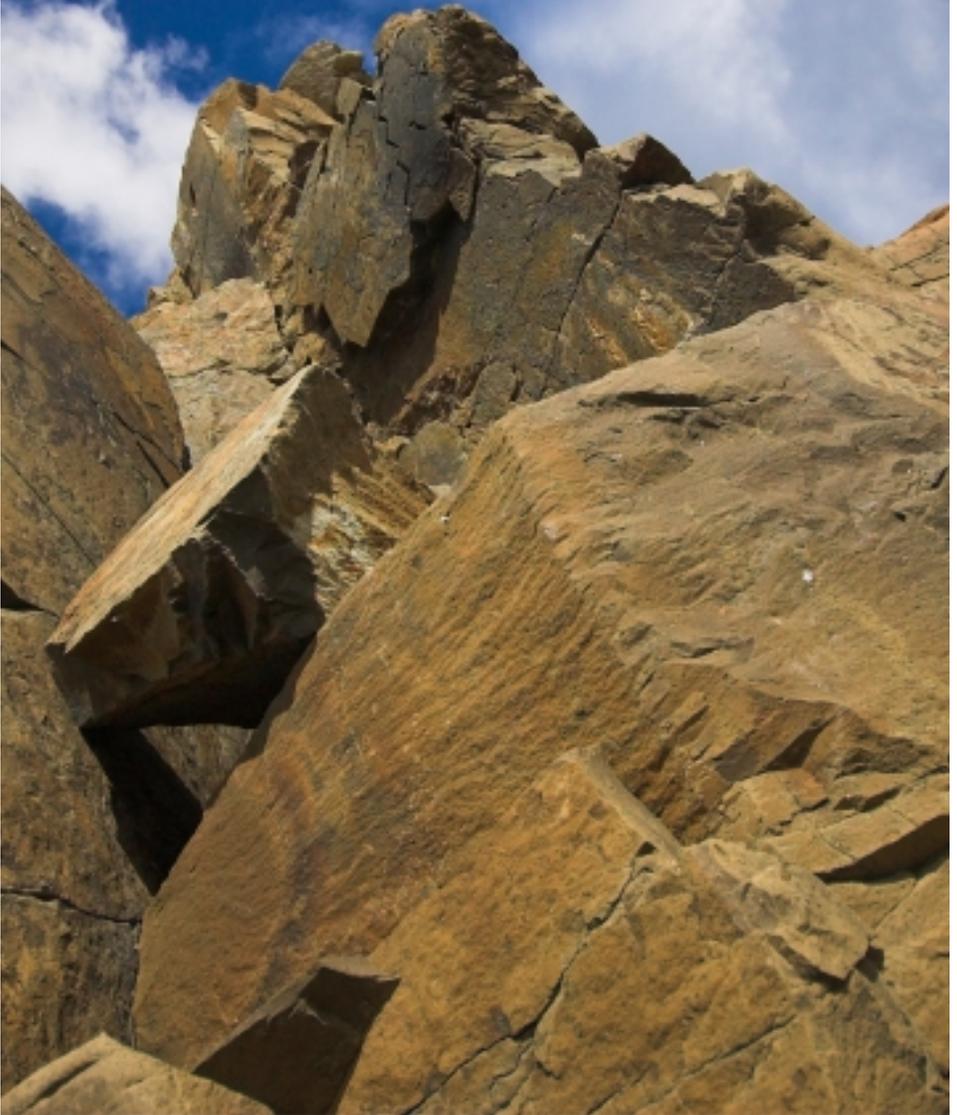


KINGDOM COME

**A THIRTEEN LESSON BIBLE STUDY
BY JEFF S. SMITH**



INTRODUCTION

In retrospect, the entire ministry of Jesus seems to center around the establishment of his kingdom, the kingdom of God so long predicted throughout the Old Testament. It was a prophecy that gained momentum with the fall of Israel and the frustrations of the Hebrews as they paid tribute to heathen kings. The kingdom prophecy, however, took a right turn when the Messiah came, for it became clear that it was a spiritual realm and that membership was not exclusively Jewish. When Jesus prayed for the kingdom to come, it had not yet, of course, but his signs and words all pointed to an imminent establishment. These lessons reveal the kingdom in his words and those of the apostles and inspired historians and correspondents to whom were assigned the task of dedicating the kingdom of God, the church of Christ.

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KINGDOM COME (1)

THE KINGDOM IS AT HAND

In the midst of his temptations, the devil took Jesus “to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me’” (Matthew 4:8).

Message understood: If you’re here to establish a kingdom, I’ll do God one better and share my authority over *all* the world’s kingdoms. The devil understood that the ministry of John the baptizer was a shot across his bow, for he “came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matthew 3:2). The devil could get behind kingdoms founded upon commerce, conquest and materialism, but not one that boasted repentance as a citizenship requirement, and so he responded.

