

King of kings

and

Lord of lords

The Concept of His Kingdom in Scripture

and

The Significance of His Sovereignty in Life

by

Ed Mathews

Dedicated to my Grandchildren

Jayton, Rachel, Jaxon, Kirsten, Jenson, Briana, Grant and Luke.

The happiness you give is a priceless gift. My prayer for each of you is the peace that passes all understanding, the hope that sustains in rough times, and the joy of hearing the words “well done.”

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Posted in the United States of America for everyone throughout the world
wanting to do the will of our sovereign God.

To Him who was, who is, and who ever will be.

CONTENTS

DEDICATION	<i>i</i>
COPYRIGHT	<i>i</i>
CONTENTS	<i>ii-iii</i>
PREFACE	<i>iv-v</i>
INTRODUCTION	<i>vi-ix</i>

SECTION I - OLD TESTAMENT

1. Genesis – Deuteronomy	2
I. Birth of Kingdom Consciousness	2
II. Yahweh and the Gods	5
2. Joshua –II Chronicles	9
I. Development of Kingdom Understanding	9
II. Role of the Nations	11
3. Pre-exile Prophets	15
I. Refinement of Kingdom Idea	15
II. Kingship of God	18
4. Exile and Post-exile Prophets	22
I. Rebirth of Kingdom Hope	22
II. Reign of Yahweh	25
5. Psalms	28
I. Worship with Kingdom Faith	28
II. Throne of God	32
6. Apocrypha	36
I. Struggle during Kingdom Delay	36
II. The Reign of God in Apocalyptic Expectation	40

SECTION II - NEW TESTAMENT

7. Jesus	45
I. Question concerning Kingdom Imagery	45
II. Jewish Missionary Activity	48
8. Matthew	53
I. Disbelief in Kingdom Sovereignty	53
II. Motivation for Contemporary Missions	56
9. Mark	61
I. Significance of the Kingdom Community	61
II. Power of the Kingdom in the Believing Community	65
10. Luke-Acts	69
I. Recognition of the Kingdom Not Yet	69
II. Kingdom and Salvation	73
11. John	78
I. Affirmation of the Kingdom Come	78
II. Vocabulary of the Kingdom Assignment	82
12. Paul	87
I. Nature of the Kingdom People	87
II. The Kingdom Community	91
CONCLUSION	96
SUBJECT INDEX	101-108

Preface

As a missionary in Guatemala, I was committed to planting and nurturing the Church in a culture different from my own. The challenge severely tested my resolve. Could it be done? Was I up to the task?

The struggle grew more intense as I battled to learn the local language. The stress was relentless. The pressure of living in a new environment added to the burden. We loved the people. We enjoyed our surroundings. We had spent many years preparing for the work at hand. But my wife was very ill. *“If you stay here,”* the doctor said, *“she will die within six months.”*

How could this be? We felt called to Central America. It was an answer to prayer. We had left a thriving ministry in northern Ohio. We said *“goodbye”* to security, family, and friends. Is this not where God wanted us to be? Had He not lead us to this place, to these people, to this work? Why, then, this sudden turn of events? What were we to make of it? How were we to understand?

Our world was rocked to its core. Faith was questioned. Prayer was re-examined. Providence was put under the microscope. The more we moved among the shadows of confusion, the more we recognized that we had been there before. Life is like that. Circumstances require frequent re-evaluation of our faith, direction, and hope.

So here I was in the place I believed God lead me to be. I pondered the swirl of events that engulfed my situation. What began in this bewildering fog slowly emerged as a lighthouse of conviction which has guided my faith every since.

In the early seventies, I returned to Texas. And, after finishing my doctorate, became a faculty member in a missionary training program. I came into continuous contact with men and women who planned to do what I had done. Their questions reminded me of those dark days in Guatemala. Was I preparing them to ride out the rough storms that were surely ahead?

In all my study for ministry at home and for mission abroad, little had been said about these questions. I was not ready for the attack of Satan. Would I throw my students to the wolves like I had been? What responsibility did I have as their mentor?

So began the search for a biblical foundation of ministry and mission. Most of what was available consisted of scattered texts of scripture relating to those who go “into the highways and byways” of life searching for the lost. These texts were helpful. They raised important issues. They answered pertinent questions. I have no intention of discouraging the reading of such materials. However, my study took me farther. It led me to look for a unifying center around which the entire revelation of God could be gathered. I scanned the whole landscape of scripture in order to find a single thrust in the inspired word. I eventually found that overarching focus. It tied the Bible together into a seamless story. The theme was the sovereignty of God. *The King*

of kings and the Lord of lords is engrained in both the Old and the New Testament. It is the heart of the message, the motivation for Christian living. It is the best answer to the befuddling questions of every saint. *The King of kings and the Lord of lords* is a biblically solid foundation for all who walk by faith. It will lead believers to the place God wants them to be. And it will keep them there.

This book is divided into two major sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. Each section contains six chapters. Each chapter has two parts: (1) the concept of His kingdom in scripture and (2) the significance of His sovereignty in life. I approach this enormous task with profound humility. I pray that all who read this book will be blessed. I hope the eternal King will be honored. If this effort fails to accomplish either of these goals, let it be charged to the ineptitude of the writer.

Ed Mathews
March 7, 2013

Introduction

Never in history has the Christian religion reached so far. Never has it done so much. And yet the Church is being hassled at every turn. Voices everywhere are clamoring for her demise. Resistance is growing. The faithful are engaged in a serious conflict for survival. The stakes are high. The encounter involves spiritual integrity. Will the people of God keep the faith? Is the Lord enthroned in every aspect of their lives?

The Church is called to examine herself, II Corinthians 13:5. She must listen again to the word of God. She should study anew the message from heaven. Then she will stand firm—always abounding in the work of the Lord, I Corinthians 15:58. She will offer her heart, strength, and resources to finish the work of her Master. She will not falter. She will not fail. The King of kings will provide the victory.

I. Kingdom in the Old Testament.

The kingdom of God is the central theme in scripture. Though it is explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, it is implicitly part of the Old Testament, too.

A. Characteristics of the Kingdom in the Old Testament. The lordship of Jehovah is universal. He has control over all of His creation. He exercises dominion over the nations, Psalm 22:27,28. He is king, Psalm 10:16. His kingly reign was most evident in Israel. God found her. He adopted her. He guided her. He blessed her. He made a covenant with her. He disclosed Himself to her in powerful words and mighty deeds, Deuteronomy 4:32-34. His sovereignty became evident in every nook and cranny of her existence. It included her communal prosperity and eternal destiny. The Lord promised that “*the saints of the Most High will receive His kingdom,*” Daniel 7:18.

Yet there would be repeated failures and momentary setbacks. Often the reign of Jehovah was scarcely acknowledged (and little appreciated). The Lord lavished abundant grace on Israel. He received scant gratitude in return. In the end, His judgment fell on her, Hosea 13:1-9. God would not tolerate insubordination. Israel found it difficult to live amidst the enslaving idolatries of her time. She was surrounded by rival gods attractively packaged in respected cultures. Israel slowly succumbed to the heathen practices of her neighbors. She learned the hard way that the Lord commanded undivided respect, Psalm 81:8-10.

B. Aspects of the Kingdom in the Old Testament. There are five significant aspects of the kingdom in the Old Testament. Each one of them is clarified in the New Testament.

1. God reigned. His rule was absolute. He controlled the heavens and the earth, Psalm 99:1-3. Nothing was outside (or beyond) His reign. He was the King of kings, the Lord of lords, Psalm 103:19.

2. He required loyalty. His people must be committed to Him alone. There was no

acceptable alternative. There was no other God. Consequently, unequivocal allegiance was demanded, Deuteronomy 6:4,5.

