater than that between a draft horse and a butterfly. Power is a physically and visibly demonstrable quality of which differences between parties can be objectively quantified, as in weight-lifting competitions.

However, a stronger man does not necessarily possess a *superior authority*. The loser in the weight-lifting contest may be the CEO of a corporation, while the champion may be his janitor. In terms of the hierarchy of the company, the man with less physical power actually has greater authority. The strength of the draft horse is thousands of times greater than that of the butterfly, but the former possesses no more *authority* than does the latter.

¹ *Authority*: “the power to determine, adjudicate, or otherwise settle issues or disputes; jurisdiction; the right to control, command, or determine. a power or right delegated or given; authorization...”
<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/authority?s=t>
“the official power to make decisions for other people or to tell them what they must do...official permission or the legal right to do something”
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/authority>

Therefore, authority is not the same thing as power, as we usually think of it, though in the conventions of language the terms have sometimes been used interchangeably. While power may be viewed as brute strength, authority is a less tangible quality. It cannot be physically observed or measured. It is a *principle*, rather than a *power*. Authority speaks of the ethical or legal right to make the call, to settle all disputes with a word, to rule or to have one's way. The man possessing greater power (seen as strength) may have the *ability* to subdue weaker opponents, but the one in authority has the actual *right* to do so, whether possessing superior physical power or not. Even the body-building champion does not have the *strength* to stop a line of oncoming traffic with one hand but the traffic cop has authority to do so even if he is a 98-pound weakling.

Authority is an ethical prerogative, not a physical capability. It is the right of the petite mother to be obeyed by her adolescent son who is a foot taller and has the strength to lift her over his head. It is the authority of a football coach in a wheelchair to command athletes twice his weight concerning what they will be doing on the field. It is the prerogative of a frail, elderly judge, crippled with arthritis, to dictate the fate of a strong, fierce and dangerous criminal. A recognized president, as Commander in Chief, commands armies powerful enough to overthrow him, and they must obey him. That is the first point we need to grasp.

The nature of authority

Power is demonstrable, but authority has to be assumed—or accepted by faith—to exist. We obey the man with a badge when he is directing traffic, not because he has the strength to halt our vehicle if we chose to run him down, but because we assume he possesses authorization from a more powerful agency and that he is no impostor. The true story of Frank Abagnale, depicted in the movie, *Catch Me if You Can*, proves how one may convincingly claim to have an authority that does not really exist. Abagnale, beginning at age 18, was able to pull-off a number of scams, successfully impersonating an airline captain, a doctor in a hospital, and an attorney—all activities for which he had no training, right or authorization.

The assumption of authority by one who takes charge may be in line with reality, or not. That is, a man may give an order *as if* people are obligated to obey him when he may in fact possess no real authority at all. Impostors sometimes telephone our homes, claiming to be from the IRS, or some other government agency, and demanding that we send them information about our private finances. This is a common scam, and most of us, hopefully, do not fall for it. In such cases, we obviously have every right to ignore the pretender's "authority" to give us commands.

There are two kinds of legitimate authority for us to understand:

1) Inherent, or natural authority, is a concept almost universally understood and acknowledged. For example, a patent is given to an inventor, or a copyright to an author, in recognition of the creative person's right to control his or her product. The natural rights of parents to govern their children would be another commonly-recognized example. Recognition of such rights assumes that one ethically possesses authority over what he or she has brought into existence. We know this intuitively—especially when we ourselves are the creators. Such is the authority that God possesses over all the cosmos and all people, due to His having created all things. This is the proper understanding of the word "sovereignty." A *sovereign* is a king or master who has all authority to act, unchallenged, within his own domain. God's sovereignty is absolute, due to His being the Author, Inventor and Father of everything that exists.

2) A second kind of authority is that which is delegated—which we call *authorization*, residing in one who has been commissioned to exercise the prerogatives of one who holds a higher position in the hierarchy. The centurion, who commanded one-hundred soldiers, understood that his authority over them was granted by one above himself—in his case, a *tribune*. He recognized that Jesus had also received delegated authority under God, and could authoritatively give commands such as, normally, only God could give. Such was the command for a sick man to be supernaturally healed from a distance by a word. The Roman officer expressed this conviction thus:

*"...only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."*²

The hundred men whom the centurion commanded obeyed him because they believed him to be subject himself to higher authority. Submission to the centurion was tantamount to submission to the highest authority in the unbroken chain of command in which this officer was a mere link—that is, to Caesar. While the power of Christ's miracles could be seen by all, the centurion did not mention Christ's *healing power, per se*, but expressed faith in His delegated *authority* to command whatever God willed to be done. Jesus was frankly astonished to find such faith in a Gentile man, and exclaimed, *"I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"*³

What the centurion possessed, and Israel lacked, was the faith or confidence that Jesus, as the Messiah, was second only to God in the cosmic chain of command. This is why most of the Jews did not follow Him. They tended to disregard His authority. Obedience is the ethically required response to legitimate authority.

² Matthew 8:8-9

³ *Ibid.*, v.10

Even though Jesus exercised great supernatural power, there was the separate question of His authority to do what He did; for example, in driving money changers out of the temple. Jesus did not do this by a show of physical strength, nor by the manifestation of miraculous power. He was able to do so by claiming that He had the *right* to do so—because it was His Father’s house!—and by the moneychangers’ cowering to His implied moral authority.

Knowing that Jesus is God in the flesh we might imagine that He possessed inherent and natural authority by dint of His deity. However, in becoming a man, Jesus placed Himself under the same authority that all men are required to honor. He emptied Himself of divine privileges, and took on “*the form of a servant...therefore God has also highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name*”⁴—that is, God gave Him supreme authority. In such contexts, as we shall see in the next chapter, “name” often functions as a synonym for “authority.” While on earth, Jesus repeatedly affirmed that He had a *derived* authority, *delegated* to Him from God.⁵

Recognizing actual authority

Authority is not only an ethical principle but also an intellectual one. We refer to intellectual authority as *expertise*. Everyone who claims to know something about any subject is inherently claiming to possess a degree of expertise—they are professing to speak with a measure of authority on the subject. Since people often disagree on a topic under discussion, and one cannot believe everyone, the question must be asked whose “authority” is to be trusted. That is, whose opinions should we believe on the subject? Because people are prone to speak with confidence on subjects they know little about, it is not always immediately obvious who can really speak authoritatively.

We naturally yield our trust to the persons who impress us as seeming to know the most about a subject. If my car is making a strange rumbling sound in the front end, a neighbor might assure me that I only need a bit more air in my tires. Another neighbor may disagree, insisting that I need to replace an “upper control-arm bushing” (whatever that may be). The second man actually *sounds* more authoritative—partly because he uses technical words which intimidate me by his apparent expertise. On the other hand, I might tend to favor the first man’s opinion because it suggests a much less-expensive solution to my mysterious problem.

Neither of these reasons is a good one for putting my faith in the opinion of one man over the other. One man may actually be an auto mechanic with 30 years’ experience working on my model of car. The other man might not know a wrench from a caliper. If so, then I will be inclined to trust the

⁴ Philippians 2:7, 9

⁵ John 5:27; 7:17; 12:49; 14:10; 17:2; Matthew 28:18

authority, or *expertise*, of the more experienced man, even if he is recommending the more expensive repair.

We recognize the authority of one person over another frequently in ordinary life, whether we are consulting doctors about unexplained abdominal pain, seeking legal advice from a competent attorney, or comparing the time displayed on our digital alarm clocks with that on our cell phones. The authority of *expertise* is that of its conformity to reality, or *the truth*. Truth possesses its own intrinsic authority, because all reality, by definition, conforms to it. We may ignore or reject the authority of the truth but we do so at our own risk since reality always wins in the end.

To ask whether there is or is not a God is an inquiry into the *truth* of the matter. One answer will conform to reality, and a contrary one will not. In the process of weighing the opinions of alternative “authorities” on this (as with any other) question, one needs to ask, “Which of the many voices making statements about God actually speaks with expertise on the topic? Who possesses the truth of the matter?” In such an inquiry, one might be inclined to believe the views of one of the world’s greatest biologists. The question of God’s existence lies entirely outside his field of expertise, since *God* is not part of the observable biosphere—the only realm in which the biologist possesses more expertise than does any layman. His expertise in a field unrelated to our query might cause us to impute a broader authority to him than his actual level of expertise would warrant.

Suppose our choice is between the opinion of a biologist who exhibits a glaring chip on his shoulder against all religious ideas, on one hand, and the pronouncements of One who fulfilled numerous ancient prophecies, worked god-like miracles, and personally arose from the dead, on the other. The choice would appear to be an easy one for rational inquirers.

Everything we believe on any subject is accepted on the basis of some perceived authority—either that of experts, parents, teachers, news outlets, eye witnesses, or our own reasoning and subjective impressions. Of course, if the greatest Expert of all, God, has spoken, His declarations on any subject would obviously provide the most rational basis for adopting any particular belief. His authority is supreme, and unlike all other contenders, His character renders Him incapable of lying (Titus 1:2). If God has delegated all authority in heaven and earth to someone, that person would be the one to listen to and to obey.

The sovereign authority of God

God is often referred to as “sovereign”—because, as the Creator of all things, He has legitimate natural authority over everything. This idea of sovereign authority does not, in itself, imply any particular policy of governance. When we say that God is *sovereign*, some have mistaken this claim to require His *meticulous providence* or His micromanagement of the universe. On this view, God’s sovereignty demands that He must also dictate, or *decree*, all things that occur, including what we

perceive as the free choices (even the bad ones) of humans and angels. If this is so, then the perceived phenomenon of our free choice is merely an illusion. All choices have their origins in the Mastermind's invisible manipulation of every piece on the chess board.

To suggest that the Sovereign is *required* to micromanage His realm is an absurdity. The very meaning of *sovereignty* means that one who possesses it cannot be *required* to do anything at all. A sovereign king may be a tyrant seeking to dictate every action of his subjects, or he can choose a less intrusive policy allowing his subjects a measure of freedom of movement and of choice. *Sovereignty* speaks of one's *right*, or *authority*, to rule, whereas micromanagement is merely one among many alternative *governing styles*, which may or may not be chosen by the one who possesses such sovereign rights.

While the Bible provides no unique definition of the word *sovereignty* when the term applies to God, as opposed to earthly sovereigns, it continually communicates the fact of God's authority over His creation using human analogies, like that of a King over His subjects, or a Lord over His servants, or a Father over His children. These analogies do not necessarily encourage one to conclude that God dictates every thought or action of those under His authority since humans in analogous roles do not necessarily determine every action of those subordinate to them. We may safely assume that such metaphors of governance are chosen deliberately to tell us something about God by way of comparison to familiar analogies.

Whether any sovereign king, lord or father will micromanage his domain, or will allow individuals under his authority a measure of freedom to make their own undetermined choices, is his to choose. It is a sovereign's prerogative to decide his own policies of governance, as a master in his home may seek to supervise and schedule every activity of his children and servants—or not do so. A father may allow his children times of unsupervised play to choose their own games and follow their own interests,⁶ and a master may give unsupervised stewardship responsibilities to a trusted servant.⁷ None of these policies would compromise the ruler's position and rank as sovereign. Nor is God the more or less sovereign whether He practices meticulous control over every human decision, or exercises His sovereign options to give some of His creatures a measure of responsible freedom of choice—along with the responsibility that such freedom incurs.

Jesus' authority

The Jews were accustomed to hearing expositions about God and the scriptures delivered by the rabbis every Sabbath in the synagogues. The rabbis did not value originality in exposition. They

⁶ E.g., Matthew 11:16-17

⁷ Matthew 24:45-51; 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27

tended, rather, to demonstrate their orthodoxy by linking their statements with the opinions of the most respected rabbis of earlier generations. They were, therefore, astonished to hear the way Jesus taught, because He bypassed the speculations of other authorities and simply told the people what the scripture *actually* meant—as if He, Himself, was the final authority on the matter. The gospels often record the impression that His words had upon His hearers: *And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*⁸

This was the reaction of people listening in the synagogue to the radical teachings of Jesus. He spoke as if He was the ultimate Authority—but was He?

Many people pretend to speak *authoritatively*, but whether or not they actually possess the authority which they seem to claim for themselves is another matter.

In the case of Jesus in the synagogue, He was able to confirm His claimed authority in spiritual matters by displaying His command over a recognizable malady in a person present. In the instance just cited, where Mark reports the surprise of the people at Christ's self-asserted authority, a demon-possessed man began causing a disturbance. Among other things, the demon confessed to recognizing Jesus as "*the Holy One of God.*" When Jesus gave the command to be quiet and to depart from the man, the demon immediately complied—under protest. Mark records the increased astonishment of the people, who exclaimed among themselves: "*What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.*"⁹

Since the legitimacy of Jesus' divine prerogative and the authority He claimed could not necessarily be determined simply by hearing Him, He was not reluctant to provide visible displays which provided documentable verification of His claims.

On another occasion, when Jesus told a man that his sins were forgiven, his critics recognized that He was claiming for Himself the uniquely divine prerogative to forgive sins. When challenged, Jesus did not back down from His controversial stand, but chose instead to provide visible confirmation that He was exercising genuine authority from God. Before Him lay a hopelessly paralyzed man. Speaking first to His critics, Jesus said: "*But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home."¹⁰

The Bible suggests that the entire miraculous ministry of Jesus—though impressively exhibiting His supernatural *power* and compassion—was primarily intended to justify people's faith in, or recognition of, His messianic *authority*. John wrote:

⁸ Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32

⁹ *Ibid.*, v.27

¹⁰ Matthew 9:6

...Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [that is, the anointed King]...¹¹

Of all the miracles performed by Christ the greatest endorsement of His authority was in God's raising Him from the dead, in accordance with the messianic predictions of Old Testament prophecy,¹² as Paul declared:

"[God] has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."¹³

It was after His resurrection that Jesus, with complete credibility, told His disciples, *"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."¹⁴* This is a claim to absolute sovereignty over every realm, the rights of a Universal King. On the basis of this claim, Jesus commissioned His followers to disciple the nations, *"teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you."¹⁵*

What would follow more naturally? If Jesus has been given total kingship and authority over all realms, what could be more appropriate than for the nations to obey everything He commands? God has *"put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body..."¹⁶* As His Body on earth, the Church is primarily defined by submission to His headship.

Of course, inherent in the idea of a "head" over a "body" is the concept of an authoritative leader, to whom the whole body submits. People who submit to a king comprise his kingdom, while limbs and organs who submit to a head comprise its body. In the case of Christ, headship and kingship are exercised by the same man, over the same people, indicating that the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God are the same entity. God's redeemed people are called by numerous labels, and are described using many metaphors. Depending upon specific context the community of Christ may alternatively be called a body,¹⁷ a bride¹⁸, a temple¹⁹, a priesthood²⁰, a holy nation²¹, a family²², a kingdom²³, etc. Yet, there is only one community of Christ to whom all such labels belong. Those who belong are those who have recognized and embraced Christ for who He is—both King and Lord—which means they have also surrendered to His absolute authority and rule.

¹¹ John 20:30-31

¹² 1 Corinthians 15:4; Luke 24:25-27

¹³ Acts 17:31

¹⁴ Matthew 28:18

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, v.20

¹⁶ Ephesians 1:22-23

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:23

¹⁸ Revelation 19:7; 21:9

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21-22

²⁰ 1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 5:10

²¹ 1 Peter 2:9

²² Ephesians 2:19; 3:15

²³ Revelation 1:6; 5:10

The true Body of Christ is thus comprised only of those members of the visible assembly of Christ who are true subjects of Christ as Head and King. It is they who have bowed to His absolute authority over themselves in all realms—including the realms of opinion, morals, values, goals, commercial and economic life, family life, business ethics, etc. No religious entity comprised of those who resist full surrender to Christ can justly be labeled the Church of Jesus Christ. There are only two possible ways to respond to a King’s authority—either by total submission or by arrogant rebellion. Those who have not submitted to Christ as King are not simply inferior Christians but remain unconverted. They are rebels against the Crown.²⁴

In a democracy, people can get away with despising and disobeying the wishes of the President or Prime Minister. They can even vote against him or her. A kingdom is not like that. With reference to a King, one is either a loyal subject or a disloyal traitor. The Institutional Church, sadly, has come to embrace in its ranks double agents from the enemy camp, as well as those who think themselves loyal, but to whom Jesus will ultimately say, “*I never knew you; depart from Me.*”²⁵ In an absolute monarchy, there is no party of “loyal opposition” to the ruler. Love and submission to the King are the universal tests of loyalty. Jesus does not recognize those who are not His obedient followers. How could He? He is not deceived by false professions of love and loyalty: As He said, “*If you love Me, keep my commandments,*”²⁶ and “*Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?*”²⁷

Jesus’ claim that He had been given “*all authority*” means that God, who possesses natural authority over all that He created, has invested in Christ unlimited sovereignty over the actions, thoughts and opinions of everything and everyone in the created realm. All must embrace His authority or find themselves very much (to quote Barack Obama) on “the wrong side of history.”

The delegation of authority

The fact that God has given “*all authority in heaven and earth*” to Jesus is an absolutely unique circumstance. Many people have been delegated a measure of authority by God—masters over servants,²⁸ husbands over wives,²⁹ parents over their children,³⁰ rulers over their citizens,³¹ etc. That is to say, God has established hierarchies, in which one party is appointed to direct, oversee, and protect other parties, serving in that role as God’s servants. Those who are subordinate to them in

²⁴ See Luke 19:27; Revelation 2:16

²⁵ Matthew 7:21-23

²⁶ John 14:15

²⁷ Luke 6:46

²⁸ Ephesians 6:5-7; Colossians 3:22-25; 1 Timothy 6:1

²⁹ Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18

³⁰ Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20

³¹ Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-14

these hierarchical relationships are expected, as a moral obligation, to accept the divinely delegated authority of such persons as from God Himself.

In every ordinary case any delegated authority that God gives is limited to a defined *sphere*, outside of which the person in authority actually has no valid jurisdiction. It is a given in scripture and in every sane society that a father may insist upon his six-year-old son's putting away his toys and going to bed at 8:00. The child's activities fall within the father's legitimate sphere of command, and the child is morally obliged to obey. However, the same father cannot command with authority a child from another family, who is not in his home, that he or she must go to bed at a certain time. That child is not within his delegated sphere, and can simply ignore his instructions. Even within his own family, a man has no authority to require his son to steal or commit fraud. In these areas the child, like everyone else, is under an authority higher than the father's. God has not authorized any father to order his children to disobey God. The sphere of the father is delineated in scripture: "*fathers...bring [your children] up in the training and admonition of the Lord.*"³² A father (like everyone else) must obey God's authority. Those under him must obey the father so long as he does not extend his commands outside his proper sphere.

This is true of worldly rulers, as well. They have no innate authority apart from that which God delegates to them. This fact was affirmed by Jesus to the Roman official, Pontius Pilate: "*You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.*"³³ Paul famously affirmed the same concept:

*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.*³⁴

Even the authority that God has delegated to rulers is valid only within the limited sphere that God has designated for them. When a ruler steps out of the sphere of authority given to him, he is pretending not to be under God, but to be something of a god himself. In that moment he is no ruler in God's sight, but an ordinary man.³⁵ He is just another man with a private opinion about what others should do. No one is morally obligated to pay attention to him.

Some mistakenly think that Paul's words in Romans 13 invest rulers with absolute authority, and that Christians must obey every command of the ruler, regardless what it may be. Such unlimited authority has never been given by God to mere men. That total authority is said to belong to Christ alone. It follows that every other appointed official is subject to Him. This is why the disciples ignored

³² Ephesians 6:4

³³ John 19:11

³⁴ Romans 13:1-2

³⁵ Ezekiel 28:2

the demand of the Sanhedrin, Israel's Supreme Court, when the latter commanded that they must not preach anymore in the name of Jesus. Peter disregarded the so-called authority of the court, saying: *"We ought to obey God rather than men."*³⁶

Notice that the apostles were not being rebellious against authority. They were simply being submissive to the highest Authority, that of Christ. He had given them clear instructions to do the very thing that the court was now forbidding. They recognized that rulers have no legitimate authority to countermand the authority of God. We see the same conscientious disobedience to rulers when the Hebrew midwives' refused to kill Jewish babies at the Pharaoh's orders,³⁷ as well as the refusal of Daniel and his three friends to obey the commands of pagan emperors requiring them to compromise in the area of idolatry.³⁸

When Jesus said, *"Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,"*³⁹ He was clearly affirming that Caesar has his own legitimate sphere of authority, but it must not be allowed to overstep the claims of God's authority—which is absolute. If we should ask what is the proper reach of the ruler's authority, as delegated by God, we find that the valid role of government is restricted to the national defense and the maintenance of civil justice through criminal law enforcement.⁴⁰ As near as we can tell from scripture, this would seem to be the total realm of governmental authority. There are instances of intrusion into the lives of law-abiding citizens which the government illegitimately claims for itself, for which there is no corresponding divine mandate or authority. The ruler issuing illegitimate orders is just another man with a personal preference.

Examples of a government operating beyond the boundaries of its legitimate sphere would include the state's granting of divorces that would not be justifiable by the standards of Jesus' teaching on the topic. Likewise, City Hall often licenses marriages between parties that God has declared ineligible for marriage to one another.⁴¹ The State sometimes forbids that Christians teach their children moral rectitude, proscribes the speaking of the truth on moral questions or forbids Christian assemblies. In doing so, the state acts beyond its divinely appointed sphere. It is authorized only to penalize criminals and uphold justice for the innocent. These examples deal with behaviors concerning which God has given specific instruction to His followers. The state has no right to mandate matters beyond the realm of God's authorization, any more than the Sanhedrin had to forbid the apostles to preach. When rulers give such commands, the subjects of God's Kingdom have every moral right to defy them.

³⁶ Acts 5:29

³⁷ Exodus 1:17-21

³⁸ Daniel 3:16-18; 6:8-10

³⁹ Matthew 22:21

⁴⁰ Romans 13:3-4; 1 Peter 2:13-14;

⁴¹ E.g., when God regards one or both parties to be still bound to a previous partner or partners.

If a mother gives her credit card to her son with instructions to fill the car's tank with gas, he is authorized to perform that specific task using her credit. He is not authorized to take the card and purchase for himself a new smart phone. In filling the tank he is acting within his legitimate authorized sphere. Yet, if he goes beyond that purchase, and uses his mother's card for anything else, he is acting illegitimately. It is even worse if he buys the smart phone and neglects to fuel the car!⁴²

We miss Paul's point if we take his words, "*there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God*" to mean that rulers have *carte blanche* to act as they will with God's endorsement. Paul is saying the same thing that Jesus said to Pilate, namely, that no one has any authority apart from what God appoints to them. If Caesar is one whom God appointed to maintain justice in society, then Caesar is obviously answerable to the One who appointed him for his conscientious performance of this duty. Those who are appointed are subject to those who appoint them. Secular rulers have no autonomous or independent claim to self-styled authority. "*For he is God's servant for your good.*"⁴³ The ruler is God's servant, and servants must obey their masters, or else answer for their disobedience. The misuse of authority by government officials is the neglect of a divine mandate, and they must answer to God for it. When they enact laws contrary to God's, they are disobedient servants, acting on their own without authority, and needn't be heeded.

The message of the Kingdom of God is about authority—namely, the authority of Christ the King. The authority of Christ is absolute, and His followers recognize and honor this fact. At the same time, they recognize the limitations in the authority that has been delegated by Him to persons in various hierarchical systems. To support the authority of a man or woman whose decrees defy or contrast with God's commands is rebellion against the One who is the King over the kings, and the Lord over the lords of the earth.

⁴² This would be analogous to the government's extending its control over citizens beyond its assigned sphere while failing in the one thing it is assigned by God to do—namely, the enforcement of criminal justice.

⁴³ Romans 13:4 ESV

Chapter Ten

The Authority of the King's Messengers

*Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions,
and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.*

(Luke 10:19)

And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.

(Romans 16:20)

Christ's authority in us

There is a popular notion abroad (especially in charismatic circles) that since we are children of the King, we are kings ourselves and should conduct ourselves in this age with the bearing and privileges of kings. This is a potentially dangerous reversal of the biblical implications of being in the Kingdom at this present time. Whereas the Bible represents our present role in the Kingdom as that of subjects and servants, this popular notion shifts our vantage point to that of the ones in charge. Preachers of this ilk suggest that the Kingdom message is primarily about *our authority* as kings in the present age, thereby shifting the emphasis from our proper role as *subjects* of the King to our imagined present role as *co-rulers* with Christ. In such preaching, stress is typically laid upon our need to adopt the “mentality of royalty.” In his book *Rediscovering the Kingdom*, Myles Munroe repeatedly argues that being in God’s Kingdom is primarily about our own privileges, power and leadership in this present world: “We are designed to rule, not to be ruled. We are designed to govern, not to be governed. We are designed to manage, not to be managed. We are designed to lead, not to follow.”¹

Commenting on Romans 12:2, where Paul exhorts believers to be “*transformed in the renewing of your minds*,” Munroe goes on to say that this refers to our need to start thinking like kings:

That’s what Paul is saying...We must learn to think like kings again, to lay hold of the spirit and attitude of kings. This is why kingdom citizenship is really all about leadership. It is about kingship and ruling a domain. It is not about being low, humble and poor, in the false, demeaning

¹ Myles Munroe, *Rediscovering the Kingdom: Ancient Hope for Our 21st Century* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 2004), 89

way that so many of us think. Kingdom citizenship is about recognizing our place and rights through Christ as citizens of God's Kingdom, and claiming those rights...²

He further argues:

As believers, we are all children of the King. The first step in successfully navigating between two kingdoms is learning how to think and act like the King's children. In spiritual reality, we are all princes and princesses, but practically speaking most of us are not there yet...Because we never learned to think like royalty, we still act like the prodigal son, seeking only the servant's share.³

Munroe repeatedly disparages the attitude of the prodigal son, who in returning to his father had planned to say, "*I am no longer worthy to be your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.*"⁴ Munroe believes that this attitude reflects an inappropriately low self-image. He speaks of such a slavish attitude as being like that of "the prodigal son, whose mentality was damaged by his time in the pigpen."⁵

This strangely overlooks the fact that Jesus was the one who told the parable, deliberately placing these words into the prodigal's mouth as an example of genuine repentance, which He was commending. It is true that the prodigal, because of his father's grace and benevolence, found himself restored to privilege, but this was only when he first sincerely acknowledged his true unworthiness.

The question here we must ask is, "When is the proper time for the believer's exaltation to privilege and rulership with Christ?" It is when the Master returns and rewards His faithful servants, saying "Well done, faithful slave, you have been faithful...rule over five cities..."⁶ The Corinthian believers, whom Paul regarded as "*carnal*" and "*babes in Christ*,"⁷ had the very same worldly attitude of seeking royal privilege and power that many such preachers recommend. Paul sardonically rebuked their carnality:

*You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we might reign with you!*⁸

Paul acknowledged that the time will come for Christians to reign with Christ, and he looked forward to that time when all believers, including himself, will reign together. The Corinthians were jumping the gun and getting ahead of the program! They thought they were supposed to reign now!

² *Ibid.*, 59

³ *Ibid.*, 93

⁴ Luke 15:19

⁵ *Op cit.*, 55

⁶ E.g., Matthew 24:45-47; Luke 19:15-19; 2 Timothy 4:8; Revelation 3:21

⁷ 1 Corinthians 3:1

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:8

Christians are often told by their preachers that we are “kings and priests.” However, this is a phrase taken from the King James Version’s rendering of Revelation 1:6 and 5:10. It is an unfortunate translation. The preferred reading, from the most ancient manuscripts, actually says that we are “*a kingdom of priests*” (a phrase taken from Exodus 19:6). The Bible nowhere refers to Christians as “kings.”

Though we are not actual kings, we are nonetheless agents, or ambassadors, of the King⁹—which means that a certain subordinate authority is vested in us. Jesus told His apostles: “*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me,*”¹⁰and, “*As the Father sent Me, I also send you.*”¹¹

These words of official commissioning tell us that the authority God had delegated to Christ has now been delegated to His subordinates. These specific statements are addressed to the apostles—and none can deny that their authority in the Church was and is paramount. Yet, the idea of delegated authority is also seen in the sending out of the seventy, who certainly were not all of apostolic rank in the later Church. When sending them out, He said:

*Whatever city you enter...heal the sick there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’... Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.*¹²

This passage connects the preaching of the Kingdom of God with miraculous, confirmatory signs, such as healings and exorcisms. This has led some believers to conclude that the Kingdom of God must always be identified with such miraculous ministry. They believe that “Kingdom authority” (a term not found in scripture) refers largely to our own exercise of authority over sickness and demonic powers, and that such authority is ours to exercise—seemingly at will. Appeal is often made to another statement, which appears in the disputed “long ending” of Mark:

*And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”*¹³

The Bible does teach that the name of Christ and the authority of His Kingdom are now, in an important sense, entrusted to us for the advancement of the Kingdom. The success of this mission involves work that is supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Church’s authority is over

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:20

¹⁰ John 13:20

¹¹ John 20:21

¹² Luke 10:8-9, 19

¹³ Mark 16:17-18

Satan's demonic minions. Because Satan's kingdom also possesses its own inferior supernatural forces, Christ has given superior supernatural gifts to His people to confront and counteract the devil's works. John tells us, "*For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil*"¹⁴—so that we may move forward on His mission with the assurance that "*greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.*"¹⁵

However, some of us may need to curb our enthusiasm a bit about the personal exercise of miraculous powers. Before we decide that we should be healing every sick person we see (wonderful as that might seem), we should keep several equally biblical facts in mind:

- 1) The authority of the Kingdom is, first of all, an authority that we stand *under*. It is not a license to run around exercising unbridled power at our own volition. Rather, it is Christ's rule primarily *over our lives and conduct*. This means that we don't simply go out and perform miracles, nor do any other such activity for God, without His instruction—as Moses once foolishly did. His striking the rock a second time resulted in a miracle but, since God had not sanctioned the action, it also warranted God's censure of Moses for going beyond God's instructions.¹⁶ Remember also Jesus' somber warning that only those who do the will of the Father will enter the Kingdom, and this requirement would exclude even some who performed great wonders "in His name."¹⁷ His authority is, first of all, *over us*.
- 2) It is never suggested in scripture that healing of sicknesses is God's highest priority, nor even His will in every case. In some scriptural instances God has chosen not to heal the sick¹⁸ because He has a better idea. To the sick, a better idea than to be healed can hardly be imagined. However, God's priorities need to be embraced by those who serve Him. He often has something much bigger and of more eternal consequence in mind, when all we would want is instant relief.¹⁹ When He does choose to heal, there is often a more important objective in view than mere relief from pain (e.g., the demonstration of Jesus' status as Messiah, or of the legitimacy of the apostles' preaching)²⁰ which, unlike the healing itself, has eternal significance.
- 3) Even when it is God's will to heal, there is no suggestion in scripture that every believer is to be involved in this specific activity. Even if Mark 16:17 is regarded as an original part of Mark's gospel, the "*signs [that] will follow*" the community of "*those that believe*" will not be practiced by

¹⁴ 1 John 3:8

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:4

¹⁶ Numbers 20:7-12

¹⁷ Matthew 7:21-23

¹⁸ John 11:6, 21; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 2 Timothy 4:20

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 12:9

²⁰ Matthew 9:6; Mark 16:20; John 3:2; 10:37f; 20:30f; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3f

every member of that community. Is every believer expected to drink poison and handle venomous snakes? There are different “gifts” distributed to members of the Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, according to His will. “*Working of miracles*”²¹ is listed as only one example among numerous others, most of which do not involve any miraculous displays of power at all. It would seem strange for God to give a special gift of working miracles to only some believers if this was to be a primary and ordinary function of every believer.

- 4) Paul said that his own apostleship was confirmed by miraculous signs and mighty deeds. He called these things “*the signs of an apostle*.”²² Doesn’t this imply that he considered this kind of thing as largely the activities of apostles? How otherwise would such activities confirm his apostolic status? Apparently, not every Christian was expected to be doing these things—“*Are all apostles?*”²³ Similarly, in the Jerusalem church, we do not find the three-thousand initial converts all going out to heal and perform miracles. We are specifically informed that “*many wonders and signs were done through the apostles*.”²⁴

Like the Great Commission itself, the delegation of authority is given to the disciple community *collectively*. This global community is like a body comprised of many members. The community is corporately the entity in which Christ remains embodied on earth after His personal departure. All the authority of God’s Kingdom resides in Christ, who lived on earth for thirty-something years as an individual man. Today He continues His earthly mission, not through the body of one man, but through a Body comprised of millions of men and women. All members of the Body submit to, and are directed by, the same Head, accomplishing different tasks—just as in the analogy of an ordinary body.

Not every member has the same function—some speak to the believing community on behalf of Christ; some speak to the world about Christ. Others provide for practical needs—some through service, others through financial support—and a relative few work miracles. While more than one function may be present in some individuals, there are many members of the Body that have only one primary function. It may be that any member of the Body, under Christ’s special direction, may serve in the emergency to heal, teach, serve, or cast out a demon, but it is not the case that every member is assigned to all of these activities as his or her regular or primary contribution to the whole work. When acting in the assigned role, under the direction of the Head, every member of the Body operates in the authority of Christ, as His authorized agent.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 12:10

²² 2 Corinthians 12:12

²³ 1 Corinthians 12:29

²⁴ Acts 2:43

The authority of Christ only operates *in us* insofar as it holds sway *over us*. Like the centurion, who could exercise authority over his subordinates only because he was, himself, “*a man under authority*,” so also the Christian’s authority only exists and functions *in submission to Christ’s authority*.

It is not enough to say, “I have authority over demons,” or “I have authority to heal.” It is necessary to include the caveat: “It is in my power to exorcise a demon if, in this case, it is what Christ wants to do through me,” or “I can heal if, in this case, it is Christ’s will to heal this particular person through me.” Having Christ’s authority is not a *carte blanche* to act independently of His direction. To assume that we automatically know what God wants is a great danger, when we are supposed to be servants at our Master’s feet awaiting instructions and then carrying them out.

Even Jesus did not heal everyone in Israel. Like ourselves, He was under orders to do only what His Father wished to do through Him: He said, “*I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things,*”²⁵ and, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.*”²⁶

When one of His close friends was sick, and at the point of death, an urgent message came from the family desiring Jesus’ intervention. Since Jesus healed people wherever He traveled, the obvious assumption was that He would go and heal Lazarus. He could even do it from a distance, if necessary. However, He did not respond to the need in the expected manner. God had a better plan in this case. Lazarus would not be healed, but would die. However, as Jesus said, “*This sickness is not unto death, but to the glory of God.*” This promise was fulfilled in Jesus’ raising him from the dead.

Any of us acting on our own and in possession of Jesus’ powers would have hurried to our sick friend’s side and raised him from his sickbed. In this case, however, we would have been doing the wrong thing. Fortunately, Jesus was more self-disciplined under His Father’s authority than most of us would be when an urgent need suggests an obvious response. Healing is not always the best outcome of sickness. God may have a better idea.

Even Paul, as a miracle-working apostle, could not heal whomever he wished, apart from the specific will of God. He couldn’t heal his ministry partner Trophimus,²⁷ and had to leave him sick in Miletus. Another partner Epaphroditus almost died in Paul’s presence, causing him great consternation. Even though the man recovered, there is no evidence that it was through Paul’s, or anyone else’s, exercise of a “gift of healing.” Paul describes it as if it was an unpredictable and seemingly natural recovery. Paul referred to this as a particular act of mercy on God’s part (not a predictable, miraculous manifestation of God’s universal policies, as some think).²⁸ Even Paul’s loyal

²⁵ John 8:28

²⁶ John 5:19

²⁷ 2 Timothy 4:20

²⁸ Philippians 2:25-27

protégé Timothy had chronic amoebic dysentery, from which none of his Christian friends, including Paul, could bring relief. Instead, Paul gave medical advice: “*use a little wine...*”²⁹

Most telling of all is the case of Paul’s own sickness.³⁰ Faith healers like to deny that Paul’s “*thorn in the flesh*” was an organic illness. They suggest he was complaining about persecution from some particularly malicious human foe. While the scriptural support for this theory seems entirely lacking, in the passage itself Paul refers to his problem as an “infirmity”—the most common word for sickness in the Greek New Testament. It is the same word Paul used in speaking of Timothy’s stomach issues. Paul was sick, which he affirmed unambiguously in his letter to the Galatians: “*You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first.*”³¹

The point of greatest interest is that, in the torments of his illness, Paul prayed desperately that Christ would heal him. As in the case of Lazarus’ illness, so in Paul’s case, Jesus had a better idea. “*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*”³²

Upon receiving this revelation, Paul accepted and even rejoiced in his illness, rather than continuing to pursue healing. Whoever says that it is always God’s will to heal would have to argue with Jesus and Paul on that score.

