

A Tract on the Kingdom

By

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Few topics in all of Scripture are given the amount of prominence that is given to the concept of “the kingdom of God.” The trouble is, however, that if you were to ask ten different Christians chosen at random to define this “kingdom” you would likely get ten very different responses. This phrase is used far more often, sadly, than it is understood. This would not be such a problem if “the kingdom” was simply a modern Christian expression used diversely to summarize various Biblical concepts, similar to the believer’s “walk with God” or their “personal relationship with Jesus.” But considering the fact that “the kingdom of God” is an expression and a concept used often in the Scriptures, some clarity on its meaning seems quite necessary.

Kingdom

The simplest way of describing what Jesus and John the Baptist meant when they used the word “kingdom” in the gospels, is that they were referring to a *rulership*. In the statement, “the kingdom of the heavens draws near,” the kingdom was, in a sense, referring to an entity on the earth whose rulership will be in the heavens.

Despite common misunderstanding, this statement is not a reference simply to eternity future (“heaven”), which in Revelation is called “The New Jerusalem.” Rather, when John spoke of a coming *kingdom*, he was specifically referring to the coming of the Messiah, who Himself was the ladder connecting the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 28:12, John 1:21) This Messiah would commence the restoration of rulership of the heavens over the earth. Thus both John and Jesus referred to this kingdom as either the “Kingdom of the heavens” (primarily in Matthew) or the “Kingdom of God.”

There is great similarity between the phrase “kingdom of the heavens,” and “kingdom of God.” God is in heaven, so it can easily be said that heavenly rulership is specifically related to God’s rulership. There are, I believe, subtle differences between these two phrases, “the kingdom of the heavens” and “the kingdom of God,” but for the most part they are the same. Therefore, for our present purposes these terms will be used interchangeably.

In Mystery

Both Jesus and John the Baptist spoke of an imminent arrival of the kingdom. Most see this as referencing Jesus’ first coming. This makes good sense considering what was established by His first coming. Remember, the “kingdom” is the rulership of God. With the establishment of the *Church*, there is now to be a group of people on the earth who, through the leadership of Jesus by His Spirit, are effectively submitting to God’s rulership. God, through Jesus Christ, can now reign as King in the hearts of His believers and over His Church. This is exactly what the Church life is meant to be – God’s kingdom. Indeed, from the heavenly perspective, God has already transferred his saints from the domain of darkness

into the kingdom of his beloved Son. (Colossians 1:13) So now, from the earthly perspective, as his Church, it is our responsibility to work this truth out practically, that the heavenly kingdom we now belong to can have an expression, through us, on the earth. Let this be a lesson for our church meetings today. We are indeed God's *kingdom*, so long as we submit ourselves to our Lord Jesus.

However, this aspect of the kingdom can best be described as "the kingdom in mystery." Mystery defines the New Testament Church. This Church, this "kingdom in mystery," was not revealed to the prophets of old. (Ephesians 3:1-10, Colossians 1:24-27) Nor today has she been called to be any great, dominating world force. All the Church is called to be is the humble, mysterious body of believers that effectively submits to God's rulership in this age.

In Manifestation

If the Church, which began at the first coming of the Messiah, is what is often meant by "the kingdom," then what do Jesus and Paul mean when they refer to entrance into the kingdom as something yet to happen? The Lord said, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' *will enter* the kingdom," (Matthew 7:21) and Paul asked, "Do you not know that the unrighteous *will not enter* the kingdom?" (1 Corinthians 6:9) What they meant can best be explained when one considers what the original audience would have understood this kingdom to be.

Throughout the Old Testament Scriptures there is prophecy concerning the establishment of an earthly kingdom of Israel that would be ruled by Jehovah Himself and would conquer all of the other kingdoms of the earth. (Daniel 2:31-45, Isaiah 4:2-6) Because of these Scriptures, the coming Messiah was expected to

conquer the occupying Romans and reign in Israel as king over the whole earth, just as prophecy has predicted. Unfortunately, the original hearers, and specifically those of the Jewish nation, had over-looked other prophecy that predicted the Messiah's first coming as a suffering servant before He could come as a conquering king. (Isaiah 53, Psalm 22:15-18) It is understandable that these Jews did not foresee the period of the Church, the kingdom in mystery, because it was never made known to the prophets. They could not fathom that God would allow uncircumcised Gentiles to be co-heirs with His chosen people of Israel in His kingdom. (Ephesians 3:5,6) Let us not, then, think that Israel was wrong to expect an earthly kingdom. For example, the book of Isaiah and the book of Psalms, both of which contain much prophecy about the coming Messiah and His kingdom, both mention "the earth" over ninety times. Even the disciples at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry at His first coming expected Him to set up the earthly kingdom of Israel. (Acts 1:6,7) Notice that Jesus did not correct the disciples understanding of the nature of the kingdom as being earthly and nationally Jewish. Rather He simply tells them that they will remain ignorant of when the Father plans on setting up this kingdom.

Jesus will return, and He will establish His kingdom on earth. This can be referred to as the time of the "kingdom in manifestation." This physical kingdom will certainly involve Israel (Romans 11:25-29) and will be on the earth (Revelation 20:1-6). This is what Paul and Jesus refer to when they speak of the future kingdom, into which certain people will gain entrance and others will not. This kingdom will be an age when the entire earth will be under the rulership of God through the conquering King, the Lord Jesus.

So while we live today as the Church during the mysterious time of the kingdom, we can take comfort in knowing that one day the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and the time of the kingdom's full manifestation will begin. (Revelation 11:15; 20:1-6) As for the final, eternal dwelling of the believer, that is called "the New Jerusalem." The New Jerusalem is described in chapter 21 of the book of Revelation, immediately following chapter 20 which describes the period of the earthly kingdom.