3. He expected loving kindness. Jehovah was concerned with individuals as well as with nations, Psalm 113:4-9. He expected the same concern among His subjects. He delighted in those who opposed racism, greed, and injustice, Psalm 99:4. He was concerned about the abuse of power, the neglect of strangers, and the struggle of the poor. God wanted His followers to be kind, compassionate, and fair, Micah 6:8.

4. He was resisted. God was frequently ignored. His promises were despised. His love was spurned. His gifts were irresponsibly wasted. Humans were sinful creatures, Psalm 14:2,3; Ecclesiastes 7:20. The Lord was aware of their apathy. He felt the sting of their arrogance. But, thankfully, He bore the shame of their failure with fatherly compassion.

5. His rule would be established. God was not totally preoccupied with the past. His prophets pointed to the time when *“the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord,”* Habakkuk 2:14. He was the Dispenser of hope. He was the Giver of salvation. That was His goal (though He would endure many dark days before it was realized). In spite of constant detours, His plan would be accomplished. His mission would be fulfilled. His kingdom would be established, Daniel 2:44.

II. Kingdom in the New Testament

The New Testament shouts what the Old Testament whispered. It clearly shows that the reality of the kingdom is before history. The providential power of the kingdom is in history. And the grand unfolding of the kingdom is beyond history.

A. Kingdom in the Gospels. The incarnation of Christ inaugurated a new stage in the development of the kingdom, Luke 16:16. *“The time has come,”* Jesus said, *“the kingdom of God is near,”* Mark 1:15. It was not the political overthrow of Rome. It was not a military victory over the enemy. The people were disappointed. They expected a powerful conquest. Instead the kingdom required personal obedience, II Thessalonians 1:8,9. The audience of Jesus was offended. They brushed aside the thought of the kingdom being in their midst. Yet, the Lord insisted, *“The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you,”* Luke 17:20,21. Even Nicodemus was confused. For the kingdom demanded spiritual rebirth, John 3:3. And, in response to how that could be, Jesus merely repeated His challenge, John 3:5. Without faith expressed in submission, people can neither *“see”* nor *“enter”* the kingdom. The message was clear. The kingdom was present. It was like yeast in a batch of dough, Matthew 13:33. It was a banquet where beggars are honored guests, Luke 13:29,30. It was a treasure worth sacrificing all one has, Matthew 13:44,45. The rule of God in our lives should bring forth fruits of righteousness. If that fruit is not produced, the kingdom will be removed, Matthew 21:43.

B. Kingdom in the Epistles. Jesus ascended back to heaven, Daniel 7:13,14. That event was the beginning of His reign, Philippians 2:8-11. He “*is seated at the right hand of God,*” Colossians 3:1. He will return in power and glory, Acts 1:11; II Thessalonians 1:5-7. The first act of His reign was sending the Holy Spirit, Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8. When the Spirit came, the disciples immediately announced the sovereignty of Christ, Acts 2:29-36. The enthroned Lord was the focus of their message, Acts 7:55,56. Jesus dwelled above. He ruled from heaven. The final stage in divine redemption had dawned, Acts 2:14-21. The resurrected Christ has all authority “*in heaven and on earth,*” Matthew 28:18. He sent the Church to proclaim this great news, Mark 16:15. Today is the day of salvation, II Corinthians 6:1,2. Soon the Lord will return. The day of reckoning is at hand. Then the kingdom will be returned to the Father, I Corinthians 15:20-24.

The five aspects of the kingdom in the Old Testament are more fully fleshed out in the New Testament.

1. God reigns. His sovereignty now includes Jesus. The core of our message, the crux of salvation is His lordship, Romans 10:9; II Corinthians 4:5. Christ is co-regent with the Father. He sits to the right of His majesty. He rules over all things, Colossians 1:15-18. Therefore, the worship of anyone (or anything) other than Him is utterly foolish and totally futile. He is the Lord, I Corinthians 10:18-22.

2. He requires loyalty. Personal commitment comes from a transformed mind, Romans 12:1,2. It is the product of the indwelling Spirit, I Corinthians 12:2,3. It is a dethroning of self and an enthroning of God. It begins with repentance. It results in conversion. Satan is removed from the soul. The Spirit of God takes over, Romans 8:9a. It requires an unconditional surrender to the Lord, James 4:7a.

3. He expects loving kindness. The Church is not (in and of itself) the kingdom. It is a reflection of the kingdom. It mirrors His rule in the world as well as His concern for the world. His sovereignty in the Church challenges her members both morally and socially. She is to respond to the kingdom with good behavior and charitable service.

4. He is resisted. The battle is relentless. The Church is a mixture of strength and weakness, right and wrong. The contradiction is confusing. The rule of God is called into question. The struggle is not new. Christ has already encountered the foe, Colossians 2:15. The forces of evil continue the attack, Ephesians 6:10-18. As the prince of darkness, Satan occasionally catches the saints off guard. The conflict will persist until the Master “*has put all His enemies under His feet,*” I Corinthians 15:25. Every pocket of resistance will be overcome. Every pretense of rebellion will be demolished. Then God will be “*all in all*”—the sole, undisputed ruler of the universe, I Corinthians 15:27,28.

5. His rule will be established. The Church marches on to the ends of the earth. The farther she goes, the more resistance she faces. Christ endured the cross. The followers of Christ are to “*complete what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ,*” Colossians 1:24. But why should

we do so? It is the will of our sovereign Lord, I Peter 4:12-19. All the pain and tears will turn to shouts of joy and praise when “*the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord,*” Revelation 11:15. And He will reign forever and ever.

SECTION I

OLD TESTAMENT

CHAPTER 1

GENESIS - DEUTERONOMY

Jesus began His ministry saying, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,*” Matthew 4:17. The “*kingdom*” was a major part of His preaching, Matthew 5:3,10,19,20; 25:34. He said the “*kingdom*” was like a farmer sowing seed, Matthew 13:18,19, like a net catching fish, Matthew 13:47, like a royal wedding banquet, Matthew 22:2. He emphasized that one must become like a child to understand it, surrender to enter it, sell everything to gain it, and carry a cross to be a member of it.

Still, in spite of all His references to the kingdom, Jesus never defined it. Neither did any of His hearers ask Him to do so. They knew. And Jesus knew they knew. The kingdom was woven into the fabric of their faith. To us, however, it is a strange idea. Our task, then, is clear. We must discover the origin and significance of this important concept.

It may come as a surprise to learn that the phrase “kingdom of God” rarely occurs in the New Testament (outside of the Gospels). It never occurs in the (Hebrew) Old Testament. Nevertheless, the rule of God is found on almost every page of the Bible. The sovereignty of heaven is the kingdom with which the Jews were so familiar.

I. Birth of Kingdom Consciousness.

Israel looked for a Messiah who would establish the rule of God. Jesus was declared to be that Messiah. He repeatedly announced that that kingdom was near. Therefore, we must study the messianic hope of Israel. It is certain that this hope did not exist in a vacuum. It developed in the womb of her faith, in the embryo of her history. It took a clearer form in the message of the prophets, Isaiah 9:6,7. But, before she could enter the messianic kingdom, she had to experience the sovereign rule of God.

The idea of the rule (or kingdom) of God was not formed by the monarchs of Israel. Though they likely contributed to it, they did not create it. For the concept of the kingdom predates the rise of the first king in Israel. We are obligated, then, to look back to the beginning of her existence, to the birth of her faith.

In the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy, the idea of the rule of God took root. It was linked to the notion of being the chosen people of Jehovah. This “chosenness” was the life blood of her belief. It explains the tenacity of the kingdom hope that was shaped by her painful history.

A. History of Israel. The story of Israel begins around 1400 BC (when she settled in the Promised Land). Because her history was closely intertwined with the surrounding nations, it is beneficial to examine the world of that time.