“But,” some argue, “the coming of the Kingdom is supposed to result in God’s will being done *‘on earth as it is in heaven.’* There is no sickness in heaven. Therefore, we should not accept it as a norm on earth either.” Yes, but we also know that there is no death in heaven, nor is the devil there. Yet, we will never in this life be physically immortal, or be free from temptations. We have every right to be praying that conditions like those of heaven—liberation from all sickness, temptations, pain, and death—will come upon earth, but we are specifically informed that those times will come in the New Earth after Jesus returns.³³ The final state of perfection must await its proper time, at the end. “*The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.*”³⁴ It seems that the related enemies of Satan and sickness will be absolutely eliminated at that time. In the meantime, affliction plays an important role in our spiritual improvement and growth.³⁵

In the name of Jesus

All Christians have read, or heard, that we are to pray “in the name of Jesus.”³⁶ Fewer know that *everything else* we do is also to be done “in the name of Jesus”: “*And whatever you do in word or*

²⁹ 1 Timothy 5:23

³⁰ 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

³¹ Galatians 4:13

³² 2 Corinthians 12:9

³³ Revelation 21:4

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:26

³⁵ Psalm 119:67, 71, 75; Romans 5:3f; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 12:9; Hebrews 2:10; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6f.

³⁶ John 16:23-24

*deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus...*³⁷ Early Christians healed and cast out demons “in the name of Jesus.”³⁸ What does this phrase mean?

When one acts *in the name* of another person, he or she is acting as an authorized agent or trustee. This involves exercising that person’s authority in his stead, as when one authorizes a trusted broker to manage one’s investments or grants someone power of attorney to sign documents. The agent must act in the interests of the principal, that is, the person who *naturally* possesses and who has delegated authority to that agent.

This is the nature of Jesus’ ministry on earth. He came as God’s authorized Agent to conduct the business of His Father: *“The works that I do in My Father’s name...”*³⁹ and *“I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.”*⁴⁰

Jesus acted in His Father’s name—in and under the authority of His Father—and He authorizes us to act likewise in His own name and under His authority. He is the Supreme Ruler, but He has delegated the management of His affairs on earth to His trusted servants.⁴¹ No matter what we do at any moment of any day, we should see ourselves as Jesus’ authorized agents in this world.

The words we speak, the prayers we pray, the purchases we make, the friends we choose, the careers we pursue, the conversations in which we engage, the things we post online—all are done strictly because we believe that God wants this action done or needs us as agents in such a circumstance. A Christian may work at the same job alongside unbelievers, but the believer is there for an additional reason. Everyone else may be there only to make a living. The disciple of Jesus is also making a living, but more importantly, he or she is acting in Christ’s name and in His stead, penetrating the environment as an agent representing His interests. The Christian bears the name of Jesus before the world, whether knowingly or not. There may be days in which we would not prefer to represent Jesus among unbelievers, or even among other believers, but doing so is not optional. It is the commission of the King.

Jesus has risked the fortunes of His Kingdom’s work, His reputation, and His credibility by placing them all in our hands. The success of His mission depends, to a large extent, upon the faithfulness of those bearing His name. This puts us in the vulnerable position of possibly taking His name “in vain”—that is, possessing His name and authority but misrepresenting Him and His interests. We are as much under orders to faithfully carry out His enterprise on His behalf as He was to carry out His Father’s. This calls for us to take our commission more seriously than many Christians have ever considered doing.

³⁷ Colossians 3:17

³⁸ Acts 3:6; 16:18

³⁹ John 10:25

⁴⁰ John 6:38

⁴¹ Matthew 25:14; Mark 13:34; Luke 19:12-13

The bottom line

The bottom line is that Jesus is on the top rung—above all. All things are officially subject to Him, and the rebellion of all people currently resisting His authority cannot diminish His rank, nor compromise His status. It is God, not men, who has given Him a name above all names. All will be brought under His feet in due time. We are among those who are privileged to recognize, prior to many others, Christ's position and our need to bring "*every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.*"⁴² This simplifies so many things! Whenever the question arises, "What should I do, or say?" the answer is always the same as that which Mary told the servants at the wedding: "*Whatever He says to you, do it.*"⁴³

⁴² 2 Corinthians 10:5

⁴³ John 2:5

Chapter Eleven

The Reign of Grace

*...so that as sin reigned in death,
even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

(Romans 5:21)

*Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace,
that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

(Hebrews 4:16)

Perhaps we do not often think of grace as something that *reigns* so much as something that *overlooks* wrongdoing. We may have been conditioned to see “law” and “grace” as polar opposites (and in some senses, they are). Many see law as something that reigns or imposes a rule, and grace as that which we count on for forgiveness when that rule has been violated. Grace then, more or less, removes the teeth from the law. But what if the Bible were to present a concept of grace with “teeth”? When God revealed His glory to Moses on the mountain, He described Himself in these terms:

And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.”¹

It seems that God, in the description of His character, cannot heap up enough virtual synonyms extolling His grace: “*gracious, longsuffering...keeping mercy...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...*” There is no doubt that God desires to be known for His forbearance, magnanimity and patience, and describes these as His principal attributes. How is it then that this “*God of all grace*”² is able, in the same breath, to describe His multi-generational severity in dealing with rebellion?

Strange as it may seem, scripture counterintuitively teaches that the human response to the correct apprehension of God’s grace is *fear*:

¹ Exodus 34:6-7

² 1 Peter 5:10

*But there is forgiveness with You,
That You may be feared.³*

Repeatedly the Old Testament writers emphasize the link between God's mercy and man's appropriate fear of Him:

*But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy;
In fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple.⁴*

*Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him,
On those who hope in His mercy⁵*

*In mercy and truth Atonement is provided for iniquity;
And by the fear of the Lord one departs from evil.⁶*

This is not strictly an Old Testament linkage. The writer of Hebrews, similarly, encourages those who have received the benefits of the Kingdom, including grace, to maintain an attitude of fear toward God:

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.⁷

The idea of *fearing* God is so unpopular in modern Christianity that many preachers, when encountering biblical references to the "fear of the Lord" are quick to explain that the word "fear" does not speak of being afraid but simply refers to "reverential awe." While reverence and awe may be among the possible definitions of the word in the original languages, one must not assume that we are to eliminate the emotion of fear as pertaining to those ideas. Paul said, "*Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men...*"⁸

Many modern believers are not very clear on the idea of the fear of God. There is a general misapprehension that God was less gracious in the Old Testament than He is in the New Testament, and was more to be feared then than is the case now. However, the fear of God is no less a New Testament requirement than an Old Testament one. Jesus Himself taught:

³ Psalm 130:4

⁴ Psalm 5:7

⁵ Psalm 33:18

⁶ Proverbs 16:6

⁷ Hebrews 12:28

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:11

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.⁹

Peter similarly spoke of the need for the Christian to maintain a healthy fear of God, in view of the fact that God's judgment will show no favoritism:

And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear...¹⁰

The proper response to the “*everlasting gospel*” itself (which is, at once, the good news of the Kingdom and the good news of grace) is summarized in these words: “*Fear God and give glory to Him...*”¹¹ The impression that God in the Old Testament is more to be feared than in the New can only be derived from a careless reading of both testaments. In the Old Testament, it is true, you seem to find God judging individuals and societies every time you turn around—but not so much in the New.

It is slanderously claimed by many (and this was the belief of the heretical Marcionites) that Yahweh of the Old Testament seems to have been different from the Father revealed by Jesus. Jesus never hurt anybody, and you do not find Him striking down His enemies, as did the God who sent the flood of Noah's day,¹² or who incinerated Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone.¹³ How seemingly “unlike Jesus” to send fire out from His presence to consume Nadab and Abihu, due to their offering strange fire in the tabernacle¹⁴—or to fatally strike Uzzah for merely attempting to stabilize the ark of the covenant upon the ox cart!¹⁵ Where is *the God of all grace* in those stories?

Before we reach any ill-informed conclusions, we must take a closer look at the New Testament itself. There, God is seen striking down Ananias and Saphira—just as He had done to Uzzah, Nadab and Abihu in the Old Testament. The positive result of the death of this couple was that “*great fear came upon the church and upon all who heard these things.*”¹⁶ It was also in the New Testament that the angel of the Lord struck the arrogant Herod Agrippa I, so that “*he was eaten by worms and died.*”¹⁷ These stories come from the Book of Acts, describing the early days of Christ's reign from heaven. Do they not sound like they could have been lifted directly from the pages of the Old Testament?

⁹ Matthew 10:28

¹⁰ 1 Peter 1:17

¹¹ Revelation 14:6-7

¹² Genesis 6:17

¹³ Genesis 19:24

¹⁴ Leviticus 10:1-2

¹⁵ 2 Samuel 6:7

¹⁶ Acts 5:1-11

¹⁷ Acts 12:23

In the New Testament Book of Revelation, Jesus is portrayed as a sacrificed Lamb¹⁸—an image underscoring His grace and atonement of sinners. Yet this “Lamb” is seen unleashing unparalleled wrath upon the unrepentant. Does it seem incongruous that a paradoxical phrase like “*the wrath of the Lamb*”¹⁹ could be written with reference to gentle Jesus? Where, in the Old Testament, can one find such severe judgment, mayhem, and devastation as is depicted in the Book of Revelation? Does it appear from any of these examples that God, in the transition from the Old to the New Testament, has undergone some change in His nature or character?

Why, then, do people get the impression that God was less gracious at one time than He is now? In the Old Testament, as we have seen, we have many emphatic declarations of Yahweh’s abundant grace and mercy, no less than in the New Testament. We could find no New Testament passage that rhapsodizes over the grace and kindness of God the Father more than does Psalm 103, where we find such statements as the following:

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And forget not all His benefits:
Who forgives all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases,
Who redeems your life from destruction,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies...
The Lord is merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy...
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our iniquities...
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
As a father pities his children,
So the Lord pities those who fear Him.
For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we are dust.²⁰*

¹⁸ Revelation 5:6

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6:16

²⁰ Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10-14

Both testaments reveal a God of abundant grace, and also demonstrate a God who does not shrink from executing severe punishments when the occasion requires. Why, then, do so many people mistakenly think that there is some perceptible change in God's nature when passing from one administration to the other? It is simply this: The Old Testament covers four-thousand years of history, while the New Testament covers only about forty.²¹ The former period is one-hundred times the length of the latter, and a larger sampling of history provides more occasions for people to get in trouble with the sort of behavior that calls for God's judgment. In fact, given the disparity in the lengths of the respective periods covered, we might expect to find approximately a hundred times as many historical judgment acts of God in the Old as we would find in the New. Such is hardly the case. On average, *per decade of recorded history*, the number of recorded divine judgments is fewer in the Old Testament than in the New (especially when you include Revelation!). In the former, we find God waiting quietly for centuries on end while Israel and the nations perennially provoke Him by their rebellion and abominable crimes.

There is nothing strange about the fact that God judges, when He finally gets around to doing so. What is astonishing is the patience He displays in allowing people extended opportunities to repent. This is stated to be one reason that Jesus has not yet returned: *The Lord...is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.*²²

The Canaanites, due to their extreme wickedness, were already ripe for destruction in Abraham's time. In predicting the judgment that would come upon that society, God told Abraham that He would only wait *four-hundred years longer* before sending judgment upon them! They were a grossly immoral people who sacrificed their children to demons—yet, they would be given four centuries to repent before they would be driven forcibly out of their land and into oblivion. Why the delay? God told Abraham, "*for the iniquity of the [Canaanites] is not yet complete.*"²³ That is, they would have to get even worse before God would be angry enough to completely pull the plug on their society.

Likewise, when God told Noah that the sinfulness of man was so great as to require the flood to destroy them, He had already observed that "*every intent of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil continually.*"²⁴ The corruption of the world's population had passed the point of no return. In fact, God's patience was running so thin with these monsters of iniquity that He announced that He would only give them 120 more years to repent!²⁵

We may get the false impression that God, as revealed in the Old Testament, has a short fuse, and that He seems to fly off the handle whenever someone fails to perfectly please Him. However, reading

²¹ Not including the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke

²² 2 Peter 3:9

²³ Genesis 15:16

²⁴ Genesis 6:5

²⁵ Genesis 6:3

more carefully, we find that God has a very long fuse, and bears with man's rebellion much longer than can easily be explained—certainly longer than any of us would if we were in His position.

Grace spurned is grace outraged

The receiving of benefits carries responsibilities with it. An enabling parent may spoil a child through irresponsible pampering and the failure to hold him accountable for bad behavior. If this leniency is what we think of as "grace," then we have grossly cheapened one of the most astonishing and magnificent concepts in the Bible, and reimagined God as a doting, weak Father, who cannot bring Himself to punish His children when they desperately need it and would benefit from it.

To receive grace is to become indebted. Generosity brings responsibility. To spurn grace is to court outrage. Consider the parable Jesus related about the gracious king who freely forgave a servant owing him a fortune which he could not repay.²⁶ When the servant pleaded for mercy, the king freely canceled his debt, and let him walk away without any penalty. This is amazing grace!

The same servant, having received such benevolence, found a fellow servant who owed him a mere pittance and, being unable to collect, he consigned his debtor to prison for non-payment. Upon hearing of this, the king (who had already forgiven the first servant) was outraged. He apprehended the merciless ingrate and delivered him over to torturers "*until he should pay all that was due him.*"²⁷ Then Jesus applied the parable to God's own policies with reference to His forgiven servants: "*So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.*"²⁸

This latter action of the king would seem to violate the very definition of forgiveness. Having previously forgiven his servant, how could he reimpose the debt upon him, requiring payment after all? Is that possible? Doesn't forgiveness mean that the debt is canceled? How could it be demanded again if the forgiveness was genuine?

The answer must be that forgiveness cancels one debt and imposes a new one. It is clear that the king required the forgiven servant to forgive others. These were the terms attached to the original cancellation of debt, whether spoken or not. Once having absolved the servant of his debt, the king could not justly enforce again the same debt that had been canceled. However, he could enforce the new debt that came with the pardon. That the servant was jailed until he would "*pay all that was due,*" would not necessarily mean that the huge sum which he had formerly owed was now required to be paid in full. Rather, receiving grace means accepting a new debt—namely, that of extending to one's

²⁶ Matthew 18:23-35

²⁷ *Ibid.*, v.34

²⁸ *Ibid.*, v.35

neighbor such grace as the offender had already received. This debt (that of forgiving the fellow-servant) was now required to be paid before release from the “torturers” could be expected.

Does it seem out of place for the kindly Christ to speak of God’s delivering His own forgiven ones over to “torturers”? What is meant by this imagery is not clear. Roman Catholics apply this disciplinary action to purgatory after death, but nothing in the parable suggests that the servant has died or that the torments to which he is given over are postmortem experiences. One view is that unforgiveness on our part makes us vulnerable to being afflicted by malicious, tormenting spirits (as Saul was).²⁹ Others may consider the “torturers” to represent the torments of conscience, or even the discipline of physical illness, as in 1 Corinthians 11:29-32. The reference naturally evokes our curiosity. However, the one thing that Jesus is clearly saying is that severe discipline attends the neglect of grace already received. To this point the author of Hebrews adds:

Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?³⁰

So the punishment due to those who insult and trample upon the Spirit of grace is greater than that penalty of death that was imposed upon those rejecting Moses’ law. Perhaps this is why the fear of God is so often connected with the awareness of His mercy and grace. The debt incurred by receiving such grace is not a small one.

Doesn’t perfect love eliminate all fear?

If these considerations tend to inspire fear in us, perhaps they should! The Apostle Peter seemed to think so:

...conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things...but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.³¹

Notice that Peter connects the need for us to live in the fear of God with the knowledge that we have been graciously redeemed by the blood of Christ. What opposite conclusions we are prone to infer from our popular notions of grace! It is common to encounter those who reason that being

²⁹ 1 Samuel 18:9-10; cf. Ephesians 4:26-27

³⁰ Hebrews 10:28-29

³¹ 1 Peter 1:17-19

“under grace” and being “redeemed by the blood of the Lamb” should banish all fear of God. We read in scripture that “perfect love casts out fear.”³² Why, then, would Peter (like Jesus³³ and Paul³⁴) instruct us to fear God?

Perhaps due to bad parenting or bad theology, religious people often think that God’s default attitude toward mankind is one of anger or hatred. Perceiving Him as being hard to please, and easy to enrage,³⁵ their mood is one of nervous fear that God will pounce upon them in wrath for the slightest infraction. In such religion, “*the fear of the Lord*” suggests a tormenting aversion to Him, rather than being drawn in love and gratitude to Him. The best that such people hope for is that they will do nothing to especially attract His slumbering wrath so that He will, perhaps, leave them alone. What a miserable life such people must live—walking on eggshells in hopes of appeasing such a peevish, volatile, and seemingly implacable King.

John wrote, “*Perfect love casts out fear.*”³⁶ The biblical teaching is that those who walk in love, need never fear His displeasure at all. Tormenting fear is cast out to the extent that we live in love for Him and for others. Nobody is perfect, but the writers of scripture assumed that love is the default behavior of Spirit-filled children of God. To the degree that we love God and others, we sense that there is nothing to fear.

One need never live in nervous intimidation before God while possessing a healthy fear of God. To give a simple parallel, most of us do not fear trains. It is even possible to love trains (I have met people who do). Yet, if any of us were to be trapped in a stalled vehicle on the railroad tracks with an approaching locomotive, we would suddenly know that we really do fear trains. We have no reason to feel our fear of trains until we find ourselves on a collision course with one! Immense power can be thrilling, and may even inspire feelings of security and awe, so long as one remains in the proper relation to it.

To survey the military resources of a national superpower like America might inspire feelings of security, or even complacency, in the hearts of her allies. However, the very contemplation of being an enemy against whom those missiles might be deployed would no doubt be terrifying to a potentially hostile nation.

As Paul wrote, “*Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men...*”³⁷ The sensible thing is to have a healthy fear of immense power so as to remain in proper relation to it—whether it be a train, freeway traffic, high-voltage electricity, a tornado, or the Creator of the galaxies. “*The fear of*

³² 1 John 4:18

³³ Matthew 10:28

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:11

³⁵ Matthew 25:24-25

³⁶ 1 John 4:18

³⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:11

the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,"³⁸ because, "*By the fear of the Lord, men depart from evil.*"³⁹ The fear of the Lord causes a wise person to avoid placing him or herself on a collision course with the God who loves righteousness and who must avenge evil.⁴⁰ When we walk in love, we walk in the light⁴¹ and maintain fellowship with God,⁴² which eliminates any sensation of fear. The sense of appropriate fear arises, as it should, only when we contemplate doing that which would compromise that proper relationship. If such contemplation does not inspire fear, then one is truly a fool. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and, as John Bunyan once quipped, he who lacks the beginning has neither the middle part nor the end.

Grace like a crocodile?

God's default attitude toward man is that of grace, which means favor. It is possible to be on His bad side, but easier and more gratifying, for those who so desire, to remain in His loving favor. It was God who so loved the rebellious world that He gave us His Son to save it.⁴³ He did this while we were sinners and enemies of His. "*God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son...*"⁴⁴

This is the grace of God that imputes to us a favored status with Him quite apart from our earning or warranting it. Those who have entered the Kingdom live in the realm of God's grace, which extends to, and remains upon, all of His true servants. Even the discipline He brings upon those who commit heinous offenses is intended for their restoration to His good graces. Therefore, Paul speaks of God's judgments as discipline that He intends for our ultimate salvation:

*...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*⁴⁵

*But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.*⁴⁶

³⁸ Proverbs 9:10

³⁹ Proverbs 16:6

⁴⁰ Romans 12:19

⁴¹ 1 John 2:10

⁴² 1 John 1:6-7

⁴³ John 3:16; 1 John 4:14

⁴⁴ Romans 5:8-10

⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 5:5

⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:32

Like the mother crocodile, who gently gathers her newly-hatched young into her mouth to transport them to safety,⁴⁷ grace too has teeth and is committed to our safety. It is God's loving disposition by which He grants benefits exceedingly beyond any that could ever be earned.

Grace is unmerited, but not unconditional

God's grace is unwarranted by human merit, but though it is *unmerited*, it is not *unconditional*. Many people have trouble separating these concepts. They say, "If one must repent (or be baptized, or persevere, etc.) in order to be saved, how is that not making salvation a matter of works?" We will have more to say about this question in a later chapter further on, but right here let me attempt to simplify the concept.

I am at the age (actually, *past* the age) when financial planners send me cards saying, "Please join us for a free steak dinner, and to listen to Mr. so-and-so discussing options for planning for your retirement." Even though I hope never to retire, I confess that I accepted one of these invitations just for the free meal. It was actually very good, just as advertised. Of course, the conditions for that gift were that I must listen to a brief presentation, which I didn't mind, since I would otherwise spend the same time doing something else, equally relaxing (but with a less full stomach). Sitting and listening are not the same as working or earning anything.

Though I did not care about the information offered, I did not write back to the person who invited me saying, "Thank you very much for the kind offer! I will be joining you for the meal, but I will not be able to stay for the presentation." I knew that I would be told that the meal is free, but only on the condition of sitting through the talk at the end. This seemed reasonable, and I knew that there would be no sense in my arguing, "But if I have to meet such a condition, then the meal is not free!" I would be wrong. There are not many restaurants where I can earn a free meal by simply listening to someone talk. Usually, when I eat in a restaurant, I have to pay money, or else wash dishes (come to think of it, I have to do one of those things even if I eat at home). I did not pay for the offered meal (thus it was a gift) and I did not do any work to earn it (therefore it qualified as "free"). However, I had to meet the conditions upon which it was offered. A gift offered on conditions is still a gift. The only thing that would alter that would be if I had to come up with a payment equivalent in value to what I received.

Grace is freely offered to those who meet the conditions. It is no different from a man being told by the woman he desires, "You may sleep with me, because I love you. However, you must marry me first." By marrying the woman, has the man paid for sex, and rendered the woman a prostitute? Such

⁴⁷ Fascinating videos of this behavior can be viewed on Youtube, e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvjDcbLtU5I>

a suggestion is utter nonsense. A husband and wife give themselves to each other freely—on the condition that they first have become husband and wife. What is free under such conditions is unavailable in any other context.

So, upon what conditions is God’s grace received? It is quite simple:

1. We are told three times in scripture, “*God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*”⁴⁸ By remaining humble before God and man one meets the conditions for receiving (but does not earn) grace. This is something from which the proud are excluded. In Christ’s parable of the two men praying in the temple, it was the self-effacing publican crying out, “*God be merciful to me a sinner,*” rather than the self-congratulating Pharisee, who went home “*justified*” before God.⁴⁹
2. Grace is accessed by the humble *through faith* in God. Salvation is “*by grace through faith,*”⁵⁰ which indicates that faith is the conduit through which grace comes to us. Paul confirms this, in Romans 5:2, where he writes: “*through [Christ] also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand.*” We have access *into grace* by way of faith. It is clear that not only our initial justification, but also our continual standing in Christ, is owed entirely to grace. That grace is accessed moment-by-moment through our faith in God and Christ.
3. One must “marry” Christ, as a bride marries a bridegroom, because grace is only found “in Christ.”⁵¹ A woman becomes a bride without paying a fee, but she does not do so without becoming a wife and incurring such duties as belong to being a wife. Likewise, when we enter into a lifelong covenant relationship of submission to Christ, we receive that for which we could never have afforded to pay, but we have a new identity and status as one who has a Head under whom to live. Receiving grace will not allow us to relate, with reference to Christ, as if we are still “single” and “unattached.” It is a lifelong, exclusive commitment. In that context, and under such conditions, infinite quantities of grace are ours throughout our lifetime and change virtually everything about our lives.

Therefore, those who humbly trust in God, as Abraham did, are accounted righteous in God’s sight. However, the same grace that justifies the sinner imposes its rule upon the disciple. We will next turn our attention to the question of what that looks like in the life of the follower of Jesus.

⁴⁸ Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5

⁴⁹ Luke 18:9-14

⁵⁰ Ephesians 2:8

⁵¹ Ephesians 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:9; 2:1

Chapter Twelve

When Grace is Reigning

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,
teaching us...
(Titus 2:11-12)*

*My grace is sufficient for you...
(2 Corinthians 12:9)*

The “*gospel of the Kingdom of God*” is also called the “*gospel of grace*,” because Christ’s is a kingdom in which God’s grace reigns: “*so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness.*”¹ When we approach the King’s throne with our petitions, we find it to be a “*throne of grace.*”² The Kingdom is both entered and lived in by the receiving of grace. Once we have received pardon for sins, what further role does grace play in the Kingdom life apart from when we sin again and need to be forgiven? What are the implications of grace’s *reigning*, other than simply to guarantee exemption from the King’s wrath?

In scripture, grace has a broader meaning than the simple definition of “unmerited favor” with which many of us are familiar. Grace is indeed unmerited favor, but this favor of God has greater ramifications than simply to guarantee that we have a friend in court who knows how to get us off the hook when we do wrong. According to Paul, grace also reigns over our actions *as sin once did*. Thus, we are “*under grace*”³—that is, under grace’s rule. What does that look like?

Some have mistaken grace as a license to sin. They ask (in words that Paul places hypothetically in their mouths): “*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?*”⁴ Paul expresses horror that the role of grace can be so misconstrued—though grace has never lacked for those who misconstrue it in just this manner. Paul answers the question by explaining that a person’s behavior is always in service to one master or another. The one being obeyed is the one who is that servant’s master. Thus, someone who claims to be living “under grace,” but whose behavior serves sin, is demonstrating that he is not under grace at all. If grace were his master, he would serve it. One

¹ Romans 5:21

² Hebrews 4:16

³ Romans 6:14

⁴ Romans 6:15

who serves sin is the servant of sin.⁵ If sin is dictating one's behavior, one is not living under grace, but under sin, as a master.⁶ Not being under grace is of course not being saved at all.

It is too common to find those who say they are “under grace,” but whose behavior is unrepentantly sinful. Paul makes it clear that when grace has come to the heart, it teaches a new way of life:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age.⁷

So, grace is a teacher. When one is subject to such a teacher he or she is instructed in the lessons of “*denying ungodliness and worldly lusts,*” and of living “*soberly, righteously, and godly*” in this present world. Those who are inwardly taught such a curriculum by grace are in the Kingdom of grace and are under its rule. Those who are not taught these things inwardly are apparently not yet “under grace.” If grace were present, according to Paul, it would be teaching them such things.

This means that, if you know someone who defends a sinful lifestyle by the claim of being “under grace, not law,” you actually know a person who is self-deceived. Whatever he or she means by being “under grace,” it is not what the Bible means. At the throne of grace, one finds mercy and grace to help—but also a *throne*.

Grace as sufficiency for the task

In the New Testament, the Greek word for “grace” is *charis*, meaning “favor.” Recipients of grace enjoy the favor of God—and to those whom God favors, He gives divine assistance. The demands of lifelong service to Christ are not *difficult* to fulfill. By human efforts, they are *impossible*. No one but God can perform and complete God's work. However, “*it is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*”⁸ The Spirit by which He lives in us is called the “*Spirit of grace*”⁹ because His presence provides the constant supply of grace needed to make us sufficient for the task of serving the King:

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves...but our sufficiency is from God...And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work...My grace is sufficient for you...’¹⁰

⁵ John 8:34

⁶ Romans 6:15-23

⁷ Titus 2:11-12

⁸ Philippians 2:13

⁹ Hebrews 10:29

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:5; 9:8; 12:9

*...since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably...*¹¹

Such passages speak of grace as a kind of sufficiency, or an enablement, to live the Christian life and to serve God acceptably. Some of the things God commands or wishes for us to accomplish can, in measure, be done in the power of our own fleshly abilities. Because of this, it may be our default habit to do such things in our natural strength. We might realize that we would need special divine assistance in order to do some of the more challenging or less-pleasant Christian duties, but most of the time we assume we can handle the responsibilities of being as kind and patient as a Christian is supposed to be.

However, it is not the duty of the Christian merely to be kind and patient. It is our duty to be like Christ in all respects, and to continue and complete the work He was doing when He was here, in the same spirit and power in which He did so. Jesus did not live a life merely in the power of human energy and a naturally amiable temperament, and neither are we expected to do so.

John said of Jesus, *“we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...”* and (two verses later) of us: *“from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”*¹² According to this passage, Jesus was *“full of grace”* (because He was filled with the Spirit of grace). We have also been filled with the Spirit of Christ (that is, the Spirit of Grace), and have also received *“of His fullness.”* We are to be filled with that with which He was filled—namely, *grace upon grace*. When Jesus spoke, people were impacted by *“the words of grace”*¹³ that proceeded out of His mouth.¹⁴ *“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”*¹⁵ Since Jesus was *“full of grace,”* that is what came out of His mouth. Similarly, the ideal for the believer is that our speech may be *“what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.”*¹⁶

Gifts of grace

Paul speaks of the work of God, performed by and through us, in terms of the functioning of various “gifts”—e.g., prophecy, teaching, exhortation, service, giving, showing mercy, leading, working miracles, etc.¹⁷ We sometimes refer to such gifts as “the gifts of the Holy Spirit,” which is a

¹¹ Hebrews 12:28

¹² John 1:14, 16 ESV

¹³ So reads the Greek, Luke 4:22

¹⁴ Luke 4:22

¹⁵ Matthew 12:34

¹⁶ Ephesians 4:29

¹⁷ See Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-10

term that Paul never actually uses.¹⁸ The word that Paul uses to speak of such gifts is the Greek *charisma* (plural, *charismata*). This word's root is the word *charis*, which, as we have said, means "grace." The "gifts of the Spirit" called *charismata* literally are "gifts of grace." The service of God can only be effectual when it is done by persons gifted by the Spirit of grace to perform all that needs to be done. The impartation of supernaturally-effectual grace is the enablement that God provides to those working through these gifts.

Peter also connects these gifts with the operation of grace from God: "*As each one has received a gift [charisma], minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace [charis] of God.*"¹⁹ The word "minister" means to "serve," and "manifold" is a word meaning "variegated" or even "many-colored" (like Joseph's coat). In this case we can safely take it to mean "many-faceted." God's many-faceted, enabling grace functions through a variety of abilities (*charismata*) entrusted to individuals in order that we, through the proper stewardship of that grace, may serve others. This is God's grace doing God's work through us. Every person in the Kingdom of God is a member of the body of Christ, and possesses some God-given gift which defines his or her contribution to the overall mission. Christ's Spirit in us, giving "*grace to help*"²⁰ through various gifts, makes us sufficient to accomplish such things as only God can properly do.

Not all of the functions referred to as "gifts" appear to be supernatural activities. In fact, being married and being unmarried are conditions to which Paul refers as different *charismata*.²¹ Does it really require supernatural assistance in order for one to serve, to give, to exhort, to lead or to teach? These, too, are listed as *charismata*, in Romans 12. There are unbelievers who can do all of these things quite well without being filled with the Spirit of God or having His gifts. In what sense does a *charisma* of giving, serving, leading, etc. make a difference?

The difference, intangible though it may be, is significant. There is a major spiritual disparity between one who leads, teaches, serves, or gives through the grace of God, on one hand, and one who does such things through merely human motivation and ability, on the other. Where God has anointed His servants by His Spirit, an activity done as a practical act of service is a spiritual endeavor and has a spiritual impact.

A janitor who serves through the *charisma* of serving given by the Spirit of grace leaves more than clean restrooms in his wake. The spiritual anointing adds to his menial service an additional overlay of spiritual blessing to others, rendering him not only a servant to men and women but also an agent of Christ in his place of labor. The hostess who is operating in such a gift is not only feeding bellies but also ministering grace to her guests. The teacher with the *charisma* of teaching imparts

¹⁸ Such an expression is found, however, in Hebrews 2:4.

¹⁹ 1 Peter 4:10

²⁰ Hebrews 4:16

²¹ 1 Corinthians 7:7

more than intellectual information to his or her hearers, but also spiritual life. The *charisma* turns an ordinary activity into a divine activity of Christ to impact others spiritually.

Even when he was not working miracles, Paul's ministry had a supernatural anointing and impact. He himself attributed his ministerial success to the working of the grace of God in him, crediting this grace as the source of:

- the effective working of God's power in him,

"...I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power."²²

- his wisdom,

"According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it."²³

- his indefatigable energy,

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."²⁴

- and the supernatural impact of his preaching.

"For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance..."²⁵

While it is possible to do what looks like "Kingdom work" through self-sufficient natural ability, the thing planted by such efforts will not be planted by God, nor will what is built have been built by God. As Jesus said: "Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted,"²⁶ and the psalmist wrote:

*Unless the Lord builds the house,
They labor in vain who build it..."²⁷*

²² Ephesians 3:7

²³ 1 Corinthians 3:10

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:10

²⁵ 1 Thessalonians 1:5

²⁶ Matthew 15:13

²⁷ Psalm 127:1

The Kingdom of God, in order to be unshakeable, must be built of and by the resources of grace given to His servants, not of their own human abilities:

*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.*²⁸

Richard Wurmbrand relates a moving story about a selfless missionary, undergoing the hardships of working among a backward tribal people. In his desire to bring Christ to people with whom he could barely communicate, he labored to enhance their lives and to comfort the afflicted. Once, as he was caring for a sick woman, she asked him, “Tell me, what is this Christ like about whom you speak?” He, pausing to consider how best to reply, finally answered, “He is like me.” She said, “If He is so, I love Him and trust in Him.”²⁹

Not enough Christians could say such a thing about themselves without embarrassment, but that deficiency should itself be a source of embarrassment! This is what living under the influence and assistance of grace is supposed to do to us—it makes us like Jesus.

Grace to help in tribulation

Paul told his converts that “*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.*”³⁰

Tribulations? That doesn’t sound like much fun. There are not many goals in this world that I would choose if I knew in advance that their pursuit must take me through many tribulations. Yet, every course of life, whether Christian or otherwise, passes through seasons of hardship and suffering. The way into the Kingdom, and the life lived there, are not free from trials—but neither is any alternative life, especially that of the rebel against God: “*the way of transgressors is hard.*”³¹

Following Jesus is guaranteed to involve unique trials, persecutions, and diabolical attacks which could be avoided by our taking no interest in the Kingdom of God. Many alternative pursuits also have trials that are distinctive to those who choose them. There is no life in this world that is exempt from grief, pain, or loss.

At least two factors make the choice to take the Kingdom path a wise one, regardless of the associated tribulations:

First, God would not charge His children with the mission of facing persecution and martyrdom without there being a huge pay-off for their trouble. In fact, the Kingdom of God, like a pearl of great

²⁸ Hebrews 12:28

²⁹ Richard Wurmbrand, *My Correspondence With Jesus* (Voice Media, 2015), 142f

³⁰ Acts 14:22

³¹ Proverbs 13:15

price,³² is valued more highly than anything the world offers at any price, and is worth more than anything we can sacrifice to gain it. The person who endures persecution, but gains the Kingdom as a result, is to be envied when contrasted to those who suffer little and miss out on the Kingdom: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven,*³³ and, *"what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"*³⁴

Nobody prefers to go through tribulations—all other things being equal—but all other things are not equal. This is the path marked out to the inheritance of the Kingdom. Only those who are determined to obtain it will choose this course: *"the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force."*³⁵ The expression, *"the violent,"* should be translated, *"the forceful,"*³⁶ or *"the determined."* To lay hold so as to possess the Kingdom requires the kind of determination that will overcome the violence brought against us by the enemy. Tragically, all people in this world will suffer but (even more tragically) not all will suffer for anything worthwhile.

Paul probably suffered greater afflictions for his faith than anyone else of his generation, but he assessed the cost/benefit factors of the Christian path, assuring the Roman Christians that he considered *"that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."*³⁷ In other words, he said, "It is so worth it!"

The second fact that makes this troublesome pursuit of the Kingdom the best choice is that, while one may suffer for many alternative causes, only this one comes with the promise of *"grace to help in time of need."*³⁸ There is a guarantee of divine assistance in the form of enabling grace to those who trust God in the fiery trials. Jesus put it this way: *"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."*³⁹

One who is in the Kingdom of Christ is also "in Christ." Jesus said His disciples are in two realms: "in Him" and "in the world." The latter refers to environment and outward circumstances. In that realm Jesus promised, *"you will have tribulation."* The other is your spiritual life in Christ. In this realm Jesus promised us *"peace."* Tribulation and peace simultaneously? I could wish for the peace by itself without the tribulations, but trouble-free living is not an option for humans. At least there is an alternative to having only the tribulations.