Jesus rejected the offer and two more just like it, turning his attention to people who dwelt in the devil’s darkness and repeating the baptizer’s invitation: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). The kingdom was never far from the Lord’s mind, for its establishment at long last was the reason he had departed Heaven and spent thirty formative years in the home of Joseph and Mary. Now, it was time. “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23).

The coming both of the Messiah and his kingdom had been a subject of Hebrew prophecy for centuries—so long in fact that a certain mythology had grown up around it. People tended to imagine the kingdom according to their own wishes rather than God’s promises, a habit that allowed them to exclude any non-Semite and to see the Messiah in almost purely military terms (see Acts 1:3-6).

Jesus, the son of a humble carpenter, however, presented an image of meekness and apparent acceptance of the Roman occupation of the Promised Land. He perfectly fulfilled Daniel’s 500-year-old prediction about God’s kingdom coming during the reign of the third empire after Babylon (first, Medo-Persia, then Alexander’s Greece, then the caesars’ Rome). So confident was Jesus of Nazareth that he boldly proclaimed, “there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matthew 16:28).

His description of the kingdom baffled even his closest associates and disciples, for never before had their been a realm that defied geographic boundaries and eschewed military defense. “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:20-21). The kingdom, founded as the church on Pentecost, continues to confound even today (Acts 1:3-2:47, Colossians 1:13).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What part of the so-called Lord's prayer is relevant to this study (see Matthew 6:9-13)?
2. What evidence is there that the devil actually had the power to give Jesus the enticements he promised (Matthew 4:1-11, Second Corinthians 4:4, John 14:30)?
3. What does repentance have to do with the kingdom (Matthew 3:1-10)?
4. When did Daniel predict the kingdom would come (2:31-45)? When did Jesus predict it would come (Mark 9:1, Luke 21:29-33)? How?
5. What was the evidence that the kingdom was at hand during the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 12:22-32, Luke 10:8-12)? What effect should kingdom citizenship have upon its people (Luke 12:32-34)?
6. How and when did the kingdom come (Luke 17:20-21, Acts 2:1-47, Colossians 1:13)?

KINGDOM COME (2)

MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD

Asking, “What is truth?” might indicate a sincere interest in determining what is objectively true from an esteemed instructor or authority upon the subject.

One might seek out a great philosopher or mine the depths of some new intellectual system. One might even consult a religious thinker, perhaps a condemned rabbi, accused of claiming to be the font of all truth.

Pontius Pilate had the power to released Jesus of Nazareth, but his political ties compelled him to satisfy the desires of his Jewish constituency. Looking for a way to appease the crowd without allowing an innocent man to die, he interrogated Jesus about his royal claim. “Are you the King of the Jews ... Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done” (John 18:33-35)?

Just there, Jesus raised a point of contention: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36). The kingdom of Christ is not according to the kind that Pilate would have understood—a physical realm with geographic borders, civil laws, hierarchical authority and a mighty military. The kingdom of Christ was established to transcend lines on maps, skin pigmentation, language, culture, even religious heritage. Even Pilate might have sought citizenship in it, but when told by Jesus that, “Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice,” he sneered, “What is truth” and turned on his heels to leave (John 18:38).

The truth is that the earthly kingdom envisioned by ancient Jews and modern Premillennialists is a figment of prophetic misinterpretation. The kingdom of Jesus Christ is “a spiritual house” and “a holy nation,” comprised of living stones—the redeemed themselves—who are transformed into “a people for his own possession” (First Peter 2:5-9).

An earthly kingdom requires military defense, but Jesus stayed the hand of Peter when he drew the sword against Malchus and the high priest’s servants. Moreover, his apostles transferred the disciples’ proselytizing zeal away from anything compulsory and into the very spiritual strategy of evangelism. “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (Second Corinthians 10:3-5).

His kingdom is not of this world—not according to its kind. “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the relationship between truth and most earthly kingdoms? What place does truth occupy in the kingdom of Christ (John 18:33-36, 8:28-32)?
2. How is the kingdom of Christ different from earthly realms (Romans 14:17)? Where is citizenship based (Philippians 3:20)? How does one enter his kingdom (Colossians 1:13)?
3. If one is a citizen in Christ's kingdom, how does that affect his place on Earth (First Peter 2:9-12, Hebrews 11:13-16)?
4. Jesus said that if his kingdom were earthly, his followers would have resisted his arresters. Since it is not earthly, what means of resistance or offense are available (Second Corinthians 10:3-6, First Corinthians 4:20)?
5. What should characterize the Christian's relationship with earthly realms, like his own nation (Romans 13:1-7, Acts 4:19, 5:29)?
6. How is that Christians will reign on Earth (Revelation 5:9-10; 1:4-6; Ephesians 1:20-23; Romans 5:17)?