1. Egypt. The sun of Egypt was setting. For two thousand years, she had been a world power. Her empire stretched from the Nile to the Euphrates. Shortly after the exodus of Israel from Egyptian slavery, the Philistines invaded Egypt. That was the final blow. Though Egypt survived, only a shell of her former glory remained. Incessant war had depleted her resources. The flame of patriotism had gone out. The will of the empire had vanished. Her former splendor became a faded memory. The demise of Egypt paralleled the book of Judges.

2. Canaan. On the northwestern frontier of Egypt, Canaan spread out across the hills and valleys of Palestine. For centuries Canaan had been an Egyptian province. The Canaanites were gathered into a patchwork of petty city-states. Each city-state had its own king (who was subject to pharaoh). The Canaanites had no political unity. Egypt allowed none. Egyptian garrisons were stationed here and there to quell rebellions. When the power of Egypt died, a political vacuum ensued. The Canaanite kinglets were left without a central government. They were incapable of creating one. Bedouin tribes infiltrated the land. Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites settled east of the Jordan River. Egypt was powerless to stop them. Then, suddenly, desert dwellers from the Sinai Peninsula appeared on the banks of the Jordan. A diviner was summoned to curse the invaders, Numbers 22:1-7. It did not work. Israel crossed the flooded river. Village after village was plundered. The hearts of the Canaanites melted in terror, Joshua 5:1. Within seven years, most of the towns were subdued. Israel divided the land and settled there.

3. Israel. Who were these people? They called themselves the sons of Jacob, the children of Israel. They believed that God had promised them this land, Joshua 1:1-5. So they took it! The conquest of Canaan was swift but not complete. Many of the original inhabitants remained, Joshua 13:1; cf. Exodus 23:27-30. Israel was vulnerable. Paganism lurked in the shadows. Her heathen neighbors would test the solidarity of her faith.

B. Faith of Israel. The takeover of Canaan could be viewed as just another war. But these desert tribesmen brought with them a unique religion. The faith of Israel was an extreme renunciation of ancient paganism.

1. Unique God. The deity of the Israelites was drastically different from the local Canaanite gods.

a. Monotheistic. The Jews had one God. Jehovah strictly warned them to have no other gods but Him, Exodus 20:3-5. The full implication of this monotheism was worked out over time. Certainly there were occasions when the Israelites strayed from that ideal. Yet, since they regarded other gods as “*useless*,” I Samuel 12:21; cf. Habakkuk 3:18-20, as “*not gods*,” II Chronicles 13:8,9; Jeremiah 2:11; 5:7; 16:20; cf. Acts 19:26, their faith (at its roots) was

monotheistic. The Jews, in contrast to their pagan neighbors, made a radical confession: “*The Lord our God, the Lord is one,*” Deuteronomy 6:4.

b. Iconoclastic. The God of Israel was not to be represented by any material object. And, as the second commandment said, “*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below*” Deuteronomy 5:8; 7:5,6; cf. Isaiah 42:8,17; 43:10-13; 44:9-11. Though from time to time the Jews worshipped idols, they never made an image of Jehovah. At her core, she had an iconoclastic monotheism.

c. Sovereign. Israel also believed her God could and did control all things. She believed that that sovereignty enabled Him to reveal His power through her. This was in stark contrast to her pagan neighbors. They were polytheists. They believed in dozens of gods. These gods (for the most part) were personifications of natural forces. They had no moral character. They were manipulated by ritual (so the worshippers could gain the benefits they desired). In such religions, then, no moral interpretation of events was possible because none of the gods ruled history. Jehovah was different. He controlled nature (without being identified with it). He was beyond human manipulation. He was a moral being in control of all events. The God of Israel was unique among ancient religious deities.

2. Unique people. Israel believed that such a God existed. She also believed that that God had (in an unparalleled act of grace) chosen her. She believed He had entered into a covenant with her. There is no time when she did not hold these truths dear. Israel was saturated with this notion of chosenness. Indeed, later, when the prophets proclaimed the judgment of God against her, Israel recoiled in disbelief. Her chosenness was the DNA of her worldview, Deuteronomy 7:7-9; cf. Ezekiel 16:1-8. The call of Abraham and the deliverance from Egypt are visual demonstrations of His undeserved favor. Israel did not merit His kindness, Deuteronomy 9:4-6. God chose her so that she might choose Him. The covenant between them was always presented as an agreement prompted by divine grace, Deuteronomy 8:10-18. The call of God (for Israel to live under His rule) began with her election. That election was the birth of kingdom consciousness, Deuteronomy 10:14-17.

3. Unique relationship. A unique God who chose a unique people is an enormously profound idea. It not only gave a moral imperative but also a dynamic hope to Israel, Exodus 19:3-6. That imperative and that hope was the essence of their unique relationship.

a. Moral imperative. Israel had been chosen by grace. Hence, she must not take her relationship with Jehovah for granted. It required obedience. Israel was not a superior race. She was not an outstanding nation. She did not possess a better culture. She was who she was. She lived where she lived because God blessed her, Psalms 44:1-8. God freely chose her. She freely chose God. The covenant between them was based on the initiative of heaven. Jehovah would bless them as long as they obeyed Him, Deuteronomy 6:10-12. The agreement demanded undivided loyalty. Idolatry (in any form) was forbidden, Leviticus 26:1. Morality (in every form) was encouraged, Exodus 23:1-9.

b. Dynamic hope. The covenant with God gave Israel a confident sense of destiny. No tragedy could dislodge it. She had a guaranteed future. This fueled an undying optimism (even during her darkest days), Lamentations 3:19-26. Israel believed she was moving toward an appointed outcome promised by Yahweh. She was chosen to serve His purpose. And, since He was the Lord of history, that purpose would come to pass. History would fulfill His plan. The future was the inevitable fruition of His design. Therein lays the tenacity of her hope, the firmness of her resolve. For her, God was the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

II. Yahweh and the Gods.

Where did the understanding of Jehovah originate? Did Israel borrow her idea of deity from her pagan neighbors? Did she develop her concept of God from the gods? Some people think so. I disagree. These questions, however, invite a closer examination of Genesis through Deuteronomy.

A. Yahweh in the Pentateuch. God revealed Himself to ancient Israel. The revelation occurred while she was living among people who believed in many gods. The similarities between Yahweh and the gods are interesting. The differences are convicting. What the Lord did in Israel simply never happened elsewhere. Their understanding of God, then, could not have come from pagan sources. The Hebrew religion was different from other religions because her God was different from their gods.

1. "There is no one like the Lord," Exodus 8:10. Yahweh was without equal. None of the pagan gods were like Him. He was incomparable. In the Old Testament, several phrases were used to express this uniqueness. For instance, in comparing Himself to other gods, the Lord declared, "There is no one like Me in all the earth," Exodus 9:14. And, while blessing Israel, Moses said, "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun" (an endearing name for Israel), Deuteronomy 33:26. The words "no one like" express a one-of-a-kindness, cf. Deuteronomy 34:10. As a particular linguistic form, the words "no one like" simply said there was no other god similar to, on a level with, or equal to Jehovah.

2. "Who among the gods is like You?" Exodus 15:11. In addition to comparative statements, Moses used rhetorical questions to express uniqueness. For example, Moses asked, "What god is there in heaven or on earth that can do the deeds and mighty works You do?" Deuteronomy 3:24; cf. Deuteronomy 4:34. Yahweh was beyond comparison among divine beings. There is simply none like Him, none equal to Him. He is magnificent in holiness, awesome in splendor, and extraordinary in accomplishment. Moses also employed rhetorical questions to describe the uniqueness of Israel. She was without equal among the nations (because her God was without equal among the gods), Deuteronomy 4:7; 33:29. It is obvious, therefore, that rhetorical questions were a communication device for expressing a deep conviction. The anticipated response to these "who is like" questions was always "none." When they referred to the Lord, the expected reply was "none but Jehovah."