What is it about placid external circumstances that make them so desirable? Is it not the inward peace that we hope may be found in such external tranquility? The irony is that many have discovered

³² Matthew 13:45-46

³³ Matthew 5:10

³⁴ Matthew 16:26

³⁵ Matthew 11:12

³⁶ The Greek word, found only here in the New Testament, is *biastes*, means "a forcer"

³⁷ Romans 8:18

³⁸ Hebrews 4:16

³⁹ John 16:33

no inward peace even in ideal outward circumstances, while inward peace is often discovered by those in turbulent circumstances.

One important event that led to the conversion of John Wesley was his experience on a trans-Atlantic journey in which the survival of the ship and its occupants was gravely threatened by an exceptional storm. Everybody on board, including the crew, were terrified and felt certain that they would die. Everybody, that is, except a group of Moravian Christians who, along with their children, remained calm and cheerful in the midst of the chaos. Wesley asked these people how they could remain in such tranquil spirits in the midst of such deadly chaos. He learned that it was because they knew Christ and were strengthened by their confidence in Him. The grace given to believers in trials is a remarkable testimony to those who lack it. John Wesley came to salvation through the influence of these Moravians, partly, because he knew that the religion he had did not provide such grace in crises as they exhibited.

In Roman times, it was commonplace to see Christians fed to lions and slaughtered by gladiators while they maintained calm spirits and good cheer—singing as they were viciously attacked. Tertullian, who lived at that time, noted that watching Christians endure their sufferings with such grace caused many spectators to instantly turn to Christ and declare themselves believers so that they could know such grace as was on display before them.

Of course, unbelievers also must endure terrible hardships in life and often survive them, returning to better circumstances afterward. What difference then does God's enabling grace make in the sufferings of believers? Suffering and death are experiences common to Christians and non-Christians alike. However, stories abound of Christians on sinking ships, in natural disasters, and in horrendous concentration camps, caring little for their own lives and ministering humbly to others who were in no worse conditions than themselves.

Eric Liddell, the Olympic champion runner, died as a missionary in occupied China. He was crowded with two-thousand other prisoners into a Japanese internment camp during World War II. His fellow prisoners were greatly impacted by his constant cheerfulness under hellish conditions. The latrines in the camp were not equipped to handle the needs of two thousand people, so the toilets continually overflowed leaving a sludge of human feces several inches deep all over the latrine floors. Of course, no one wanted to enter this filthy mess but there were Christians in the camp, including Eric, who voluntarily waded into the sewage with mops and with cloths tied around their faces, to clean it up for everybody's benefit. It is said that Eric sang hymns cheerfully as he performed this service. A fellow prisoner with him, Langdon Gilkey later wrote about him:

It is rare indeed when a person has the good fortune to meet a saint, but [Eric Liddell] came as close to it as anyone I have ever known...In camp he was in his middle forties, lithe and springy of step and, above all, overflowing with good humor and love of life. He was aided by others, to

be sure. But it was Eric's enthusiasm and charm that carried the day with the whole effort. Shortly before the camp ended, he was stricken suddenly with a brain tumor and died the same day. The entire camp, especially its youth, were stunned for days, so great was the vacuum that Eric's death had left.⁴⁰

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand spent fourteen years imprisoned and tortured in Communist Romania for his stubborn refusal to compromise his faith. Three of those years were spent in solitary confinement, in which he composed and memorized inspiring sermons and preached them to himself. He reports that he sometimes sensed the presence of Christ so profoundly that he danced for joy in his tiny cell. His several books,⁴¹ written after his release, testify to the supernatural grace of God working to sustain the joy and strength of the captive believer.

Corrie ten Boom and her family were Dutch Christians who worked to assist Jews to escape from Nazi-occupied Holland. They were betrayed to the Nazis and Corrie's father, brother, and sister were arrested along with her. All were consigned to cruel labor camps, where Corrie's father, brother and sister eventually died from the harsh treatment. Corrie and her sister Betsy were held together at Ravensbrück, the Nazi labor camp for women, where they endured backbreaking labor requirements, freezing temperatures without adequate covering, crowded women's barracks so infested with lice that the guards would not enter, food that we would not feed to our dogs, and cruel physical abuse.

Both sisters were gentle Christian ladies, who loved God, but Betsy's faith (as Corrie relates in her book, *The Hiding Place*) was exceptional. Both ladies strove to minister as cheerfully as possible to the miserable women who shared with them in their unlivable circumstances. Betsy eventually died in the camp due to the abuse and malnutrition. Prior to her death, she urged Corrie to remain strong so that she could later tell their story to the world. "We must tell people what we have learned here!" she said. "We must tell them, that there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here."⁴²

It is true, those who have suffered more than we have for Christ are in a much better position to inform us—should we ever find ourselves in such a pit—what it is we shall find there. The pit may be exceedingly deep, but Jesus is deeper still! God's grace meets us in tribulations and in sufficient quantity to our need.

To endure trials gracefully depends upon receiving grace steadily through a settled faith and focus upon Christ. "*For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you*

⁴⁰ Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure*, quote by Jack Wald <https://www.rabatchurch.org/sermons/bearing-fruit-in-dry-times>, accessed 8/10/20

⁴¹ E.g. Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1967, 1998), *If Prison Walls Could Speak* (1993), *Alone With God* (1999), and *In God's Underground* (2011)

⁴² Corrie ten Boom, with Elizabeth and John Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1971), p.240

become weary and discouraged in your souls."⁴³ Grace comes through faith, and faith is *the evidence of things unseen*.⁴⁴ Paul spoke of the impact that this focus on the unseen Christ has upon the suffering of Christ's disciples:

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.*⁴⁵

It is only as we are not looking at the earthly things, but rather at the invisible things—those things least obvious in the midst of afflictions, like the goodness and sovereignty of God—that our afflictions transform us into Christ's likeness. This is the working of the grace of Christ given to the one who trusts in Him. As Isaiah put it: *"You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You."*⁴⁶

This is true whether our trials are physical, financial, emotional, interpersonal, or otherwise. One of Paul's most unbearable afflictions was something to which he metaphorically referred as the thorn in his flesh. Whatever it was, he found it extremely difficult to endure. This led him to pray on three occasions that the Lord would remove the burden of this "thorn." Jesus answered his prayer, not by relieving his suffering, but by encouraging him with the assurance, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."*⁴⁷ Paul knew the grace of God, not merely in the mercy he received, but in the enabling sufficiency it provided in severe tests.

If tribulations are guaranteed to the believer, so is the inward peace and support that the grace of God brings in the midst of the trial. The early Christian martyrs were subjected to worse tribulations than anyone reading this book is likely to face for their loyalty to the King. They were not superhuman beings. Like Elijah, they were people *"with a nature like ours"*⁴⁸ possessing as much personal aversion to pain and suffering as does the average human being. Through the grace given to them, they behaved so heroically in persecution and martyrdom as to astonish even those who had known them.

Most of us are not yet facing the crisis of impending martyrdom, though such things cannot be ruled out as near-future possibilities. We might be thinking, "I can barely handle the comparably

⁴³ Hebrews 12:3

⁴⁴ Hebrews 11:1

⁴⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

⁴⁶ Isaiah 26:3

⁴⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:9

⁴⁸ James 5:17

minor trials that I face in daily life, how can I ever face the horrendous challenges of imprisonment, torture, or losing my life or loved ones?" God put this challenge to the complaining prophet Jeremiah, saying:

*If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you,
Then how can you contend with horses?⁴⁹*

How indeed? If western Christians whine when facing such garden-variety trials as are sometimes encountered by people living in the most pampered and prosperous age in history, what will we do when there are true challenges to our fortitude? The question is not rhetorical. How shall we do under such circumstances? That will depend upon our learning to trust in the sufficiency of God's enabling grace, even now in our present less-difficult circumstances. The Christian life, in good times and bad, is not intended to be lived in the strength of human courage. The King's servants alone have free access to unlimited grace to empower them to faithfully live the kind of life that the King requires. Necessary grace comes in proportion to the need of the moment. Small challenges require less grace, while great challenges require greater grace. God is keeping track of what His children need. His potential supply of grace is unlimited, and is always equal to the need.

Timely Grace

The grace that God gives for trials is always timely. It is not given in advance of the crisis to be stored up by the believer against future trials. Hebrews 4:16 promises that coming to the throne of grace for strength we will find "*grace to help in time of need.*" *In time of need*—not *prior to* the time of need. This is why we cannot imagine at this moment that we would ever have the fortitude within ourselves to endure torture for Christ. We do not have that strength, because we do not have the present need. Focus on trusting Christ for the grace to glorify Him in present circumstances. Whenever the greater trials may come, the grace sufficient to endure any ordeal will be given to those who know how to trust Him.

Corrie ten Boom relates a lesson her father impressed upon her when she was six years old. She had learned of the death of a neighbor's baby, and this had gotten her thinking about the inevitability of death—her own, and that of her family members. In distress, she sobbed to her father, "I need you! You can't die. You can't!"

The godly man sat at her bedside and said, "Tell me, Corrie, when we take the train from Haarlem to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket for the train? Three weeks before?"

She replied, "No, Daddy, you give me the ticket just before we get on the train."

⁴⁹ Jeremiah 12:5

“That’s right,” he replied, “and so it is with God’s strength. Our wise Father in heaven knows when you are going to need things, too. Today you do not need the strength, but when the time comes, He will supply the strength you need.”

This is good theology, brought down to the lower shelf where even a child can grasp it. How many adult believers have really understood this? Those who have suffered in the faithful service of the King have learned this lesson in their inward experience.

As a young minister in my twenties, I had a wonderful wife who was killed in a roadside accident shortly after we were married. I arrived on the scene of the accident only after the paramedics had come and were about to transfer her covered body into the ambulance. The person who had contacted me about the accident had only told me that there had been an accident, so I was not aware of the severity nor of her condition. When I arrived on the scene, I introduced myself as the husband to one of the EMTs, and asked, “What is her condition?” He looked at his companions then back to me and said, “She’s dead.” The news stunned me. It seemed impossible. She was only 25 years old, and we had only been married for six months!

Though taken aback by the news of my young wife’s death, I instantly experienced an involuntary phenomenon that reminded me of an experience familiar to me from childhood. Being raised in Southern California, it was common for our family to visit the beaches in the summer. As small children my sister and I liked to wade waist-deep in the surf and to let the small waves hit us in the chest or belly. At just the right moment, we would jump up to keep our heads above water. Whenever we could see that an unusually large wave was coming we knew it would overpower us, so we waited until it was just upon us. At the last minute we would hold our breath and submerge ourselves until the big wave had gone by overhead. While submerged below the overpassing wave, I could just feel the mild turbulence above me, but I was not at the mercy of the wave. This was the very sensation I experienced when I heard the word of the paramedics, “She’s dead.”

It was obviously the worst news I had ever received or could imagine receiving. However, I had the distinct sensation of being submerged in the grace of God just as the big wave went over me. I could feel that there was turbulence but it never felt as if it hit me full force. It was the supply of God’s timely grace that made the crisis bearable. I never doubted that Christ was on the throne, that He had the power to have kept my wife alive if He had chosen to do so, and that he never makes any mistakes in judgment. Grace comes through this faith.

Good grief

Of course, I mourned the loss of my wife! However, the grace given in times of grief transforms such an experience for the believer. Friends told me that the divine sustenance I was experiencing was a matter of concern. Some assured me that I was simply in “denial,” which is the first of five stages

of grieving that people experience when suffering a significant loss. They warned me that, when the denial stage passes, I should be prepared for an emotional crash as the next stage followed. I suspect they had forgotten what Paul said about such things: “*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who [have died], that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.*”⁵⁰ The predicted “crash” never came. I believe the reason that it did not was because I was never in *denial* at all. Rather, from the beginning, I was in a state of *affirmation*. The affirmation of God’s goodness and sovereignty in crises brings grace to help in time of need. The expectation that Christians must go through the common stages of grieving that unbelievers experience fails to take into consideration God’s promise of this timely and sufficient grace to those trusting Him. Though we who believe do grieve our losses, we do not grieve as do others do who lack hope—and who lack God’s sustaining grace.

Living in the Kingdom of God is living by faith in God, which maintains a state of continuous grace. Grace transforms every aspect of life. It teaches us inwardly to live a godly and holy life. It also makes us sufficient to live that life, and to impact others in the process, ministering grace to them as well. Grace even transforms the worst parts of life into seasons of nearness to God, which strengthens the trusting follower of Christ beyond any natural capacity to endure severe sufferings. Those who find, and live in the realm of, God’s grace learn by experience that “*there is no pit so deep that Jesus is not deeper still.*”

⁵⁰ 1 Thessalonians 4:13

Chapter Thirteen

Justice—The Fruit of the Kingdom

*My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill.
He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine.
He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it;
So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes...
What more could have been done to My vineyard That I have not done in it?
Why then, when I expected it; to bring forth good grapes, Did it bring forth wild grapes?
(Isaiah 5:1-4)*

One would think that God has everything He could wish for, and could effortlessly create anything that He lacks. So, what does He want from us? The fact that He's capable of creating for Himself anything that He can imagine or desire would seem to render it impossible that we could give Him anything that He would really value and does not already possess. But the Bible teaches that there is something God is eagerly seeking from us, which has proven to be elusive to Him.

Israel had difficulty grasping what Yahweh wanted from them. They gave Him such things as humans valued, which they thought He should appreciate. In an agrarian society, wealth was often counted in terms of livestock, so the people brought animals to God as offerings, assuming that God should appreciate this sacrifice of their possessions. They were partly correct. Animal sacrifices had been prescribed for the atonement rituals, but there was something else—something spiritual—that Yahweh valued far more than animal sacrifices in the absence of which the value of the sacrifices counted as nothing—or worse, as an *abomination*, to Him.¹ These more important things Israel never really seemed to produce for Him. The prophets sometimes had to remind Israel that Yahweh was not exactly “needy” or dependent on the material gifts they brought to Him:

*I will not take a bull from your house,
Nor goats out of your folds.
For every beast of the forest is Mine,
And the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the mountains,
And the wild beasts of the field are Mine.*

¹ Proverbs 15:8; 21:27

*If I were hungry, I would not tell you;
For the world is Mine, and all its fullness.²*

In Isaiah's parable (cited at the head of this chapter) the prophet says that Yahweh had planted a vineyard, from which He, like all vineyard owners, desired to receive good fruit. His vineyard inexplicably failed to produce the expected fruit despite His having given it every advantage. This failure was the occasion of no small consternation and frustration to Yahweh:

*What more could have been done to My vineyard
That I have not done in it?
Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes,
Did it bring forth wild grapes?³*

Eventually, the prophet breaks away from the symbolism of the parable and speaks plainly of what the *fruit* was that God wished to receive from Israel:

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,
And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant.
He looked for justice, but behold, oppression;
For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.⁴*

What God was looking for from Israel was *justice* and *righteousness*. This is what God has always sought from His people. The establishing of Israel as a kingdom of His own at Mount Sinai was like the planting of a potentially fruitful vineyard—or a field of grain, or a fig tree—all of which are biblical metaphors communicating the same theme: God is looking for “fruit” from His people. What He expects is the fruit of just dealings and righteous behavior from those who regard Him as their King.

Isaiah's parable points out that Israel had been given every opportunity to become a just and righteous nation. God had cleared the land by removing the wicked and seductive Canaanites from among them. He had given His perfect laws (the *Torah*) to direct Israel in the ways of justice. He had been their protection, like a hedge, against enemies. He had even sent prophets to correct them when their fruit was not all that it should be. The prevalent message of the prophets in the Old Testament was that the people of Israel were not living according to the standards of justice and righteousness that God had prescribed in the *Torah*. Virtually every prophet's message can essentially be summarized as, “So, where's the *fruit*—the justice; the righteousness?”

² Psalm 50:9-12

³ Isaiah 5:4

⁴ Ibid., v.7

Justice and *righteousness* are two of the most important words in both the Old and the New Testaments—and for good reason! They summarize what it is that God desires and expects from mankind, and particularly from that society that is supposed to be His Kingdom. The two words appear together, as twin concepts, in the Old Testament 38 times, and their meanings overlap considerably. The degree to which most of us have allowed these words to go unexamined, and unapplied to our personal and community behavior, is truly scandalous, given the centrality of their significance to the fulfillment of what God requires from His people.

Both of these Hebrew words⁵ are judicial, as well as ethical, in their meanings. In addition to referring to courtroom justice, they are used in connection with general ethical behavior of one person toward another in any relationship.

The definition of societal and legal justice is not complicated. The simple rule is: Do right by your neighbor! Treat people as they genuinely deserve to be treated and determine to treat no one worse than he or she deserves.⁶ God's standard for courtroom justice is stated succinctly by Solomon:

*He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just,
Both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord.⁷*

As Jeremy Treat puts it: "Justice is a beautiful vision of equity and order in the world. *Equity* could be defined as all people getting what they deserve, whether protection or punishment."⁸

Charitable judgment

The presumption of the innocence of an accused person whose guilt has not been certainly established is fundamental to justice. For example, under the *Torah* a person was to be presumed innocent, by default, and could not be condemned in a court of law without there being two or more witnesses against him.⁹ In order to discourage lying witnesses against the accused, the law prescribed that one who was proved to be a false witness would receive the very punishment that the accused would have received had he been found guilty.¹⁰ Such a principle would justify a modern law

⁵ Justice = Heb. *Mishpat*; Righteousness = Heb. *Tsedhaqah*

⁶ This does not rule-out personal acts of mercy, where one is spared the warranted consequences of bad behavior—as when David spared Shimei the penalty for treason (2 Samuel 19:21-23), or when God spared David the consequences of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 12:13). However, mercy is always an individual prerogative. The society as a whole is required to follow strict principles of justice.

⁷ Proverbs 17:15

⁸ Jeremy Treat, *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 122 (Italics in original)

⁹ Deuteronomy 19:15

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 19:16,19

requiring the loser in a court battle to pay the opponent's legal fees—as well as to receive the criminal penalties that the other party would have incurred if found guilty!

Paul, apparently informed by the Old Testament standards of justice, also says that one should not receive accusations against Christian leaders without hearing two or more witnesses against them.¹¹ Jesus taught His disciples the same rule to be applied in the settling of all disputes among themselves.¹² In all such cases, the witnesses themselves must be vetted before their testimonies can be received.

If followed in all personal interactions as well as criminal and civil justice cases, these principles would militate against the “rush to judgment” that so often accompanies high-visibility criminal cases, and which frequently destroys many relationships.

Justice and human rights

The concept of justice implies a foundation of human “rights” to be recognized and uncompromisingly honored in a society. Justice simply comes down to “upholding the rights of all”—whether judicially or in personal relationships. Where the course of true justice is followed by all, there will be no victims. No person's legitimate rights will ever be impinged upon by every person's upholding of the legitimate rights of another. We will never grasp God's concern for justice without first gaining a foundational understanding of the rights that God has given to every man and woman.

A *right* is a privilege or a prerogative to which a person is morally and ethically entitled. Such a prerogative may be justly surrendered by the one possessing it, but no one can, without injustice, deprive another of his or her proper right. To violate another's *right* is to commit an ethical *wrong*. God gave the first humans the right to rule over the created plants and animals.¹³ Beyond this, there are individual rights to be respected and upheld in all human interactions. One universal human right, mentioned in the Book of James, is the right of every human being to be treated with dignity, due to being created in God's image: “...with [the tongue] we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God...My brethren, these things ought not to be so.”¹⁴

The *Torah* also identified divinely-mandated rights belonging to all people. These can be inferred from the moral assumptions behind specific commandments. In the fifth through the ninth commandments. For example:

¹¹ 1 Timothy 5:19

¹² Matthew 18:16

¹³ Genesis 1:28-29

¹⁴ James 3:9-10

- “*Honor your father and your mother*”—recognizes the rights of parents to be respected by their offspring;¹⁵
- “*You shall not murder*”—recognizes every person’s natural right to his or her life;¹⁶
- “*You shall not commit adultery*”—establishes the rights of spouses to the permanence and inviolability of their marriages;¹⁷
- “*You shall not steal*”—implies the right of every person to his or her honestly-gained private property;¹⁸
- “*You shall not bear false witness*”—protects the right of every person to retain the reputation his or her actions have earned.¹⁹

It is possible for a person to forfeit certain rights by engaging in criminal behavior—the violation of others’ rights. Thus, the man who commits murder (and certain other capital crimes) thereby forfeits his own natural right to live.²⁰ By certain misconduct, a woman may forfeit the permanence of her marriage,²¹ and one who steals or destroys another’s property, whether deliberately or negligently, forfeits the right to some of his own property in making proper restitution.²² Such forfeiture of rights is in accord with true justice.

A *right* can thus be defined as whatever is deserved by, or owed to, persons based upon their innate humanity and their individual actions. One who shares God’s concern for justice and righteousness is passionately concerned to avoid wronging others with respect to any of their true, God-ordained rights.

God loves justice, and it is a lovely thing indeed. If all people were simply to live by the standards of justice toward their neighbors as God commands us to do, there would be no wrong done to any person. There would be no murder, no theft, no fraud, no violence, no abuse, no slander or gossip, no rape, no molestation, no adultery, no divorce, no kidnapping, no societal oppression. It would be an ideal society. Such a society, in fact, would be just what God expects and requires His Kingdom to be. Christ’s command to us that we “*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,*” then, is little else than the command God gave to Judah, in Isaiah 1:17: “*Seek justice.*”

Justice Vs. “Social Justice”

¹⁵ Exodus 20:12

¹⁶ Exodus 20:13

¹⁷ Exodus 20:14

¹⁸ Exodus 20:15

¹⁹ Exodus 20:16

²⁰ Genesis 9:6

²¹ Deuteronomy 24:1-4

²² Exodus 22:1, 5-9

The term *social justice* is a term that is much discussed in our time. The term refers to something altogether different from actual justice in that it focuses upon alleged wrongs done by *whole groups*, and *special rights* that are thought to be owed to other groups that are deemed “less-fortunate.” In modern parlance, *social justice* refers to the state’s redistribution of advantages and resources to disadvantaged groups to satisfy their rights to social and economic equality. Activists who are involved in promoting such redistribution often call themselves “Social Justice Warriors” (abbreviated SJWs).

A related term is *identity politics*, which defines human rights differently for one *group-identity* than it does for another. The focus is on redress to groups that are viewed to be disadvantaged due to the oppressive behavior of another group. The term “disadvantaged” can refer to specific racial groups (almost always, non-white people), to women (as having fewer advantages than men), to economic categories (both the unproductive and the working poor), and to gender-identified minorities (LGBTQ+). The assumption is that people in such groups have been “oppressed” by those in the more “advantaged” groups—which principally means males who are heterosexual and white—especially if they have done well for themselves financially.

Contrary to the divine command, “*You shall not covet anything that is your neighbor’s,*”²³ SJWs believe that resources and power should be stripped from members of the enviable group(s), and redistributed to those in the disadvantaged groups. This does not take into consideration how any particular individual in either group may have come into a state of advantage or of disadvantage. For example, it doesn’t matter if a white man earned everything he owns by his own hard labor—or if someone is “disadvantaged” as the result of his or her own poor life choices. Social justice judges everything on the basis of the group into which someone was born. The actual actions of individuals (the only matter with which true justice is concerned) are considered irrelevant to the larger social picture. What is missing from this theory is the idea of individual responsibility—one of the main themes of scripture.

The fact that some individuals from the “disadvantaged” groups have become remarkably successful (e.g. black persons who excel as athletes, entertainers, entrepreneurs, or politicians) and that some of those in the “advantaged” groups have been born into poverty and squalor is data not regarded as worthy of consideration in determining the rights of those belonging to the respective groups. SJWs are concerned only with *group privilege*, and ignore the only factor by which real justice is defined—individual merit or demerit.

While a passion for justice is appropriate—and is particularly required of followers of Christ—one must have a rational standard for defining *justice* and for distinguishing it from *injustice*. A truly just society is one in which no person’s rights are violated, and each bears responsibility for his own

²³ Exodus 20:17

actions and natural outcomes. No person is entitled to something that can only be had by unjustly depriving another. Since each should receive what he or she personally earns and deserves—and not all people earn or deserve exactly the same wages—inequality of personal *outcomes* is not the same as injustice.

If one person lives in a better house than another, is this an injustice? Not if no one's personal rights were violated in its acquisition. Assuming the person in better circumstances has acquired what he or she has through labor or other honest means (e.g., an inheritance)—and that the person in poorer circumstances has not been deprived of something he or she has earned—such inequality is no example of injustice.

If someone owns a company and reaps more material advantages from it than do his or her employees, is this injustice? Not if those employees are working for a wage and benefits to which they have voluntarily agreed, and are not being unjustly hindered from becoming business owners themselves.

I have personally never owned a company, and have often worked for others at minimum wage. Due to my personal priorities (e.g., to live by faith, and not to charge for my ministry service), I have spent much of my adult life quite poor. However, being a Christian, I never coveted what others had earned nor begrudged the lifestyles of those more materially successful than myself. We are commanded to covet nothing belonging to another. Social Justice Warriors ought to examine their hearts to see if this is at the root of their discontent. In times when my own resources were minimal, the New Testament command, "*Let your conduct be without covetousness, and be content with such things as you have*"²⁴ was more than enough to instill gratitude for what I had, and to eliminate the possibility of envy or jealousy toward those who had earned or inherited more than I had.

If one group of people lives under hardships arising from institutional injustices committed against their ancestors, but which have since been rectified many generations ago, is this a continuing injustice to be redressed? So long as nobody is currently being deprived of the things he or she has earned (and therefore deserves), there is no injustice there.

The guilt and penalties for injustices committed by one generation do not transfer to those of later generations who have not repeated their crimes. This is God's common-sense justice principle, stated in Ezekiel 18:20, that fathers will not be punished for their sons' sins, nor the sons be punished for their fathers' sins. Justice treats every person as an individual, not as the member of a group, or the descendant of some lineage. Due to unchangeable past events some of us have been born with fewer advantages than others. These respective disadvantages and advantages do not accrue uniformly to specific racial or gender groups. Each of us possesses some advantages and some disadvantages, *vis-à-vis* others that we will meet. This is simply the way the world is as we find it, and

²⁴ Hebrews 13:5

is not necessarily the result of injustice. We can improve conditions in the world for future generations, but not by imposing unjust penalties on those who are more fortunate in the present one. We must begin where we are and move forward, treating others as justly and as mercifully as we can in either a good or a bad situation.

SJWs do not identify themselves and others as individuals possessing personal human rights and responsibilities (that is, they do not see the matter as God does), but only as members of either aggrieved or privileged identity groups, in which the interests of the group as a whole are pressed against the interests of other groups. Thus, a poor person asserts his rights to take away the wealth belonging to a richer person—not on the basis of individual warrant, but on the basis of belonging to a group identified by their socio-economic circumstances as less-fortunate.

The question is not raised whether any particular poor person has earned this status through neglect of working for a living or by wasting money previously possessed. Nor is the question raised whether the richer person may be justifiably prospering due to having diligently worked and wisely managed his or her assets. The motive behind the advocacy of social justice has less to do with a well-considered concern for *actual* justice than it has to do with group resentment and envy. In this respect, Dr. Martin Luther King would not have joined, nor been sympathetic toward, the modern social justice movement because he desired to see justice for all, but did not desire to promote either special consideration nor penalties for any group.

Obviously, every identity group is comprised of some virtuous and some unvirtuous individuals. Social justice ignores this fact and treats the whole group collectively as having “rights,” unrelated to the merit or demerit of any actual individuals within the group. This mentality inevitably results in the demand that some innocent persons in the advantaged group be unjustly deprived of some of their rights in order to improve the conditions of (often undeserving) individuals within the complaining group.

Real justice means that a person gets what he or she deserves, *without favoritism*. Social justice is the opposite. It advocates for people getting what they do not deserve strictly *on the basis of favoritism*. Justice is color-blind whereas social justice outcomes are often racially determined.

The Bible clearly says that God does not show favoritism in His judgments (1 Peter 1:17), and specifically that He shows no partiality toward those of one race over those of another: “*There is no partiality with God*” (Romans 2:11). In context, this last statement is affirming that God will not favor Jews over Gentiles in His judgment—even though the former had been God’s own special people. Israel even had a history of having been enslaved by Gentiles for centuries in their past. Apparently, having ancestors who were slaves did not give Israel (who were no longer slaves) any special exemption from being judged on the same basis as anyone else. Each man and woman will receive merit-based judgment at the throne of God where perfect justice is always done.

God also insisted that law courts should judge strictly upon individual merits, without showing any favoritism toward either the disadvantaged or the advantaged: “*You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor.*”²⁵

Historically, injustice in courts has usually favored the rich over the poor. This is, of course, condemned in scripture: “*You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit.*”²⁶ Modern SJWs wish to distort justice in favor of the disadvantaged—which would be equally unjust. In the *Torah*, this kind of injustice is also condemned: “*...nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.*”²⁷

True justice asks “what did this person do?” *Social justice* asks, “To what special-interest group does he or she belong?” Social justice theory assumes that conditions of poverty and oppression cause (and justify) crime and bad behavior. The teaching of scripture and of real-life experience prove otherwise. Even poor and oppressed people can choose to be virtuous and are as responsible as anyone else for choosing to do so. Circumstances do not dictate nor excuse immoral actions. Hardships, of course, can increase the temptation to do wrong, but humans have been charged by God with the responsibility of resisting and overcoming such temptations. When any of us succumbs to temptation, we bear our own guilt. The circumstances do not justify our neglect of duty.

True justice upholds and defends the rights of every individual—seeing that every person, regardless of race, gender, or economic circumstances, gets what he or she personally deserves, according to personal choices and actions. In the process of doing so, justice causes no harm to another, violates no rights, and deprives no one of what he or she is owed.

From the time of the creation, and increasingly since the fall, wealth is rightly produced through labor.²⁸ In the New Testament, the mandate is, “*if any will not work, neither should he eat.*”²⁹ For a slothful lover of leisure to be guaranteed the same economic outcome as that of the honest hard worker can only be accomplished by an unjust deprivation of the rights of the latter and the redistribution of his or her earnings to meet the deficit of the former. Such a policy is not *social justice* but *institutional injustice*. God absolutely detests and forbids it.

Economic Justice

²⁵ Leviticus 19:15

²⁶ Exodus 23:6 ESV

²⁷ *Ibid.*, v.3

²⁸ Genesis 3:17-19

²⁹ 2 Thessalonians 3:10

Justice does not dictate equality of outcomes for every person. In fact, true justice dictates inequality of outcomes—e.g., for the working man and the sluggard, or for the law-abiding man and the criminal. The free choices of individuals differ, and naturally bring different results. If I choose a way of life that very justly leads to poverty, no one should unjustly force unearned benefits upon me which I did not choose honestly to pursue—and especially not at the expense of others who bear no responsibility for my choices and their consequences.

If I commit a crime, my consequences should, justly, be different from those of a man who commits no crime. If one person makes personal sacrifices in order to get a good education and to qualify for a high-paying job, then his or her economic prosperity (according to true justice) ought not to be equal to that of one who lethargically wastes away the years of opportunity in playing videogames and smoking weed. If I make less at my job than do many honest people working in more lucrative jobs, this is an instance of unequal outcomes, but it is not an instance of injustice. It should be clear that my services may legitimately be worth less to an employer than are another person's. If I have received the pre-agreed-upon wage associated with my type of employment, where is the injustice in my having less money than another has?

Jesus made this point clearly in the parable of the man who hired laborers to work his vineyard, paying them disproportionately to their hours worked, but nonetheless according to the mutually agreed-upon terms of their employment. Some workers, who had agreed to work for (and received) a fair wage, were resentful when they learned that others who had done less work had received the same wage as themselves. In such a case, Jesus did not regard those who complained of the unequal outcomes as victims of an injustice, but as merely greedy and covetous ingrates.³⁰

If one works for a wage or provides a product of value to others, justice requires that he or she should receive satisfactory remuneration, in goods or services, from the party who benefits from the labor or receives the product. When the goods or labor of one person are voluntarily exchanged for the equivalent value of payment from another, the transaction takes advantage of no one. Both parties are equally benefited, and no one is the poorer for it.

If I do no work, I benefit no one, so nobody owes me payment. If I forcibly require (or find a government official who will forcibly require) another person for whom I have done no labor to involuntarily give me money that I have in no way earned, then I am perpetrating an injustice. I am not only receiving that to which I have no right, but I am also, in the process, violating the right of another person to his or her own honest earnings. This is injustice—something that God hates. As a disciple of Jesus, I must never perpetrate or seek to benefit from such a scheme.

Rather than *equality of outcomes*, justice seeks *equality of opportunity*—meaning the liberty of every person to choose one's own course of life and to accept the consequent outcomes of that choice.

³⁰ Matthew 20:1-15

Any human being—without respect to group identity—should be allowed equal opportunity to freely pursue his or her own course of life without harming or interfering with another’s free pursuits.

A person of color like Ben Carson, who was raised in poverty by a single mother, was nonetheless in a privileged class—that class comprised of people born into a free country where he had the opportunity to choose to better his circumstances by hard work and study. By doing so he got a good education, lifted himself out of poverty, became a world-renowned neurosurgeon, and later, a cabinet member for the President of the United States.

On the other hand, a white man born into privilege and wealth, by making poor choices, can end up penniless and drug-addicted in a gutter. Both the black surgeon and the white junkie in the gutter are rewarded for their respective choices. Race had nothing to do with it. That is simply justice.

People of all ethnic origins, of both genders, and of all sexual orientations, have often been very successful in life, and there are representatives of every group who have made complete failures of their lives. This demonstrates that, in order to succeed in a just society, no identity group needs to be given *special rights* at the expense of the legitimate rights of other human beings. Justice requires, however, that each must be free to choose his or her own course in life, within the range of his or her gifts and abilities, and is entitled to the rewards of such choices.

Only by enforcing an unjust *equality of outcomes* would it be possible to avoid the income inequality between parties who make disparate choices. Thus, inequality is not the same thing as injustice. I am not equally strong, intelligent, talented, or gainfully employed as are some others. That is inequality but not injustice. I am not owed better circumstances than any that I have personally earned or received by another’s voluntary gift. The outcomes (and the incomes) of some people will inevitably differ from mine. I have no grounds to complain about the better circumstances of others, unless my legitimate rights have been violated.

Kingdom justice and national politics

Some may argue that the concerns of God’s Kingdom transcend the interests of worldly politics—and this is, in one sense, true. The fortunes of the Kingdom of God are not ultimately tied to the fortunes of any earthly nation or political party. International politics are concerned with the interests of certain nations *vis-a-vis* those of other nations. The Kingdom of God is concerned with the blessing of all nations equally—though this equal blessing must be sought in the context of every nation’s commitment to upholding the rights of its own citizens. International justice is in the realm of Kingdom concerns, since the Kingdom is to encompass all “*the kingdoms of this world.*”³¹ Global

³¹ Revelation 11:15

justice is violated, for example, when one nation forcibly confiscates the resources of another as has happened (and still happens) in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

When it comes to national politics, there is a fine line between what we might see as “political” issues, on the one hand, and “social” or “moral” issues, on the other. Both categories spill over into matters about which God or His people cannot be indifferent. There is a tendency, these days, to *politicize* issues that are really *social* and *moral* in nature—like marriage, sexuality, childhood education, community healthcare, race relations, etc. These are social issues, which are the rightful concern of Christians, though they have been wrongfully turned into political hot button issues.