KINGDOM COME (3)

ASSIGNED TO THE APOSTLES

Earthly kingdoms generally have at least one thing in common—a monarch who lives within the borders of the realm and directs its affairs in some authoritative fashion.

Even before founding his kingdom, however, Jesus Christ was aware that he would not be around in a physical sense to attend to its daily interests. The throne of David is a spiritual seat in Heaven, from which he would shepherd his flock from on high (see Acts 2:29-33). In his stead, Jesus commissioned his twelve apostles to act as doctrinal conduits, communicating his will to the church below.

Jesus promised first Peter and then the other apostles the keys to the kingdom, a reference to their authority in opening its doors and revealing the covenant by which it would operate (see Matthew 16:19). “Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18, NASV).

The apostles were not appointed to be legislators, but messengers—ones sent, as the title implies, but their ability to speak so authoritatively gave rise to the concept of apostolic authority. Jesus told them, “You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29-30, see also Matthew 19:28). Thus, their inspired letters and speeches, as well as their approved conduct, became a pattern for disciples and churches.

Most notably, Peter and the apostles used the kingdom keys on the day of Pentecost as they convicted a massive audience and converted them into believers (see Acts 2:1-47). Fulfilling the great commission required using those keys in distant lands as well. Saul of Tarsus finds himself in Greece and “he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). In Rome, “he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (Acts 28:23). Kingdom keys were always turning, evangelistically and doctrinally.

These apostles became ambassadors for the gospel of Christ, ministers of reconciliation and exemplars of the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Second Corinthians 5:20, Ephesians 6:20). The apostles were tireless evangelists, subjected to intense official scrutiny and Jewish scheming. Martyrdom befell at least some of them, but the willingness to die for Christ outweighed any impulse of self-preservation. Their authority was not inherent or successive, but was delegated by the King, allowing them no legislative power to alter the covenant as caprice or culture might dictate.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which apostle is the chief of the group, with greater authority over the others (Luke 22:24-30)? What was to be the apostles' assignment in the kingdom (Second Peter 3:2, John 14:26, 16:12-15)?

2. Consider Matthew 16:19. The New American Standard translates the verb tenses properly—what was the apostles' role in producing truth? What makes them part of the church's foundation (Ephesians 2:19-22, 3:5)?

3. What do keys usually symbolize or indicate? What did the apostles do with the kingdom keys on the next Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47)?

4. How did they—specifically Paul—use them more broadly (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 14:21-22, 19:8, 28:23-31; Romans 11:13, First Timothy 2:7)?

5. How did Paul assert—or suggest he could have asserted—his authority as an apostle (First Thessalonians 2:6, Philemon 8-9)?

6. While apostle sounds like a powerful office, how did Paul perceive it (First Corinthians 4:9)? What is their reward (Revelation 18:20, 21:14)?

7. Explain the authoritative nature of apostolic example.

KINGDOM COME (4)

THE KINGDOM OF THE PARABLES

Far from a forgivably failed aspect of his mission, the establishment of the eternal kingdom is the central success of the ministry of Jesus Christ, who sits upon its Davidic throne in Heaven today. Jesus began his ministry by preaching the kingdom, predicted its imminent arrival right up to the cross, and used the parable to describe its unique character.

Jesus brought the parable of out of the bedchamber, where God had communicated with prophets, royals and rising stars through dreams under the Old Testament. Daniel interpreted a dream had by Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar more than five centuries before the time of Jesus, in which he foresaw a kingdom that was enduring and everlasting. It would find establishment during the reign of the third world empire after Babylon, which was conquered by the Medo-Persian alliance, succeeded by Alexander's Greece and eclipsed by the Caesars' sprawling Roman dominion. Indeed, it was during this last era that Jesus was born, lived, died and lived again. Daniel said, "And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these" (Daniel 2:40).

The kingdom would be established via the cross on the day of Pentecost, but its conquest of the world would be just as different from earthly realms. Christ compared its growth to the metamorphosis of a tiny mustard seed into a great tree, "larger than all the garden plants" (Matthew 13:31-32). In another parable, the kingdom "is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened" (Matthew 13:33).

While earthly kingdoms might boast great treasures and economies, the kingdom of God would be of even greater value, for truth and redemption cannot be appraised by ordinary means. Kingdom citizenship, therefore, is like "treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and ... sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44). More famously, it is like a pearl of great price (45).

Where most earthly kingdoms are homogeneous, God's would boast great diversity, sometimes positive and sometimes not. The kingdom is like a field with both wheat and chaff (Matthew 13:24-30); it is also like the catch produced by a dragnet, capturing fish of every sort (13:47-50).