3. "The Lord is one," Deuteronomy 6:4. The identity of Israel was clarified by the demand to "love Yahweh with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,"

Deuteronomy 6:5. The force of this command rested on the declaration that “*Yahweh is your God.*” Indeed, He is “*one*” or He “*alone*” is the God of Israel. The Hebrew text is ambiguous. It points either to the undivided nature of Yahweh or the undivided loyalty of Israel.

- Undivided loyalty of Israel. To say “*the Lord is our God, the Lord alone*” introduced the command to love God with complete devotion, Mark 12:29,30. It described the appropriate commitment of Israel. It focused her loyalty on Jehovah. It encouraged Israel to give herself completely to Him. According to this rendering (of Deuteronomy 6:4), it was a radical confession. Israel should worship “*no other god*” but Jehovah. She should have “*no other gods*” but Him, Exodus 20:3.

- Undivided nature of God. The alternative translation (of Deuteronomy 6:4) says “*Yahweh is one.*” It emphasizes the integrity of His nature, the unity of His being. He was known as the One “*who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt,*” Deuteronomy 5:6. When she made an idol, God was ready to destroy her, Deuteronomy 9:12-14. This threatened destruction made Him appear inconsistent, Deuteronomy 9:28,29. In the end, His integrity prevailed. He kept His covenant with His people, Deuteronomy 7:8,9; cf. Numbers 14:11-16. To confess that “*Yahweh is one*” was to claim He was faithful. He was consistent in purpose, undivided in His being.

B. Yahweh and the Gods. Yahweh was unique, whole, and undivided. He was a covenant God of impeccable integrity. Where did these ascriptions originate? Did Israel borrow them from local, pagan religions? The evidence does not warrant that conclusion. Rather Yahweh was greater than and distinct from the gods of Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan.

1. Distinct from the gods. Israel lived in a world shaped by polytheism, by a supposed cosmic struggle between gods and goddesses. Though the Pentateuch reflects some of these local influences, every element of paganism is eliminated from them. The faith of Israel stood in sharp contrast to her polytheistic environment.

- a. El. The father and omnipotent ruler of the Canaanite gods was El. He was the “*Most High God.*” Therefore, in age and power, El surpassed them all. While living in Ur of Chaldea, Abraham worshipped the gods of Babylon, Joshua 24:14. When he entered Canaan, he served El (the god of Melchizedek, Genesis 14:18-20, and Abimelech, Genesis 20:1-7). Likewise, Jacob built an altar and called it “*El, the God of Israel,*” Genesis 33:19,20. According to archaeological findings, a religious upheaval was in progress in Canaan when Abraham arrived there. The Babylonians were invading the land. They brought with them their gods. The people in Canaan (also called the Amorites) adopted these new gods, cf. Genesis 15:12-16 and Amos 2:9,10. Baal eventually replaced El as the king of the gods in Canaan. But, as an agricultural fertility cult, Baalism did not penetrate the desert regions of Midian in the south. It was to the south that Abraham migrated, that Jacob lived, and that Moses tended sheep, Exodus 3:1. Here in Midian, Moses met El—the “*God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*—at the burning bush, Exodus 3:6. There the Lord, who was similar to El, revealed Himself as distinct from El. Both El and Yahweh were called the Creator, the God of mercy, and the Holy One.

Both were authors of social order, teachers of righteousness, and champions of widows and orphans. But, unlike El, Yahweh did not rule over a pantheon of gods. Instead, Yahweh declared Himself the one and only God, the sovereign ruler of heaven and earth. It was this God who called Himself “*I am who I am,*” Exodus 3:14. So, Moses, who had worshipped El, was given a new understanding. He received a new insight into the uniqueness of Jehovah. He was better prepared for his imminent confrontation with Baal. This, then, is why Genesis shows no antagonism between the religious practices of the patriarchs and the inhabitants of Canaan. They both worshipped El. However, when Baalism swept away El, and Yahweh stepped forward, things changed. Animosity grew. The new Canaanite god, Baal, and the newly revealed God of Israel, Yahweh, confronted one another, Exodus 23:23-26a; Deuteronomy 11:8-17.

b. Baal. When Israel crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land, they became bitter enemies of the Canaanites. And Yahweh became a fierce adversary of Baal. Israel was repeatedly warned to remain faithful to God, Deuteronomy 17:2-7; 18:9-13; 30:17,18. Yet, in spite of the warnings, many in Israel soon abandoned Yahweh, Judges 2:10; 6:7-10; 10:6,7a. And, in time, some of her leaders adopted Baal cult practices, Jeremiah 32:30-35. The rivalry between Yahweh and Baal persisted throughout the history of Israel. The people misunderstood the distinctiveness of Jehovah—the God who asked them to love Him as He had loved them, Exodus 34:10-14.

2. Greater than the gods. Whenever the Pentateuch mentioned other gods, it assumed these gods were real to the pagans. Yet, in comparison to these gods, Yahweh was always distinct from and greater than the gods. The prohibitions against idolatry and the expressions of exaltation reflect this greatness.

a. Prohibition against idolatry. Israel was strictly forbidden to make idols, Exodus 20:4,5; Leviticus 19:4; 20:1-5; Deuteronomy 29:16-18. Idols were merely man made objects. They were detestable, useless, and ineffective pieces of wood and stone, Deuteronomy 27:15; 32:21. Idols cannot see, hear, smell, or taste, Deuteronomy 4:28. So idols will disappoint and embarrass. The Lord had good reasons for forbidding idolatry.

- An image of Yahweh was impossible to make (since no one had ever seen Him).
- An image was subject to the control of human beings.
- An image of Yahweh would make assimilating fertility cult practices easier.

Consequently, in contrast to the Canaanite gods, Yahweh made Himself known entirely apart from idols, Deuteronomy 4:12-18. The prohibition against idolatry, therefore, set Israel apart from her pagan neighbors. It distinguished Israel from the Canaanites, Yahweh from the gods. As a sovereign Lord, He had the authority to impose a ban against idolatry, Deuteronomy 4:1,2. He is the God not formed by human hands nor controlled by human decisions.

a. Expression of exaltation. Some scholars believe Israel adopted her forms of praise from pagan sources. Certainly Babylon, Egypt, and Israel employed similar statements of uniqueness for their deities. Hence, the question of Israel borrowing her praise forms must be

taken seriously. Yet, after considering the evidence, it is impossible to prove that Israel plagiarized. No doubt the Hebrews were aware of the pagan idioms of praise. But it seems far more likely their expressions of exaltation came from their direct experiences with Yahweh, Exodus 15:11. It is out of the richness of these encounters with God that Israel knew Jehovah. There was no need for her to imitate her heathen contemporaries. Rather, from her very beginning, Israel linked the uniqueness of Yahweh with her rescue from Egypt, Exodus 20:2. Her confession was not a borrowed confession. It was her experience. Yahweh was a God beyond comparison or imitation, Deuteronomy 4:34; 33:29a. There was none greater because there was none other, Deuteronomy 4:39. In light of His redeeming power, Exodus 7:5,17; 8:10, and His covenant love, Deuteronomy 4:7, Israel could confidently say there was no god but God. He was not a pagan deity, a “*false*” rock, a god who disappeared in the time of crisis, Deuteronomy 32:21,31,37. Quite to the contrary, Yahweh was a real, redeeming, covenant God who loved His people. If Israel took her monotheism seriously, she had an authentic witness among pagan polytheism. And so do we! But, if she succumbed to religious tolerance, she would lose her incredible purpose. And so will we! Therefore, our concern should not only be the condemnation of the gods but also the proclamation of Yahweh—the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

CHAPTER 2

JOSHUA - II CHRONICLES

When Israel conquered the Promised Land, she was a loose confederation of tribes. Within the tribes, authority was vested in the elders. Unity was expressed in the worship of one, supreme deity. The ensuing centuries would slowly incubate their rudimentary concept of the kingdom.