Whenever I make a statement on my Christian radio broadcast about justice, or any social concern, I often receive angry emails from listeners saying, “Stick with the Bible, and stay out of politics!” I do not advocate for any politician and am not a member of any political party. I am nonetheless obliged to speak on behalf of the King who is above all kings, who has a very great concern about human well-being and social behavior. To confuse the subject of loving one’s neighbor as oneself with that of partisan politics is to demonstrate that too often the Church has divorced itself from the realm of social responsibility. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., received these very criticisms for his becoming too politically vocal. Writing from the Birmingham jail, in 1963, he said:

In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: ‘Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.’ And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, non-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.³²

It is the primary duty of Christ’s followers to maintain and to promote justice in all of their relations and dealings with other human beings—of every race, religion and gender—both inside and outside the Christian community. It is often impossible to completely differentiate between a concern for ethics, on one hand, and the governing policies of certain politicians and political parties, on the other. According to scripture, John the Baptist rebuked the wicked ruler Herod Antipas “*for all the evils which Herod had done.*”³³ Likewise Paul, while in captivity, held conversations with the Roman governor Felix about “*righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come.*”³⁴ Those who govern nations need to hear from the Church, because even in a religiously pluralistic society, “*He who rules over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.*”³⁵

³² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963

³³ Luke 3:19

³⁴ Acts 24:25

³⁵ 2 Samuel 23:3

The primary power of the Church to change society is not through political means, but by moral example and spiritual influence. We do not impose force upon the physical bodies of men and women, but we do exert pressure upon their consciences. It is not the duty of the Church to politically dominate the secular society. As Paul said:

For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside [the Christian community]? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges.³⁶

However, we are required, in the Christian community, to faithfully maintain God's standards of conduct among ourselves, serving as an example of a just society to the world around us. We may be excused if the unbelievers ignore our moral guidance, but there is no excuse for the believing community's toleration of unrepentant injustice being practiced within its ranks. *"Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person.'"*³⁷

This refers to the duty of the King's colonies on earth to practice what is usually called "church discipline," as is plainly commanded by both Jesus and Paul³⁸—which is too often neglected by disobedient churches.³⁹ Standards of justice faithfully enforced within the Body of Christ must stand in remarkable contrast to the injustices of ungodly secular societies, presenting a rebuke to the consciences of nations and providing a safe haven to those seeking to enter an alternative society of godly justice.

We must place the highest premium upon maintaining these principles among ourselves—because justice is the fruit that our King seeks from His Kingdom. The Body of Christ is to be a morally self-regulating community with its own counterculture based upon the commandments of its Head. The first priority of Christians is to maintain intramural justice within the realm of our own believing community. It is an abomination and a reproach if the very people who voluntarily claim to embrace the King's rule do not themselves walk as He commands. It is necessary *"for judgment to begin at the house of God."*⁴⁰ Even if we could have no impact on the unregenerate world outside we should, at the very least, be able to present to God in our own royal colonies the fruit He has sought for millennia from His vineyard.

Though we do not physically force our ways upon the secular world, in the providence of God, many of us find ourselves domiciled as citizens in nations where individuals have great liberty of speech, possessing a voice even in the matter of how the secular state is governed. This historical development means that we can at least teach the nations God's justice, and protest (and perhaps

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 5:12-13

³⁷ *Ibid.*, v.13

³⁸ Matthew 18:15-17; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 2 Thessalonians 3:14

³⁹ E.g., Revelation 2:14-16, 20

⁴⁰ 1 Peter 4:17

change) unjust laws and policies. Over the past two-thousand years, the Kingdom of God has exerted tremendous influence upon the conscience and governance of the secular world. God, who loves justice and hates injustice,⁴¹ does not hate the latter among the heathen any less than He hates it among His own people—though He expects better of us. The killing of a woman and her children by home invaders is a ghastly injustice in the sight of God, whether the victims are Christians or unbelievers. If we are to take God’s side in this world we must also regard such injustices as intolerable. Yahweh is always on the side of the innocent, which means He is on the side of justice. Though the laws of the state are not specifically *Christian*, there is every reason to insist upon their being *just*. Even if we do not have ultimate control over worldly society outside our own Kingdom community, we can nonetheless speak up, advocate, and sometimes vote, for true justice in all realms.

If Christians vote they are by definition “getting involved in politics.” When this happens, should we see this as a case of the Kingdom’s citizens becoming distracted by worldly concerns? Or should it be seen as the faithful stewarding of a valuable opportunity to impact the world in the direction of more-just policies and the protection of human rights? It is not our primary purpose to redeem the world through politics—an ambition, in any case, doomed to have less impact than we might wish. Ours is not to create a theocratic state through political means but to win over and disciple the sinners who otherwise will tend to drive society in the direction of ruin and greater suffering for all. In a democratic society we also have the power to somewhat limit the damage done to innocent victims by the unconverted. It is certainly a part of our mission to protect the innocent and alleviate human suffering wherever possible.⁴²

Politics alone cannot produce a just society. No politician can end poverty or racism through legislative action—since these problems have more to do with sinfulness in human hearts than with externally imposed laws. Laws may require an employer to hire a person of a minority race, but no law will change the racial hatred in the heart of the one forced by law to do this against his will. Only God and the gospel can bring change at the level where it is required.

Laws passed to end poverty cannot address the actual causes of poverty, which may be lack of industrious drive, substance abuse, addiction, immorality, unmarried parenthood, or poor personal stewardship of resources and opportunities. Laws can be passed that hand out free money to the poor, but they will not turn a lazy man into a hard worker, a dead-beat dad into a loving provider, or an addict into a faithful manager of his limited resources and opportunities. What such laws eventually do, as history has demonstrated, is penalize responsible and productive people while redistributing their honest earnings among those who continue to choose lifestyles that guarantee their perpetual poverty. As a result, the poor remain poor, and the rich are made poorer. The envy

⁴¹ Psalm 37:28; Amos 5:15; Zechariah 8:17

⁴² Matthew 25:31-46

and resentment that many poor people feel toward the successful may be minimally appeased by such a redistribution, but the problem of poverty has not diminished and injustice has increased.

Citizens of the Kingdom of God are stewards of their opportunities, as well as their assets. If we have the opportunity to affect social policies toward justice, thereby advancing the interests of God's Kingdom, we should do so to the extent of our giftings and opportunities. We must do all we can to bring others into the Kingdom of God as followers of Jesus where they must be trained and educated in the ways of God and of His justice. Short of converting everyone we must also serve as a conscience for the unconverted, edging society's convictions increasingly toward the standards of God's justice. Why? This will not get them to heaven. However, heaven is not where the Kingdom and its justice are ultimately to reside. To the extent that we can affect the consciences of the unconverted, leading to a more just society in general there will be less in God's world to offend Him on a daily basis, as well as a more righteous environment for future generations to enjoy, whose welfare is to be as great a concern to us as our own.

A Christian's voting in any election should never be merely a partisan action. However, a vote that promotes greater freedom, justice, and human rights is a vote to promote a better life for one's neighbors, children and grandchildren. To do to others what you would have done to you includes at least making an effort to leave to future generations such liberties and blessings as previous generations have left to us. On the other hand, to vote for policies that only serve our immediate selfish interests, which will leave a less-just society to our children and grandchildren, would have to be regarded as a most serious sin.

Chapter Fourteen

The Fruitful Kingdom

*Behold! My Servant whom I uphold,
My Elect One in whom My soul delights!
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.
He will not cry out, nor raise His voice,
Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.
A bruised reed He will not break,
And smoking flax He will not quench;
He will bring forth justice for truth.
He will not fail nor be discouraged,
Till He has established justice in the earth;
And the coastlands shall wait for His law.¹*

The Kingdom of God and Global Justice

Notice how many times, in the above prophecy, the goal of establishing global justice is mentioned as the principal mission of the Messiah. It is repeated like the beating of a drum. God is desiring justice as the fruit of His Kingdom, and as the Kingdom expands to include all nations, so must the fruit of justice transform the nations.

There is no suggestion in scripture that this goal is to be sought through the means of worldly politics. Jesus said that His Kingdom was not a worldly kingdom run on worldly principles. He refused to respond to “political” challenges in the manner characteristic of worldly kingdoms.² Jesus, Himself, did not get involved in the actual enforcement of civil justice. It was not His calling. When asked to arbitrate between two brothers in a property dispute—a very valid concern for the courts—Jesus begged off, saying, “*Man, who made me a judge or an arbitrator over you?*”³ Jesus, like Paul, was not prepared to become involved in legal disputes between those who were not part of His Kingdom. However, Paul did believe that such disputes, between disciples within the Kingdom should be resolved justly by the intervention of godly mediators who were expected to be well-schooled in God’s principles of justice.⁴

¹ Isaiah 42:1-4

² John 18:36

³ Luke 12:14

⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:5

As previously noted, the weapons of our warfare are not carnal. It is through the preaching of the Kingdom of Christ, through prayer, and our godly obedience, that the Kingdom conquers the souls of men and women. Once they have surrendered to Christ, and have become disciples living according to His commands, justice simply becomes their way of life. If twenty percent of the inhabitants of a nation should become true disciples of Jesus, there should be a significant witness for justice seen in their behavior, elevating that nation's social conscience. If fifty percent were to follow Jesus, then the society should exhibit a tremendous increase in justice practiced in its societal behavior. Even without seeking political office or control, if a significant majority of the population of any nation should become agents of Christ's Kingdom, that society, including its leaders would have to take notice. The consciences and the voting even of unbelievers would begin to be affected. Where there is "*the increase of His government*" among His people, social policies of increasing justice must inevitably follow.⁵

In addition to promoting the ideal of universal justice through the conversion and discipling of the lost, the Kingdom's influence has already made impressive strides toward societal justice in many lands—even without achieving the full conversion of their citizens and rulers. The very presence of a witnessing colony of the King has transformed nations far more than most modern people realize. According to Paul L. Maier, Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University:

Not only countless individual lives but civilization itself was transformed by Jesus Christ. In the ancient world, his teachings elevated brutish standards of morality, halted infanticide, enhanced human life, emancipated women, abolished slavery, inspired charities and relief organizations, created hospitals, established orphanages . . . founded schools . . . instilled concepts of political and social and economic freedom, fostered justice . . . No religion, philosophy, teaching, nation, movement—whatever—has so changed the world for the better as Christianity has done.⁶

This assessment is objectively verifiable. The net increase in justice worldwide is the conspicuous fruit of the Kingdom's presence in the world.

The goal of course is not merely to create a better world so that it simply becomes "a nicer place for sinners from which to go to hell." Rather, the ultimate ambition of the Kingdom is to extend the knowledge of God to all nations until, according to Isaiah, "*the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*"⁷ Another prophet worded this a little differently:

⁵ Isaiah 9:7

⁶ Paul L. Maier. In Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grande Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 2004), 8, 9

⁷ Isaiah 11:9

*For the earth will be filled
With the knowledge of the glory of the Lord,
As the waters cover the sea.*⁸

The knowledge of the glory of the Lord! That is Yahweh's stated goal for the world. It is no doubt with this verse in mind that Paul wrote:

*For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*⁹

Notice, Paul says that, in the face of Jesus Christ, we have been enlightened with "*the knowledge of the glory of God.*" This is precisely the knowledge of God that is destined to fill the earth "*as the waters cover the sea.*" We who are believers have already obtained this knowledge of the glory of the Lord (more on this in chapter 20). God has declared that such knowledge must become universal globally. The knowledge of the glory of the Lord is the knowledge of His nature and character. It is not mere "head knowledge." It is a knowledge that draws the follower into the imitation of the divine character.¹⁰ And what is it that those who know God actually know *about* Him? Yahweh speaks through Jeremiah thus:

*but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord.*¹¹

Knowing God means knowing His love for lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness. The increasing knowledge of God will be accompanied by the increase of justice in all realms. Judah had only a few kings who knew the Lord. One of these godly exceptions was Josiah. He ruled righteously, and sought to enforce justice. Josiah's ungodly son and successor Jehoahaz turned back to the dark side. In rebuking Jehoahaz, the Lord eulogized his godly father with these words:

*"Did not your father...do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.
He judged the cause of the poor and needy;*

⁸ Habakkuk 2:14

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:6

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 5:1

¹¹ Jeremiah 9:24 NASB

Then it was well.

Was not this knowing Me?" says the Lord.¹²

This rhetorical question, posed by Yahweh, suggests that doing justice and righteousness is what it means to know Him. This suggests that those who claim to know God but do not practice such virtues do not really know him. John insists upon this conclusion:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.¹³

When rulers (and citizens who are self-governing) come to know the Lord, they follow just and righteous policies of government and interpersonal social relations. Otherwise, how can it really be said that they know God?

Israel's unfruitfulness

The fruitlessness of Israel was bemoaned in many of the prophetic oracles in scripture. This fruitlessness is also the message behind Christ's cursing of the fig tree.

The story is familiar. Jesus was hungry and saw a fig tree covered with leaves. When He looked more closely He found that there was no fruit on the tree, so He decreed that this tree would never again produce fruit. The tree promptly withered and died. Although Mark's gospel tells us that it was early in the year for fruit to be appearing on fig trees, the winter was nonetheless past, and it was known that some trees fruited earlier than others in the season. The presence of foliage was one indicator that such might be the case with this tree. Like His Father, Jesus was looking for fruit, but as He checked among the leaves, He found none. Consequently, He said that the tree would never have another fruitful season, and the tree promptly died.¹⁴

This was not simply an instance of Jesus' unreasonable petulance toward a tree which was not itself responsible for any wrongdoing. His was a prophetic action. The prophets of the Old Testament had often illustrated their messages with dramatic, symbolic actions, as when Jeremiah smashed a ceramic pot as an emblem that Jerusalem would be similarly destroyed by the Babylonians.¹⁵ Obviously, Jesus had no anger toward the tree any more than the prophet had animosity toward the pot that he shattered. This was simply the way that many of the prophets got their point across with a dramatic flair.

¹² Jeremiah 22:16

¹³ 1 John 2:3-4

¹⁴ Matthew 21:19; Mark 11:13

¹⁵ Jeremiah 19:10-11

Jesus had earlier likened Israel to a fig tree, in a parable in Luke 13:6-9—

And He began telling this parable: “A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, ‘Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?’ And he answered and said to him, ‘Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.’”

In Isaiah’s parable, Israel was likened to a disappointingly fruitless vine. So also, in this parable, Jesus likens Israel to a fruitless tree in a vineyard. The owner (God) complains to the vine-keeper that the tree is worthless and should be removed. The vine-keeper—assumed to represent Jesus—intercedes with the owner for the tree to be spared for one more season to see if it would finally produce the desired fruit. Thus ends the parable. It has no conclusion or resolution. It ends with a big question mark. Israel was to be given only a little more time to become a nation fruitful in justice and righteousness. Would they?

Notice that Luke writes: *“He began telling this parable...”* He *began*, but He did not *finish* the parable! He left the conclusion undetermined. The subsequent encounter with the fig tree that Jesus cursed supplies the dramatized conclusion to this parable. Israel did not change. They had failed to produce fruit for fourteen hundred years and would not be given another chance. The coming of the Messiah was the last opportunity before judgment for fruitless trees, as John the Baptist had said: *“And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*¹⁶

The metaphor of bearing fruit is sometimes switched from that of fruit-bearing plants to that of the fruit-bearing womb. God commanded our first parents to *“be fruitful and multiply”*¹⁷—that is, to produce many children. Israel’s requirement to produce justice as fruit is sometimes compared to a woman expecting to bear a child—“the fruit of the womb”—so that images of barren ground and the barren womb both describe Israel’s failure.

In a tragic-comical stanza, Isaiah, speaking as a representative of his nation, employs the childbirth imagery to describe the unfruitfulness of Israel:

*We have been with child, we have been in pain;
We have, as it were, brought forth wind;
We have not accomplished any deliverance in the earth,
Nor have the inhabitants of the world fallen...¹⁸*

¹⁶ Matthew 3:10

¹⁷ Genesis 1:28; Malachi 2:15

¹⁸ Isaiah 26:18

Here is the tragedy. Israel paid a price in travail going through the same labor pains that should have produced the “fruit” of a child—only to bring forth “wind.” Uncouth as it may seem, Isaiah says that they expected a baby but only ended up passing gas! No justice was brought forth— just fruitlessness.

Wanted: A new people

One reason for Israel’s failure to deliver the “baby” was her perennial unfaithfulness to her Husband. Israel’s worshiping of idols was viewed as cheating on her Husband—Yahweh. The “*faithful city*” (Jerusalem) had “*become a harlot.*”¹⁹ Judgment would come upon her for both her fruitlessness and for her harlotry. A new, pure bride would be sought, who would “*be married to another, even to Him who was raised from the dead,*” so that she might “*bear fruit for God.*”²⁰

In Matthew 21:33-43, the same point is made with another parable. Using imagery that is obviously borrowed from Isaiah’s parable of the vineyard, Jesus sets up the story precisely as Isaiah had set up his. There is a vineyard planted and cultivated in potentially fruitful ground. As in Isaiah’s story, the owner is frustrated in his attempts to receive good fruit from his vineyard. However, Jesus introduces a new element to His story that was not found in its predecessor—the leasing of the vineyard to tenants. It was common for landowners to lease their property to farmers, who would take the profit only after rendering to the owner an agreed-upon share of the produce as payment on the land lease.

Jesus indicts the tenants who were given the responsibility of making the vineyard productive, and who owed the master a share of the fruit in accordance with their lease agreement. These tenants represent the political and religious leaders of Israel through the centuries. Under their guidance and supervision Israel was supposed to please God by maintaining justice and righteousness in their social dealings. They did not. Even urging them in the right direction by the Old Testament prophets did not bring a reversal of their negligence. The prophets who came to challenge the fruitless nation were saying, in effect, “Where is the justice that Yahweh requires?” These messengers were not successful in turning Israel or her leaders around. In fact, the prophets were either killed or expelled by the Jewish leaders, just as Jesus described in the parable.

As the fruitless fig tree was given one last chance, prior to being permanently cursed, so also in this story Israel is given one last chance. “*Then last of all he sent his son to them...*” (v.37). *Last of all!* The longsuffering of God, continually warning and pleading with Israel, had now reached its end. Messiah has finally arrived; would they repent? The leaders recognized the son as the one who was

¹⁹ Isaiah 1:21

²⁰ Romans 7:4

legitimately in line to inherit the vineyard. In an irrational and desperate attempt to permanently hold onto what they already controlled, they committed the ultimate injustice by killing the heir.

This was an enormous miscalculation on their part. Getting rid of the Son did not secure their position, as they had hoped, but guaranteed their destruction. The judgment that came upon rebellious Israel was the destruction of their nation and capital in the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The conclusion of the parable is that the owner of the vineyard “*will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons*”(v.41). Stepping out of the parable, and into the world of His day, Jesus then looked upon His Jewish adversaries and solemnly pronounced this verdict: “*Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.*” (v.43)

Israel as a nation had squandered its last chance to be Yahweh’s conduit of justice and righteousness to the world, as He had originally called them to be. It would be another nation—the holy nation of the Messiah—that would now take over that assignment.

To some, this line of talk initially sounds uncomfortably antisemitic. However, it is not. It is the assessment of the Jewish prophets, the Jewish Messiah, and the Jewish apostles. Being devout Jews themselves, none of these could possibly have been *antisemitic*. This claim is an objective observation, based upon Israel’s history (the most unbiased and unflattering history ever written by any people *about themselves!*) and upon the declarations of the Messiah.

Some believe that there will be another chance given to the nation of Israel to fulfill its original calling. This expectation seems to run up against rather plain statements of Jesus that the fig tree will *never produce fruit again*, and that the coming of Jesus, two thousand years ago, represented Israel’s last chance (“*last of all he sent his son*”). Besides, the vacancy created by their removal from that status has now been permanently filled. The Church, the nation that has filled that vacancy, is forever open to the inclusion of any Jews who wish belatedly to embrace their Messiah!

It has also been suggested that when Jesus said, “*the kingdom of God is taken from you,*” he was not speaking to Israel as a nation but only to their leaders. This, again, ignores the actual wording of the statement. He did not say that the Kingdom will be given to “new leaders,” but to “*a nation.*”²¹ One nation is dismissed; another nation is called into its place. Addressing those who belong to this new Kingdom of priests, Peter wrote:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God...²²

²¹ The Greek word is *ethnos*, the regular word for a nation or a people other than Israel. When speaking of Israel as “a people” the word usually used is *laos*.

²² 1 Peter 2:9-10

We see that all the labels once reserved for Israel in the Old Testament are now applied to the people of the Messiah. The privilege of being God's Kingdom, first given to Israel but cast away from them by their perennial rebellion, has alighted upon a new people, a holy nation, an alternative society, to carry its fruit-bearing mission forward.

This new nation was comprised, initially, of the faithful Jews—the remnant of the previous nation, who embraced their Messiah. There were always some in Israel who faithfully served God in contrast to a rebellious majority. God, being gracious and just, did not reject the few who were endeavoring to bear the fruit of justice and righteousness in their lives. In the Old Testament these are often referred to as “the remnant.” The promises found in the prophets of ultimate restoration to right relationship with God are plainly declared to refer to this remnant.²³ In rejecting the apostate nation God never rejected His faithful remnant but fulfilled His promises by bringing the Messiah to them and by joining them to Him in His Kingdom, the Body of Christ. This was the promised restoring of the Kingdom to Israel.²⁴ This remnant was comprised of the ones called “the disciples,” and they were the first Jews to become members of Israel's renewed Messianic Kingdom. Later, Gentiles would be added to their number, even to the point of outnumbering the Jewish segment, just as Isaiah and Jesus had predicted.²⁵

Confusion exists over Israel's future role in God's Kingdom. It needn't. Jews have as much access to the Kingdom as do Gentiles. There is no discrimination against them. They must come on the same terms as anyone else and once they have entered they are part of the Kingdom community where “*there is neither Jew nor Greek.*”²⁶ Israel, as a whole race or nation, is not the recipient of the promises which are for the faithful remnant who have come into the Shepherd-Messiah's fold. Even promises that sound like they are addressed to Israel as “all of you,” are really addressed to this remnant:

*I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob,
I will surely gather the remnant of Israel;
I will put them together like sheep of the fold,
Like a flock in the midst of their pasture...²⁷*

*Listen to Me, O house of Jacob,
And all the remnant of the house of Israel,*

²³ Jeremiah 23:3-6; 31:7, 10, 15; Joel 2:32; Micah 5:2-5

²⁴ Acts 1:6

²⁵ Isaiah 11:10; 49:18-22; 54:1-3; Matthew 8:11-12

²⁶ Galatians 3:28

²⁷ Micah 2:12

*Who have been upheld by Me from birth,
Who have been carried from the womb...²⁸*

If there is an expectation of a special status of national Israel in their former role in the future, then the New Testament writers gave no impression of being aware of it. Orthodox Jews (rejecting, as they do, the messianic claims of Jesus) are of the opinion that the promises to their people have not yet been fulfilled. Paul disagreed, saying: *“But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel...”²⁹* Not all of ethnic Israel belongs to *the remnant Israel*—the ones for whom the promises were intended. Paul acknowledged that there are promises of God in the Old Testament concerning the salvation of Israel, but quoting Isaiah, he pointed out that the salvation promises would only apply to the remnant, and that the remnant has already received, and continues to receive, the promise fulfilled in the Messiah:

Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, [only] the remnant will be saved’ . . . Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.”³⁰

The titles once applied to Israel—like “Abraham’s Seed,”³¹ Yahweh’s “Firstborn,”³² the “Vine,”³³ and the chosen “Servant of Yahweh,”³⁴ are all now applied to Jesus the Messiah, and those in Him. He is thus the new Israel—the true fruit-bearing Vine. Where Israel failed in its mission, Christ succeeds. Being part of the Kingdom no longer depends upon being *in Israel*, but upon being *in Him* of whom Israel was a mere type and shadow. The faithful remnant of Israel and the faithful of the Gentiles now comprise a new holy nation, a new olive tree³⁵ (another image previously used of Israel³⁶). Those who are Christ’s are, in Him, *“the [true] circumcision,”³⁷* as well as *“Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.”³⁸*

Will the Church fail, as did Israel?

²⁸ Isaiah 46:3

²⁹ Romans 9:6

³⁰ Romans 9:27; 11:5

³¹ Genesis 15:18; Galatians 3:16

³² Exodus 4:22; Romans 8:29; Hebrews 1:6

³³ Isaiah 5:7; John 15:1, 5

³⁴ Isaiah 49:3; Matthew 12:17-18

³⁵ Romans 11:16-22

³⁶ Jeremiah 11:16

³⁷ Philippians 3:3; Romans 2:28-29

³⁸ Galatians 3:29

The Church has had its moments of glory and its moments of humiliation. Since the coming of Christ, injustices that had prevailed in every society have become rarer and fewer in number through the influence of the leaven of the Kingdom. Such would include such monstrosities as human sacrifice, unwanted babies left to die of exposure, blood-sports in the Roman arenas, cannibalism in tribal cultures, slavery, the degrading of womanhood in the West, the cruel binding of the feet of baby girls in China, the neglect of lepers and burning of widows on their husbands' pyres in India, etc. These and countless other horrors were common practice before the coming of Christ's beneficent rule to these lands. The abolition of these injustices can be credited directly to the introduction of the gospel and the influence of Christ's Kingdom around the world.

At the same time, the Church has often become inexcusably complacent in view of the amount of work that remains to be done. Though his moral weaknesses and sins have been well-publicized, Dr. Martin Luther King, himself a pastor, obviously believed that he was acting and speaking in the name of Christ in his peaceful promotion of civil rights. Though he was, sadly, not an exemplary role model in some areas of private morality, his indictment of the complacent Church must not be ignored or discounted:

There was a time when the church was very powerful in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment...By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide. and gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound...Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often even vocal sanction of things as they are...If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.³⁹

Nonetheless, Justice will prevail

³⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. April 16, 1963

The Kingdom of the Messiah, consisting of the faithful Jews and Gentiles in Christ, is predicted to be “*a nation bearing the fruits of [the Kingdom].*”⁴⁰ Since God still awaits the fruit of justice and righteousness to satisfy Him, the vineyard’s assignment has not changed—only the assignee. The above words of Jesus assure us that God will receive His desired fruit and it will come through us. Isaiah declared concerning Christ:

*Of the increase of His government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.*⁴¹

*Behold, a king will reign in righteousness,
And princes will rule with justice.*⁴²

*For as the earth brings forth its bud,
As the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth,
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.*⁴³

Granted, this does not guarantee that every unbeliever or every nation will fully succumb to the Kingdom’s beneficent influence. If God did not interfere with the free will of our first parents, nor prevent them from rebelling in the first place, there is no reason to expect that He will alter His policy in the case of present or future stubborn generations. However, the community of the *willing* is another matter. If some pagans remain recalcitrant, this must not be the case with those who have surrendered to Christ’s lordship, and who comprise His own holy nation.

*The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”
The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.
Rule in the midst of Your enemies!*

⁴⁰ Matthew 21:43

⁴¹ Isaiah 9:7

⁴² Isaiah 32:1

⁴³ Isaiah 61:11

Your people shall be volunteers

In the day of Your power..."⁴⁴

When Paul told the Colossians that the gospel was “*bringing forth fruit*” through “*all the whole world*,”⁴⁵ he was referring to the Kingdom community throughout the world whose members were “*fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*”⁴⁶ Like Israel of old in its best times the Kingdom of God is an alternative society uniquely growing in the knowledge of God and, consequently, experiencing fruitfulness in good works. This is the springing up of justice and righteousness like fruit in the earth, as Isaiah predicted:

Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,

And the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,

And righteousness remain in the fruitful field.⁴⁷

Of course, there is no predetermined limitation that would necessarily forbid that all might eventually become part of this society, so that “*the kingdoms of this world*” through the Church’s efforts should “*become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.*”⁴⁸ Regardless of the degree of the response of others, the *success* of this venture is not our responsibility. Ours is to be *faithful* in the task. Its *success* is God’s responsibility. “*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*”⁴⁹

We rightly pray, “*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth...*” but God shifts the responsibility back upon His people, working through His power, when He says, “*Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.*”⁵⁰

Even so, Amen, Lord! So be it!

⁴⁴ Psalm 110:1-3

⁴⁵ Colossians 1:5-6

⁴⁶ Colossians 1:10

⁴⁷ Isaiah 32:15-16

⁴⁸ Revelation 11:15

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:6

⁵⁰ Amos 5:24

Chapter Fifteen
Salvation as Subjection

The Lord is our King;

He will save us...

(Isaiah 33:22)

...there is no savior besides Me...

I will be your King;

Where is any other,

That he may save you...?

(Hosea 13:4, 9-10)

Behold, your King is coming to you;

He is just and having salvation...

(Zechariah 9:9)

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne...”

(Revelation 7:10)

The gospel of the Kingdom is well-summarized in the announcement that *“There is another King—one Jesus.”*¹ This gospel is also called *“the gospel of your salvation,”*² and *“the word of this salvation.”*³ In ancient times, a king often obtained his status by military conquest, procuring the salvation of his people from their enemies. As seen in the passages cited above, salvation and kingship are joint concepts in scripture, and have been since the foundation of Israel as a nation. Yahweh initially urged Israel to become His Kingdom, based upon the fact that He had mightily delivered them from their oppressors in Egypt:

*You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to
Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a*

¹ Acts 17:7 KJV

² Ephesians 1:13

³ Acts 13:26

*special treasure to Me above all people...And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*⁴

In the period of the judges, prior to the monarchy in Israel, the judge Gideon heroically rescued the nation from Midianite oppressors. The spontaneous response of the people, after the battle was won, was, *“Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.”*⁵ Even though Gideon declined, on the grounds that Yahweh was Israel’s rightful king, their offer reflected the natural order of things. Deliverers often become rulers.

When Saul was anointed as Israel’s first king, many rejected him, saying *“How can this man save us?”*⁶ Lacking the popular support in his role as king, Saul went back to his farm and worked the fields.⁷ Only after the people of Jabesh-Gilead were attacked by the Ammonites and Saul raised up an Israelite force to deliver them did the whole nation eagerly proclaim him their king.⁸ If a man wants to be king, he had better be able to save his subjects from their foes. On the flip side, if a people wants someone to save them, they had better be prepared afterward to acknowledge him as their king.

The Messiah King was also expected to be a “Savior” to Israel⁹—that is, it was expected that He would rout the occupying heathen forces and deliver Israel from their subjection, rendering them an independent kingdom under God and His Anointed One. At the birth of John the Baptist, his father Zacharias gave a prophetic utterance, in which he identified John’s birth as the harbinger of the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic expectations:

*[God] has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David.
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who have been since the world began,
That we should be saved from our enemies
And from the hand of all who hate us...*¹⁰

That the King of David’s lineage would save Israel from the bondage and oppression of their enemies did not mean that Israel would forever thereafter be subject to no ruler at all. It was understood that the One who would deliver would also assume the role of King and Lord over His people. Neither the Old nor the New Testament envisages the people being saved by the Messiah

⁴ Exodus 19:4-6

⁵ Judges 8:22

⁶ 1 Samuel 10:27

⁷ 1 Samuel 11:5

⁸ 1 Samuel 11:6-15

⁹ Isaiah 19:20; Jeremiah 23:6; Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23

¹⁰ Luke 1:69-71

without being brought into subjection to Him as King, and themselves becoming His righteous Kingdom.

Salvation is for Him

The Christian message of salvation has often been represented as salvation *from* something—generally, from hellfire. Salvation is certainly deliverance from *something*—from the bondage of sin¹¹ and from Satan’s power.¹² It is important, however, that we focus as does scripture not on what we are saved *from*, but what we are saved *for*. It is fine to be rescued from an oppressive master’s captivity, but we miss the point of the whole transaction unless we also recognize that the one who has purchased us is also a Master—a good one—to whom loyal obedience is now due.

*...having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness...But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness...*¹³

We may have been encouraged, by modern preachers, to look at salvation as something God does strictly for us, rather than something done in His own interest. All things exist through Him and for His glory. As with all other things our salvation is primarily intended for His glory. Paul clearly declares that God saved us, primarily, *“that we...should be to the praise of His glory...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known...”*¹⁴

Elsewhere, Paul again states God’s purpose in Christ’s dying for our sins: *“that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”*¹⁵ So, Jesus died because God was seeking a people for Himself. God saves us for the same reason that He originally created us—*viz.*, that He might have a family:

*For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.*¹⁶

¹¹ Matthew 1:21; John 8:34; Romans 6:16-17; 8:7-8; 2 Peter 2:14, 19

¹² 2 Timothy 2:26; Hebrews 2:14-15

¹³ Romans 6:18-19, 22

¹⁴ Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14; 3:10

¹⁵ Titus 2:14

¹⁶ Romans 8:29

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory...¹⁷

God made us for Himself,¹⁸ but gave us the option of loving Him or not. Like the prodigal son in the story, each of us has made the same wrong choice, and has become alienated from the Father. This misstep on our part has ruined everything—not least our own lives. *Salvation* refers to God's reaching out and saving (or recovering) what was lost. It is the recovery *for Himself* of something He had valued, and which had to be returned to its proper Owner.

When we read that Jesus described His mission as being “*to seek and to save that which was lost*,”¹⁹ we might ask, “Lost to *whom*? And for *whom* is it being recovered?” These questions find their answers in Luke 15, where we have three related parables of lost things being recovered. These parables are intended to help us understand what salvation is. In the context, the Pharisees were complaining that people of “the wrong type” were coming to Jesus to be in His Kingdom and that He was accepting them gladly. It was scandalous for a holy man to associate with notorious sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, etc., who were leaving their old lives to follow Him.²⁰ In response to the Pharisees' objection, Jesus illustrated, by these stories, that God is celebrating the return to Himself of these lost children.

1. There is, first, the parable of the lost sheep, whom the shepherd seeks until he finds it and returns it to his fold. From childhood, many of us have seen paintings of Jesus with a lamb over His shoulders, or heard this story told so as to evoke sympathy for the lost sheep. What will become of it, if it is not found by the shepherd? Maybe it will stumble over a cliff in the dark. Perhaps predators will find it first. The poor thing!

This would not have been the first thought of Jesus or His listeners—some of whom were probably shepherds themselves. They knew that the sheep, once recovered, might eventually be slaughtered for an evening meal. To a shepherd, a sheep is not a pet, but a commodity. Though he might have been fond of some of his sheep, to the shepherd the sheep is a possession whose loss was felt in his own pocketbook. The implication may be present that the sheep is far happier and better-off under the shepherd's protection than lost in the wilderness. However, the saving of the sheep was a boon to the shepherd and is the reason he went after it at all. He saved it for himself.

¹⁷ Hebrew 2:10

¹⁸ Proverbs 16:4; Isaiah 43:7

¹⁹ Matthew 18:11

²⁰ Luke 5:32

2. The second parable is about a woman who loses a coin and searches for it until it is recovered. Certainly, this story does not have any subtext of a benefit to the coin itself upon its being found. The coin is not in any existential danger. In this story again it is the seeker who has lost something of value and rejoices to recover it.
3. The third story is the famous parable about the prodigal son. The story follows the same basic theme as do the previous two parables. Something is lost—this time a family member. In this case, the personal response of the lost son is emphasized, rather than the searching on the part of the father. Upon repentance and returning to the father the son is celebrated and restored to honor in the family.

Unlike the previous parable about the lost coin, a benefit to the one restored is a factor in this story. Nevertheless in this parable, as in the previous two, the emphasis is the rejoicing of the one who had originally suffered the loss—who represents God. The prodigal's father is not simply delighted that he has the opportunity to improve the circumstances of some poor wretch, who has randomly walked up the path to his estate. If that were the intended point, the bereaved father could have simply been depicted as going out and finding any poor beggar and adopting him in place of the lost son. No, the rejoicing of the father is understood to be in the restoration of one who was precious to him: "*this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found*" (v.24).

It is clear enough in scripture that the sinner is enormously benefitted by being restored to a rightful relationship with the Father, but as in all matters, our understanding will be skewed if we continue to think everything of importance revolves around us, rather than around God's interests. God's revealed interests are that we should be restored to Himself! This happens when we submit ourselves to His Son, whom He has exalted to rulership over His Kingdom.

So great salvation

We Protestants and evangelicals typically interpret the word "salvation" in terms of gaining access to heaven in the next life. The theology of the Reformation is often interpreted as having this focus. I doubt that there are many reading this page who have not been conditioned to equate the word "salvation" with the concept of going to heaven. To Protestants, this is essentially identified with the idea of "justification by faith." Justification involves the removal of any barrier that would debar the sinner from eternal life in the presence of God.

The Bible does, indeed, teach that we are justified in the sight of God by what Paul calls *pistis*—the Greek word usually translated "faith." In much popular preaching this condition has often been reduced to the simple act of believing certain propositions about Jesus—namely that He died for our

sins, arose from the dead, and will take us to heaven someday if we can be persuaded to believe these things.

This reductionistic message emerged as a result of the controversy between the Roman Catholics and the Reformers in the sixteenth century. The former taught that salvation is gained through a combination of faith, good works, and sacraments. Luther and his supporters reduced the number of necessary items to one: merely “faith” (omitting good works and sacraments from the list). Certain Pauline texts, especially in Galatians and Romans, seemed to favor Luther’s contention. Protestants and evangelicals, who are the heirs of the Reformation, often consider the affirmation of “justification by faith alone” (*sola fide*) as the genuine credential of being orthodox with reference to the true gospel.