Like most kingdoms, judgment is a necessary part. Jesus, however, goes to great pains in his parables to describe God's kingdom as a place for mercy and second chances, where a debtor can have his slate wiped clean, but must be willing to extend the same courtesy to others (Matthew 18:21-35). It is a realm where the Master rewards as he sees fit (20:1-16).

God's kingdom is also comparable to a wedding, as the virginal brides make ready (Matthew 25:1-13) and the father issues invitations (22:1-14).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Nebuchadnezzar's dream is a sort of nocturnal parable. What sort of kingdom did Daniel interpret from that dream? When should it come?
2. How is the kingdom of heaven like a grain of mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32)? How is it like leaven (Matthew 13:33)? (Be thorough.)
3. How valuable is the kingdom (Matthew 13:44-45)? What are the implications of this appraisal (Mark 8:34-38, Philippians 3:3-11)?
4. What is good about the kingdom's diversity (Romans 2:28-29, 11:11-23, Ephesians 2:14-22, Acts 17:30, First Corinthians 12:4)?
5. What elements are represented by the wheat and weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) and by the fisherman's dragnet (47-50)?
6. What do we learn about mercy from the parables (Matthew 18:21-35; see also James 2:13, Luke 6:37, 17:3-4; Ephesians 4:32)?
7. How would you apply the parable of the landowner to your experience (Matthew 20:1-16; see also First Thessalonians 5:14, Hebrews 3:13)?
8. What do we learn from the parable of the virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)? Why did one guest suffer at the wedding party (Matthew 22:1-14)?

KINGDOM COME (5)

ADMISSION IS NOT RACE-BASED

Citizenship in earthly kingdoms is usually a matter of birth or immigration; one is born a citizen of his home country or emigrates to another and is granted legal status somehow. Although patriotism might indicate to us that our country is the best, people across the border are just as likely to dispute that.

Citizenship in the kingdom of God is not a question of birth, but of rebirth, and that process defines one's immigration to it. Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven is voluntary and unbiased.

Under the Law of Moses, citizens in that kingdom were made by birth. One was born to Hebrew parents and before the baby was capable of choosing right or left, he or she was a citizen of the nation. There was no choice for the Jewish baby, even an unbeliever, and there was very little hope for the Gentile baby, outside of becoming a Hebrew proselyte.

The kingdom that emerges in the New Testament is instantly a different sort altogether, defying geographical and cultural boundaries to include believers from every corner of the globe. By basing kingdom admission on something other than race, God fulfilled an ancient promise to Abraham, who preceded the Jewish nation by many centuries, and in him, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Kinship to Abraham remained the Jews' chief claim to kingdom citizenship during the ministry of Christ and yet he soundly disabused them about this perceived bias. It was John, however, who warned them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:7-9).

The Jews were on notice that they were welcome in Messiah's kingdom, but only as penitent believers, not as children of spiritual privilege, for "God shows no partiality" (Romans 2:1-11). Kingdom citizenship—the only kind that really matters—depends upon something higher than good genes. Peter told Gentile Cornelius that, "in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35).

Because they should have recognized him sooner, Jesus warned the Jews again, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits" (Matthew 21:43; see also Matthew 8:11-12).

The gospel of the kingdom sounded forth from Jerusalem, through Samaria and to Gentile lands, "as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14). Our citizenship is in heaven and that transcends anything earthly.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did one become a citizen of ancient Israel (Luke 3:7-9)? How is that different from the way that one becomes a citizen in Christ's kingdom (Hebrews 8:8-13, Romans 1:16-17)?
2. How did many Jews react to the news that they would now be sharing "their God" (Acts 15:1-4)?
3. How did the Law of Moses serve to ensure the division of the races (Ephesians 2:12-22)? How was that obstacle removed (Colossians 2:11-17)?
4. How did Peter become aware of the scope of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3, Acts 10:1-11:18)?
5. How does God ultimately show that he is no respecter of persons (Romans 2:1-11)?
6. What was it that caused the Gentiles' incipient faith to be more impressive than the Jews' ancient, inherited tradition (Matthew 8:5-13)?
7. What cost the Jews dearly when the new kingdom came (Matthew 21:43, Romans 10:1-4, 11:1-10)?
8. What is incumbent upon citizens of God's kingdom (Philippians 3:20-21, First Peter 2:4-12)?

KINGDOM COME (6)

ENTRANCE BY REBIRTH

Entrance into the kingdom is available to any person who both believes in the Lord Jesus Christ and is prepared to do something about it.

John wrote that, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:11-13).

The process of admission is one of conversion, implying and requiring change in the character and lifestyle of the one who would be saved. The New Testament writers go so far as to describe this change as the creation of a new person, steeped in faith and resistant to immorality and regression.