I. Development of Kingdom Understanding.

The formulation of kingdom thinking emerged within a most unlikely environment. The tribal theocracy depended on deliverers in dangerous times, Judges 3:9,15. These deliverers were empowered by the Spirit of God, Judges 3:10; 14:6. Though their victories gave them local prestige, they were not kings. They were merely temporary leaders raised up by Yahweh.

In the tribal theocracy, an anti-monarchical mood prevailed, Judges 8:22,23; 9:7-21. Only in light of such a feeling can one understand the outrage of Samuel. The people wanted a king. The old prophet bristled at their request. He saw it as a flagrant rejection of Jehovah, I Samuel 8:1-9.

Israel might have remained a tribal theocracy if an emergency had not arisen. The Philistines—who had defeated Egypt and settled on the coast of Palestine—were poised to overrun Israel. The enemy was a tight knit, well disciplined, heavily armed, military machine. In the first battle, the Hebrews were cut to pieces, scattered in disarray. The Ark of the Covenant was captured, the tabernacle destroyed, I Samuel 4:1-11; cf. Psalm 78:60-64; Jeremiah 7:12; 26:7-9. Israel was humiliated. Pagans occupied her land. She was disarmed, vulnerable, and scared, I Samuel 13:19-21. The tribal league failed. The people of God were crushed.

In order to deal with the emergency, Israel begged for a king, I Samuel 8:19,20. The initial move toward statehood ended in a failure. Though given the Spirit of Yahweh, I Samuel 11:6,7, Saul differed little from the deliverers who preceded him. He did not change the internal structure of the tribal confederation. He had no administrative organization, levied no taxes. He did not create a state government. He had no standing army. And, in the end, he was defeated by Philistia, I Samuel 31:1-6.

A. Reign of David. David reversed the situation. He brought unimagined glory to the people of God. The giant killer of local fame was chosen to succeed Saul—first in Judah, II Samuel 2:4a, and later over all Israel, II Samuel 5:1-3. A different nation was soon to emerge.

1. Monarchy. David rose to power on a wave of popular acclaim, I Samuel 18:7. He sharpened the notion of the kingdom in Israel. David gathered a sizeable army (under His

command), I Samuel 22:2; 27:2; II Samuel 15:18. He was a gifted leader, a powerful king.

2. Security. When David was crowned king, the Philistines immediately challenged his authority, II Samuel 5:17. David prevailed. Philistia was defeated, II Samuel 8:1. Then David engaged in a series of stunning military victories, II Samuel 8:11-14. When the dust settled, David ruled over a vast empire. And the kings beyond the borders of his realm hurried to make peace with him. In the span of a few years, Israel was transformed. The former league of bickering tribesmen became a ranking world power. The word “kingdom” took on a new meaning.

3. Prosperity. The conquests of David gave Israel control over the lucrative trade routes between Egypt and Syria. Solomon, the son of David, went a step further. He built a substantial maritime enterprise, I Kings 10:22. The regal splendor of the kingdom under Solomon was unsurpassed before or since, I Kings 10:1-9,23-25.

B. Golden Age. The people of Yahweh became the kingdom of Israel. The changes were enormous. The outcome has few (if any) parallels in the history of the Jews.

1. New developments. The tribal league was transformed into a central government. It had a standing army, judicial system, administrative offices, tax code, and capitol city, I Kings 4:1-6. The state was organized under the crown. The people were subject to the king, I Kings 4:7. Little was left of the former agrarian simplicity. An urban upper class developed. Princes and harems, pomp and ceremony became the order of the day. Wealth was abundant. A body of literature was developed. In the difficult days ahead, nostalgia for the golden era of Israel would grip the nation. It would be impossible to think of the Messiah without hoping for the restoration of this kingdom grandeur, Acts 1:6.

2. National religion. Under David and Solomon, the religion of Israel was centered in Jerusalem. The tabernacle was gone. The temple was built. The hope of Israel was tied to the holy city, I Kings 9:3-9.

3. Grave danger. An official, state-supported religion developed. But, where a secular government and a religious institution join hands, problems lurk nearby. The spiritual serves the secular. The temple hallows the throne. And, sure enough, the palace and the altar became bed fellows in Israel. The state had financed the building of the temple. The king was hailed as the (adopted) son of God, II Samuel 7:11b-14a; cf. Psalms 2:7; 89:20-29. The goals of the throne and the temple were blended together. Each supported the other. Thus, the state was seen as the “kingdom of God,” ruled by the “son of God,” and populated by the “people of God.” Would Israel eventually become a completely secular state? Would her citizenship in the kingdom of God be satisfied by the privilege of being citizens of Israel? In other words, would she mistake the rule of David for the rule of God? Would she confuse the reign of her king with the rule of the King of kings?

C. Fading hope. The danger was very real. But it was not to be. For many in Israel viewed

the secular government as an intolerable intrusion, grossly incompatible with the kingdom of God.

1. Violent reaction. Tension grew. The monarchy had instigated many changes. The crown thought the people were owned by the state. His subjects were supposed to work for him without pay, I Kings 12:1-4. The king treated his subordinates as slaves, I Kings 12:13,14. The people reacted with predictable scorn, I Kings 12:16. Their animosity increased as their enslavement deepened. Furthermore, the king was “selling” the nation in order to “feather” his own nest. Treaties were made with pagan countries. Those arrangements were solemnized by “political marriages,” I Kings 11:1-3. These foreign wives finagled the throne of Israel to give official recognition to their idol gods, I Kings 11:4-8. The followers of Yahweh were outraged. The king should not ignore the King of kings. The kingdom of Israel must conform to the kingdom of God. The northern tribes rebelled. The son of Solomon tried to quiet the storm. It was too little too late, I Kings 12:18,19. The once mighty empire was shattered. The rebellion was the will of Yahweh, I Kings 12:21-24. The excesses of the state had been resoundingly denounced. Israel never recovered from the disaster of the revolt. Egypt took advantage of her weakened condition. The Egyptians invaded Judah and looted Jerusalem, I Kings 14:25,26. Syria ravaged Israel, I Kings 15:20. The empire of David was in shambles. The Golden Age of Israel became a distant dream.

2. Downward spiral. An attempt was made to recapture the glory days of Solomon. King Ahab made an alliance with Phoenicia. The treaty was sealed with a “political marriage.” Jezebel brought her god (Baal) to Israel. Ahab became a fertility cult practitioner. The worship of Yahweh hung in the balance. The prophet Elijah confronted the situation, I Kings 18:20,21. Baal rituals encouraged “sacred” prostitution by both genders. The adherents participated in sexual orgies of the most disgusting kind. The question of Yahweh or Baal was not a trivial matter. The state was making a concerted effort to replace the worship of God with the worship of gods. The future looked bleak, I Kings 19:13b,14. A feeling persisted that the state should be purged of paganism by killing the Baal worshippers. A blood bath followed, I Kings 18:40. The house of Ahab was butchered, II Kings 9:1-10. Jezebel was murdered, II Kings 9:30-33. Such brutality has few parallels in history. This ugly episode was not the mere product of a mindless mob. It was the expression of an agitated religious conservatism. The exponents of the blood bath were Yahwehists. The father of the movement was Elijah, I Kings 19:15-18. In the name of Jehovah, he declared holy war on a pagan state. Israel had departed from her sovereign Lord. She opted for fertility cult practices. The purge was an attempt to correct these perversions. Did the purge make the kingdom of Israel into the kingdom of God? No! Political action does not yield spiritual results. In fact, the purge was condemned, Hosea 1:4. Wounds of lasting hatred had been inflicted. Grudges smoldered. Yahweh “*began to reduce the size of Israel,*” II Kings 10:32,33. Judah was also attacked, II Kings 14:11-14. The purge did not purge. Though Baalism was defeated, a shrine to the goddess Asherah, the wife of Baal, remained in Israel, II Kings 13:6. A foreign paganism had been drowned in blood. An indigenous paganism took its place.