However, heated controversies like that between Luther and the Roman Church seldom generate balanced positions. In such controversies the rival parties naturally gravitate to positions poles apart from each other. Sometimes orthodoxy is considered to be the position the furthest distance from the opposing view. Thus, any mention of “good works” in connection to Christian salvation is regarded by many evangelicals to position a believer dangerously close to Roman Catholicism.

The focus on the means of justification in the sixteenth-century controversy caused the Church to focus on this particular disputed aspect of salvation to the exclusion of many others. Even Paul’s position came to be reduced to a brief aphorism, which became the *shibboleth*²¹ of the evangelical movement: “Salvation is by faith alone.”

In the above affirmation, the word “salvation” seems to be equated with “justification,” to the exclusion of the full range of the biblical teachings about the salvation purchased and obtained by the Messiah. The word *justification* is too often truncated to mean little more than “being given a pass” allowing unworthy sinners to avoid hell and enter heaven. The concept has been stripped in the popular mind of its full meaning in terms of restoration of sinners to a proper relationship with God. Justification accomplishes reconciliation, resulting in an unobstructed relationship with our Creator here and now—not just access to a better place after death.

Even the word *faith* (*pistis*) has often been illegitimately reduced to one’s simple acquiescence to a certain list of facts about Jesus—which falls very short of the word’s actual meaning and of the concept of salvation found in scripture. The word *pistis* does indeed speak of faith, but the same word can also be translated “faithfulness.”²² The word can speak either of the quality of *trusting* or of the concept of being *trustworthy*. It can mean loyalty or it can mean counting on the loyalty of another.

²¹ Something like a “password” establishing one’s authentic identity (Judges 12:5-6)

²² E.g., Matthew 23:23; Romans 3:3; Galatians 5:22 in most English versions

Thus, both “faith” and “faithfulness” are legitimate translations in different contexts.²³ In modern English, it is still the case that the expression, “in good *faith*” speaks of one’s honesty, fidelity, or integrity—or *faithfulness*.

The word *pistis*, therefore, can speak of both sides of a loyal relationship, as between a husband and wife. Both make promises of fidelity to one another. Thereafter, both are to be faithful (in the sense of “loyal” and “trustworthy”), and both are expected to trust in the loyalty of the other. This is the nature of covenants of which marriage is an entirely biblical example. We are saved (just as couples are married) in the context of a covenant—ours being with God. In a covenant each party promises fidelity to the other and each must trust the promises of the other.

It may be jarring to hear the famous Reformation war cry altered to read, “*justified by faithfulness*,” but Paul based the doctrine of *sola fide*, chiefly, on two Old Testament verses: One tells us that Abraham was declared righteous when he “*believed in the Lord*,”²⁴ which speaks of “faith” in the common sense of “believing” or “trusting.” Paul’s second proof text is Habakkuk’s promise that “*the just shall live by faith*”²⁵ (KJV). The interesting thing is that, in the latter passage, “faith” is *pistis*, both in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), and in the New Testament citations of it. In translating the Hebrew text into Greek, the *Septuagint* scholars used this word *pistis* to render the Hebrew word, *emunah*, which has the specific meaning of “firmness, steadfastness. . . faithfulness.”²⁶ Thus, in Hebrew, Habakkuk is told that “*the just man will have life for his faithfulness*.”²⁷

If the word *pistis* is capable of bearing both meanings—faith and faithfulness—then the Hebrew background of its use in the *Septuagint*’s rendering of Habakkuk 2:4 definitely tips the scales to the latter meaning, at least in that passage. Paul, a scholar in both the Hebrew and the Greek Old Testament texts, would know that in Hebrew the meaning of Habakkuk 2:4 (which significantly informed his own understanding of justification) was, “*the righteous shall live by (or have life for) his faithfulness*.”

By conjoining Abraham’s “believing” and Habakkuk’s “faithfulness,” Paul formulates his teaching about justification by *pistis*, implying that both sides of a trusting and loyal relationship between God and His people must be understood. Paul’s doctrine would best be stated: “We can trust God to be faithful, and we are expected also to be faithful to Him. These are the terms of justification.”

Even the part about Abraham’s “believing” is not intended to convey the idea of merely accepting certain facts as being correct (by that definition, the devil is a great *believer*). To “believe in Christ” or

²³ *Pistis*— “*this can mean both faithfulness and trust, though it is seldom used in the former sense.*” [examples of meaning “faithfulness” from footnote: Matthew 23:23; Romans 3:3; Galatians 5:22; Titus 2:10] —Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol.V!* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 204

²⁴ Genesis 15:6

²⁵ Habakkuk 2:4

²⁶ The Complete Word Study New Testament, 2301

²⁷ See Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 55-57

to “have faith in God,” expresses the adoption of a completely warranted trust in, and reliance upon, the One who has invariably proved Himself to be trustworthy. This casts “salvation” in relational, not merely intellectual, terms. Notice Paul’s description of Abraham’s faith as being far more than mere acquiescence to certain propositions about God:

[Abraham], contrary to hope, in hope believed...And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore “it was accounted to him for righteousness.”²⁸

Notice, in that last sentence, “*And therefore...*” Paul describes Abraham’s faith as being all-compelling and life-altering, and then says “*therefore*”—because this was the kind of faith he exhibited—“*it was accounted to him for righteousness.*” Abraham’s belief in God’s character and integrity changed his whole life perspective, his goals, and his concept of the purpose of his existence. His faith made a difference in his life. It set a new target at which to aim. This is what appears to be missing today in the case of many so-called “believers”—their faith makes no difference in real life. It seems appropriate to ask, if our faith does not make any difference to us why should it make any difference to God? If we don’t take God seriously why would He take us seriously?

While justification may be understood as a courtroom term for acquittal, the idea of being forensically justified has the purpose of reinstating the proper relationship between the justified and the Justifier. It is not simply a *get-out-of-jail-free* card given to a remorseless criminal. Rather, justification is the equivalent of a king’s granting amnesty to a traitor upon the understanding that the erstwhile rebel is now resuming his proper role in the Kingdom as a loyal and obedient subject. Justification is simply the doorway into salvation, not the whole of it.

There can be no salvation without genuine subjection to Christ as King. This means that there is no salvation outside of the Kingdom of God. If we recognize that salvation is “a right relationship with God through Christ,” we must remember that, when it comes to kings, anything short of full submission is a wrong relationship. Any person who is not willingly subject to the King remains a rebel at war against Him.

Biblical Salvation

On the question of what biblical salvation is, I take the liberty of lifting a relevant page from a previous book of mine:

²⁸ Romans 4:18-22

Many Christians seem to think of salvation primarily (or even exclusively) as a divine rescue of the sinner from hell, but the scriptures actually present salvation as God's addressing a broader range of concerns. In scripture, salvation is not represented, primarily, as deliverance from hell in a future life, but, rather, from present conditions that are the result of the sinner's alienation from God. This alienation from God is viewed as man's primary predicament.²⁹ While Peter, Paul, or other primitive preachers, never specifically said that Jesus came to save people from "hell" (it is, no doubt, implied), they do tell us that Jesus came to save us from the following:

1. This present evil age (Gal.1:4)
2. Our present alienation from God (2 Cor.5:19-20; Eph.2:12-19)
3. An aimless and hopeless life (1 Pet.1:18-19; Eph.2:12)
4. Bondage to sin (Matt.1:21; Luke 4:18; John 8:31-36; Acts 3:26; Rom.6:22);
5. The fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15/ 1 Cor.15:54-55).

Additionally, "salvation" is seen as a rescue from "the wrath to come" (e.g., Matt.3:7; Rom.5:9; 1 Thess.1:10; 5:9), though what form this wrath may take remains obscure. It need not refer to postmortem destinies (though it might). Though frequently mentioned in the Old Testament,³⁰ God's "wrath" is never clearly identified there with circumstances of the next life, but with severe temporal judgments upon nations or individuals.

Likewise, in the New Testament, "wrath" is said to be a present reality resting upon, and revealed against, sinners while they live on the earth.³¹ There are three passages which speak of believers being saved from "wrath."³² While there is the possibility that this expression was seen as equivalent to postmortem "hell," the biblical writers chose not to clarify this.³³

Most theologians, with good warrant, see biblical salvation as involving at least three aspects:

- *Justification*—by which one is saved from the guilt and penalties of sin, and reconciled to God,
- *Sanctification*—usually seen as either the progressive, or sudden, deliverance from sin's power over the believer in daily living, and
- *Glorification*—which is the final vindication of God's children, and their salvation even from

²⁹ e.g., Isa. 59:1-2; Jer.2:5, 13; Eph.2:12

³⁰ e.g., Ex.15:7; 22:24; Num.11:33; 1 Sam.28:18; 2 Kings 22:17; Ps.59:13; 78:31; Isa.9:19; Jer.32:37; Ezek.21:31; etc., etc.

³¹ John 3:36; Rom.1:18; 1 Thess.2:16

³² Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9

³³ Steve Gregg, *All You Want to Know About Hell...*(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 55f

the presence of environmental sin, eventually to be realized in the final resurrection of our bodies.

These three aspects of salvation are often discussed as a triad. There are other concepts that are related to salvation as well, including redemption, regeneration, adoption, transformation, etc. (most of which can be associated with aspects or consequences of the three already listed).

The concept of eternal life is also closely associated with biblical salvation. The Gospel of John, unlike the other three gospels, only rarely uses the expression, *Kingdom of God*.³⁴ In its place John frequently uses another term, which is less frequently used in the other gospels—namely, “life”—referring to life of a spiritual nature, divinely imparted at rebirth and throughout the Christian’s walk.³⁵ This term often appears in John without a modifier, but it is also often coupled with the Greek word *aionios*, commonly translated in English versions by the words “*eternal*” or “*everlasting*.”

Most readers of the English text see *eternal life* simply as a reference to immortality, or as life extended into an eternal future. However, the Greek adjective *aionios*, is associated with the root *aion*—a noun meaning “an age.” *Aionios* can speak of something *enduring for an age*, meaning for an indefinitely long time—up to and including *forever*. Alternatively, the word can refer to something *pertaining to a particular age*. The Jews thought of history in terms of distinct ages—especially “the present age,” in contrast to “the age to come”—which refers to the Kingdom Age to be inaugurated by the Messiah. This Messianic Age was depicted by the prophets as an age of the Holy Spirit’s activity, and an age of the redemption and glory of Israel.

Many modern Greek scholars and evangelical theologians³⁶ now believe that the word “*aionios* life” refers to the life which pertains to the Kingdom Age of the Messiah—that is, “*life in the Kingdom*”—without specific reference to its duration. Jesus spoke of entering the Kingdom of God as equivalent to entering into “life.” Observe how Jesus uses “life” and “the Kingdom of God” interchangeably in Mark 9:

“It is better for you to enter into life maimed...” (v.43)

“It is better for you to enter life lame...” (v.45)

“It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye...” (v. 47)

³⁴ The word “kingdom” appears 55 times in Matthew, 19 times in Mark, and 45 times in Luke, but only 3 times in John.

³⁵ References to divine life occur less than 10 times in Matthew, only 4 times in Mark, 3 times in Luke, but 32 times in John

³⁶ See Steve Gregg, *op. cit.*, 105-106

In the three parallel statements, Jesus says that it is better to enter into “life,” twice, and that it is better to enter into the Kingdom of God, once. He naturally slips from one expression to the other as presumed equivalents.

As we have emphasized, entering into the Kingdom is not something associated with the afterlife, but occurs when we become disciples of the King.³⁷ This is also when we enter into *aionios* life.³⁸ This is the life of the Kingdom so that one enters the Kingdom and into this life simultaneously.

The Messiah’s Kingdom is the realm of God’s salvation and life to mankind. To be “saved” is to enter the Messiah’s Kingdom and to live the life of the Messianic Age. When the rich, young ruler inquired of Jesus how he might participate in “*aionios* life,” Jesus equated this with entering the Kingdom of God.³⁹ Then, when Jesus spoke of the great difficulty of a rich man entering the Kingdom of God, the disciples’ spontaneous reaction was “*who then can be saved?*” (that is, “who can enter the Kingdom, if it is so difficult?”).⁴⁰ In this passage, Jesus and His disciples naturally spoke of having “eternal (*aionios*) life,” “being saved,” and “entering the Kingdom of God” as interchangeable concepts.

The “gospel of salvation” is the same message as the “gospel of the Kingdom.” This is the message of having *aionios* life—the life lived in the Kingdom. The main point is that salvation is the restoration of lost rebels to the proper relationship with God and to Christ as Lord and King—and the only right relation that a citizen may have with a king is complete subjection.

³⁷ Colossians 1:13; Matthew 5:3; Luke 16:16; Revelation 5:10

³⁸ John 3:36; 5:24; 6:47, 54; 1 John 5:13

³⁹ Matthew 19:16, 23-24

⁴⁰ Matthew 19:23-25; Mark 10:24-26; Luke 18:24-26

Chapter Sixteen

Saved Without a Lord?

...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

(Romans 10:9)

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.

(1 Corinthians 6:19f ESV)

The desire to be rescued without being owned

Many who call themselves evangelicals today seem to preach a salvation from condemnation, without any corresponding demands of submission to Christ's Lordship. That makes as much sense as wanting to be a married bachelor or to sell your house without having to surrender its title. We are saved because Jesus has redeemed us by His blood. To "redeem" means to purchase. People are not forced to accept the terms of Christ's redemption, but there is no such thing as being *purchased* without being *owned*.

The desire to be saved, but not owned, has caused some to misrepresent Paul as having a different take on the gospel and salvation than that which is found in Jesus' teaching. There is not a single place in scripture that would allow us to distinguish between Paul's preaching and that of Jesus, other than the fact that the message of the Kingdom, by Paul's time, had in the meantime picked up the additional facts of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension to the throne. These events were more obscure in the preaching of the gospel by Jesus prior to their occurrence because of the need to keep them a secret from His enemies, who must be induced to inadvertently bring them about. While these facts were inherent in Christ's preaching, they were not publicly proclaimed as features of the gospel until after they actually had occurred. The first to embed these facts in the Kingdom gospel was not Paul, but Peter along with the Jerusalem apostles.¹ Christ's ascension to the throne did not alter any aspect of Christ's gospel of the Kingdom, other than to display the means by which Christ assumed His role as King in the Kingdom.

Paul taught that salvation is obtained through the gift of God's grace.² Thus, the gospel of salvation is the gospel of God's grace.³ However, Jesus also preached justification by grace, as consistent with

¹ Acts 2:22-24,36; 3:13-15; 4:33; 13:28-30

² Ephesians 2:8-9

³ Acts 20:24

the gospel of the Kingdom as He preached it.⁴ Paul himself equated the gospel of grace with the gospel of the Kingdom (see Acts 20:24-25), so there is no scriptural basis for distinguishing salvation as preached by Paul from the salvation preached by Jesus.

For Paul, the Jews' anticipation of national, political redemption was fulfilled spiritually to the believing remnant in that much greater redemption from the slavery of sin.⁵ This same redemption and liberation from sin was also featured in Jesus' teaching.⁶ Paul equated our redemption with our entering the Kingdom of God: *"He has...conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son...in whom we have redemption through His blood..."*⁷

Redemption is the purchasing back for oneself something that was earlier lost or forfeited. The redeeming party then takes ownership of what has been re-acquired by purchase. Paul speaks of Christ dying for us *"that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works."*⁸

Jesus' death was to redeem for Himself, by His blood, the people who would populate His Kingdom on earth, and someday reign with Him in it. What He has purchased for Himself is our loyalty and obedience to Him. Paul similarly wrote: *"You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body,"*⁹ and *"...present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."*¹⁰

In the same vein, Peter explains the ramifications of redemption:

*...as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'... knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot..."*¹¹

According to Peter, knowing of our redemption involves the knowledge of being owned by and separated to God (which is the actual meaning of the word "holy") resulting in our being *"obedient children."*

⁴ Luke 18:13-14; 23:42-43

⁵ E.g. Romans 6:16ff; cf., Matthew 1:21

⁶ Mark 10:45; John 8:34-36

⁷ Colossians 1:13-14

⁸ Titus 2:14

⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 ESV

¹⁰ Romans 12:1

¹¹ 1 Peter 1:14-16, 18-19

In Revelation 12:10, John heard a heavenly voice, whose message equated the coming of salvation with the Kingdom of Christ: “*Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come...*”¹²

Salvation and the Kingdom of Christ thus arrived simultaneously, in the same moment. To enter one is to enter both.

No King, no Savior

In popular parlance, Jesus’ role as *Savior* is sometimes conceptually separated from His role as *Lord* (Ruler), with the former role having to do only with the future escape from penalties for our sins. This is a misrepresentation of the scriptural teaching. The only salvation available to man is found *in Christ*. Consider these facts:

- Grace is ours *in Christ*.¹³
- Justification is ours *in Christ*.¹⁴
- Redemption is ours *in Christ*.¹⁵
- Eternal life is ours *in Christ*.¹⁶
- “Chosen status” is ours *in Christ*.¹⁷

In Paul’s terminology, one has all of these when, and only when, one is *in Christ*—meaning a *member in the Body of Christ*. Since membership in Christ’s Body means being submitted to His headship, it is another metaphor for people who are *subjects in the Kingdom of Christ*. In a body every member is ruled by a head, and in a kingdom every citizen is ruled by a king. The two concepts are identical. If Christ is my Head, He is my King. If He is not my Head (King) I am not *in Him*, nor am I scripturally a *saved* person.

I grew up hearing people in church share their personal testimonies of salvation. Often, they clearly separated the act of “accepting Jesus as Savior” from that of “accepting Jesus as Lord.” Typically, the testimony went something like this: “I accepted Jesus as my personal Savior at church camp when I was twelve years old, but it wasn’t until I was in college that I accepted Him as my Lord.”

¹² Revelation 12:10

¹³ Ephesians 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:9

¹⁴ Romans 8:1; Ephesians 4:32

¹⁵ Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14

¹⁶ Romans 6:23; John 1:4; 1 John 5:11-12

¹⁷ Ephesians 1:4

Speaking this way gives listeners the impression that a person can obtain a Savior without simultaneously acquiring a Lord.

Yet, the Bible knows of only one Jesus who is at once Savior, Messiah, and Lord. There is not a “*Savior Jesus*” whom one may accept at one point in time, and a second, “*Lord Jesus*,” whom one may embrace separately at a later date. The latter act is sometimes referred to as “making Jesus the Lord of your life.” Technically, we do not *make Jesus Lord*. God Himself made Him the Lord over all creation (including *us*) nearly two-thousand years ago.¹⁸ He has never since held any lesser office. He is the Lord of every person. Every person either recognizes and honors His lordship or fails to do so. Christ’s kingship is an objective fact, whether we submit to it or not. We do not *make Him Lord*. We simply stop acting contrary to the facts—and start obeying Him.

For some, especially those who come to Christ at a young age, the understanding of the concept of “lordship” may be an awareness that develops gradually. The understanding and application of that lordship, with reference to various aspects of one’s personal life, typically evolves with maturity. It is one thing to say that one does not have a Lord and quite another to say that one’s grasp of His role as Lord must undergo a maturation in the course of living.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the angel who appeared to the shepherds on the hillside proclaimed “*good tidings*” (the gospel) of great joy. The message was: “*For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*”¹⁹ Only one Jesus was born that night in Bethlehem, and He was born possessing all of His titles—Savior, Christ (King), and Lord. Consequently, if you have Jesus, you have a Savior, a King and a Lord. If you do not have a Lord, or a King, then you do not have Jesus, and thus no Savior either. There exists no world which has a Jesus who is Savior but not Lord. Jesus is only one person. Having that person is what saves: “*He that has the Son has life; he that does not have the Son of God does not have life.*”²⁰ There is no salvation in Christ that does not include the lordship of Christ.

According to Paul, we receive salvation (Christ as *Savior*) the moment we acknowledge Him as *Lord*:

*...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*²¹

The New Testament contains numerous brief statements about the means of salvation, such as the oft-quoted words of Paul and Silas to the Philippian jailor: “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and*

¹⁸ Acts 2:36

¹⁹ Luke 2:10-11

²⁰ 1 John 5:12

²¹ Romans 10:9

you will be saved."²² Doesn't this suggest that salvation is nothing more than believing in Jesus as one's "personal Savior"? It is strange that so many can quote this passage without noticing that it unambiguously identifies the object of saving belief as *the Lord* and the *Christ*: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ...*" The acknowledgement of the lordship and messiahship (kingship) of Jesus are embedded in the confession that leads to salvation.

Suppose there was a U.S. presidential election in which the outcome was disputed. Let us say the vote of the electoral college favored one candidate while the popular vote favored the other. Neither candidate actually concedes the race to the other. Now suppose that a reporter seeks an exclusive interview with one of the claimants to the title named Bill Smith. Mr. Smith's campaign chairman returns to the reporter and says, "If you will acknowledge President Bill Smith, and will consistently refer to him thus, you may have the access you seek for your interview." In the context of the contested election, to "acknowledge President Bill Smith" would clearly imply the acknowledgement that the title was legitimately his, and to personally honor his claim to the office.

Similarly, in a world where Romans regarded Caesar as "Lord" and where Jews were looking for their Davidic King (Christ), the command to "believe in the *Lord Jesus Christ*," could not fail to be understood as meaning, "you must recognize Jesus as Lord (rather than Caesar) and as the promised Jewish Messiah (King)—and act in accordance with that belief."

It should go without saying that, in every New Testament passage, "believing" and "confessing" presuppose the presence of sincerity. Obviously, to confess what one does not really believe cannot fool God, who is the one from whom the gift of salvation is being sought. Both of the above passages (Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9) tell us that salvation comes through believing in Jesus, and both also say that one must believe and confess His lordship and messiahship. It is interesting that, though the statements are concerning the topic of *salvation*, neither of them (nor any other in scripture) states that what one must believe is that He is "Savior." *Savior* is indeed one of His legitimate titles and functions, but it is not this title that sinners are urged to confess or to believe. In fact, according to Paul, Jesus becomes the Savior to the person who confesses Him as Lord and King.

We have all witnessed a bride and a groom exchanging vows in order to enter that sacred covenant to which salvation is likened in scripture. When the time comes for the groom to say his vows, the minister says, "Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife...and forsaking all others, to cling only to her, in sickness and health...?" Suppose the groom's response would be, "I will take this woman to be my cook, my housecleaner, my laundry maid, and my bed partner. However, after we have been married for a while, I will consider whether I want to forsake all others and remain solely hers. I mean, isn't that rather restrictive—like being *owned*?" Yes. Very much like it.

²² Acts 16:31

Do you think that man would leave the building a single man or a husband? Obviously, one cannot legitimately have the benefits of having a wife without being married, which involves a lifelong, faithful, monogamous commitment.

This is precisely parallel to the person who thinks he or she can say, “I accept Jesus as my personal Savior, Protector, Provider, Healer and Advocate,” but thinks that the question of His lordship can be postponed to be negotiated at a later date, if at all.

The immense privilege of being in subjection to Christ

Modern societies are very egalitarian—or at least, they think that they are. No economic class, gender, racial, or social group is officially recognized as having rule over another in our contemporary democratic societies. The very idea of kings and masters is an abomination to the thoroughly modern person—who often objects to any hint of hierarchy in marriage, family, or church roles. Egalitarianism is esteemed as one of the most cherished secular values.

However, despite the dream of complete parity, wherever more than a handful of people attempt to work, play or live together, a pecking order emerges. If the team has no official captain, a *de facto* captain will arise to fill the void. If the husband does not assume the role of the head of the family, then the wife, one of the children, or the state will effectively fill that role. When an official hierarchy is absent, there will be an unofficial, functional hierarchy, based upon power, merit, motivation, or charisma that naturally emerges. Egalitarianism is more of an ideal than a reality. This is not likely ever to change so long as human beings are attempting to accomplish anything cooperatively.

Hierarchy—the arrangement in which someone is subordinate by definition or by default to someone else—is not necessarily a bad or demeaning arrangement, despite the politically-correct mood of our day. The wife who would be shocked at the suggestion that she should submit to her husband in the home regularly accepts without protest her subordination at work to her boss or supervisor. The “let’s be egalitarian” game is something people play when they feel that nothing of importance needs to be accomplished. If a family, a company, or a team actually wishes to thrive and meet goals, such game-playing is willingly put aside—often resulting in the loudest advocate of “equality” assuming the highest position available in the hierarchy. In the real world, there will always be leaders and followers, management and labor, chiefs and Indians, rulers and subordinates.

There is only room at the top of any hierarchy for a very few. If there are too many on the top rung they will get in each others’ way and topple all but one or a few. That means that virtually everybody will be in some measure subordinate to officials of some kind, whether in the workplace, in the political sphere, in the home, or on the softball team. As long as we are fighting against this reality, we are beating our heads against a stone wall, and the damage done will not be to the wall.

In the best-known track from Bob Dylan's first Christian album (*Slow Train*, 1979), he expressed in terms even a child can understand (something unusual for Dylan), the universal human condition:

*You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Yes indeed, you're gonna have to serve somebody.
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody...*

We can't all be chiefs in the earthly sphere, but even those who lead nations and corporations are unavoidably subject to one or another of the rival cosmic "kingdoms." Submission to Satan is seldom voluntary, but submission to Christ always is (at least, for the present). The call of Christ is not a call to sinners to abandon a life of total freedom in exchange for a life of servile subjection and bondage. Christ calls people who are already slaves to sin into the freedom of being His servants and heirs. The good news of the Kingdom of God, that "*there is another King*," presents to those already enslaved to Satan—and to their own pride, lusts, and empty ambitions—the alternative of embracing a Ruler who is actually the world's true Liberator. The choice is not between unbridled liberty, on the one hand, and servile subjection, on the other. Those are not the available options. Juan Carlos Ortiz, in his book *Disciple*, gives an apt analogy:

The kingdom of darkness is like a wrecked ship that is sinking fast. When the captain knows his ship is lost, he goes to the passengers and says, 'Listen, those in second class can go to first class; you're free to do what you want. Anyone who wants to drink, help yourself at the bar; it's all free. If you want to play soccer in the dining room, go ahead. If you break the lamps, don't worry.'

The passengers say, 'What a nice captain we have! We can do whatever we like on this ship.'

But they will all be dead in a few minutes.

In the kingdom of darkness, you can have all the drugs, lust, and cheating you want. Nevertheless, you are lost. You think you are the king. You are led by the selfish spirit of your kingdom. But it is only a matter of time.

What is salvation? It is to be 'delivered...from the domain of darkness, and transferred...to the kingdom of His beloved Son' (Colossians 1:13). It is not getting free of the kingdoms altogether. It is moving from the rulership of Satan to the rulership of Jesus Christ.

In the new kingdom, you cannot do whatever you like. You are part of the Kingdom of God. He is the King. He rules. We live according to His wants and wishes.²³

²³Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 1975, 1995) 28-29

Some Christians have quipped that the rewards of following Jesus are “out of this world!” Well, some of the rewards are indeed in another world, but one inestimable reward above all others can be enjoyed right here in this present world without delay. Christ’s servants have the privilege of serving and following the King of Kings. This is a unique King, who has been known to place the well-being of His servants above His own, to scandalously behave like a servant toward them, and to willingly die in the campaign of saving their lives. To serve a Master like that is like hitting the jackpot—or like obtaining a seat on the rescue vessel after the Titanic has fatally hit the iceberg. However, this rescue vessel, like all others, has a Captain who must be obeyed.

Many naturally wish to be the supreme rulers of their own lives, but no one can be. There are no current vacancies for that position in the whole universe. However, one who cannot be the leader does not lose the opportunity to be a happy follower. The desire for independent self-rule was what led our first parents to turn to the dark side, only to find that darkness is a whole lot worse than light, and that they subsequently had less control over their own lives than they had before they rebelled.

The rebellious human ego insists upon maintaining control of one’s own course, one’s own things, and one’s own destiny. This is the main obstacle preventing many from coming to Christ on His terms. This must be why the Bible repeatedly tells us that grace is given only to the humble. If one is too proud to sacrifice his or her own preeminence that person is ready to receive neither grace nor salvation. Jesus described the normal attitude of a servant, which was also what He required of His disciples—and which He also adopted toward His Father:

And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down to eat’? But will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’²⁴

This is an unfamiliar scenario to us. We might think the master in the illustration to be unkind, but Jesus is not teaching about how masters should treat their servants. He is simply describing, as a model for His disciples to imitate, the attitude of one who has signed away his own rights in becoming the slave of another.

If one cannot be at the top of the totem pole, one must resign himself to being subject to the wishes of someone else who is in that position. However, this is not necessarily as demeaning as our cultural instincts may initially cause us to think. It is true that the institution of slavery, as we have

²⁴ Luke 17:7-10

known it in western lands, was dehumanizing and degrading beyond measure. When people of one ethnic group are stolen away from their homes, and treated like sub-human animals—as was the case in what is called “Atlantic” or “African” slavery—it involves almost every kind of criminal injustice known to man. It is racist, cruel, dehumanizing, and, in the Bible, a capital offense (in the Old Testament, kidnapping was punishable by death).

When the Bible speaks of slavery it refers, in many cases, to servitude voluntarily taken upon oneself. In the ancient world, a man unable to pay his bills, and thus in danger of homelessness and desperate poverty, could voluntarily sell himself into slavery for his own survival or economic security. This is what the repenting prodigal son was hoping to do.²⁵ The *Torah* allowed a man to do this. It was better than being reduced to begging, exposure, and possible starvation. The Law did not, however, permit the dehumanizing of one’s slaves. Slaves were to be seen as less fortunate human beings, and treated compassionately. They were not to be raped, killed, or treated unfairly. Also, there was no component of *racism* defining slavery in the Bible. Many of Israel’s slaves were of their same race—fellow Israelites. While prisoners of war from other nations might be kept alive in servitude, it was not because of their race, *per se*, but because of their enemy status in wartime.

A Jewish man who had a Jewish slave was required to release him freely after seven years of service.²⁶ It may shock us to learn that a situation is envisioned in the Law in which a slave, offered his freedom, would choose to remain in slavery.²⁷ There might be any number of reasons for this (though modern free men and women cannot imagine any!). One reason might be that certain household slaves had a pretty good situation—certainly better than the mess they had gotten themselves into on their own before selling themselves into slavery. If the members of the master’s household were kind, fair, and sympathetic to the dignity of their servants (which was not unheard of, and was possible to be practiced by all), that servant might well choose the security provided there over the insecurity of personal freedom. Since masters met all the needs of their slaves—food, clothing, housing, medical attention—the slaves of a compassionate owner might think it unlikely that they would find a better situation abroad.

We shouldn’t feel too smug or enlightened. There are among us today people who work two or three jobs and have no more free time than a slave had in the ancient world, but whose combined employment does not guarantee their housing, food, medical care, etc. The slave of a good man might have more enviable circumstances than many free men had—or have today. Joseph, as a slave in the house of Potiphar, given rule over the other slaves, almost certainly was living comfortably—though he was not at his own liberty to follow an independent career.

²⁵ Luke 15:18-19

²⁶ Exodus 21:2

²⁷ *Ibid.*, v. 5

Despite the aversion we moderns have even to the word “slave,” this is the word that Paul, James and Peter all voluntarily chose to describe themselves in relation to Christ.²⁸ They did not see this label as a reproach, but as an honor.

In biblical times, if a person had no option of being a master, the next most honorable position was to be the trusted slave of a great man—as Eliezer was in Abraham’s household,²⁹ or Joseph was with Potiphar,³⁰ or Gehazi with Elisha,³¹ etc. All of these men were subject to their masters and/or mentors, but all were held in high esteem both within the household and in the eyes of the public. Elisha the servant of Elijah was described by others as “*the man who poured water over the hands of Elijah*”³² (no doubt a coveted role among the sons of the prophets). Joshua the servant of Moses got to succeed his master as leader of the nation. Gehazi was welcomed into the courts of a king to regale him with accounts of his master Elisha’s exploits.³³ Many trusted servants were brought into close friendship with their masters, like Jesus with His disciples.³⁴

Beyond the biblical examples mentioned above, we find the same to be true in the secular Roman world—the world from which most of Paul’s readers would derive their understanding of his use of the slave metaphor. Having a master of high rank conferred prestige to a slave. In his book, *Slave*, John MacArthur writes:

In New Testament times, slaves derived their own status from the social standing of their masters...To be the slave of an influential and well-respected master was itself an esteemed position...³⁵

In his book, *Slavery as Salvation*, Dale Martin explains that, in Roman times, “slavery to an important person bestowed on the slave a certain amount of prestige and power, a status-by-association.”³⁶

MacArthur adds:

From a secular Roman perspective, there could be no greater master than the emperor, which is why slaves of Caesar were held in especially high regard...But if it was considered an honor to be

²⁸ Romans 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1, the Greek word *doulos* does not mean “servant,” as it is rendered in most English translations, but “slave.”

²⁹ Genesis 15:2

³⁰ Genesis 39:3-4

³¹ 2 Kings 4:12

³² 2 Kings 3:11

³³ 2 Kings 8:4-5

³⁴ John 15:14-15

³⁵ John MacArthur, *Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ* (Nashville:Thomas Nelson, 2010), 95

³⁶ Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), xxii

the slave of one of the Caesars, it is infinitely more so to be the slave of Christ—the King of kings and Lord of lords!³⁷

One who will not humble himself to be another's servant has not yet the Spirit of Jesus, who washed the feet of His disciples and urged them to imitate this lowly act of servitude toward each other.³⁸ It was a major teaching of Christ that true greatness is taking the lowly role of service to others, and that those who faithfully submit themselves to such a status will be the delight of their King and will be exalted³⁹ as Jesus Himself was.⁴⁰

Once this attitude of subjection is adopted, it brings great peace and joy. It is concerning this very matter that Jesus said, "*If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.*"⁴¹ Thus, the attitude of humble submission, says Jesus, is the secret to happiness. Striving to be the one in charge may be exhilarating in the midst of the competition, but it is not the path to inner peace. Such peace comes when we lay aside our selfish ambitions and find our proper place in the service of Christ and others—unless Jesus was mistaken.

When God called godly men, like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, the boy Samuel, and Isaiah, their response took the form of a single Hebrew word—*Hineini*⁴²—which is a composite of two smaller words and means "*Here I am!*"⁴³ It is the proper response of a servant to a summons—roughly equivalent to our phrase, "*At your service!*" For those who regard themselves to be at Christ's service, there is something ennobling in being able to make such a reply to God's call. What an honor it is to receive a summons from the Universal Sovereign and to be able to respond, *Hineini!* "Here am I! Send me on whatever errand or mission you desire to entrust to me. I am honored to be summoned to the service of such a generous and worthy Master!" In Old Testament prophecy, Jesus is represented as giving this very response to His Father: "*Then I said, 'Behold [in Hebrew: Hineini], I come; In the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God.'*"⁴⁴

Esther's glory was her submission to the king Ahasuerus (who also happened to be her husband). The stubbornness of her predecessor, Queen Vashti, had gotten her banished from her royal position, but Esther had the king's adoring favor, due to her submissive disposition. More than once, the king told her that she could have anything she asked of him, up to half his kingdom!⁴⁵ The striking thing about Esther was her servant-like attitude, even as Queen. Whenever she approached Ahasuerus

³⁷ MacArthur, *Op cit.*, 96, 97

³⁸ John 13:12-16

³⁹ Matthew 20:25-28; Luke 14:7-11; cf., Galatians 5:13; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6

⁴⁰ Acts 2:36; Philippians 2:9-11

⁴¹ John 13:17

⁴² Genesis 22:1, 11; 31:11; 46:2; Exodus 3:4; 1 Samuel 3:4; Isaiah 6:8

⁴³ Sometimes translated, especially in the KJV, "Behold!" or "Lo!"