Jesus inaugurated this concept when he was visited by a ruler named Nicodemus early in his ministry. Jesus told him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Nicodemus wondered how a person could possibly be born a second time, to which the Lord responded, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 5:5).

Rebirth, or regeneration, then, is a matter of being born again of water and the Spirit. God saves the elect “by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7).

Rebirth is a process of conviction and change, one that is consummated in the watery grave of baptism, where the old man of sin is interred and a new person of faith and hope is born (Ephesians 4:17-24). Citizenship in the kingdom cannot be purchased, inherited or earned, but it does not follow that the sinner has no responsibility—after all, he is the one who must work out his salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Jesus is the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:9)—the gospel is the kingdom invitation and it must be answered to take effect (Romans 10:14-17, Acts 2:38-41).

The kingdom, then, is populated by sinners who have sought and received the grace of God and now enjoy fellowship with him through the blood of his son. They are new creatures, striving to put the kingdom ahead of all else and to reform their own behavior. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (Second Corinthians 5:17).

The kingdom citizen has been born again and is equipped for discipleship and ministry, to do spiritual battle with the forces of evil and temptation. He or she finds mercy and justification in submitting to the teaching and authority of the savior.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What right do all believers in Christ Jesus possess? Does this equate to salvation? Explain.
2. What does it mean to be born again (John 3:3-5)?
3. What gets clean in the “washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:4-7, First Peter 3:18-22)?
4. Entering the kingdom requires conversion. From what kinds of things were the Corinthians converted (First Corinthians 6:9-11)?
5. What characterizes the old way of life (Ephesians 4:17-24)? Where is the renewal taking place (see Romans 12:1-2)?
6. What is the role of circumcision in kingdom entrance (Galatians 6:15, Colossians 2:11-12)?
7. By becoming kingdom citizens, what other relationship is happily severed (Romans 6:1-11)?

KINGDOM COME (7)

THROUGH MANY TRIBULATIONS

Anything worth having is usually difficult to obtain; sometimes it is just as hard to maintain.

That, after all, is the main point of the beloved parable of the pearl of great price. Sacrifice is required, along with a respect for spiritual priorities in a material world. Along with sacrifice, however, the cost of the kingdom must also be measured in the currency of tribulation and inflicted hardship.

The apostle Paul had just emerged from a stoning in Lystra, where he had been briefly admired as a god, only to fall prey to the prejudices and provocations of some visiting Jews. He escaped with Barnabas to Derbe and then did the unthinkable by returning to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

The apostle to the Gentiles was an expert on the narrow, strait way, suffering much at the hands of his adversaries on land and sea (see Second Corinthians 11:23-33). For too many today, kingdom entrance seems to be accomplished without cost, in a luxurious edifice and sterile circumstances. Such an entrance is merely the public display at best; at worst, it is an illusion – a deception – for the kingdom is only entered by way of many tribulations. There are temptations to overcome, weaknesses to conquer, persecutors to withstand, time to endure, doubts to dispel.

Christ’s kingdom is the object of intense opposition; “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). Herod Antipas executed the baptizer and his successors would perform similar mischief against James. Saul of Tarsus counted himself chief among sinners for the evil he worked against the church while he disbelieved (Acts 8:1-3, First Timothy 1:12-15).

Tribulation might even come from within one’s own family, especially where new convictions disturb honored traditions. “And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Matthew 10:36). The Hebrew readers suffered exclusion from society and plundering of their possessions that they might both enter and remain in the kingdom (10:32-39). The believers in Thessalonica were rewarded for responding to persecution and affliction with steadfast faith (Second Thessalonians 1:3-12).

Kingdom citizenship is threatened furthermore by simple temptation to sin, to backslide, to commit apostasy. Life is filled with trials, “so that the tested genuineness of your faith ... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (First Peter 1:6-7). The tempter will stop at nothing to distract an ear from the gospel call or to reclaim a redeemed soul from the kingdom of life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Name something worth having that is perfectly easy to obtain and to keep.

2. What makes it seem that some people are entering the kingdom with ease? How is the kingdom truly entered (Acts 14:22, First Corinthians 15:58)?

3. Jesus taught a parable about sowing seed that illustrates just how difficult kingdom entry becomes. Identify the form that tribulation took in each example (Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23):
 - Wayside:
 - Rocks:
 - Thorns:
 - Good Soil:

4. What could make each of these a challenge: belief, confession, repentance, baptism (John 7:45-49, John 12:42, Second Corinthians 7:10-11, Luke 7:28-30)?

5. What are the benefits of suffering hardship en route to the eternal kingdom (James 1:2-8, First Peter 1:6-9, Galatians 2:20, Revelation 1:9)?

6. What forms of persecution are prevalent among modern disciples of Christ (Second Timothy 3:10-13)?

KINGDOM COME (8)

KINGDOM FIRST

The important question does not concern who is on first, but what is first.