II. Role of the Nations.

Since Israel was the chosen people, what was the place of the other nations in the plan of God? Should chosenness be viewed as superiority? Israel failed to understand her calling. Will we mistake the meaning of our chosenness? A look at the role of the nations will clarify the issues involved in being the people of God.

The Old Testament contains numerous examples regarding the acceptance of people outside of Israel. For instance, God established a covenant with Noah, Genesis 9:9. Melchizedek (who was not in the lineage of Abraham) was “*a priest of God Most High*,” Genesis 14:18. In other words, the Lord began His saving activity outside Israel. His dealings with Abimelech, Jethro, Balaam, Job, and Naaman are ample evidence of His concern for other people. The covenant He made with Abram was for the sake of “*all peoples on earth*,” Genesis 12:1-4. It was an agreement that included everyone.

The call of Abraham was intended to be a blessing for the whole world. All nations were included. God chose Abraham in order to wrap His arms around the Gentiles, too, Galatians 3:6-9. Abraham was certainly pivotal in the redemptive plan of Yahweh. But the covenant was not limited to him (or Israel). Everybody would share in His salvation through obedient faith. He was the God of all nations.

A. Concern of God for the Nations. One God created one world in which He placed one family who was promptly plagued by one problem: sin. The Lord dealt with this infectious disease in the flood. After that new beginning, the sin problem quickly surfaced again. Consequently, as before, Yahweh narrowed His focus. He chose to work through one man: Abraham. The one God blessed the one man for the sake of all people, Genesis 12:3. It was obvious that Jehovah was concerned for the nations. The descendants of Abraham would not be the sole recipients of divine grace. Israel would receive favors that were promised to others also. Yahweh loved all nations, Genesis 18:17,18; 22:15-18; 26:2-4; 28:13,14. It is difficult to perceive how the Jews could overlook these statements. In verse after verse, with clear language, the purpose of Israel is plainly stated. The principle of divine election for universal service was unmistakably transparent.

1. Place of Israel. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests (or mediators) between God and the nations, Exodus 19:5,6. They were to bring people before the Lord. Israel was required to be holy, set apart for the service of God. She was to make known to the nations the wonders of Jehovah. There was no room for self-service. The Hebrews were commanded by God to love aliens, Leviticus 19:33,34. The hymnbook of Israel (the Psalms) is filled with references to the nations—calling them to honor Yahweh as the king of all the earth, Psalms 66:1-8; 96:1-3; 117:1,2. Israel dared to ask God to bless her so that she could in turn be a blessing to everyone else, Psalms 67:1-7. Unfortunately, Israel sang these hymns as if they only applied to her. We make the same mistake. We sing “Send the Light” and do little to take that light beyond the four walls of the sanctuary. How can we be children of God when we are so self-absorbed?

2. Place of the nations. The prophets reminded Israel of her original purpose, Isaiah 49:5,6. God wanted her to be a “*light to the Gentiles*,” Isaiah 52:10. The pagan nations

would stand in awe. They would be speechless at what was made known to them about the suffering servant, Isaiah 52:13-15. Israel had a task to do. She was to bear the message of salvation to the ends of the earth, Isaiah 42:6,7; 62:1,2. The nations would come and worship Jehovah, Isaiah 66:18-23. The world would see the futility of their idols when they witnessed the power of God, Jeremiah 16:19-21. But Israel profaned His name. The Lord sent her into exile. His power was revealed through her punishment, Ezekiel 36:22,23; 38:23; 39:7. That power was made known in her exodus from Egypt. It was also revealed in the return from captivity. God dealt with Israel as He deals with all nations, Amos 9:7. He restored Israel as a gesture of His grace. He wanted all nations to come to Him, Micah 4:1,2. He was concerned for everyone, Zechariah 8:20-22. God did not have favorites. He was partial to no one. The Lord was equally the Lord of all.

B. Significance of Israel to the Nations. In the Old Testament, the nations are people who do not know Yahweh, Exodus 5:2; II Kings 17:26; cf. John 17:25. They were different from Israel. They were the pagan tribes, the ethnic groups outside of Israel. They worshipped gods (instead of God). They did not honor the true and living God, Romans 1:22-25. Yet the nations belonged to Jehovah (because He created them). He “*set up boundaries*” between them, Deuteronomy 32:8. Though Israel was the “*apple of His eye*,” God did not abandon the nations, Deuteronomy 32:9,10. He made Himself known to them. He spoke, from time to time, with people beyond Israel. Nebuchadnezzar is a prime example, Daniel 4:31. How, then, were the nations related to God?

C. Relationship of God with the Nations. Israel was chosen to serve Yahweh. She was bound to Him by a covenant. It was different for everyone else. The nations were not chosen. However, now and then, they received temporary assignments from God, I Chronicles 5:26; II Chronicles 36:22,23. They advanced His purpose without being aware it was His purpose they advanced, Micah 4:11,12. When the children of God disobeyed Him, He sent a pagan nation to punish them, Deuteronomy 28:49; cf. Isaiah 45:1-4; Jeremiah 25:8,9. Yahweh frequently used the nations as His instrument of judgment, Habakkuk 1:5-11. The book of Judges is a collection of case studies about the discipline which God brought on Israel through the nations, Judges 2:10-14; cf. Isaiah 10:5,6; Jeremiah 5:15. Certainly He was gracious to Israel in choosing, rescuing, and guiding her. Yet He also summoned the nations to be His rod of correction (when she stepped out of line). Though the nations were not His covenant people, their conscious deeds were their unconscious compliance to His will. And, when they failed to acknowledge Him, the nations fell victim to the wrath of God (in the same way Israel did), Isaiah 10:12. In other words the Lord was in complete control of history. The temporary selection of a nation was not inconsistent with His election of Israel. Indeed, it was for her sake that a nation was summoned. The pagans were called to rekindle the flicking flame of Israel so that she could again be a “*light to the Gentiles*.”

D. Mission of God to the Nations. What Yahweh did exclusively for Israel, He was doing inclusively for the nations. Ultimately, everything He did for His people, He was doing for the sake of all people.

1. The nations saw Him in Israel. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, the nations trembled, Exodus 15:14-16. The pagans feared Yahweh, Joshua 4:23,24. His wonders and signs caused them to fear Israel, too, Deuteronomy 2:24,25; 28:10; cf. Nehemiah 6:15,16. His protection of Israel after the exodus was also a demonstration of His power, I Kings 8:59,60; cf. Psalm 67:1-7. Later, when Israel angered God, Yahweh was ready to annihilate His people. He relented because the pagans would not understand, Numbers 14:15,16. For the same reason, Israel was rescued from Babylonian exile, Ezekiel 20:9,14,41; 36:23,36; 37:28. Therefore, the nations were encouraged to praise God. The rescue of Israel (by implication) included all who turned to Jehovah, I Chronicles 16:23-31; Psalm 98:2,3. Thus, the nations were called into judgment, Isaiah 41:1,21. Their gods were discredited, Isaiah 41:22-24. They were declared false and useless, Isaiah 41:28,29. Yahweh called Israel to be His servant, Isaiah 44:1,2. Through her, the nations saw Him. They were ashamed. They heard His voice. They shut their mouths, Micah 7:15-18.

2. The nations came to Him through Israel. The way was opened for the nations to come to Jehovah. They were not excluded. At various times, in the past, the pagans had been incorporated into Israel, Esther 8:17. But the Passover regulations seemed to exclude them, Exodus 12:43. However, upon further reading, the nations could be included, Exodus 12:48. The condition for participation was circumcision—the sign of the covenant. Acceptance of the covenant meant reception into Israel. The way was open for the nations to be among the elect, to worship Yahweh. The people of Israel were the door to the kingdom of God. As a nation of priests, she was a mediator between Jehovah and the nations. The kingdom of God was reflected in Israel. It reached beyond her to all nations. She was His missionary people. They were not sent to the nations but drew the nations to Him.