⁴⁴ Psalm 40:7; Hebrews 10:9; see also, Isaiah 8:18; Hebrews 2:13

⁴⁵ Esther 5:3, 6; 7:2

with any request, she prefaced her petition with *"If it pleases the king..."* Observe how often these words are on her lips in the story.⁴⁶ Her every request was willingly subject to the king's pleasure. Jesus and the Christian both have the same approach to making requests of the Father: *"If it is your will..."*⁴⁷ or, *"If it pleases the King..."*

The mother of Jesus, the most blessed of all women, also took this servile posture toward her unique commission. It was a privilege, to be sure, to be told that her child would be the long-awaited Messiah but it would come at a cost to her. It would cause her sterling reputation in the family and the community to be tarnished, when she was found to be pregnant while still unmarried. More than that, it could certainly threaten her prospects of marriage to her fiancé, who knew, as others did not, that the child was not his. However, her humble response to the assignment was *"Behold [in her own language, Hineini] the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."*⁴⁸

None but a slave of Christ can know the joy and honor of receiving one's assignments from *The High King*. What a privilege to bow before Jesus, when asked to make a costly sacrifice, and to be able to say, "Here am I, Your servant! Be it to me according to your word!" It is the unique pleasure of those willingly subject to the King of Kings which cannot be known or enjoyed by anyone else. This is salvation from our sinful selves and the thrill of new life in the Kingdom of Christ here and now.

When preachers get around to including this truth in their evangelization of potential converts, we can expect to finally see the Kingdom populated again with genuine disciples who have come to Christ for the true salvation that is found only as subjects in His Kingdom. Unbelievers who are looking only for fire insurance at no cost will find nothing appealing in this message, and will hopefully cease to play at religion in the colonies of the believers. From the standpoint of the health and true success of the churches, this cannot happen too soon.

⁴⁶ Esther 5:5, 8; 7:3; 8:5; 9:13

⁴⁷ Luke 22:42; James 4:15

⁴⁸ Luke 1:38

Chapter Seventeen

Inheriting the Kingdom

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'

(Matthew 25:34)

For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

(Ephesians 5:5)

The New Testament speaks sometimes of the imperative of *entering* the Kingdom of God, and elsewhere, of the privilege of *inheriting* the Kingdom. Upon a careless reading of the scripture one might not even notice that the expressions are different. Even noticing this difference, we might initially speculate that both expressions refer to the same transaction, perhaps from two angles. *Entering* the Kingdom is obviously presented as an obligation and a duty, whereas *inheriting* the Kingdom is seen as a great reward. Though this is true, a closer analysis of the phrases in their contexts reveals that *entering* and *inheriting* the Kingdom of God are different events occurring at different times. We must *enter* the Kingdom now, if we wish to *inherit* the Kingdom in the future—namely, when Jesus returns. The time will come when everyone will wish to inherit the Kingdom—especially given the alternative. However, only those who enter and live in the Kingdom in the present time will be entitled to inherit the Kingdom in the next age.

As we have observed, the Kingdom of God was actually planted and established in the world at Christ's first coming two thousand years ago and has been growing like a small seed into a global phenomenon ever since. It is destined to encompass and rule the nations under the Messiah, as the last of the world empires. The Kingdom is eternal, and those who enter it in this life and remain faithful unto death will also live forever in it after the future resurrection.

In one of His parables, Jesus described the Kingdom as undergoing phases in its development and its fruition, like grain in the field—*first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.*¹ Only when it has reached its final stage does *the harvest* come. From our standpoint in history, the initial phase (*the blade*) is now long-since past, and the final phase (*the harvest*) is yet future. We are presently living in the growth stage between the two advents of Christ. The future harvest is at the end of the parable, but it is not the end of the Kingdom. The Kingdom has no end.²

¹ Mark 4:26-29

² Isaiah 9:7; Daniel 2:44

The ideas of *entering* and of *inheriting* the Kingdom of God are two completely different concepts, representing the respective privileges pertaining to different phases of the Kingdom. In the terms of that parable, *entering* speaks of our necessary response to the Kingdom's ultimatum in the present growing phase, while *inheriting* refers to our privileges in the Kingdom in the future harvest phase.

Jesus told Nicodemus, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."*³

We enter the Kingdom of God through spiritual rebirth. Some believe that Jesus is referring to the future resurrection of our bodies from the dead, and misapply this concept of entering into the Kingdom of God to what takes place after this life or at the time of the end when Jesus returns. But being reborn of God is identified elsewhere as the status of Christ's disciples in this present life:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope... Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth...having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God...⁴

If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him...and everyone who loves is born of God...⁵

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...⁶

Being born again is just as supernatural a phenomenon as is being physically raised from the dead, and is likened to it.⁷ When we become followers of Christ, we are said to arise from a former state of being dead to God in our sins. This obviously speaks of reconciliation and spiritual regeneration at the point of conversion. This spiritual regeneration is a work of God, and one has not entered the Kingdom until God has performed this work.

Jesus rebuked the false religious teachers of His day, saying, *"you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."*⁸ Jesus is not referring to some future act of entering the Kingdom but speaks of those in His own time *"who are entering."* If you are entering something, you are currently passing from outside to inside. Believers transition out of Satan's kingdom into God's Kingdom at the time of true conversion. If one has become a true disciple of Jesus, then God *"has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love."*⁹

³ John 3:5

⁴ 1 Peter 1:3, 22-23

⁵ 1 John 2:29

⁶ 1 John 5:1

⁷ Luke 15:24; John 5:24; Ephesians 2:5; Colossians 2:12-13; 1 John 3:14

⁸ Matthew 23:13

⁹ Colossians 1:13

We must, in this sense, *enter* and live in the Kingdom in this present life if we hope someday to inherit the Kingdom in the future. Jesus placed the *inheriting* of the Kingdom at the time of the final judgment.

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...'¹⁰

Inheriting the Kingdom

What, then, does it mean to inherit the Kingdom?

The difference between entering the Kingdom now and inheriting the Kingdom later is simply this: We enter the Kingdom now, as mere *subjects* under Christ's rule; but we inherit the Kingdom in the end in the same sense that a crown prince inherits the kingdom of his father. That is, he inherits the throne, the scepter and the crown. He begins to actually rule. In this life the disciple says to Christ, "Rule over me," but when Christ returns, He will say to the disciple, "Rule with me! *Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.*"¹¹

Another way of seeing it is, when we *enter* the Kingdom, *the Kingdom obtains us*, but when we shall *inherit* the Kingdom, *we shall obtain it*. It becomes not only God's, but ours, and we share with Christ in its rule and administration.

As mentioned earlier, there is a certain stream of Christian teaching that speaks of our reigning on the earth as kings in the present life. The emphasis is on our taking authority over life's circumstances—not only defeating sin in our lives, but also banishing sickness, poverty and every negative thing. They say, "We are King's Kids, and should be taking charge of the world around us." It is true that, as agents of Christ, we are authorized to carry out His errands in His name—or on His behalf. We do this, however, as servants and agents of the King, not as kings ourselves. This commission does involve carrying forward His royal claims in the face of satanic opposition, encountering demonic resistance, over which we possess His authority. It does not, necessarily, always involve exemption from sickness, nor does this authority have any particular impact upon our own economic prosperity (though He has promised to provide our needs if we seek the Kingdom above all else). It involves carrying out Christ's program of bringing salvation to the world—not our own agendas seeking personal comfort, luxury, accolades, or rank.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:31-34

¹¹ Luke 19:17

It may be tempting to reign as kings, enjoying power and affluence in the present life, but this is not appropriate for those who are at war in the trenches. In fact, such luxuries hold little interest to one who has denied himself and taken up his cross to follow Jesus—which is prerequisite to entering the Kingdom in the first place.¹² It was only a few verses after Paul had encouraged Timothy to “endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ,”¹³ that he also promised, “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him.”¹⁴

In the present era, we are *under* authority in the Kingdom; in the end, we shall *share in* the authority in the Kingdom. Paul was upset with the Corinthian Christians because they were prematurely seeking their future palace privileges. Astonished at their failure to grasp the implications of being currently in the Kingdom, he rebuked them: “You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!”¹⁵ The proper time for reigning as kings is yet future. When that time comes, Paul said he will reign together with the rest of us in the Kingdom—but not before. According to Jesus, it will be after the final judgment that, “the righteous will shine forth as the sun [like the King Himself] in the kingdom of their Father.”¹⁶

I would know intuitively the difference between my parents inviting me to *enter* their house, on the one hand, and inviting me to *inherit* their house, on the other. If I enter their house as a guest, I come in on their terms, and submit to their house rules. If they instruct me to take off my shoes as I come into the house, then that is what I will do. It is their house, not mine. If they say, “Dinner will be served at 6:00,” I would never say, “But it is only 4:00, and I am already hungry! Why don’t we eat now?” No, when I am in their house as their guest, even though I am their son, I come on their terms and their schedule.

By contrast, should my parents allow me to inherit their house, then I will no longer be under their house rules. I would then *make* the house rules. The house has become my domain. It is the same house but my position there has changed completely.

As is clear from both the Old and the New Testaments, in the end all the world will be ruled by Christ. This is Christ’s inheritance as God’s Son. In words attributed to Christ, we read:

*The Lord has said to Me,
You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.*

¹² Luke 9:23

¹³ 2 Timothy 2:3

¹⁴ 2 Timothy 2:12

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:8

¹⁶ Matthew 13:43

*Ask of Me, and I will give You
The nations for Your inheritance,
And the ends of the earth for Your possession.
You shall break [or “rule,” LXX¹⁷] them with a rod of iron;
You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.¹⁸*

Notice that the earth is Christ’s inheritance, which the Father bequeaths to Him. He is to reign, not over heaven, but over earth: *“He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”¹⁹*

And what of His servants who have faithfully followed Him in this present time? According to scripture, we have already become sons and daughters and stand to inherit all things with Him. Paul explains:

... we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.²⁰

Heirs of God! As Jesus is God’s Son and heir, so His followers are also God’s children and heirs of the Father. Being *joint heirs* with Christ means that what He inherits from His Father, we also inherit along with Him. Those who faithfully followed David, in times of his national rejection and persecution, later ranked as his “mighty men” when He came to universal power. As the scripture says of the events associated with the “seventh trumpet”:

And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!”²¹

This same destiny awaits the faithful subjects in the present phase of His Kingdom:

...[Christ has] ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and...made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.²²

It was of His disciples that Jesus was speaking when He said, *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”²³* Christ is to inherit the earth, and His disciples inherit it with Him.

¹⁷ LXX—the abbreviation for the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament

¹⁸ Psalm 2:7-9

¹⁹ Psalm 72:8

²⁰ Romans 8:16-17

²¹ Revelation 11:15

²² Revelation 5:9-10 ESV

²³ Matthew 5:5

Paul described a child who is heir to the family estate, but who, in childhood, has no authority over it. In his minority, he differs little from a household slave, as he is kept under tutors and caregivers. Only when the father decides that the boy is sufficiently mature does he allow him to actually inherit the estate so as to control it. Though Paul is here discussing a different issue,²⁴ the analogy works for our present point as well. There is a parallel to the circumstances of those living in the Kingdom under authority today (like little children in the household), and those who will come into possession of the Kingdom as co-rulers (like adult children who inherit the household) at a later time. When Jesus described the role of servants in the Kingdom as that of stewards, He said, “*if you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own?*”²⁵

Notice that Jesus spoke of our present stewardship as the handling of “*what is another man’s.*” He contrasted it with a future when the disciple would have “*what is [his] own*” to manage.

The Kingdom inherited

What will it look like to inherit the Kingdom? It is surprising that there is not more said about such things in scripture. We are so accustomed to appealing to potential converts by promising (or threatening) post-mortem circumstances that we might not even have noticed how little attention is given to such things in the scriptures themselves. No part of the Old Testament focuses on the afterlife, and a very small portion of the material in the New Testament seems concerned with the matter. The overwhelming majority of the Bible concerns itself with past events occurring in this world and our duties in the present life. One finds the occasional glimpse of the final rewards of the faithful and the unfaithful, but with very little detail given. Occasional promises of future glory are intended to inform our present life choices, but detailed portrayals of that age are lacking. The matter is largely left to our imaginations—and many preachers and writers have exploited that gap, filling it with contents from their own imaginations.

As a child, I asked my father what heaven would be like (I actually meant the *eternal state*—technically the New Earth—but I did not yet know the correct concepts or terminology). He assured me that heaven would be a place in which we will have everything we want. Being a young child, I then imagined a world where I had unlimited toys and candy, where I could shrink to the size of my toys, change into any animal, become completely invisible at will, or fly like Superman. These were the kinds of things my childish mentality valued and the infantile things about which I fantasized

²⁴ In portraying the transition from mandatory Torah observance (Old Testament duty) to the liberty of God’s people in Christ, Paul contrasts the circumstances of future heirs, while they are children, with those of mature heirs in the New Testament order. The people of God under the New Covenant, have privileges like those of full-grown sons in the home.

²⁵ Luke 16:11-12

(actually, some of those things still seem kind of cool!). When a friend at school first described sexual intercourse to me, at age 9, my reaction was “That sounds gross!” It was impossible, in that state of prepubescence, for me to even imagine, or sympathize with, the things an adult would find appealing. Of course, “*when I became a man, I put away childish things.*”²⁶

This may help to explain by analogy God’s reasons for not telling us plainly what the New Earth will literally be like. In our present mode of being, we may be as far from being able to appreciate such things as a small child is from being able to appreciate adult tastes and desires. The things which will bring us supreme delight in our glorified state may be as impossible for us to find attractive, in our present condition, as it is for a nine-year-old to imagine enjoying adult sexual intimacy.

The analogy of sex is actually an apt one, because Jesus said there will be no marriage in the resurrection. This is a pretty good indicator that sex will not be a part of our lives in that world. Wait...what? A world with no sex? Many today cannot imagine a fulfilling life lived in complete celibacy. However, the new order will be as perfectly suited to our greatest desires in that state as was the original creation to those of our unfallen first parents. God will not take from us pleasures, the absence of which would make being with Him less enjoyable than was life in this fallen world. Glorification will be an improvement, not a reduction, of our enjoyment. We can reasonably assume that if God takes from us something that we currently find pleasurable it will only be because we will then be in a state in which those things will no longer hold any appeal. At that time we will instead be enjoying the more ecstatic phenomena of which earthly, temporal pleasures were only a vague shadow:

In Your presence is fullness of joy;

*At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*²⁷

Another reason for the Bible’s omission of detail about the Eternal State may be to prevent our becoming so distracted by the reward at the finish line that we do not concentrate on the running of the race itself—like the employee who spends so much time watching the clock that he gets little done during his shift. We must undistractedly fulfill our mission first. The future is known and kept safe for us by God.

When it comes to ideas of the next life, there is no reason to be thinking in terms of a place of literal “pearly gates” and “streets of gold.” This symbolic imagery is found in the Book of Revelation, and would have to be analyzed in a separate study.²⁸ Likewise, the ridiculous imagery of sitting on clouds with halos and playing harps is not informed by anything in scripture. Our destiny is not in

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:11

²⁷ Psalm 16:11

²⁸ E.g. Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views, Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), p.562

the sky, but on the redeemed and renewed earth. When Jesus returns, we will rise to greet Him like a welcoming committee, meeting Him in the sky only to accompany Him on the final leg of His journey to earth.²⁹

The Kingdom of God will at that time be global and universal. The earth will have been renewed at Christ's coming, so there will be *"no more curse."*³⁰ This means there will be no more effects of the fall—*"no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain."*³¹

One reason for the exemption from sickness, pain, and death is that we will not be in bodies of the same nature as those that we now inhabit. We will have been resurrected into glorified bodies. As Paul tells us, our present bodies are merely natural, inglorious, weak, and subject to decay, whereas our resurrected bodies will be "spiritual,"³² glorious, powerful and immune to decay. Of our physical condition at that time, Paul writes, *"Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God [referring, of course, to the future phase]; nor does corruption inherit incorruption."*³³ The new earth will be free from corruption (decay),³⁴ and so our bodies will be adapted and conformed to the same circumstance—no longer to experience the adverse effects of aging, pain or physical degeneration.

When Paul says, "flesh and blood" will not inherit the Kingdom, he does not mean that we shall be disembodied spirits nor that the bodies of that age will be less than real, physical bodies. Paul elsewhere indicates that our glorified bodies will be like the glorified body of the resurrected Jesus, who, Paul said, *will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.*³⁵ It is not wise to speculate too much concerning the details of what such a body is like, but we know that Jesus described His own resurrected body as being not *"a spirit"* but of *"flesh and bones."*³⁶

Paul said that *"flesh and blood"* cannot inherit the future phase of the Kingdom, yet we will have bodies like that of Jesus, who had *"flesh and bone."* Apparently, "flesh and blood" is an expression that differs in meaning from "flesh and bone." The former refers to natural, mortal bodies, in which *"the life of the flesh is in the blood."*³⁷ Such bodies can bleed out and die. Jesus' resurrection body had already "bled out" and was described as *"flesh and bones"*—physical in structure—but not *"flesh and*

²⁹ The phrase, *"to meet the Lord in the air"* (1 Thessalonians 4:17) employs the Greek verb *apantesis* (to meet), found only twice elsewhere in scripture (Acts 28:15; Matthew 25:1). In every occurrence it speaks of a welcoming delegation going out to greet a visitor as he approaches, in order to accompany him for the remainder of his journey.

³⁰ Revelation 22:3

³¹ Revelation. 21:4

³² 1 Corinthians 15:42-44

³³ 1 Corinthians 15:50

³⁴ Romans 8:21

³⁵ Philippians 3:21

³⁶ Luke 24:39

³⁷ Leviticus 17:11

blood.” When Paul said of the resurrection body, “*it is raised a spiritual body*,”³⁸ he may be implying that the resurrected body is not vivified by blood, as is the case with our present bodies, but purely by *spirit*. This is only speculation, since detailed explanations are lacking in scripture.

What will those who reign with Christ be doing for eternity?

Worship would seem to be a very common activity of those who see God as He is face to face. No doubt many of us have had experiences of worship in some gatherings that are not particularly thrilling. To many worshipers, the fact that God is invisible makes Him seem distant or unreal. However, when a genuinely spiritual community of believers, especially in times of revival, are worshipping in the Spirit there can be no more exhilarating experience than to offer up such spiritual sacrifices in the presence of God. Those who have known such times of worship have caught a dim glimpse of what it must be like to adore Christ face-to-face. All will experience it then.

If we simply picture the eternal future as one endless song fest we may be informing our imaginations from the visions described by John when he was caught up to heaven, in Revelation 4 and 5. These visions do not pertain to life on the future New Earth but to events in heaven, contemporary with events on earth in the present age. This is not describing our destiny.

The universal Kingdom of that future time will be a realm of worship—even as the disciple’s life is now, only more so, because we will see Him whom we now worship. However, worship is not primarily a matter of singing and praising. Our “*reasonable service*” of worship in this present age consists in our presenting our bodies to God in daily service.³⁹ It will not be otherwise in the eternal state: “*And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him.*”⁴⁰ To serve Jesus will involve sharing in His reign, and will not be felt to be a heavy yoke. Service out of love never is. Only those addicted to serving themselves would find this unappealing, but they needn’t worry. They will be elsewhere.

Our service to God, like that of Adam and Eve, will be the care and supervision of the earth as its overseers and nurturers. Christ’s management over the creation will be shared by His people.

We are assured that those who have endured the rigors of discipleship in the present life will reign with Christ—but *over whom*? We are not told, but it is a fair inference that not all who are saved will have endured sufferings or stewarded their responsibilities with equal faithfulness or diligence. Therefore, not all will be given equal ruling responsibility. Jesus described some who will reign over “*ten cities*” and some who rule over “*five cities.*”⁴¹ These will be those who were good and faithful stewards in this life. Christ indicates that not all of God’s servants in the present life will have stewarded equally well. Perhaps there will be a significant number who reign over no cities at all,

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:44

³⁹ Romans 12:1; 6:13

⁴⁰ Revelation 22:3

⁴¹ Luke 19:17, 19

having done and endured little for Christ in their lifetimes. Perhaps, these will be the ones who are ruled over by those who rule. This is sheer speculation on my part.

Again, details are lacking, and we should not draw very dogmatic conclusions from the images found in parables or in apocalyptic visions, which can be highly symbolic. Perhaps, we should visualize life in the new order as not very different from much of the activities of the present life—only absent the effects of the fall. Redeemed humanity will be managing an unfallen earth, as Adam and Eve did prior to their rebellion. Perhaps, there will be additional worlds to steward as well. Only God knows. It is ours to find out at that time.

The question often arises, “When we are finally with Christ in the Kingdom will we still possess ‘free will,’ and is there any chance that we could fall away again, as our first parents did?” Is it conceivable that there could be another “fall” in that age, as there was in the first age? Once we have been glorified will we lack that freedom of choice that was the downfall of our first parents?

The truth is, we will have greater freedom of will than we have in the present life. We who are Christ’s disciples right now have been regenerated, which has provided us with a new heart upon which God’s laws are written. This is a heart that desires above all things to serve and please God. The absence of this primary motive in a person is the evidence that conversion and regeneration has not yet taken place in that person. Those who will inherit the Kingdom of God with Christ are those who in this life already desire to live perfectly but who are frustrated by the weakness of the flesh and the temptations of the devil. We wish to consistently please God, and never sin at all, but we are not fully free to do what we will. Paul described our case in terms with which all Christians can relate:

“For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.”⁴²

In the resurrection, there will be no more weakness or temptation of the flesh. There will be no devil to deceive or seduce us. Unlike today, our dominant desire to live perfectly in the sight of God will be completely unencumbered. The purpose of the devil’s existence is to test those who are the potential heirs of the Kingdom. Those who inherit the Kingdom will be those who have already undergone such testing and have passed the final exam. There will be no further need of tests, and, therefore, no need of a tester. Satan will have been removed to the lake of fire.⁴³

The most significant thing about the Kingdom’s future stage is that Christ will be among us here again. The whole appeal of heaven after death, of the New Earth after the resurrection, and of the Kingdom as a completed enterprise, is Jesus Himself. Those who wonder whether they will find eternity boring may simply ask themselves whether they currently find Jesus to be boring. If not, then

⁴² Galatians 5:17

⁴³ Revelation 20:10

they will not tire of living with Him for eternity. Those who presently find Jesus to be dull or *blasé* have obviously never met Him, and will never be forced to endure His presence in the next age against their wishes.

Chapter Eighteen

Entering the Kingdom

*But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men;
for you neither go in yourselves,
nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.*
(Matthew 23:13)

*Assuredly, I say to you,
whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child
will by no means enter it.”*
(Mark 10:15)

If we would inherit the Kingdom *with Christ* in the future, we must enter the Kingdom *under Christ* now. It is a simple matter to enter the Kingdom of God. It is done by surrendering fully to the lordship of the King, which involves a rather simple series of steps, defined in scripture, as we shall see.

But simple is not the same thing as easy. Some people find it pretty difficult to make that surrender. In particular, Jesus singled out rich people¹ and Pharisees² as those who would have particular difficulty entering the Kingdom of God. There are special reasons for these two cases.

The rich and the Pharisees (which are sometimes the same person) have something in common—namely, they both have something other than Jesus in which they can place their confidence. The rich man tends to place his sense of security in his wealth, while the Pharisee tends to trust in his own righteous accomplishments. The rich will often think, “I can take care of every need that arises. Who needs God?”³ The Pharisee is prone to think that his good behavior commends him to God, leaving God indebted to him.⁴ This leaves no room for a sense of need for Jesus to forgive or save. The rich man is usually too self-sufficient to transfer his trust to Christ, and the Pharisee may be too proud to do so. These conditions provide serious obstacles. The way to enter into life for these two is not more complicated than for anyone else—but it is much more difficult.

The transition into the Kingdom of God, for those willing to make it, is really no more complicated than is getting married—but it is similarly life-altering. At the point of transition, the new disciple

¹ Matthew 19:23-24

² Matthew 21:31

³ Proverbs 10:15; 13:8; 30:8-9

⁴ Luke 18:11-12; Philippians 3:4-6

receives the indwelling Spirit of God and is spiritually reborn. Having been thus “born again,” the believer now belongs to Christ’s Kingdom and has taken up the commission of the King.

The conditions for entering the Kingdom

Our effective transfer into the Kingdom is God’s doing,⁵ just as our rebirth into divine life is God’s doing.⁶ However, since salvation is a relationship with God, and relationships are bilateral affairs, we also play a role in the transaction. As in every relationship there is mutual participation, including choices on our part, apart from which God will do nothing.

Jesus compared being born again into the Kingdom with the snake-bitten Israelites being cured in the time of Moses.⁷ The dying people had no power to heal themselves and were totally dependent upon God to provide the miraculous cure. Nonetheless, God’s action was not unilateral and something was required of them to be healed. They were required to look at the bronze serpent as a condition for receiving the miracle.⁸ It was a simple act, and anyone could do it, but if they did not do so God would not perform the miraculous intervention they sought. There is no suggestion that God, in His sovereignty, decided which of the Israelites would look at the bronze serpent and which of them would not. That was fully their responsibility. God made a way of salvation; they had to take it in order to be personally saved.

As Jesus told Nicodemus, the same principle applies to being reborn and entering the Kingdom. We cannot “rebirth” ourselves any more than the Israelites could heal themselves from the terminal toxicity of the snakes’ venom. Apart from God’s intervention we cannot rescue ourselves from the power of the serpent, nor translate ourselves into the Kingdom of Christ. God does that for those who come to Him on His terms.

Some people, who apparently have not thought very clearly about the matter, have argued that the setting of conditions turns salvation into a “works-righteousness” bargain with God. They are concerned that this would strip God of the glory He deserves as sole Deliverer and leave the believer in a position to boast of his or her “performance”—as if turning one’s eyes toward a snake on a pole qualifies as a virtuous work! Looking at the bronze serpent was no “work,” it was merely a condition for receiving the gift of healing. When Peter and John said to the beggar at the temple gate, “Look at us,” do you imagine that, had the man stubbornly refused to do so, they would have healed him anyway? We don’t know, of course, but his response of looking at them did not involve him in a

⁵ Colossians 1:13

⁶ John 1:13

⁷ John 3:14-15

⁸ Numbers 21:8-9

virtuous “work” by which he somehow “earned” a supernatural healing—nor did it turn him into a “self-healer” with the ability to cure his own disability.

The requirement of meeting conditions does not transform a free gift into a purchased entitlement. To meet God’s requirements for salvation is no more a question of earning anything from God than if He were to say, “I have purchased your railroad ticket and you are welcome to travel north with me, but you will first have to get off of the southbound train.” There are conditions for salvation clearly stated in scripture. Those who wish to deny this may do so at their own peril but their denials won’t change what Jesus said or what the apostles wrote on the subject.

The preaching of the early Christians called their hearers to *repent, believe, and be baptized*. This was the means by which one becomes a disciple of Jesus. The *receiving of the Holy Spirit* was also anticipated in the transaction, though this seems to have often occurred almost spontaneously as a result of meeting the previous three conditions. Not every passage about salvation mentions all of these conditions, because an emphasis on one or another may better have suited an author’s purpose in a given passage. The mention of one of them would have been regarded as a shorthand representation of the whole series of events, which typically occurred almost simultaneously. As far as the biblical record indicates all of those accepted into the early Church had first met these conditions and knew them well.

Peter could write, “*baptism now saves you*”⁹ without mentioning faith, repentance, or the Holy Spirit. Yet every Christian reader would have known that their baptism had followed repentance and faith, and was followed by the receiving of the Holy Spirit. The mention of a single element called to a Christian’s mind the whole conversion experience. Peter could preach, “*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized...and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*”¹⁰ without even mentioning faith in Christ, which, in the context, would clearly have been implied. Paul could tell the Philippian jailor, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved,*”¹¹ without mentioning repentance, baptism or the Holy Spirit—yet when the man believed, he was baptized the same night.¹² We would be hard pressed to argue that repentance and the receiving of the Holy Spirit did not also occur in connection with his conversion. The saving response to the gospel was understood as including all of these facets, which generally occurred in rapid succession the very hour or day that the gospel was heard and believed. Let’s examine each of these elements individually:

Repentance

⁹ 1 Peter 3:21 NASB

¹⁰ Acts 2:38

¹¹ Acts 16:31

¹² *Ibid.*, v.33

It is in the nature of the case that one cannot follow Jesus and follow one's own agendas at the same time, until one's agenda conforms with His. This is why Jesus said that one who is unwilling to forsake all and bear a cross "*cannot be my disciple.*"¹³ It is not a question of Christ's being harsh or unwilling to bargain. It is a simple fact of life. It is not possible to ride two horses going opposite directions at the same time. It is the nature of reality. Therefore, repentance is necessary to true conversion and to entering the Kingdom of God. Jesus preached, "*The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent...*"¹⁴

In the Old Testament, there are two Hebrew words translated in English as "repent"—one (*nacham*) means "to change the mind, to regret, or to be sorry" and the other (*shoob*) means "to turn back." The Greek word in the New Testament for repentance (*metanoia*) refers to a change of mind. Repentance is not a meritorious "work" any more than being persuaded is a work. Changing the mind does not, in itself refer to any particular expenditure of energy in action, although after it occurs, there will be "*works befitting repentance,*"¹⁵ or "*fruits worthy of repentance.*"¹⁶

Repentance is a radical reassessment of priorities and a turning on one's heels toward the opposite direction. Once movement in the new direction begins, it will show itself in a certain change of choices and behaviors.

It is this readjustment of the orientation that saves, even before any behavior has resulted from it, as seen in the repentant publican in Christ's parable, and the believing thief on the cross.¹⁷ Why such a turning and reorientation would be a condition for entering the Kingdom should be apparent. If my mind is set on pleasing myself, or others, I cannot, at the same time, choose to live to please God—as would be required in coming under His kingship. I cannot live my life seeking to advance the agendas of two masters opposed in their purposes to each other. I can only follow Jesus when I surrender my own schemes. The two cannot be pursued simultaneously. If an imagined conversion brings no perceptible change in one's direction, habits and choices, then repentance has not actually taken place—nor has one passed from death into life or entered the Kingdom of God.

If repentance is a change of mind, about *what* is the mind changed? People change their minds about inconsequential matters all the time. This is not what repentance implies. Repentance is a change of mind about the purpose and core values of life. As an unbeliever, one's primary value is to please oneself and seek one's own advantage. When the mind has changed, pleasing God becomes the new core value and purpose for living. If the changed mind has embraced the will of God as one's

¹³ Luke 14:27, 33

¹⁴ Mark 1:15

¹⁵ Acts 26:20

¹⁶ Luke 3:8

¹⁷ Luke 18:13-14; 23:42-43

principal concern, there will be grief over the years of sinning against God, and a determination to fully please Him in the future.

And what is the will of God? The most emphatic teaching of the New Testament is that God's will is for people to believe in and embrace Jesus as the Lord and Christ.¹⁸ To begin believing such a thing requires a "change of mind" for those who did not previously believe in Him. Thus, repentance is the prerequisite for faith in Christ, which is no doubt the reason that, when the two are mentioned together, repentance is generally mentioned prior to faith.¹⁹ Repentance and faith occur together in experience. The unbeliever repents *unto* faith in Christ. Thus, while repentance is not necessarily *chronologically* prior, it is *logically* prior to faith (but is essentially simultaneous with it), it is in the very act of changing the mind that faith in Christ is initially embraced.

Faith

What does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ? It means, at the least, to recognize Jesus as the Christ—or King. Believing is not the mere mental acquiescence to an affirmation. It refers to embracing and approving of this truth. Such belief is partly a matter of being persuaded (one cannot believe something of which he or she remains unconvinced), and partly an act of the will (one will never believe what he or she refuses to believe).

The devil intellectually *believes* that Jesus is the King, but he will not willingly embrace this truth, so as to *accept* it as the governing reality of his own activities. His whole career is devoted to resisting it. Satan's "faith" is like that of many people who say that they believe in Christ but whose lives prove otherwise. Such faith is "dead," because it is not accompanied by works that manifest an embracing of this truth.²⁰

We may accept the fact that a given person is a rocket scientist or a garbage collector without such a belief impinging upon any of our own life choices. It is impossible, however, that we can be said to have embraced the fact that Christ is the Supreme Ruler of the universe, and the Eternal Judge of all souls if this alleged faith leaves us unchanged in our behavior.

Remember, the noun "faith" (Greek: *pistis*) has the broader meaning of both *faith* and *faithfulness*. Even though the word does not have both meanings in its every occurrence, faith and fidelity—conviction and loyalty—reliance and reliability—are always twin concepts in a relationship. This is especially true in relationships based upon a covenant, wherein both parties pledge mutual, exclusive fealty to one another. It would be dangerous to assume without warrant that any given verse about

¹⁸ E.g., Matthew 17:5; John 3:16; 6:40; 1 John 3:23

¹⁹ Mark 1:15; Acts 19:4; 20:21; Hebrew 6:1

²⁰ James 2:19-20

faith in God (or Christ) is lacking in these covenantal ramifications. The verb “believe” is *pisteuo*, which is obviously the cognate of *pistis*. It is the act of “*doing pistis*.”

Again, the repentant person’s change of mind will always include the new understanding that Christ is entirely trustworthy, whereas few other things are. If we strongly suspect that a piece of currency is counterfeit, or that a medicine bottle has been mislabeled, or that an airline pilot is not sober, or that a rickety bridge will not hold our weight, etc., it will be impossible to put practical confidence in these things. Having such suspicions, we will naturally avoid taking any of the actions that would require confidence in that which seems to warrant our skepticism.

It should be very clear in our minds that Christ never expects anyone to believe anything about which there is good cause to be skeptical. There is no biblical term for “blind faith” or, what we might reasonably call “gullibility.” There is often a need or requirement to “step out in faith,” that is, to take actions that depend on the presence of conditions or facts that cannot immediately be verified by the data collected by our senses. However, the duty to take such a step only exists when there is excellent reason to believe that the one asking us to take the risk is entirely trustworthy. If I wish to change lanes on the freeway I might ask my wife in the passenger seat to tell me if there are any vehicles in my “blind spot” on the right—the zone which is invisible to the range of vision in my mirrors. If she looks, and then assures me that it is safe to change lanes, I trust her honesty and competence enough to take actions which could result in disaster if she were to prove untrustworthy. Yet, after years of marriage I have learned that she is trustworthy and would not mislead me in such a matter.

When atheists foolishly say that believers must believe things for which they have no evidence, it is clear that they either do not know what biblical faith means, or else that they are giving additional evidence of their inability to think rationally (the first evidence is provided in their denial of God’s existence).

A believer has better evidence to believe in the claims and trustworthiness of Christ than any other religion can provide to inspire faith in its leaders and assertions—and is miles ahead of atheism in the area of solid historical evidences. Atheism, of course, has as much right as any other faith to be evidentially tested and explored. Unfortunately, however, the defining claim of atheism that there is no God²¹ is just the kind of claim that defies testing. No one can prove, nor meaningfully test, such a

²¹ Modern atheists have taken to denying that this is their basic claim. These days, many people wishing to adopt the stylish label of “*atheist*” do not wish to be made to look totally foolish in any attempt to defend the untenable claims implied by that label. They prefer to claim that *atheism* is not the insistence that “there is no God” (any attempt at proof of which would be transparently a fool’s errand), but only means “no belief in God”—a very different thing indeed.

Reasonable people may be excused for not acquiescing with this gratuitous manipulation of the English language. There is already a perfectly good word in English (and Greek) for the person who does not claim to know whether or not God exists, and that is the word *agnostic*. Many modern persons who hold such a position want to co-opt the label *atheist* for themselves, and assign its classical definition to a new term *anti-theist*. I realize that *atheist* sounds more respectable than *agnostic*, since the latter means “not knowing,” and is simply a profession of ignorance. To one wishing to pretend to intellectual respectability, “one who

universal negative. The assertion that there is no God must be regarded as stating only one possibility (at least prior to inquiry). There is no way of proving or being certain that God does not exist in any realm. The claims of most religious systems are similarly untestable. In contrast to all others, the claims of Christ Himself are in the category of testable historical data. If Jesus existed, this fact can be explored like any other historical claim. If He did the things reported of Him—e.g., walking on water, raising the dead, healing the blind and lepers, and Himself rising from the dead after plainly predicting that He would do so—then those who trust His claims about His identity and authority are certainly not the ones being gullible.

As it turns out, we have four biographies of Jesus written by people close to Him or to His immediate followers—much closer than most biographers have ever been to their subjects. Claims that the gospels are unreliable as histories are mere expressions of wishful thinking. No one has ever been able to provide evidence that the events the gospels document are false, and much of what they document is verified in secular sources written by non-Christians very close to the time of the events.