When the budget is stretched, what obligation moves to the bottom? When time is short, what gets done and what does not? When loyalties are tested, who is honored and who is asked to retreat?

If life really is only very temporal compared to the eternity of the afterlife, such choices are clear, but to most people, it is not as obvious as that. This life is simply more tangible and immanent than the next and, therefore, it usually takes precedence. Jesus, however, lived what he taught in his abbreviated earthly sojourn: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

His context involved material necessities and the worry that accompanies their occasional elusiveness. If the kingdom is put first, he reasons, one’s needs will fall into place – perhaps not with abundance or ease, but only sufficiency. Is that enough? Most want more – much more – and that is often where the kingdom’s priority is threatened.

Take the case of the rich, young ruler who visited Jesus to boast of his spiritual achievement. “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:21-22). The Lord commented, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God” (23). The kingdom did not come first for that man, nor does it for many others in his position, even if their wealth cannot approach his. Even the pursuit of wealth can displace the kingdom at the top of the priority heap, where time, money and emotion are distributed accordingly.

There are occasions in which putting the kingdom first requires the sacrifice of something dear and valuable, something that rivals eternal life as a priority because it produces immediate, yet immoral gratification. “And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell” (Mark 9:47). If only figuratively, the Lord has illustrated how far the disciple must be willing to go to hold the kingdom when the eye wanders.

When the kingdom is rivaled by concerns that are mostly noble – family, work, rest – the choice can be less obvious. The kingdom must come first, although it need not eliminate every other goal. “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). A Kingdom First mentality will necessarily involve painful sacrifice and even the loss of dear things, but the reward is immeasurable (Matthew 19:29).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to put the kingdom first (Matthew 6:25-33)?
2. How does worry interfere with the kingdom as priority (Philippians 4:7-13)?
3. What did “kingdom eunuchs” have to sacrifice (Matthew 19:1-12)? What might other disciples forfeit (Matthew 19:27-30)?
4. Why is it so hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom (Matthew 19:23-26; see also First Timothy 6:6-20, Ecclesiastes 5:10-12)?
5. What sacrifice do we learn from the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-32; see also Hebrews 12:12-17)?
6. Making the kingdom our priority will not always be easy. How do we confront those priorities that challenge it (Mark 9:43-48)? Give some practical examples of executing this figurative language.
7. What would make the plowman look back (Luke 9:59-62)?

KINGDOM COME (9)

THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH

Not many noble, not many powerful, not many earthly-wise are chosen for kingdom citizenship; instead, it is the meek who shall inherit the earth.

Perusing the beatitudes, one finds that the description of God's citizens would not be entirely desirable by today's kings and presidents. Selflessness and innocence are prized where aggressiveness and stoicism hold rank among men. Meekness is an especially admirable quality in the kingdom and yet it is treated with nauseated disdain in most places outside of it. The Christian's chief challenge is to learn meekness on both sides of the kingdom wall – safely among believers and surrounded by adversaries.

Inheriting the earth is a phrase borrowed from the old covenant, where Moses promised length of life in the Promised Land to those who obeyed the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12). It appears in the thirty-seventh psalm as well, where we learn that, “the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace” (11). Inheriting the earth no longer invokes a conquest of Canaan, but rather entry into the kingdom of heaven referenced repeatedly in the beatitudes (see also Second Peter 3:8-13).

Meekness fits well in the context of the beatitudes, where mercy, an acknowledgement of sinfulness, and hunger after righteousness are encouraged. Meekness is not synonymous with weakness or a lack of backbone, but rather is strength under control. A meek person does not need to flex his muscles or intimidate others to satisfy his ego; he is not aggressively self-willed, but will stand up when there is a cause and be heard when others pragmatically are silent.

When Jesus needed some way to explain the kind of citizens his kingdom would require, he did not summon princes or power brokers, but a little child to come to his side. “At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’” (Matthew 18:1-4; see also Matthew 19:14).

The value placed upon meekness reminds the disciple that the kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of men, where might often makes right and an arsenal of weaponry is required to assert and export greatness. A willingness and yearning to serve rather than dominate is worthwhile (Matthew 20:20-28). There is that little child in all of us – submissive, ready to please, innocent and without guile, humbled by circumstances. The kingdom can be received no other way, even if some tend to treat it like their personal fiefdom, lording themselves over others and seeking a sense of superiority (see First Peter 4:7-11, 5:1-5).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. States and nations symbolize themselves with majestic objects upon their flags and seals – lions, eagles, bears, even stars and crosses. What most aptly illustrates kingdom citizenship according to our King of kings (Matthew 18:1-4)? How does one go about receiving the kingdom this way?