CHAPTER 3

PRE-EXILE PROPHETS

The years between 800 and 700 BC were turbulent times in Israel. Trouble was brewing on two fronts. (1) Political. The dark clouds of foreign invasion loomed ominously on the horizon. Assyria had already devastated Syria. But, due to internal weakness, Assyria did not attack Israel. Had divine providence intervened? Israel thought so. She assumed she was the kingdom of God. (2) Spiritual. A series of military victories renewed a semblance of the Golden Age under Solomon, II Chronicles 26:6-8. The Jews basked in a new found prosperity, II Chronicles 26:9-15. However, Israel was spiritually sick. Immorality and materialism were evident everywhere, Amos 2:6-8. The temple was crowded with mindless ritual keepers, Amos 4:4,5. Worship was a mechanical, nauseous attempt to manipulate God, Hosea 4:4-9. The priests tolerated (even encouraged) the grossest sin. They uttered no rebuke—except to those who criticized them, Amos 7:12,13.

I. Refinement of Kingdom Ideal.

Israel had a fine army and a strong economy. But she had a rotten religion. She put riches above righteousness, Amos 5:7,10-12; 8:4-6. She loved luxury while complacently ignoring the ruin of her society, Amos 6:1,3-6. A sick nation cannot heal itself by going to Church and overlooking justice, Amos 5:21-24. When the established religion is unable (or willing) to critique itself, spirituality is in desperate straits. Israel was in double jeopardy—sick without knowing it! Her priests demanded monetary support above moral behavior. Doom was inevitable.

A. Israel was NOT the Kingdom of God. What does all this darkness and despair have to do with the kingdom? The pre-exile prophets addressed Israel as the people of Yahweh. She was His partner in the covenant. She knew that. She depended on that to provide her approved standing with heaven. However, her bond with Yahweh had become a facade of pretense. Israel was thoughtlessly ungrateful. She had no excuse. She would not be pampered. She would be punished for her transgressions, Amos 3:11,12; 5:1,2. The Lord had no favorites, Amos 9:7. Certainly God had chosen Israel. But He would also discipline her, Amos 3:2. Her covenant with God was a moral agreement. Israel was not a moral nation. “The hand writing was on the wall.” Repentance was her only cure, Amos 5:4,14,15. Amos, the messenger of God, had made this quite clear. He did not believe Israel was the kingdom of God. The authorities in Israel were outraged. They charged him with treason, “*raising a conspiracy*” against the king, Amos 7:10,11. Israel did not repent. She made no effort to change. She thought she was safe when the Lord judged the nations, Amos 5:18-20. She was tragically mistaken, Hosea 11:1-5. Yahweh would destroy His people, Amos 9:8. The kingdom of Israel was NOT the kingdom of

God. This is a warning to us. If we pray “*Your kingdom come,*” we must also live “*Your will be done,*” Matthew 6:10.

B. Israel was Punished for her Unfaithfulness. Israel had believed she was the kingdom of God. Her agonizing defeat permanently altered that understanding. Her giddy hope turned into deep despair.

1. Political decay. As the state collapsed, her concept of the kingdom was redefined. Israel had six kings in twenty-five years. Anarchy reigned. The government was a joke. The people were in moral disarray, Hosea 4:1,2; 7:1-7; 8:4. The priests turned a blind eye. Indeed, they were the root of the problem, Hosea 4:8,9; 5:1; 6:9,10. The land was soaked with the poison of paganism. The religion of Israel was bankrupt. Still the political maneuvering continued, Hosea 5:13. The politicians were clueless, Hosea 7:11. Israel was headed to the grave yet remained unaware of it, Hosea 7:9. Assyria attacked, II Kings 17:1-4. Israel held out for three, long, painful years. In the end, however, it was to no avail, II Kings 17:5,6. Surely what was left of Israel could not be the kingdom of God! They were a crushed people. Nevertheless, they held on to a distant hope, Jeremiah 31:17.

2. Spiritual ruin. Idolatry was rampant in Israel. It is what caused her destruction. Israel had broken covenant. She had committed spiritual adultery, Hosea 1:2; 2:2-13. Israel was as fickle as the morning mist, Hosea 6:4. Her moral behavior made the pagan gods blush, Hosea 4:10-14. Israel was not the people of God. Her rebellion caused her doom, Hosea 7:13; cf. Hosea 9:11-17. She lost her freedom, returned to slavery, Hosea 9:3. No amount of religious activity stemmed the tide of destruction, Hosea 6:6; 8:13. God took away her king, Hosea 13:9-11. She was not the kingdom of Yahweh.

C. Judah became the Final Refuge. Where was the kingdom? Could it be Judah? Judah had escaped the catastrophe that fell on Israel. Yet Judah was also in pitiful shape.

1. Condition of the remnant. Paganism was alive and well in Jerusalem, II Kings 16:3,4; Isaiah 2:7,8. Sin was as common as dirt, Micah 1:9; 2:1,2; 3:11. Judah was as rotten as Israel. Therefore, Jerusalem would collapse like Samaria, Micah 3:12. A revival was attempted, II Kings 18:1-5. The dream of the kingdom of God on the Davidic throne in Jerusalem was not entirely dead, II Chronicles 30:6-9. The Yahwehists were elated. However, the revival was too little too late. The army of Assyria returned with a vengeance. The land was ravaged. Jerusalem was spared but precious little of the countryside survived, Isaiah 37:33-35.

2. Hope for the messianic kingdom. At a time when the sovereign rule of God seemed most unlikely, the kingdom was given its most eloquent expression. Like Hosea and Amos, Isaiah did not excuse the sin of the men, Isaiah 2:17-21, or the women, Isaiah 3:16-24. They had no respect for God, Isaiah 5:11,12. Yahweh did not tolerate such behavior. He hated pious fraud, pretended piety, Isaiah 1:11-17. Isaiah did not think Judah was the kingdom of God, Isaiah 1:2-4. Judgment was inevitable, Isaiah 3:8,9. Yet, the prophet looked beyond the

punishment. He saw light bursting out of the darkness, Isaiah 9:2. That light was a future prince in the lineage of David who would rule forever, Isaiah 9:6,7.

a. Yahweh was the reason for hope. The encouraging words of Isaiah did not issue from a patriotic sentiment for Judah. The hope of the prophet was rooted in Jehovah alone. He was in control of history. Time fulfilled His eternal purpose. Everything was subject to His will. He called Israel. They failed. But their failure would not become the failure of God. He sent Assyria as an instrument of His punishment, Isaiah 10:5,6. The Lord had His hand on the helm of history—including the history of Judah. The future resided in Him.

b. Purification was the reason for punishment. Judah was redeemable. In spite of her sin, there was still a “holy seed” in the land, Isaiah 6:13. The dross would be removed. And, though the tree of David would be cut down, a stump would remain. God would cleanse His people. He would remove her impurity, Isaiah 1:24,25. The idea of a pure remnant (amenable to the purposes of heaven) had a profound influence on her kingdom thinking, Isaiah 4:2-4.

c. The Kingdom was the reason for history. A nostalgia for the “good ole days” of the reign of David became the framework for the anticipated kingdom of God. The few survivors remaining in Judah were obviously not that kingdom. The hope of the people turned toward the future. They longed for the messianic king, Isaiah 11:1-5. The importance of that concept can hardly be overstated. Their undying hope was tied to the house of David, to the city of Jerusalem, Micah 4:1-3. The kingdom would be moral (not military). Only those who submitted to God would enter it, Isaiah 11:9. No human plan, no political policy, no religious program could produce it. It was solely the work of the King of kings.