Everything I have just said can be denied—but not upon the basis of anything resembling rationality or evidence. The claims of Christ can only be denied from a prejudicial foundation of gratuitous skepticism—usually arising from the prior acceptance of a totally unprovable *naturalist* or *materialist* worldview. Being human comes with the ability to choose one's worldview from among several alternatives. The choice of a worldview which affirms something as unprovable as the alleged non-existence of all things supernatural is so naïve as to embarrass an unprejudiced plain thinker. The atheist is not the one in any position to do the intellectual shaming. Not all people are blinded by a default prejudice, nor obliged to adopt an irrational skepticism concerning God and Christ. A clear-thinking researcher will find that there is excellent evidence, of the ordinary historical type, supporting the Christian beliefs about Jesus—especially His historical resurrection from the dead. Books by former atheists who actually decided to do such research, and became convinced believers are now numerous.²² Such a person, if examining the data freely and without prejudice, will find that the claims of Christ rest upon far better documentation and proofs than exist for any contrary belief.

The best that any atheist can say against this is, "I find your evidence unconvincing." The reasonable retort of the believer would be, "I am comfortable adopting a belief supported by evidence

does not know" (in the Latin, *ignoramus*) sounds less informed, and may suggest an openness to the possibility of having one's mind changed by information currently unknown to the person. In any case, the new definition for the word *atheist*, unlike the old definition, makes no assertion of any kind whose validity could be explored. It simply means, "Don't expect me to make any risky or testable assertions. I simply choose not to defend any particular position on this subject." This is a confession that, in that part of the brain which normally is occupied by God-thoughts, there is in their case a mere void. The older definition of atheist required greater responsibility and courage to claim for oneself than most modern *atheists* desire to own.

²² E.g., Josh McDowell, *Evidence Demands a Verdict* (and several modern revisions and sequels); Frank Morris, *Who Moved the Stone?*; Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*; Alistair McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, and *Why God Won't Go Away*; See also: Anthony Flew, *There is a God*; etc.

that you find unconvincing, rather than to stake my life on a belief like yours for which no evidence of any kind exists.”

In adopting a worldview, every person must satisfy his or her own burden of proof—and live with the results of one’s own standards of rational persuasion. No one should imagine that Christian truths can be proven to the satisfaction of those who are determined to reject them at all costs. Not all people are equally well-informed, or rational—nor do all people necessarily want to be. As I said, there is an element in the definition of faith that involves the free will. However, rational beliefs are never based upon nothing. Let none naïvely assert that the believer’s faith is either irrational or blind—at least not until the critic has honestly checked the quality of the evidences upon which his or her own beliefs are founded.

Once the evidence has been permitted to lead us to where it leads open-minded searchers, we will have more than adequate warrant for believing that there is not only a God, but also that He is loving and seamlessly reliable. We will find rational warrant for trusting the testimony of such a God concerning His Son. We will be confident that our fully believing all that He says, and obeying all that He commands, is the wisest and safest of all life’s options.

Why is faith a condition for salvation? First, because salvation is a relationship with God, and trust is the basis of all relationships. If we don’t trust someone, we will wisely refrain from becoming intimate or vulnerable with them. That is, the relationship will be superficial and of little value.

Second, because following Jesus calls us, in this war zone called earth, to take risks concerning realities that are invisible to us, and to rely on the trustworthiness of our Creator’s wisdom, good intent, and competence. Without such a confidence, we cannot trust His direction and guidance in life.

When our faith is in Christ, we are not only trusting Him to take us to a better place when we die, but also accepting that He is to be our Captain and Commander in this life. We are agreeing to accept His guidance and to put our safety and well-being into His competent hands. We must be persuaded that we will never have reason to regret our childlike trust or death-defying loyalty to Him. It must be our conviction that Christ’s choices for our lives are wiser and better-informed than our own could ever be. We must trust that He will not lead us or send us into any situation into which we will ultimately wish we had not followed Him. It is trust in His superior wisdom, love, and good will that makes us count it safe to trust His every judgment, to believe His every promise, and to obey His every command.

If Jesus says “*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all [necessary] things will be added unto you,*” then it is my judgment that He knows better than I do. He never has an interest in deceiving His disciples. Without such confidence in the King, there is no discipleship, and can be no salvation. The choice to trust everything Christ says, and all that He claims to be, is the choice of a moment—the moment of conversion. Living by faith in His instructions and commands becomes the

pattern of a lifetime. “Faith” or “believing in” Christ refers to a lifetime of trusting Him and taking whatever risks are called for in obedience to the One whom we trust. Whatever is less than this is not Christian faith, and is not what brings about rebirth allowing one to enter the Kingdom.

Baptism

When Peter preached the Kingdom of God, on the Day of Pentecost, his hearers were cut to the heart by His message, and spontaneously cried out, “*What shall we do?*” Peter’s answer remains normative for all who would enter the Kingdom:

*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*²³

It is interesting that Peter mentioned repentance, but not faith. This needn’t surprise us. Peter had just declared that God had “*made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.*”²⁴ If his hearers had not believed this declaration they would have walked away rather than asking what response God was requiring of them for their crime of crucifying the Son of God. What remained for them was to repent. This was a changing of their minds from being the rejectors who judged Jesus as worthy of crucifixion, to being loyalists who now judge Him to be their worthy King. Peter’s sermon had made clear that such things are implied in the call to “repent.”

However, Peter here adds to our previous list of responses. To be clear, we are not seeking to list meritorious duties to be fulfilled in order to *earn* salvation, but essential components involved in the one transaction of embracing the King and His Kingdom. The new believer submits to water baptism—at least every believer in the apostolic times did so. This was viewed as the mark of passing out of one world and into another. It depicts stepping over the threshold—the crossing of the border from one’s former land into one ruled by another King, like passing through the wardrobe into Narnia, in the children’s fantasy books of C.S. Lewis. Baptism advertises that one has died in one realm and is being buried (in water, not in earth) as a precursor to being raised alive in an alternative domain, the Kingdom of God.

The likening of water baptism to being buried and resurrected to new life with Christ comes from Paul.²⁵ He also likened it to the Israelites passing through the waters of the Red Sea,²⁶ escaping the life of bondage in the kingdom of Pharaoh in order to experience freedom as God’s Kingdom. Peter similarly compared the believer’s baptism with Noah’s family in the ark, passing through the waters

²³ Acts 2:38

²⁴ Ibid., v.36

²⁵ Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:11-12

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, 6

of the flood.²⁷ In doing so, they were leaving behind the old, corrupted world in order to enter a pristine new one.

Baptism was the only outward action taken by the new believer marking his or her entrance into the new realm of the Kingdom. In the first several centuries, no unbaptized person would have been regarded as having taken the claims of Christ seriously enough to be allowed at the communion table. There is no record of any believer in the early Church who neglected to be baptized or whose baptism occurred so much as a day later than his or her accepting the yoke of discipleship. The gospel was preached by the apostles in such a way as to make clear that repentance brings the participant into a new life, which is to be symbolically portrayed outwardly by water baptism.

In Peter's statement to the inquirers on the Day of Pentecost, he seemed to join repentance and baptism so intimately that he could speak of them as one event, being done "*for the remission of sins.*"²⁸ Likewise, Peter saw baptism so closely tied to the conversion events that he could say "*baptism now saves us.*"²⁹ Even Paul spoke of being raised, in baptism, to a newness of life.³⁰

This would not sound strange to anyone in the early Church, since this series of responses—repentance, faith, and baptism—accompanied every conversion, following one another in rapid succession and without delay. When Philip preached the Kingdom of God in Samaria, it resulted in the respondents being baptized.³¹ Later, when he "*preached Jesus*" to the Ethiopian eunuch, his message must have included the requirement of baptism, because spontaneously upon hearing the gospel the man said, "*Here is water, what hinders me from being baptized?*"³²

Nonetheless, they knew well that the ritual of baptism itself does not justify and regenerate the believer. If Peter sounded, in his first sermon, like he was saying that remission of sins comes specifically through baptism, he did not take the same position in his second sermon where he did not even mention baptism. Instead, he said, "*Repent therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out.*"³³

In the house of Cornelius, Peter also witnessed the fact that the Spirit came as at Pentecost upon a group of as-yet unbaptized hearers. Receiving the Holy Spirit is a sure mark of regeneration which apparently had quietly taken place in the hearts of Peter's audience as they listened to his preaching about Christ. We must assume, as Peter did, that they had inwardly repented and believed the gospel and thus had experienced all of the aspects of conversion that Peter had listed in Acts 2:38, except baptism. They were certainly justified and cleansed at that point, though not yet baptized. Yet, the

²⁷ 1 Peter 3:20-21

²⁸ Acts 2:38

²⁹ 1 Peter 3:21 KJV

³⁰ Romans 6:4

³¹ Acts 8:12

³² Acts 8:36

³³ Acts 3:19

first order of business upon seeing the evidence of their salvation was that Peter “*commanded them to be baptized.*”³⁴

Being baptized is to salvation what wearing a wedding ring in western culture is to being married. A ring does not make the marriage real or valid. The vows and the life faithfully lived afterward do that. The ring publicly advertises that such vows have been made. For a married man or woman to fail to wear a ring would not mean that they are unmarried, but may well communicate such a false message to outside observers. The ring bears witness to the reality which is itself based upon the more significant covenantal transaction and promises made. Yet, even if one might technically be “saved” (i.e., *justified*) prior to being baptized, the latter is not optional. If we would follow the biblical pattern of those entering the Kingdom of God, baptism should be received immediately upon the decision to follow Christ. I know this will be regarded as inconvenient, in many cases—but those looking for convenience should really be looking elsewhere for a less-inconvenient truth. Jesus calls no one to the path of greatest convenience.

Receiving the Holy Spirit

We have seen that Peter told the first converts in the Church to “*repent...be baptized...and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*”³⁵ This last clause is the only part of his answer that is stated in the indicative rather than the imperative voice. It is implied that the Holy Spirit will automatically be given to those who repent, believe, and are baptized into Jesus.

However, this was not the case with Philip’s converts in Samaria. They came to faith, were baptized, and experienced great joy, but they did not receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them until Peter and John came to Samaria and laid their hands upon them.³⁶ This seemed to be an unusual case—possibly a unique one.

Prior to Philip’s preaching in non-Jewish Samaria, there had only been one recognized Church on the planet, and that was in Jerusalem. With the dispersal of many Christians from Jerusalem after Stephen’s death the gospel was carried to more distant regions and new congregations began to spontaneously spring up.³⁷ The authenticity of these satellite start-ups as genuine “daughter” congregations of the “Mother Church” in Jerusalem could not be taken for granted. Did they have the endorsement of the apostolic Church, or might they be unauthorized “cultic” aberrations? This would have to be investigated by the apostles or their legates from the Jerusalem church before formal approval could be extended to these spontaneous, far-flung, non-Jewish movements. Since Philip had

³⁴ Acts 10:48

³⁵ Acts 2:38

³⁶ Acts 8:8, 12, 16

³⁷ Acts 11:19-20

not been sent out by the apostles to plant churches, and since no Samaritans (a racial group despised by the Jews) had previously been part of the Church, Philip's work would need apostolic endorsement in order to be accepted as an extension of the true Body of Christ in new territory.

The visit of Peter and John to Samaria to investigate the work resulted in their approval and recognition of its validity. Only then did the Spirit, who had come upon the Jerusalem church at Pentecost, descend upon the Samaritan believers as the apostles laid hands upon them—a mark of partnership and endorsement.

Likewise, when Paul, much later, led twelve disciples in Ephesus to faith in Christ, and baptized them in water, they were not filled with the Spirit until he, as a separate act, laid his hands upon them.³⁸ Paul did not assume (as many in our day seem to), that simply by dint of their having believed and been baptized, the Holy Spirit had automatically come upon them in power. This apparently did not happen in their case prior to the laying-on of Paul's hands. Jesus said that the believer should specifically ask God for the Holy Spirit to be given,³⁹ which sounds like something separate from repenting, believing, and being baptized.

Whether one is filled with the Spirit by the spontaneous action of God (as at Pentecost and the house of Cornelius), or whether this occurs through the laying on of hands (as in the case of Philip's converts and those Paul encountered in Ephesus) would seem to be God's sovereign choice. We may like to boil everything down to standard procedures but God does not always allow us that luxury. He does things His way and in His time. The most we can say is that receiving the Holy Spirit is an essential part of the transaction of entering the Kingdom. Whether spontaneously or by the laying-on of hands the general rule was that the early Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit as an essential part of the conversion experience. Jesus told Nicodemus that being *born of the Spirit* was the prerequisite to seeing or entering the Kingdom of God.⁴⁰ As Paul later wrote, the Holy Spirit baptizes us into the Body of Christ,⁴¹ and "*If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.*"⁴²

The Kingdom of God is experienced as "*righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*"⁴³ These things are fruits of the Holy Spirit's presence and fullness in one's life.⁴⁴ In the Old Testament prophecies, the Messianic Kingdom Age was also to be the age of the Spirit.⁴⁵ Life in the Kingdom of God is life in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's presence and power are not optional.

This means that living in the Kingdom does not simply mean outward conformity to whatever rules, commands or standards may be handed down from the throne. Christ's Kingdom requires a

³⁸ Acts 19:5-6

³⁹ Luke 11:13

⁴⁰ John 3:3, 5

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 12:13

⁴² Romans 8:9

⁴³ Romans 14:17

⁴⁴ Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 5:9

⁴⁵ Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 36:26-27; 37:14; Joel 2:28-32; Zechariah 14:8 (w/ John 7:37-39)

righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees: *“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of Heaven.”*⁴⁶ Pharisees were pretty meticulous concerning outward obedience to the religious rules, but they lacked the inward transformation that only the indwelling Spirit can accomplish. They were like “whitewashed tombs” which were squeaky-clean on the outside, but inwardly foul and disgusting in God’s sight. Jesus once said to a group of them, *“But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you.”*⁴⁷ That is a glaring and totally unacceptable deficiency in one’s spiritual life and condition. True righteousness in terms of keeping the divine commandments is entirely a matter of love for God and for man.⁴⁸ We experience this righteousness and love as a result of the Spirit’s writing God’s laws and ways in our hearts—an image referring to the internalizing of God’s ways into our nature and character. As a result, obedience begins with the acquiescence of our hearts and proceeds from there to our outward behavior.⁴⁹ Lacking this working of the Spirit and the fruit of that working, which is *agape*, the Pharisees were like Paul’s hypothetical man who exhibited seemingly-spiritual behaviors, but who, because he had not love, was *“nothing.”*⁵⁰

Love is the law of the Kingdom,⁵¹ and also the fruit of the Spirit.⁵² Life in conformity with the King’s law simply is not possible for anyone lacking the Holy Spirit. Jude described the imposters in the churches as *“sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit.”*⁵³

It is the Holy Spirit who produces the fruit of the Kingdom. It is He who imparts gifts of enabling grace for Kingdom service. It is He who regenerates and renews the repentant rebel,⁵⁴ transforming him or her from glory to glory into the image of Christ.⁵⁵ To enter the Kingdom, one must receive the indwelling Holy Spirit, and endeavor to be continually filled with the Spirit.⁵⁶ While this may not be a normative requirement in modern church-life it is the essential biblical prerequisite for life in the Kingdom of God.

Receiving the indwelling Holy Spirit is being *“born of the Spirit”* into the Kingdom of God. Our genuine repentance, faith and baptism qualify us to receive this miraculous aspect, for which we should ask the Father, according to Jesus.⁵⁷ If there is no fruit of such conversion, then one must take

⁴⁶ Matthew 5:20

⁴⁷ John 5:42

⁴⁸ Matthew 22:35-40; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14

⁴⁹ Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 12:35

⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

⁵¹ John 13:34; James 2:8

⁵² Galatians 5:22; Romans 5:5

⁵³ Jude 19

⁵⁴ Titus 3:5

⁵⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:18

⁵⁶ Ephesians 5:18

⁵⁷ Luke 11:13

an inventory: Did I repent sincerely? Am I trusting Christ completely? Have I been obedient to the command to be baptized? Have I desired and asked the Father to fill me with the Holy Spirit?

If neglect is discovered in any of these matters, then one should urgently attend to the deficiency. If all of these questions can be answered in the affirmative, then simply trust like a child that God has done His part and has “conveyed [you] into the kingdom of His beloved Son”—then go and live obediently under His rule, trusting Him in all things.

What about the “Sinner’s Prayer”?

Some may find it strange that I have said nothing about what is commonly referred to as the *sinner’s prayer*.⁵⁸ This omission has been intentional. Throughout this book I have endeavored to affirm only what the scriptures affirm, and they do not present the saying of such a prayer as a normative means of one’s entering the Kingdom. This is not to discourage anyone from saying such a prayer, which may be very effectual if accompanied by a genuine inward conversion. It is simply that I cannot, in good faith, advocate what the Bible does not advocate. I also fear that its common use as a method of convincing a prospect that he or she has made the transition from death to life, when not accompanied by true conversion, has often led to false assurance of salvation.

There is of course the parable of a publican who prayed, “God, be merciful to me a sinner”—which is indisputably a “sinner’s prayer.” Jesus says this man returned home “justified”—which, no doubt, means that had he died that day he would have come to God on good terms, as did all the Old Testament saints. However, his case does not represent normative conversion for Christians entering the Kingdom since in the parable he is not depicted as either a disciple or believer—or as even knowing about Jesus. Living under the Old Testament era (he was said to be praying in the temple), the humility of his heart and his remorse over his sins were all that was required to renew his fellowship with God. The same was true of David when he had sinned and repented. Yet he did not live to see or enter the Messianic Kingdom.

More relevant would be the case of the repentant thief on the cross who asked Christ to remember him in His Kingdom. There were no particular words of repentance, but it was certainly the prayer of one who was a sinner and who gave evidence of being repentant. Jesus said nothing to the man about the Kingdom, but since He promised that the man would be in Paradise (not the same thing) we may reasonably believe that this man will be allowed a place in the Kingdom after the resurrection of the Last Day. In any case, his was not an ideal or normative conversion in that it was a true “death bed” repentance. He did not live to exhibit the nature of his presumed disciple status. Assuming he became a true believer and was saved, it would have been his inward repentance, rather than his prayer that placed him in the company of the King’s followers.

⁵⁸ Luke 18:10-14

In scripture, people are not ordinarily seen coming into Christ's movement by saying prayers. Prayer is very important for the believer and in many cases since biblical times the transition from being outside to being inside the Kingdom has been *accompanied by* the saying of a sincere prayer. However, it should not be thought that a prayer is what makes someone a disciple of Christ. In the Bible Jesus called disciples to follow Him. They did not respond by saying a prayer but by leaving their old lives to faithfully follow and obey Him.

Likewise, when Peter had preached the gospel and the people responded, "*What shall we do?*"—or when the Philippian jailor asked, "*What must I do to be saved?*"—no one replied, "Repeat this prayer after me while every head is bowed and every eye is closed..." If we seek our answers from scripture to the question of how one becomes a follower of Christ, again and again we find the four-fold answer—*repent, believe, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit*. We shall not find any suggestion in the Bible that what is needed is a formulaic prayer.

Mind you, I am not against such prayers (I am pretty sure I said such prayers once or twice in my childhood). But if we think that, because we have persuaded someone to say such a prayer, we have thereby brought him or her into the Kingdom, we are cherishing a hope that is not warranted by anything in scripture. I know myself to be a disciple not because of any of the prayers I may have said in my childhood but because of my repentance and faith, which were followed by baptism and the filling of the Holy Spirit—all of which has been followed by a life of devotion and obedience to Christ. These things did not happen all at the same time for me as they did for converts in the Bible, due to the kind of teaching I was given. Nonetheless, "Better late than never," I say. The evidence that one is a true follower of Christ is that that one is in fact following Christ, not that a prayer was said sometime in the past.⁵⁹

I am certain that many have made this transition successfully at the same time as they said a special prayer which, again, I would not disparage. What I hope to get across is that many have been persuaded to utter such a prayer, but have nonetheless gone home unconverted. It is plain that the word *convert* actually means *change*. True conversion is a change of life and direction. It is the embracing of another King—Jesus. Those who become His followers will say plenty of prayers, to be sure—including prayers of repentance!⁶⁰ However, it is not the words uttered, but the obedient life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit that marks conversion and transition into the Kingdom: "*For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.*"⁶¹

Prayers of repentance should freely flow from a repentant heart. Whenever the heart is burdened over past or recent sins, speaking to God about it is the most natural and appropriate thing one can do. God will never despise it! However, since it is always possible to offer words of prayer that do not

⁵⁹ John 10:27; Luke 14:27

⁶⁰ Matthew 6:12; 1 John 1:9

⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 4:20

correspond to any internal reality, it would be wise not to mark your conversion from the point of merely having prayed such a prayer, but from the moment you have genuinely abandoned your old life and become a devoted follower of the King. There is no need to be one of those who will say, “*Lord, Lord!*” but to whom He will say, “Excuse me, but I don’t recognize you.”⁶²

⁶² Matthew 7:21-23 (obviously paraphrased)

Chapter Nineteen
The Triumph of the Kingdom

*And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom
which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people;
it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms,
and it shall stand forever.*

(Daniel 2:44)

To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?

*It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground,
is smaller than all the seeds on earth; but when it is sown,
it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches,
so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.*

(Mark 4:30-32)

*Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.*

(Isaiah 9:7)

It came from outer space. In 1958, a tiny meteorite about the size of a soccer ball, plummeting through the earth's atmosphere, made landfall and came to rest on the property of a particularly unfortunate Pennsylvania farmer. Alerted by the barking of his dog the old man investigated, only to discover the steaming object strangely emitting otherworldly sounds. Naturally enough, the farmer took up a nearby stick, tapped the extraterrestrial orb, and watched in astonishment as it opened up in sections like a space pod—revealing within it a small, pulsating, reddish, gelatinous blob.

Overcome by his curiosity, the farmer could not resist the urge to poke the substance and to raise it on the end of his stick for closer examination, whereupon the alien thing slid down the stick to encompass his hand.

The *Blob* apparently fed on human flesh and increased in size proportionately after every meal. By the time the terrified farmer reached the office of the doctor, the thing had engulfed his arm, and was still hungry. Before the end of the day, it had consumed the patient, the doctor, and his nurse—

who (as is customary in old horror films) simply stood paralyzed and screaming as the *Blob*—now the size of a bean-bag chair—inched its way toward her at a snail's pace across the examination room floor.

Though the Blob never picked up much speed, it managed to pick up more passengers as it moved through the small Pennsylvania town consuming and absorbing everyone that was unfortunate enough to be in its relentless path. As a result, the *Blob* got larger and larger until, by the end of the film, it was large enough to cover an entire building—the town diner. Inside the diner were trapped our heroes, led by the 27-year-old Steve McQueen playing the role of a teenager in his first lead movie role.

It would be cruel for me to spoil the film for the reader by revealing the ending. Suffice it to say that as in all older movies the heroes predictably survive, and the monster-amoeba from space is ingeniously defeated. By the end of the movie it is clear that, were the thing never to be defeated, it would eventually have grown as large as the world, having consumed every last inhabitant.

I was a child when *The Blob* first appeared on the big screen and it was the most terrifying thing I had ever seen. Though I have seen the film subsequently without the same effect, I had numerous nightmares about *the Blob* when I was a child. Throughout my later life, I remembered *The Blob* as the quintessential sci-fi, horror B-movie. It became a cult classic.

It was not until I learned about the Kingdom of God in scripture that I began to wonder whether the movie (which actually was written and directed by Christians, and produced by a Christian film company!¹) might not have been deliberately inspired by Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2.²

As it turns out, the subtext of the movie was not religious but political. The red ooze that was swallowing up everyone in its proximity was meant by its makers to be a subtle metaphor for the creeping “Red Menace” of Communism, which was spreading on numerous continents in the fifties.

¹ Just a bit of “Blob” trivia: The original concept for the movie came from Jack H. Harris, a man with secular movie-making ambitions, but little money. He pitched the idea to a Christian production company called Valley Forge, which had previously made about 250 Christian films, and whose stated mission was simply “to promulgate the Word” [Harris, in Tom Weaver's book, *Interviews with B Science Fiction and Horror Movie Makers*]. Harris convinced them to make their first secular feature film, on the promise that they could thereby make a lot of money to preach the Word more broadly. The screenplay was written by a minister, Theodore Simonson and a former actress, and the movie was directed by Methodist minister and filmmaker Irvin S. Yeaworth. “And so it was,” writes Ryan Lambe, at Denofgeek.com, “that a group of devout Christians ended up making one of the most successful sci-fi films of the 1950s.” This may have been Valley Forge's only movie that did not directly fit their mission statement “to promulgate the Word,” but now, through my use of it, even *The Blob* is being used to spread the word of the Kingdom!

² *The Blob* would have been a closer parallel to the Kingdom of God had the writers included the ideas that the earth was already infected with a universal, incurably deadly plague, and that the Blob had come down on purpose to rescue the doomed race! On this alternative plot line, those consumed by the Blob actually would not have died, but, unperceived by outsiders, had entered a new world, a realm within its expanding membrane where all were cured, free and secure and lived good and fulfilling lives. The movie makers (for their own reasons) did not consult me, at age five, concerning alternative possible plot twists. In any case, I did not understand the Kingdom of God, at the time, well enough to have made such helpful suggestions!

That Christ's Kingdom as a global benign force has its rival counterpart in Global Communism as a malign force has often been noted.³

Like Communism during the Cold War (and a little like the *Blob*), the Kingdom of God is a *movement* that absorbs human beings into itself. Both movements advance through the dissemination of their respective messages, inspiring their adherents with a vision of a future order in which peace and justice prevail. Both demand the full allegiance of their workers and of those subject to them. The main difference is that Communism is based upon an enslaving lie, whereas the Kingdom of Christ is founded upon liberating Truth. Once the Kingdom of God and its objectives are understood, it is tempting to suspect that Satan stole the Kingdom paradigm so as to create a counterfeit in the movement of World Communism.⁴

Communism and the Kingdom of Christ have similar, rival ambitions—namely, the conquest of the world. However, the opposite of Christ's Kingdom is not Communism, *per se*, but the sinister, multi-headed hydra⁵ of which Marxism is merely one emerging head. If Communism were to collapse entirely, the kingdom of Satan would seek to emerge in yet another guise. The contest for the world is between the kingdoms of Satan and of Christ, respectively.

Over the course of the past two thousand years the trajectory of victory has been on the side of Christ's movement—which began with 120 Jewish believers in Jerusalem and now commands the nominal loyalty of almost a third of the earth's inhabitants. This is tremendous numerical growth, which is important, though the depth of commitment in many who profess faith in Christ is open to question. Daniel's prophecy assures us that the divine Kingdom will continue to advance, like a stone not of earthly origin, growing into a great mountain to fill the whole earth, as it takes into itself an increasing percentage of humanity.

Though the methods of conquest are not militaristic or political, such an advance of the influence of the King cannot fail to have social and political impact. In the Roman Empire the growth of Christianity eventually brought about even the conversion of the pagan emperor and the banishing of paganism from the corridors of socio-political power. The benign influence of the Kingdom has now successfully penetrated every nation on the planet through the valiant sacrifices of heroes and heroines who "*did not love their lives unto the death.*"⁶ The missionaries of the Kingdom have been the *shock troops* who have cleared the way for massive and beneficial transformations of societies, both large and small.

³ E.g., Billy Graham shared the contents a letter written by a young convert to the Communist cause, comparing the degree of commitment to the cause required in the movement to that required for the service to Christ.

⁴ World Communism appears to have failed, *for the time being*. Contrast these two fascinating active maps showing the progress of Communism, and of the Kingdom of Christ, respectively:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/100-years-of-communism/> compare with <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ0dZhHccfU> and <https://vimeo.com/113801439>

⁵ Revelation 13:1ff

⁶ Revelation 12:11

For example, when Charles Darwin first visited Tierra del Fuego, he found the inhabitants in a state of misery and moral degradation, but when he returned some years later after the gospel had been introduced by missionaries, "The change for the better was so indescribable that he not only testified of his astonishment but became a regular contributor to the missionary society."⁷

We may easily underestimate what the power of the Holy Spirit working mightily through the gospel of the Kingdom is capable of accomplishing in transforming societies. James Hefley relates an anecdote illustrating another instance of what has been occurring globally over the past twenty centuries through the conquests of God's Kingdom:

During World War II on a remote island in the Pacific an American serviceman encountered a literate native, from a tribe of former cannibals, who was carrying a Bible. Gesturing to the man's Bible, the American said, "We educated people no longer put much faith in that book." The native replied, "Well, it's good that we do, or you would be eaten by my people today."⁸

Whole societies have been transformed by the power of the Kingdom of God, spreading like leaven within them. Near the end of World War II, in the process of liberating Okinawa, American troops came upon a village called Shimabuku. Approaching the village warily, they were met by two old men carrying a Bible. As they suspiciously entered the village the Americans were stunned by what they found. In stark contrast to the depravity and dilapidation of the surrounding Okinawan villages, Shimabuku had no poverty, no crime, no divorce, no prostitution, no drunkenness. The people were happy and industrious. Their village and farmlands were orderly and there were crops in the field. Why was this village so different from those around it?

Thirty years earlier, an American missionary on his way to Japan had visited Shimabuku and had converted those two men. He had left them with a Japanese translation of the Bible and urged them to live by its teachings. In the following thirty years, having no other contact with Christianity, these two men had converted and transformed their village. The story was reported in *Reader's Digest*, where the Army driver is reported to have said, "Maybe we are using the wrong weapons to change the world!"⁹

The limits of the power of God's Kingdom to conquer darkness through His Word have not yet been discovered. What can happen in one village obviously can happen in a whole district or province—which is confirmed historically in a number of the great evangelical revivals. What can happen in a single province can even happen in a whole nation.

⁷ John Blanchard, *Does God Believe in Atheists?*, (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2000), 411.

⁸ Cited by James Hefley, *So What's So Great About the Bible?* P.76

⁹ Story from John Blanchard, *How to Enjoy Your Bible* (Pistyll, Holywell, UK: EP Books, 2015), 66-67

For example, the blessings of contemporary Western Civilization with our modern conception of human rights and liberties can be attributed directly to the influence of the Bible and of the people who believe and propagate it. The first President of the United States expressed the sentiment that *“It is impossible to rightly govern without God and the Bible.”*¹⁰ Daniel Webster, the great American statesman born only a few years after the founding of the nation, opined: *“The Bible is the Book...which teaches man his responsibility, his own dignity, and his equality with his fellow man.”*¹¹ Webster’s younger contemporary, President Ulysses S. Grant, exhorted the nation: *“To the influence of this book we are indebted for the progress made in true civilization, and to this we must look for our guide in the future.”*¹²

The Kingdom of God is the last of the world empires—an empire of spiritual transformation through the living Word of God. It conquers and rules its subjects not by unwelcomed imposition, nor with weapons of war, but by the cheerful consent of the governed who are won over by the living Word of God. It does not require a devout Christian to recognize this. It is often the ruthless conquerors of the world who must confess to the superior power of God’s Word to conquer civilizations. Napoleon said, *“The Bible is no mere book, but a living creature, with a power that conquers all that oppose it.”*¹³ He obviously had a good grasp of the history of the past two thousand years.

The modern world is too little aware of the debt it owes to the gospel of the Kingdom of Christ. As the influence of Christianity is being viciously challenged in Western Civilization, at this particular moment, the need for Christianity in the world is being defended, ironically, by the most unlikely advocates—modern atheists!

In the first decade of this century a number of atheist writers launched a concerted attack on all religion—especially Christianity. Richard Dawkins,¹⁴ Christopher Hitchens,¹⁵ Sam Harris¹⁶ and Daniel Dennett,¹⁷ all published best-selling books within months of each other ridiculing and savaging people of faith and declaring that all religion is a delusion and that its influence “poisons everything.” Surprisingly, less than fifteen years later the unofficial leader of the group, Richard Dawkins, has made a startling admission. In 2006, he was claiming that the rearing of children as Christians should be regarded as a form of child abuse. More recently, Dawkins wrote: “Whether

¹⁰ George Washington, *thinkexist.com/quotes*

¹¹ Daniel Webster, in a speech, June 17, 1843, at Bunker Hill Monument, Charlestown, MA, cited in Burton Stevenson, *The Home Book of Quotations, Classical and Modern*, (NY: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1967)

¹² Ulysses S. Grant, *brainyquote.com*

¹³ Napoleon Bonaparte, *thinkexist.com*

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006)

¹⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007)

¹⁶ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 2005)

¹⁷ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006)

irrational or not, it does, unfortunately, seem plausible that, if somebody sincerely believes God is watching his every move, he might be more likely to be good.”¹⁸

Another recent non-Christian book, *Dark Agenda*, was written by David Horowitz, an agnostic Jew. While rejecting the truth claims of Christianity, Horowitz argues that the benefits enjoyed by Western Civilization arose almost entirely from the influence of that faith. He argues that the continuation of these benefits to future generations depends on the continuation of Christian influence in the world.¹⁹

In an article on Stream.org, Jonathon Van Maren posted an article called *Atheists in Praise of Christianity?* in which he notes “a trend” of atheists who are beginning to recognize that Christianity is a necessary influence for the preservation of civilization. Reviewing the recent book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*,²⁰ by atheist historian Tom Holland, Van Maren writes:

While studying the ancient world, Holland...realized something. Simply, the ancients were cruel, and their values utterly foreign to him. The Spartans routinely murdered “imperfect” children. The bodies of slaves were treated like outlets for the physical pleasure of those with power. Infanticide was common. The poor and the weak had no rights.

How did we get from *there* to *here*? It was Christianity, Holland writes. Christianity revolutionized sex and marriage, demanding that men control themselves and prohibiting all forms of rape. Christianity confined sexuality within monogamy. (It is ironic, Holland notes, that these are now the very standards for which Christianity is derided.) Christianity elevated women. In short, Christianity utterly transformed the world.

In fact, Holland points out that without Christianity, the Western world *would not exist*. Even the claims of the social justice warriors who despise the faith of their ancestors rest on a foundation of Judeo-Christian values. Those who make arguments based on love, tolerance, and compassion are borrowing fundamentally Christian arguments. If the West had not become Christian, Holland writes, “no one would have gotten woke.”

Van Maren provides a number of additional examples. One is Douglas Murray, another atheist author and columnist, of whom he writes:

[Murray] has started to warn that the decline of Christianity is a dangerous thing. Society now faces three options. First, Murray says, is to reject the idea that all human life is precious. “Another is to work furiously to nail down an atheist version of the sanctity of the individual.” And if that

¹⁸ Richard Dawkins, *Outgrowing God* (New York: Random House, 2019), 99

¹⁹ David Horowitz, *Dark Agenda: The War to Destroy Christian America* (Palm Beach, FL: Humanix Books, 2018)

²⁰ Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019)

doesn't work? "Then there is only one other place to go. Which is back to faith, whether we like it or not."²¹

Of yet another case, Van Maren writes:

Charles Murray, the American social scientist and sociologist, is an agnostic. Yet, he told me in an interview that he believes the American republic will not survive without a resurgence of Christianity. "You cannot have a free society with a constitution" like the American one "unless you are trying to govern a religious people," he observed.

Modern inhabitants of Western Civilization might mistakenly assume that our moral instincts—namely that the weak and disadvantaged should be relieved and lifted up, that men and women are equal, and that those of every race should be treated with undifferentiated human dignity—are the natural instincts of every person and culture. Such an assumption is naïve in the extreme.

When Mother Teresa came to Calcutta, this charitable instinct was conspicuous by its absence in the Indian population. The Hindu worldview of that land favored leaving miserable and sick people untouched and unaided so that they would fully endure in this life the consequences of karmic justice carried over from a previous lifetime. Only by being left in their wretchedness could the miserable qualify for better circumstances in the next incarnation cycle. This is the religious philosophy of over a billion benighted people on earth. The social and global impact of Mother Teresa's bringing the compassion of Christ's Kingdom to Calcutta is a matter of well-known history.

Some poorly-informed Christians (usually in the service of some eschatological program) have been heard to insist that the world is today in worse condition than it has ever been before! The truth is almost exactly the opposite. The beneficent transforming power of the Kingdom of God has fashioned for us a world that would not be recognized by anyone living in times before Christ's Movement invaded the world. In former times, warfare between nations was so barbaric as to defy tasteful description to people of our cultural sensitivities. In Roman times, infidelity of husbands to their wives was regarded as neither unusual nor immoral. In many societies, slaves could lawfully be beaten to death at the whim of their masters. Other than the early Christians, few had any conscience about leaving unwanted newborns out to die of exposure or to be eaten by dogs. Before the advent of modern medicine (the existence of which owes much to devout Christian pioneers in modern medical science like Louis Pasteur), whole towns, and even continents were sometimes decimated by plagues.