Entrance into the Kingdom

Since some will gain entrance into this coming, earthly kingdom and some will not, the question naturally arises, "what is the requirement for entrance?" The Lord was quite direct when telling of the foundational requirement for entrance into the kingdom in John 3:3 when He said, "Unless one is *born again* he *cannot see the kingdom* of God." He then went on to link this being "born again" with belief in Himself and the gaining of eternal life. (John 3:8-16) Of course, the experience of being "born again" is what puts us in the position of being children of God, a position that is secured eternally. (John 10:28) This faith in the Lord and the subsequent possession of eternal life is also the foundational requirement for gaining entrance into the coming, earthly kingdom. But is this the only requirement or are there any other criteria for gaining entrance into the kingdom?

Though belief is certainly what brings a person into the Church, the kingdom in mystery, it is clear that simple belief alone does not guarantee that a person remains in the fellowship that is this kingdom. According to 1 Corinthians 5:13 the Church is to "remove the evil man from among themselves." Likewise in

Matthew 18:17 Jesus tells His disciples to expel from fellowship one who refuses to repent after the rebuke of His brethren and the church. Therefore it can be clearly maintained that righteous, obedient living is to be required to maintain existence in the kingdom as it exists today in mystery. Why is this? And how does this relate to the coming “kingdom in manifestation?”

The Judgment Seat of Christ

Often overlooked in the Scriptures is the fact of the Lord’s discipline and judgment of those who are His own. A heavy emphasis is often placed on the grace of the Lord toward sinners, but sadly this often pushes out all together the important truth of His discipline of His own people. Hebrews 12:7, 8 says that, as sons of God, we should expect a measure of discipline from Him. Not to discount His gracious gift of salvation from the condemnation that we deserved, but some Christians seem to think that this means that *all* judgment is reserved exclusively for unbelievers. This cannot be, though, for why, then, would Paul warn the Corinthian *Christians* that “we shall all (Paul himself included) appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil”? (2 Corinthians 5:10) Clearly the Lord also has a measure of judgment for those who are His own.

How, though, does this relate to the coming kingdom? Well, just as there are certain requirements for participation in today’s “kingdom in mystery,” there is a standard for receiving an inheritance in the coming kingdom in manifestation. Let’s look back at the Lord’s word about church discipline in Matthew 18.

The reason the churches today are to expel the immoral brother is given immediately after the Lord Jesus’ command to expel.

Matthew 18:18 says, “whatever you bind on the earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on the earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” In other words, if Church discipline is carried out with the leading of the Holy Spirit, then God honors it! What happens on earth affects heaven, and vice-versa. Look also at the point that Paul makes when, after he says to “remove the evil man” in 1 Corinthians 5:13, he asks in 1 Corinthians 6:9, “do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” The reason Christians expel from the kingdom is because Christ will expel from the kingdom!

Throughout the New Testament, this maintenance of righteous and obedient living is established as being the necessary criteria for entrance into the kingdom, and this is applied both to the kingdom today in mystery as well as when the Lord bring the kingdom in manifestation. See these examples:

“Unless your righteousness surpasses...you will not enter the kingdom” –Matthew 5:20

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ ...but he who does the will of My Father...will enter” –Matthew 7:21

“Those who practice such things (idolatry, strife, envying, carousing, etc.) will not inherit the kingdom” –Galatians 5:21

“No immoral or impure person...has an inheritance in the kingdom” –Ephesians 5:5

Reevaluate also the teachings of Jesus on the Mount of Olives when He is talking about how He will reward His servants (Matthew 25 and Luke 19) with both entrance and inheritance in the coming kingdom. Note that His discussion there is about

bondservants of His, not with those who never call Him “Lord,” yet there remains a distinct possibility of their expulsion from His earthly reign.

What a convicting message! The warnings our Lord gives to us his servants are far more severe than they are usually understood to be.

Again, this truth regarding entrance into the kingdom should not be confused with that regarding forgiveness of sins or justification before God the Father. Man is justified before the Father entirely because of the work of another: Jesus shedding His blood on the cross. Justification is only achieved by grace, through faith, (Romans 3:28) and this justification is what secures our position with the Lord when he yields up his kingdom to God in eternity future, (1 Corinthians 15:23-28) *after* the time of the earthly kingdom. The criteria for entering into the New Jerusalem, unlike for the time of the kingdom, is simply to have one’s name inscribed into the Lamb’s book of life, (Revelation 21:27) and this is accomplished simply by our faith in the Lord Jesus. (Ephesians 1:13,14) However, this does not mean that reigning with the Lord in His earthly kingdom when it comes is given indiscriminately to all the justified. Rather, this position is one given as a *reward* to the faithful servant in this age. Look at how Paul discusses the judgment seat in 1 Corinthians 3:13 – 15. He says that “That Day” will disclose our works and they will be “revealed by fire” and “tested.” Either our works will survive the test and we will receive the reward or they will be consumed and we will “suffer loss,” still being saved, but “only as through fire.” Just like existence in His kingdom in mystery today, inheriting the coming kingdom is not graciously given to all who believe and is not forever secured. (Hebrews 4:11) The reward of the Lord’s kingdom is based on our works and can be lost!

How then, should we live during this time of our testing? How much more somber are the Lord's words on Olivet to watch and be ready for His coming? The Lord certainly did not give us this warning and incentive in vain. Let us take seriously His words, "Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap." (Luke 21:34) It is his desire and purpose for us to inherit all that He has for us, both in this age and in the age to come. So let us, then, watch and be faithful in this age, so that we will not be ashamed at His coming to usher in the next.

"Behold, I am coming soon, *bringing My recompense with Me*, to repay everyone for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Revelation 22:12, 13)