2. Fill in this partial chart on the beatitudes.

VERSE	BLESSED ARE THE ...	THEY WILL RECEIVE ...
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		

3. List two Bible characters who were described as meek. Describe their respective strengths.

4. What is the reward for meekness (Isaiah 29:19, Matthew 5:5, James 1:21, Second Peter 3:8-13)?

5. What happened when James and John lacked meekness (Matthew 20:20-28)? How is that repeated today (First Peter 5:1-5, Third John, Colossians 3:12-15, James 3:13-4:6)?

KINGDOM COME (10)

GREATNESS AND OBEDIENCE

For some, kingdom citizenship is hardly enough unless greatness accompanies it; that is not entirely bad ... if greatness is properly defined and sought.

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11). John lived and died before the resurrection and thus the kingdom, but his legacy is the entrance of myriad souls into the realm he served. He was the forerunner even in this, helping to prepare people for the new covenant and discipleship in the blood of Christ (see First Peter 1:10-12).

Discipleship – faith + obedience – serves to determine greatness in the kingdom, rather than public displays of piety intended to inflate the ego. Referring to the Law of Moses still in effect as he spoke, Jesus warned, “Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). The rabbis sorted through the commands, to categorize them as either light or weighty, but no command of God is disposable – his covenant is not a cafeteria line (James 2:8-13).

Indeed, the kingdom promised a remarkable reversal of fortunes, illustrated by the fates of the rich man and Lazarus, who dwelt upon different sides of town in life and Hades in the afterlife (Luke 16:19-31). “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matthew 19:30). Praise and punishment are connected to attitude, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

Public piety does not necessarily guarantee kingdom greatness, for some pursue that path to attract the admiration of others and forfeit any eternal reward (Matthew 6:1-18, 7:21-27; Luke 6:46-49). True greatness is content to labor more privately and to cast every glory upon the savior.

The obedient walk of discipleship is the only one worthy of the kingdom, for faith without works is dead (James 2:14-26). It is a way of life that seeks holiness and eschews immorality (Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 5:5). When a scribe told Jesus about total devotion to God, the Lord replied, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:28). Love. Heart, soul, mind and strength. For God and neighbor. That is great and rare.

This obedience is not an attempt to bypass grace and merit salvation, but is the heart’s response to the savior’s invitation (Philippians 2:12-16). Even when one has done all he can, he is still an unprofitable servant whose sins made necessary the sacrifice of God’s son (Luke 17:7-10). Jesus, however, is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:8-9).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What kind of commitment brought the scribe close to the kingdom (Mark 12:28-34)?

2. How did Jesus determine greatness when he was accused of undoing the Law of Moses (Matthew 5:17-20; see also Matthew 23:23-24)?

3. List the public displays of faith in these passages.
 - Matthew 6:1-18:
 - Matthew 7:21-23:

4. What made them insufficiently pleasing to ensure kingdom citizenship (Philippians 2:1-4, James 2:8-13)?

5. What is forfeited when one succumbs to the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 5:5)? Which works of the flesh are severe enough to merit such punishment?

6. How is it possible to live in a way that is worthy of the kingdom (First Thessalonians 2:11-12, Ephesians 4:1-3, Colossians 1:9-13, Revelation 3:4)?

7. Where does faith without such works fail (James 2:14-26, Luke 17:6-10)?

8. What makes for kingdom greatness (Matthew 23:11-12, John 13:1-17)?

KINGDOM COME (1 1)

INHERITANCE IN HEAVEN

If this life were all that there is, it would make sense to chase every pleasure and every treasure available, but it is not.

There awaits the faithful an inheritance, measured not by its worth in gold or pounds sterling, but in an immeasurable weight of glory. The inheritance belongs to all those who are counted sons and daughters of God by faith, adopted according to election (Galatians 4:1-7, Ephesians 1:11-18).

As an inheritance, of course, it is not entirely ours while we yet live on this earth. It is conditionally, not universally, offered and distributed. It is dependent upon the way that we respond to the gospel, both initially as seekers and continually as followers (Hebrews 9:15). Paul explained it to the pastors from Ephesus: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). It is an inheritance that comes by real unmerited grace and never by imaginary flawlessness (Galatians 3:18, Colossians 1:12, 3:24).

Abraham is offered as an example of one who became an heir of life outside of the Law of Moses, living prior to its establishment, while we live after its abolition. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). The great inheritance that is eternal life hinges upon real faith, the kind that is active and submissive.

The apostle Peter called it “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (First Peter 1:4-5). Citizenship in the kingdom transcends death, continuing past the tomb and into the resurrection where the inheritance is fully and finally grasped. It is treasure in heaven, stored up throughout life with every act of sincere righteousness (Matthew 6:19-21). Treasure in heaven is – figuratively – gates of pearl and streets of gold. Treasure in heaven is eternal life and direct fellowship with the glory of God himself.