²¹ Jonathon van Maren, *Atheists in Praise of Christianity*, published May 19, 2020
<https://stream.org/atheists-in-praise-of-christianity> (accessed 6/25/20)

The concepts of human rights, freedom of religion, liberty of conscience, and the equal status of women to men, are ideals that we may take for granted, thinking them to be natural human instincts—unless we are acquainted with history. Prior to the coming of Christ’s Kingdom, conditions worldwide, in terms of justice and human rights, were similar to those still found in the strictest Islamic countries. These societies have until now vociferously resisted the incursion of the gospel’s influence in their lands. The consequence is that, in terms of human rights, many such countries have advanced little since Medieval times.

Resistance is futile

The prophecy of Daniel foresees the Kingdom’s eventual conquests even in these resistant territories. Emperor Julian the Apostate, reigning after the conversion of the Roman Empire, unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow Christianity and to officially reinstate Rome’s pagan heritage. He failed, and by some reports died saying, “*You have conquered, O Galilean!*”

It is a foolish thing for the kings of the earth and the rulers to set themselves against Yahweh and against His Messiah, saying “Let us cast off His claims to our submission.”²² Yahweh is not impressed. He is amused! “*He who sits in the heavens shall laugh...[He declares to His foes] ‘Yet I have set my King upon my holy hill.’*”²³ To take a phrase from Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor in Geneva, the authority of God’s Kingdom is “*an anvil that has worn out many hammers.*”²⁴

Let the nations hammer away! Let them wear themselves out!

*Behold, your King is coming to you;
He is just and having salvation,
Lowly and riding on a donkey...
He shall speak peace to the nations;
His dominion shall be from sea to sea,
And from the River to the ends of the earth.*²⁵

Of mustard seeds and leaven

²² Psalm 2:1-3, paraphrased

²³ Psalm 2:4, 6

²⁴ The statement was technically referring to the “Word of God,” rather than the “Kingdom of God.” However, the Word of God is “the authority of the Kingdom of God.” Beza’s imagery might have been borrowed from a poem typically attributed to the seal of a Waldensian Church:

Hammer away, ye hostile hands.

Your hammer breaks, God’s anvil stands.

²⁵ Zechariah 9:9-10

Does the task appear to be too unrealistically enormous, the progress too slow, and the victory too far off? Are we prone to be discouraged by temporary setbacks or reversals? Remember, *“He will not fail nor be discouraged, till He has established justice in the earth...”*²⁶ Do not become discouraged. He isn’t! The success of the mission does not depend upon weapons that are earthly but on the weapons issued by the King to His warriors, which are *“mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”*²⁷

The prophet Daniel guarantees the veracity of these predictions with the strong assurance that *“The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.”*²⁸ However, we have even greater assurance of this vision’s fulfillment than that of Daniel’s words, in nothing less than the words of the King Himself.

Jesus used two parables to illustrate the ultimate quantitative growth and qualitative influence of His Kingdom upon the world. In one parable, the Kingdom is likened to a tiny seed which grows into a very large plant with boughs sufficient to shelter the birds of the air.²⁹ This speaks of the extensive nature of the Kingdom’s impact. In the second parable, Jesus compares the Kingdom to a pinch of yeast, or leaven, placed into a lump of dough, causing the rise of the whole lump.³⁰ This speaks of the internal moral and cultural influence of the Kingdom upon the world. As we have seen, these predictions have been largely confirmed in their fulfillment in the centuries since their utterance.

A novel (and mistaken) interpretation

Once again, we must digress to deal with a misconception that is commonly found in expositions upon these two parables by those of the *“Postponed Kingdom”* school. Jesus does not even take the time to explain these two parables to His disciples since their meaning is regarded as sufficiently obvious. While the original hearers would naturally have viewed these parables as presenting an optimistic vision of the future of the Kingdom, there are certain commentators who assure us that we have this just backward. These narratives, they say, are not about the success of the Kingdom but of its failure. What? How so?

It is explained that the birds who lodge in the branches of the mustard “tree,” represent evil influence or the devil’s infiltration of the Church in the end times. They further identify the yeast of the second parable as evil ultimately corrupting the Kingdom, especially at the end of this age. Thus,

²⁶ Isaiah 42:4

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 10:4-5

²⁸ Daniel 2:45

²⁹ Matthew 13:31-32

³⁰ Matthew 13:33

we are assured, the two parables are predicting the ultimate corruption and failure of the Church in this world.

The gist of this argument is that the birds, appearing in a previous parable (where they ate up the good seed before it could germinate), were identified as “the wicked one” who comes to deprive hearers of the knowledge of the gospel.³¹ It is further asserted that *leaven* is always an image of evil.³²

We are told that there is a “law of exegetical constancy,” which is a hermeneutical principle guiding us in the interpretation of scripture. This alleged “law” states that a symbol that is used a certain way in one passage must have the same meaning whenever it is used in other passages. It’s a good thing they told us. One would never have noticed it from reading scripture alone.

This so-called “law” would require that we must equate the fallen king of Babylon with Jesus, since both are referred to as the “*morning star*.”³³ In fact, on this principle, Babylon, the devil, and Jesus would have to be the same, since each of them is likened to a lion.³⁴ In a single chapter (Matthew 13), several parables feature “*seed*,” though the seed has different meanings in each case. In one parable, the seed is “*the word of the Kingdom*,”³⁵ in another, it is “*the Kingdom*” itself, and in yet a third “*the sons of the Kingdom*.” Interestingly, in the parable of the wheat and the tares, the phrase “*sons of the kingdom*” refers to true believers in Christ, but the same expression used elsewhere refers to the unbelieving Jews who are ultimately rejected: “*the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness*.”³⁶

It seems that the alleged “law of exegetical constancy” has no basis in reality. Who is supposed to have imposed this artificial law upon readers of the Bible? Certainly, neither Jesus nor any of the biblical writers seemed to have had any awareness of it. If they knew of such a law, they flagrantly violated it.

A better rule would be to allow the symbolism of a parable to be interpreted in terms of internal factors in the parable itself. For example, birds in the context of a farmer sowing seeds are a problem. On the other hand, in the context of their nesting in tree branches, birds pose no problem. In fact, that is exactly where birds ideally nest. They are not deleterious to the welfare of the tree at all, as they are to the crop of the farmer whose seeds they consume.

The image of a tree sheltering birds and woodland creatures is a common and positive one in the Old Testament, where it is assumed to be one of the tree’s main functions to provide shelter for otherwise vulnerable creatures of the woods. Nebuchadnezzar in his glory³⁷ and the Assyrian Empire

³¹ Matthew 13:19

³² E.g., Matthew 16:12; Luke 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8

³³ Isaiah 14:12; Revelation 22:16

³⁴ E.g., Jeremiah 4:7; Daniel 7:41; Peter 5:8; Revelation 5:5

³⁵ Matthew 13:19, 31, 38

³⁶ See Matthew 8:12

³⁷ Daniel 4:21-22

in its ideal state³⁸ are both described symbolically as great trees providing such a service to their people as trees provide for the birds and woodland creatures. This imagery describes them when they were reigning well. Both are later depicted as the stumps of trees chopped down, due to their proud thoughts and evil actions. Similarly, Ezekiel depicts the Kingdom of God in these terms:

Thus says the Lord God: "I will take also one of the highest branches of the high cedar and set it out. I will crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant it on a high and prominent mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell. And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the Lord, have spoken and have done it."³⁹

Ezekiel describes the Kingdom in its exalted and flourishing state as being a shelter for birds. So does Jesus. He simply borrows established imagery from His prophetic predecessors and depicts His Kingdom in its best health as being a shelter and security for those who flee into it. This is a picture of salvation and security, not of corruption and evil.

Likewise, in the case of the parable of the leaven, or yeast. It is true that yeast is sometimes likened to evil influences, in that it is an ingredient that spreads throughout and significantly affects its environment. However, sin is not the only principle that can behave this way. In times of revival, for example, the influence of the Holy Spirit can spread and transform in precisely the same manner. We have already seen examples of the spreading of the Kingdom's transforming power in formerly pagan societies as a result of its predicted expansion.

Yeast is a good analogy for any spreading influence, whether good or bad. In the present parable, it represents a distinctly positive influence. Jesus does not describe the Kingdom as a lump of dough into which some nefarious person has inserted the corruption of leaven. Rather, the actual words of the Master (who, we presume, knew how to say what He wished to say) were: "*The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven.*" If someone wants to insist that yeast, in the Bible, can only be a symbol for evil, then this one contrary example should suffice to correct that misapprehension. It is the Kingdom itself that is like yeast in its environment—that environment being the world. Like a rising tide that lifts all ships, it not only serves its own constituents but also commonly elevates the socio-political standards of the secular environment in which it grows.

³⁸ Ezekiel 31:3, 6

³⁹ Ezekiel 17:22-24

The clear predictions of the prophets and of Christ Himself tell us that the progress of the Kingdom will continue and will prevail against *“every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God.”*

Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!”⁴⁰

No wonder the Psalmist saw the victory of the Kingdom as just cause for global rejoicing!

*The Lord reigns; Let the earth rejoice;
Let the multitude of isles be glad!
Clouds and darkness surround Him;
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.
A fire goes before Him,
And burns up His enemies round about.
His lightnings light the world;
The earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the Lord,
At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.
The heavens declare His righteousness,
And all the peoples see His glory.*

(Psalm 97:1-6)

⁴⁰ Revelation 11:15

Chapter Twenty
The Dawning of the Risen Son

*But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.*

(Proverb 4:18 NASB)

*And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed,
to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place,
until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts...*

(2 Peter 1:19 ESV)

Since the influence of the Kingdom upon the world is not accomplished by use of force, but of persuasion, it is understandable that the process occupies a longer period of time than it would if it simply involved God's unleashing twelve legions of angels upon the defenseless world. That it has taken twenty centuries to reach the stage of conquest that prevails today should be no discouragement to those who are in it for the long haul. If a thousand years to the Lord is like a mere day, we have no reason to believe that He considers the rate of progress discouraging—nor can we be sure that it will not be another thousand years before the goal is reached. Indeed some have suggested the possibility that we are still in the “infancy” of the Church Age! While my own instincts (for whatever they may be worth) would favor the suspicion that the end is somewhat nearer than that, there are nonetheless no guarantees that any of us alive today will live to see the ultimate victory. Like Daniel, we will rise to see it in the end of days.¹ In a growing child's body, many generations of individual cells live and die over the course of the years, but the child itself still relentlessly grows to maturity.

Jesus described the Kingdom's growth as progressing incrementally by stages. In one parable, He likened the Kingdom to a wheat stalk, growing imperceptibly from a seed without human notice. Whether the farmer slept or was awake (like the cycles of lethargy and revival of the Church through the ages), the seed continued steadily growing to maturity, passing through various stages of development, “*first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.*”²

This is how the Kingdom has come, and continues to advance—i.e., by increments. The preaching of Jesus in His lifetime was one stage in which the Kingdom was present. His death, resurrection and ascension marked a very important next stage in the Kingdom's coming—and the coming of the Spirit

¹ Daniel 12:13

² Mark 4:26-29

at Pentecost another stage still. Even the destruction of Jerusalem and of its defunct priestly order marked another stage of the Kingdom's "coming." In our present time the Kingdom is increasing in size and maturity. The final stage will be when Jesus returns and His reign becomes universal. Each of these developments, in its own context, may be referred to as the "coming of the Kingdom of God" in one of its progressive stages.

Since the first century, the stalk has grown larger, the heads (congregations) more numerous, and the unripe grain in the heads (believers in these congregations) have been maturing. Again, this progress is seldom noticed over the short term. However, the growth continues inexorably toward the final consummation: *"But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."*³

Uneven, but relentless, progress

This is not to suggest that there are no setbacks locally and temporarily. Anyone who has held an asset like gold bullion, or who holds shares in a growing stock, has learned the folly of checking the status of his or her investments on a daily basis. Such a habit will cause alternating elation and chagrin as, day-by-day, the value of the asset is seen to undergo today, an advance; tomorrow, an adjustment. The peaks and troughs on the value charts seen over a short period reveal little or nothing about the larger trajectory. A person who has held on to gold purchased at \$300 an ounce, in 1999, found, twenty years later, that his \$300 has become almost \$2,000. However, if he had checked its value over a period of a given month, or even over a few years, he would have seen erratic movement, or none at all, and would have had no idea whether he was holding a good investment or not.

Our perception of the historical movement in the Kingdom's progress, even over the period of our lifetime, is like looking at the spot price of gold as it fluctuates in the course of any given day or week. We need to step back to see the larger picture. When we do this, we find that the biblical predictions concerning the increase in the Kingdom have been remarkably fulfilled up to the present—and the trajectory is continuing upward.

In one part of the world, in a given generation, evil seems to reassert itself, threatening to undo the former progress of the Kingdom's influence in that place. Do not judge the matter from the perspective of a single lifetime. The study of historical revivals shows that the greatest revivals often come as corrections to the lowest dips in the moral and spiritual condition of a society and of the Church. History shows that the devil has apparently not yet learned how to avoid overreach in his ambitions. Evil rises for a season. It experiences some success. It becomes encouraged—then

³ Mark 4:29

exhilarated! Then it reaches too far and overplays its hand. Just at the moment when Satan thinks he can taste imminent victory and seems to hold more of the field than previously, he is again driven back by a surge of the Holy Spirit's in-flooding and, globally, the devil's ground is found to be diminished in the end.

Will everyone eventually be converted then?

The means by which Christ's former enemies are brought into subjection, at least at this present time, is through their willing response to the gospel. This response ushers them into the Kingdom and renders men and women subject to the King on His throne. We have noted that Paul, paraphrasing Psalm 110:1, said that Jesus shall continue to reign at the Father's right hand "*till He has put all enemies under His feet.*"⁴

It may sound as if such passages predict the conversion of the whole world. This is not necessarily so. Christ will continue to reign from His present throne in heaven until all of His enemies are conquered, but this does not mean that all will be conquered in the same manner. For example, the last enemy to be conquered will be death.⁵ This does not mean that death will be converted and become a follower of Christ. In fact, we are informed that death will be cast into the lake of fire.⁶ It is God's desire that the nations be saved and disciplined.⁷ The numbers of those who surrender willingly to the King, having been mercifully conquered by His Spirit and His Word, will increasingly swell the ranks of His Kingdom.

However, at the time of Christ's coming, not all will have been converted, and many will have to be subdued involuntarily. There are prophecies of massive resistance remaining to be defeated at the second coming of the King. Those who cannot be persuaded to submit will still be removed and judged. Their removal from this planet will leave behind an earth universally submissive to the King. We know that this will not be a uniformly "Christian" world prior to Christ's coming, for several reasons:

1. The twin parables of the wheat and the tares,⁸ and of the fishing net,⁹ depict the presence of both "*sons of the Kingdom*" and "*sons of the wicked one,*" or of good and bad "*fish,*" to be sorted out at the end.¹⁰ In the former parable, it is specifically stated that the children of the evil one (the "*tares*") will remain in the world until "*the harvest,*" when the angels will sort them out:

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:25

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:26

⁶ Revelation 20:14

⁷ Matthew 28:18-20

⁸ Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

⁹ Matthew 13:47-50

¹⁰ Matthew 13:41, 49

The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!¹¹

This does not depict a world completely converted at the end.

2. Jesus speaks of this fact also, in His parable about the nobleman who left his goods in the care of trusted stewards. He then made a long journey to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.¹² In the story, there are citizens who reject his absentee rulership, and who remain obstinate till the end. Jesus describes these stubborn resisters as being slain at His coming for their disloyalty,¹³ while his faithful stewards are rewarded. Seemingly, there will still be holdouts standing against Christ even at the time of His coming.
3. Jesus also speaks of His judgment throne as a place where “all nations” will be gathered before Him for judgment.¹⁴ Among these nations, at His coming, there are both “*sheep*” and “*goats*”—the former destined for *eternal life*, and the latter for *eternal fire*.
4. Speaking of fire, Paul describes the coming of Christ as involving “*flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”¹⁵ That such fire will be necessary suggests that there will be some who will remain disobedient to the gospel on the last day.
5. The same imagery reappears in the vision of Revelation 20—the much-disputed “millennial” chapter. This chapter, alone among biblical passages, refers to the stretch of “one thousand years” during which martyred saints are seen reigning with Christ. For centuries, Christian opinions have been divided, and have been given descriptive labels—*premillennialism*, *postmillennialism* and *amillennialism*—that represent entirely different eschatological systems, and embrace alternative interpretations of this chapter. Some are more, and some less, optimistic about conditions in the “end times.”

In every system, however, the thousand-year period is followed by a brief period of Satan’s release from prison, and his instigating a global, but abortive, rebellion against the Church.

¹¹ Matthew 13:41-43

¹² Luke 19:11-27

¹³ *Ibid.*, v.27

¹⁴ Matthew 25:31-46

¹⁵ 2 Thessalonians 1:8

Therefore, no matter how optimistic one may be about the success of the gospel in the end of the age, all must accommodate a short period of serious rebellion at the very end, before the new cosmos is introduced. Not all will have been converted at the conclusion of the age.

In Revelation 20, the final satanic resistance is futile and short-lived, but it is nonetheless a significant resistance movement occurring at the very end of this present world. It is not a small uprising, because those participating in it are numerous “*as the sand of the sea*”¹⁶ and the revolt encompasses “*the breadth of the earth*.”¹⁷ Therefore, regardless of one’s eschatological leanings, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, despite the enormous general success of the gospel, there will be those who either continually resist conversion, or whose commitment to Jesus is shallow enough to ultimately be toppled by the deceiver.

It will always be necessary to test the quality of fruit gathered in the seasons of harvest. The transformation of nations does not guarantee a uniform depth of sincerity or of sacrificial commitment among all who follow the crowds in the popular embrace of Christ in revival times.

In Revelation, we see that Satan’s greatest surge of opposition against Christ’s Kingdom is followed immediately by his final doom. There, we are told, Satan...

will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth...to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire...¹⁸

This passage describes the final, and most intense, time of trial for the Church, because for the first (and last) time in history, the persecution appears to be global in extent. There have been many terrible persecutions throughout the present age, but they have always been restricted to certain sectors of the globe, leaving the Church in other areas unmolested. At the end of the age Satan will pull out all the stops and bring the worst that he has against the entire “beloved city” (the Church).

Historically, the Christian Movement has grown during such periods of fierce opposition. Like other historic times of persecution there will no doubt be martyrs, confessors, and lapses from the faith. As in previous surges of persecution, this final siege of the King’s colonies, while sending many saints prematurely to their reward, will again, as always, fail to overthrow the Kingdom of Christ. The beloved city is besieged, but not taken.

Notwithstanding this short season of final opposition, the lasting gains achieved through the centuries of social transformation and renewal are not to be discounted, even if there will be one

¹⁶ Revelation 20:8

¹⁷ Revelation 20:9

¹⁸ Revelation 20:7-10

final sifting of wheat and chaff to determine ultimate destinies. The Bible does not describe a world becoming steadily more rotten right up to the end—then suddenly made perfect by instantaneous metamorphosis at the moment of Jesus’ return. Removal of the final opposition can be expected to leave a sanctified and fully devoted remnant, who have faithfully carried out the commission given to them. Their numbers, as a result, will be vast beyond human ability to calculate:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”¹⁹

There was never any serious question about it. When all is said and done, Jesus is always the Victor!

The glory of God manifested

In the final vision of Revelation, the Kingdom is depicted as a New Jerusalem and a spotless bride, “*having the glory of God.*”²⁰ Though the Bible nowhere says that believers are called to go to heaven, it does state that we are called to the *Kingdom* and to *glory*.

*...that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.*²¹

*He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*²²

*Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*²³

In scripture, the hope of the Kingdom’s loyalists is never said to be *heaven* (that’s God’s domain, not ours). The believer’s hope is always identified by the term “*glory*.” Consider Paul’s consistent language when speaking of the *hope* of the disciple of Christ:

¹⁹ Revelation 7:9-10

²⁰ Revelation 21:9-11

²¹ 1 Thessalonians 2:12

²² 2 Thessalonians 2:14

²³ Matthew 13:43

*through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*²⁴

*To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*²⁵

*...looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.*²⁶

So what are all these references to *glory* talking about? What is the “glory” of God that we desire and hope for? This depends upon the context in each case. Glory has various meanings in scripture:

- It functions, at times, as a synonym for “fame,” “honor,” or “reputation;”²⁷
- It can also refer to “splendor” or “radiance”—like the shining of the sun or the stars,²⁸ or the glow upon Moses’ face;²⁹
- Additionally, the word glory is used interchangeably with the concept of “likeness” or “image.” Thus, Christ is said to be, “*the brightness of [God’s] glory and the express image of His person.*”³⁰ Also, speaking of the creation of man and woman, Paul says that man was made to be “*the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.*”³¹

This latter meaning, while not excluding the others, seems to be what the apostles mean by our hope of obtaining the glory of God, since John speaks of the Christian’s hope as that of becoming like (i.e., in the likeness of) Jesus at His coming:

*Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*³²

²⁴ Romans 5:2

²⁵ Colossians 1:27

²⁶ Titus 2:13. NASB

²⁷ E.g., Daniel 5:18; 1 Timothy 1:17; Revelation 4:9, 11

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:41

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:7

³⁰ Hebrews 1:3

³¹ 1 Corinthians 11:7

³² 1 John 3:2-3

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.³³

Observe, in the last passage, Paul's use of "glory" and "image" as interchangeable terms. In other passages, this transformation into the *glory* or *image* of Christ is specifically associated with our enduring sufferings in this life while trusting Christ:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory...³⁴

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.³⁵

This last verse is remarkable in its locating the future glory as being "*revealed in us.*"³⁶ This hoped-for likeness of Christ is the result of a gradual inner transformation, which is even now being wrought in us by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18), so that our inward character and spiritual nature are to increasingly resemble Christ's. Most of us may feel that we are far from that ideal at the moment, but this is the *glory* to which we have been called and in which we place our hopes—the glory of being like Jesus. Furthermore, the obtaining of this *glory* is likened to the light of a sunrise, gradually dawning, as in certain verses that we have cited earlier:

*But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.³⁷*

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts...³⁸

Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!³⁹

³³ 2 Corinthians 3:18

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:17

³⁵ Romans 8:18

³⁶ NKJV, Young's Literal Translation, etc. Many modern translations read "*shall be revealed to us.*" However, the Greek word *eis* more commonly means "into" or "in." In fact, there is not one case where the words "revealed to" in scripture contain the preposition *eis*. In every case of this phrase, the Greek text omits the preposition and indicates the recipient by the grammatical form of a noun or pronoun. Here is the complete list of such cases: Matthew 11:25; 16:17; Luke 2:26; 10:21; John 1:31; 12:38; 1 Corinthians 2:10; 14:30; Ephesians 3:5. None of these cases contain the preposition *eis* (or any other) in the common phrase, as this one does.

³⁷ Proverb 4:18 NASB

³⁸ 2 Peter 1:19 ESV

³⁹ Matthew 13:43

Corporate Glory

One thing that I hope to get across is that God's purpose is not merely concerned with the destiny of individuals, but also with that of His whole Kingdom and His Body corporately. In a child's developing body it is important that every limb, appendage, and organ experiences individual growth to maturity, but this is only to accommodate the development of that member to the growth of the whole body together. God desires that every believer come to maturity in order that the Body as a whole may be healthy and well-proportioned. The Body matures along with the maturing of every member. This is what Paul is speaking of when he writes: "*...the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*"⁴⁰

Paul said that he was determined to "*present every man perfect [that is, mature] in Christ.*"⁴¹ However, this objective was to serve the larger goal, namely, that "*we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect [that is, mature] man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*"⁴²

For unexplained reasons many modern translations render this last verse, "*until we come to maturity,*" or "*to mature manhood,*" or some such unfortunate paraphrase of Paul's actual words. Such a paraphrase is regrettable because it obscures the meaning of what Paul was talking about. Such renderings give the impression that Paul is describing individual maturity that we all must reach. Indeed, he does mention the need for individual maturity in the following verse: "*that we should no longer be children...*"

But Paul does not say, in our present passage, "until we are all adults," but "until we all (plural) are an adult (singular)." As the ESV has it in the margin: "*to a full-grown man.*"

Paul, in this place is referring to the corporate growth of the whole Body of Christ—"we all"—becoming one mature Body—"a mature man." This may be difficult to grasp, but two chapters earlier,⁴³ Paul had written of the Body of Christ as a "*new man*" (that is, a Body) which God created from Jewish and Gentile believers. As he puts it elsewhere, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one [Body] in Christ Jesus.*"⁴⁴ What God created as a *new man* must eventually become a *mature man*. As individual members mature, so does the whole Body. None of us is expected to reach the intended goal without the rest of us.

⁴⁰ Ephesians 4:16

⁴¹ Colossians 1:28

⁴² Ephesians 4:13

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2:15

⁴⁴ Galatians 3:28

Thus, God's goal is larger than many Christians have ever realized. God does not simply want to bring many sons to heaven but, rather, "*many sons to glory.*"⁴⁵ These many sons comprise His Kingdom, the company of His faithful loyalists formed together into the corporate embodiment of the Son of God. We are already His hands and feet, but He deserves better than what we have yet attained. A perfected Head requires a perfected Body, and this is what He shall have.

Therefore, our destiny is not to be glorified alone as individuals but, as Paul puts it, "*that we may also be glorified together.*"⁴⁶ The Kingdom of God is not so many isolated individuals, but a community, a population comprising a shining "*city on a hill,*" a corporate bride which is destined to be the "*holy Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.*" As individuals, we are like "*living stones...being built up a spiritual house...*"⁴⁷ Collectively, the Body of Christ is that spiritual house under construction—the Holy Spirit's temple.

What is the standard by which individual maturity is measured? The answer must be the *glory*—or the likeness of Christ. In an individual, the likeness of Christ is seen in one's character being made up of the patience, humility, faithfulness, just dealings, and compassion of Christ. These are all summarized in the term "*agape, which is the bond of perfection.*"⁴⁸

*"By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have agape for one another."*⁴⁹

But what is the measure of the *corporate maturity* of the Body? Well, we know what corporate immaturity and carnality looks like, from Paul's harsh rebuke of the Corinthian church:

*And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ...for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?*⁵⁰

Unity birthed of mutual love is the measure of corporate maturity in the Church. According to Paul, loyalty to particular leaders and denominations instead of to Christ and His people is the mark of an infantile Church. Unfortunately, reaching corporate maturity in unity has not held the same priority to Christians as it does to Christ. Jesus's passionate prayer for the Church (which, we assume, must be ultimately answered) was that they would dwell in unity. He prayed:

⁴⁵ Hebrews 2:10

⁴⁶ Romans 8:17

⁴⁷ 1 Peter 1:5; cf., Ephesians 2:19-21

⁴⁸ Colossians 3:14

⁴⁹ John 13:35

⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:1-2

...that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

In Ephesians 4:13, we saw that the “*mature man*,” which the Church is to become, will be characterized by “*unity of the faith*” and “*unity of the knowledge of the Son*.” This is what is good and acceptable to God for His people—that they act like one Body, one family, and one Kingdom. When all bodily members act in obedience to the same head, they act in harmony with each other as well.

We might conclude, from surveying the present disunity of the churches, that we are still very far from the goal. However, the composition of the True Church has never been identical to that of the institutional churches. Many who regard themselves members of Christ will discover, to their chagrin, that they never have been such. The warning given by Jesus indicates that among the many who will be surprised will be ministers who had exhibited what appeared to be impressive spiritual gifts (Matthew 7:21-23).

The True Church is the Body of Christ, comprised of all disciples the world over who possess the Spirit of the Head, and who are submitted to His authority (which is implied in the idea of “headship”). They are found worshiping in many kinds of assemblies amid others who have no sincere faith in Christ. God knows who they are. It is they who must be perfected in love and in unity among themselves. This consideration renders it impossible for us to calculate how far the corporate Body of Christ might be from its eventual maturity. All we can know with certainty is our own level of maturity or immaturity—which should be sufficiently obvious upon honest self-examination.

Sonrise

When Jesus was born upon earth, His appearance was heralded as the dawning of day after a long darkness.⁵¹ Jesus Himself said that He, like the sun, is “*the Light of the world*,”⁵² and referred to the time that He would be leaving again as the coming of “*the night*.”⁵³ After Jesus had returned to heaven, Paul spoke of the time of His absence as a time of night which would someday end in the dawning of a new “*day*,” at His return.⁵⁴

⁵¹ E.g., Isaiah 60:1-3; Malachi 4:1-2; Matthew 4:16; Luke 1:78

⁵² John 8:12

⁵³ John 9:4

⁵⁴ Romans 13:12

In the meantime, Christ's subjects in this world fill the role of "*the light of the world*,"⁵⁵ as does the moon at night, by reflecting the light of the sun back to earth. We anticipate the reappearing of Jesus as those who wait for the dawn.

The absence of the Son is the *night*, and His presence is the *day*. We are living in the night between the day of His first coming and the day of His second coming. He will return—this time to remain permanently—after which, "*There shall be no night there.*"⁵⁶ From that time forward, "*All the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord.*"⁵⁷

An important truth about the second coming has been somewhat obscured by regrettable traditional translations of Matthew 24:27, where the coming of Christ is likened to "*the lightning*" that "*comes from the east and flashes to the west.*" This way of translating the passage speaks to us of suddenness—like a bolt of lightning suddenly flashing across the sky. But did you ever wonder why Jesus said that the *lightning* travels from the east to the west? This seems counterintuitive, rather than axiomatic (as Jesus implies it to be). While lightning sometimes may flash in a westerly direction out of the east, it is clear that it may as readily flash in any other direction, or perhaps more commonly, vertically.

The word "lightning" is the Greek *astrape*. This word is, in fact, the correct term for lightning, but this is not always its meaning. When defined in the lexicons, *astrape* is said to mean either "lightning" or, more generally, "bright shining." It is in this latter sense that the word is used in Luke 11:36—"*If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, as when the bright shining [astrape] of a lamp gives you light.*"

Interestingly, the same translators who rendered *astrape* as "*lightning*," in Matthew 24:27, quite reasonably chose to translate the same word as "*bright shining*," in Luke 11:36, where it refers to the brightness radiating from a light source. But what prevented them from translating the word this way in Matthew 24:27? Would it not present a very different image if Jesus were to have said, "*For as the bright shining comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be*"? Instead of a lightning bolt, this would clearly be comparing His coming to a glorious sunrise!

If one should arise before dawn and watch the eastern horizon, the sky will be observed to change from nearly black to a lighter blue. On the edge of the horizon a ribbon of red-orange will gradually appear, and the whole sky will become progressively lighter and lighter, nearly like daytime even before the upper rim of the sun is visible. Within seconds, the sun will fully present itself, and the dawning of the day is complete.

Is this what Jesus is telling us about His second coming—that His coming will resemble a sunrise, rather than a bolt of lightning? Is it that the Kingdom's glory will increase more and more until the

⁵⁵ Matthew 5:14; Ephesians 5:8; Philippians 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-8

⁵⁶ Revelation 21:25; 22:5

⁵⁷ Numbers 14:21

moment Jesus appears in the air and returns to earth after so long an absence? The increasing light is the progressive glorification of the saints into the image of Christ as Paul described.⁵⁸ As the people of God stand faithful in trials, these *“light afflictions...work for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”*⁵⁹ He will return to find a bride who *“has made herself ready,”*⁶⁰ without *“spot or wrinkle or any such thing.”*⁶¹ *“We know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”*⁶²

The coming of the Lord resembles a sunrise, in that its near approach will be heralded by the people of His Kingdom displaying greater and greater likeness to Him. This is the appearing of the *“full grain”* of the Kingdom *“in the head,”*⁶³ and the transformation of the Body to *“a mature man.”*⁶⁴ The world will see Christ’s image (that is, His *glory*) *in His people* as they increasingly surrender to His will, walking in justice, mercy, faithfulness and humility, and exhibiting the holiness and unity that is the fruit of *agape* love. Thus, the trajectory of the true colonies of the Kingdom will be *“like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day.”*⁶⁵

*Therefore glorify the Lord in the dawning light,
The name of the Lord God of Israel in the coastlands of the sea.
From the ends of the earth we have heard songs:
“Glory to the righteous!”*⁶⁶

⁵⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:18

⁵⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:17

⁶⁰ Revelation 19:7

⁶¹ Ephesians 5:27

⁶² 1 John 3:2

⁶³ Mark 4:28-29

⁶⁴ Ephesians 4:13

⁶⁵ Proverbs 4:18 NASB

⁶⁶ Isaiah 24:15-16

A final word

To be a part of God's Kingdom is the greatest privilege available to human beings. It is also mandatory for all who would live and die in a manner pleasing to God. Apart from the Kingdom, nothing exists that gives transcendent meaning to world history and human endeavors.

Like everything of value, the Kingdom comes at a cost. That is why Jesus encouraged those who would be disciples to "*sit down first and count the cost*"⁶⁷ before making the largest investment of a lifetime. There is a cost, but there is also the surpassing value on the other side of the ledger. Every person must consider whether the *pearl of great price* is worth the cost of possessing it because, as Paul told his converts: "*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.*"⁶⁸

Jesus said, "*The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.*"⁶⁹ The need to "*press into*" the Kingdom of God suggests a determination to overcome resistance. There will be opposition from Satan to any soul who determines to enter and remain in God's Kingdom. Some of that resistance will be felt inwardly, as the selfish nature whimpers and protests, wishing to remain the unchallenged governor of its former domain and self-determiner of its own course of life. Peter warned his readers about this inward struggle: "*Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.*"⁷⁰ Some of the devil's opposition will come from outward influences—especially friends or family members, who are offended that you have abandoned their way of life, and have thereby registered an implicit rejection of their values and choices:

*For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.*⁷¹

Some of those who criticize you, will be speaking from their own insecurities. Some may actually be acting out their jealousy that you, unlike themselves, have discovered in the Kingdom of Christ the meaning and purpose for your existence—which they secretly covet but are unwilling to pay the price to obtain.

Pay no heed to any detractors. They will not be around to prop you up or defend you at the Final Judgment, no matter how much you may compromise to please them today. Tragically, they will be occupied with worries of their own on that day.

⁶⁷ Luke 14:28

⁶⁸ Acts 14:22

⁶⁹ Luke 16:16

⁷⁰ 1 Peter 2:11

⁷¹ 1 Peter 4:3-4

Some readers may at this moment be facing the choice of a lifetime. Choose wisely!

“No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”⁷²

⁷² Luke 9:62

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www.thenarrowpath.com

About the Author

Steve Gregg's teaching ministry began in Southern California, near the beginning of the "Jesus Movement" revival, in 1970. Throughout the ensuing half-century, he has taught around the world on every continent, directed a small Bible school (called *The Great Commission School*), in Oregon, for sixteen years, as well as numerous small, summer-long discipleship programs, in Santa Cruz, CA.

Since 1982, Steve has been a frequent guest lecturer for Youth With A Mission (YWAM) *Schools of Biblical Studies* (SBS) and *Discipleship Training Schools* (DTS) around the world.

Steve has been the on-air host of a daily radio talk show entitled *The Narrow Path*, since 1997. As of 2020, this program airs weekdays on about 30 radio stations nationwide and is streamed worldwide over the Internet from the website: www.thenarrowpath.com. The program's format is one of real-time, call-in, Bible questions and answers.

Besides the present two-volume project, Steve currently has two previous books in print, both published by Thomas Nelson Publishers:

Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary (1997, revised 2013)

and

*All You Want to Know About Hell: Three Christian Views
of God's Final Solution to the Problem of Sin* (2013)

He has also authored many magazine and journal articles, including several for the *Christian Research Journal*. These can be found online at www.Matthew713.com.

Over 1,500 of Steve's recorded, classroom Bible lectures are posted online. These can be downloaded free of charge from www.thenarrowpath.com. The catalogue of lectures includes in-depth verse-by-verse expositions through the entire Bible, as well as hundreds of in-depth topical lectures on biblical subjects of interest to believers. He has also engaged in formal public debates with Christians and atheists throughout his ministry career. These lectures, and every resource at the website, may be downloaded free of charge.

There is also a free mobile app available for Android and iPhones from which the radio program can be heard (live or in archives), and where the lectures from the website can be streamed (search: thenarrowpath.com).

Several Youtube channels contain libraries of videos of Steve's lectures. The main one can be viewed at www.youtube.com/user/Biblegate.

Based upon his lifetime teaching labors, Steve was offered and awarded an honorary D.Div. from Trinity Theological Seminary (Evansville, IN), in 2017.