Christ is the mediator of the new covenant by which this inheritance is distributed (Hebrews 9:11-17). When he returns at the second advent, it will be to separate the sheep of redemption from the goats of eternal punishment and that separation will be defined by an obedient lifestyle. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matthew 25:34).

A better inheritance is what the penitent thief on the cross sought when he pleaded with Lord, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who usually enjoys an inheritance upon Earth? What has that to do with us and Jesus (Galatians 4:1-7, Ephesians 1:11-18)?
2. How did Peter describe the Christian's inheritance (First Peter 1:3-10)? What, if anything, separates believers from their inheritance?
3. How does our inheritance differ from treasure stored up on Earth (Matthew 6:19-21, First Timothy 6:17-19)? What is the point?
4. Discuss whether it is therefore wrong to save money or invest it in stocks or property or insurance.
5. How is Abraham an example of seeking lasting treasure (Hebrews 11:8)?
6. What specific things distinguished the redeemed sheep from the lost goats (Matthew 25:31-46)?
7. How did Paul describe the Christian's inheritance (Second Corinthians 4:6-5:5)?

KINGDOM COME (12)

AN ETERNAL KINGDOM

The kingdom of God, in which citizenship is obtained while on Earth, continues on into eternity, for it is “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Hebrews 12:28).

Daniel looked into Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and foresaw a kingdom unlike the Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks and Romans. Their kingdoms were all earthly and temporal, existing only according to God’s will and purpose for them. Each was eventually toppled, according to divine prophecy. Daniel saw something different for the kingdom God would establish in the place of the fallen house of Judah. “And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, ... It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44).

Christ established that kingdom, not by leading a Jewish revolt against the Romans, but by conquering the devil’s Hadean gates and paving the way to human redemption, “and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33; see also Hebrews 1:8).

Earthly life is as temporal as a vapor compared to eternity; securing eternal life over punishment is all that matters. “Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (Second Peter 1:10-11).

Some wonder about the nature of that kingdom when earthly life is concluded and eternity, in a sense, begins. Is Heaven a manifestation of earth’s pleasures – lounging on clouds, endless days of fishing or golf? The eternal kingdom is never defined in those terms, but is a realm of fellowship with God and involvement in his praise (Revelation 1:4-6).

Paul thought about the final arrival of that eternal kingdom. He encouraged the Corinthians to remain faithful, reasoning that at the resurrection, Christ will deliver the kingdom to his Father, bringing the saints to their reward (First Corinthians 15:20-28, 50-58). Inclusion in that delivery is conditional, however, “that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27). At his appearing, he will judge the living and the dead according to their works, granting the faithful a reward that will not expire (Second Timothy 4:1, 18).

The kingdom of God, in which eternal life exists, is everlasting and extraordinary. “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What has happened to every nation and empire in the history of man until now? How did Daniel distinguish God's kingdom from these?
2. How might the gates of Hades have prevented Jesus from establishing the kind of kingdom that first century Jews and modern Premillennialists expect (Matthew 16:18, Luke 24:13-27, Acts 1:6-11)?
3. Does the kingdom exist today (Colossians 1:13, Revelation 1:6)? What will happen to it (First Corinthians 15:20-28, Ephesians 5:27)?
4. What should the believer do to ensure his election on Judgment Day and entrance into the everlasting kingdom (Second Peter 1:3-11)?
5. By what will God judge his people in that day (Second Corinthians 5:10, Second Timothy 4:1)?
6. How did Paul compare eternal life with earthly sorrow (Second Corinthians 4:16-18)?
7. What is incumbent upon us since we are receiving an unshakable kingdom (Hebrews 12:25-29)?

7. What are the benefits of suffering hardship en route to the eternal kingdom (James 1:2-8, First Peter 1:6-9, Galatians 2:20, Revelation 1:9)?
8. What does it mean to put the kingdom first (Matthew 6:25-33)? Making the kingdom our priority will not always be easy. How do we confront those priorities that challenge it (Mark 9:43-48)? Give some practical examples of executing this figurative language.
9. What is the reward for meekness (Isaiah 29:19, Matthew 5:5, James 1:21, Second Peter 3:8-13)?
10. How is it possible to live in a way that is worthy of the kingdom (First Thessalonians 2:11-12, Ephesians 4:1-3, Colossians 1:9-13, Revelation 3:4)? What makes for kingdom greatness (Matthew 23:11-12, John 13:1-17)?
11. How did Peter describe the Christian's inheritance (First Peter 1:3-10)? What, if anything, separates believers from their inheritance?
12. What should the believer do to ensure his election on Judgment Day and entrance into the everlasting kingdom (Second Peter 1:3-11)?

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