D. Judah broke Covenant with Yahweh. For nearly a century, the surviving remnant of Judah remained a vassal state of Assyria. In the ancient world, it was common for conquerors to pressure the conquered into accepting their gods. Judah yielded. The covenant with Jehovah was set aside. Pagan idolatry was practiced in the house of Yahweh, II Kings 21:1-9. God was insulted. National ruin was assured, II Kings 21:10-15. However, Assyria, in due time, collapsed, Nahum 3:1-7. The world rejoiced, Nahum 3:19.

1. Dying embers. With the demise of Assyria, Judah repaired the temple. In the process, the “Book of the Law” was discovered, II Kings 22:3-10. A religious revival ensued, II Kings 23:1-14. Perhaps, the prophet Isaiah was right after all: there was “holy seed” in the land! Perhaps, Judah would be sheltered on the day of divine judgment, Zephaniah 2:1-3. Into this narrow window of optimism, Jeremiah made his appearance. He was stunned by the idolatry in Judah. The people made excuses for pursuing idols, Jeremiah 2:23-28. There was no use pretending, Jeremiah 2:22. The revival was shallow. Real repentance did not exist, Jeremiah 5:23-29. The clergy was corrupt, Jeremiah 5:30,31. The people were hypocrites, Jeremiah 6:16-20. In order to be the people of God, it would take more than padlocking pagan

shrines. It would take more than reactivating temple worship, Jeremiah 7:21-23. The people needed a new heart, Jeremiah 4:3,4,14.

2. Final blow. The leader of the religious revival was tragically killed, II Kings 23:29. Judah became a vassal state of Egypt. The Egyptians taxed Judah heavily. But, in spite of this crushing financial burden, the next king built a new, opulent palace, Jeremiah 22:13,14. Jeremiah was deeply disappointed, Jeremiah 22:15-17. The hope of religious reform died. Pagan cult worship resurfaced, Jeremiah 7:16-18. Still the people maintained a blind confidence in their innocence, Jeremiah 2:35. After all, they had the temple, Jeremiah 7:4, and the law, Jeremiah, 8:8. But they were deceived. The Lord knew the truth, Jeremiah 7:8-11. Judah was hopelessly lost—beyond the reach of prayer, Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11,12; 15:1,2. She would soon feel the fury of a new enemy, Jeremiah 22:6-10. Obviously Judah was not the kingdom of God.

3. New hope. Judah was abandoned by the Lord, Jeremiah 12:7. Indeed, there was a remnant. But, no one still living in Judah was part of that select group, Jeremiah 5:1-9. There was no use hoping pure metal could be refined from such low grade ore, Jeremiah 6:27-30. Judah was beyond changing, Jeremiah 13:23. The Lord struck the fatal blow. God is a moral God. He does not ignore those who ignore Him. He called them to choose His kingdom instead of their nation. They did not. Judah was destroyed. But, among the humiliated captives in Babylon, who submitted to His sovereignty, the righteous remnant would be found, Jeremiah 29:10-14. With these folks, Yahweh would make a new covenant. Only those who recognized the failure of the state to produce the kingdom could lay hold of this higher hope. The world may crumble but God will stand firm, Jeremiah 31:35-37. However, in exile, the people of God were like a valley of parched bones, Ezekiel 37:3,11. What appeared hopelessly dead would spring to life, Ezekiel 37:9,10. Those given this new life were the remnant, the true people of God, the kingdom of Yahweh, Ezekiel 37:23-28. They were the ones who received a new heart and a new covenant, Jeremiah 31:31-34. And we hear the echo of that covenant every time we take the holy supper: “*This cup is the new covenant in My blood,*” Luke 22:20; cf. I Corinthians 11:25. Are we the people of God? Are we part of the kingdom of Yahweh? Certainly we will not inherit the mantle of the kingdom unless we discharge the responsibilities of the kingdom.

II. Kingdom of God.

Israel believed the Lord was coming to establish His kingdom. But one wonders to what extent that hope was integral to her faith. If the words “*kingdom of God*” were used as the measure of her interest, the answer would be very little. For that phrase does not occur in the entire (Hebrew) Old Testament. Moreover, references to the “*kingdom Yahweh rules*” is found only nine times, I Chronicles 29:11; Psalm 22:28; 103:19; 145:11-13; Daniel 2:44; 4:31,32; Obadiah 21. By contrast, the word “*king*” was applied to Yahweh forty-one times. Thus, by any standard, the study of kingdom language in the Old Testament is quite limited. And, what little there is, focuses entirely on the kingship of God (rather than the kingdom of God). Still a focus on the Lord as king will yield a rich treasure of understanding.

A. Idea of a King. Yahweh was recognized as a king in Israel from the beginning of her nationhood. She was a “*kingdom*” under the leadership of Jehovah, Exodus 19:5,6.

1. God as king. The reign of the Lord was first mentioned in the song of Moses (which celebrated the crossing of the Red Sea), Exodus 15:18. As king, God was her leader, Exodus 15:13; Numbers 23:21. The Lord subdued her enemies, Numbers 24:8. Lest Israel becomes proud, she should remember who guided her through the wilderness, Deuteronomy 8:10-14. It was her king, Deuteronomy 33:5; Psalms 10:16. He provided royal protection. His kingship was not an office but a function. It was not a title but an action. Israel must keep that reality close to her heart.

2. God as king in Israel. The kingdom of David was established by Yahweh, II Samuel 7:11b-13. It differed substantially from the monarchies in Egypt and Babylon. For, in the latter countries, the king was believed to be a god. Not so in Israel. The kingship of man and the kingship of God were always viewed as separate and distinct. For instance, the Ark of the Covenant was considered the throne of Yahweh, I Samuel 4:4; II Samuel 6:2; Psalms 80:1; 99:1. Since the ark was kept in the tabernacle, this mobile tent of worship was viewed as the “*dwelling of the Lord*,” Exodus 25:8. And, when the temple replaced the tabernacle, the temple became the residence of God, II Kings 19:14-16. Yet, when Yahweh took possession of His house, it was recognized that the true abode of God was in heaven, I Kings 8:27-30; cf. Acts 7:48,49.

3. God as king over the world. The idea of the kingdom included both Yahweh enthroned on earth and Yahweh enthroned in heaven. These two aspects were merged into one by the pre-exile prophets. The results became the universal reign of Jehovah. The throne of God above the ark was blended with the worldwide rule of God from heaven. Yahweh was king over all, Psalms 5:2; 74:12; 145:13. He observed the actions of men on earth from His celestial throne, Psalms 11:4; 102:19,20. Heaven was His throne room. Earth was His footstool, Matthew 5:34,35. All nations had a sense of His universal rule, Psalms 22:27,28. Though the pagans may not have fully understood it, the saints freely acknowledged it. He was the king over the nations, Jeremiah 10:6,7.

B. Reign of God. The prophets apparently addressed Israel in the classic categories with which they were familiar. Their pagan neighbors viewed the reign of their gods in a framework of cosmic conflict celebrated in their annual festivals. The successful rule of their gods over the elements of the conflict gave confidence to the idolaters. The prophets of Yahweh challenged that view (though they presented the kingship of God in terms of this conflict-confidence theme).

1. Conflict. The sovereign master of the universe, the covenant God of Israel defended His honor by tolerating no rivals. Instead of fighting fellow gods and goddesses (as the pagan festivals depicted), Jehovah warred against the fertility cults and idol deities.

a. Against fertility cults. Baal was a powerful king who controlled the elements of the storm. He rode the clouds, released the lightning, and spoke in the thunder. The pagans addressed him as their “king,” “mightiest warrior,” and “judge.” Baal himself boasted that he

was “king over the gods.” Supposedly there was no god who ruled over him. Against that background, the counter claims of Yahweh were made. His victories over those who challenged His sovereignty paralleled the alleged accomplishments of Baal. They demonstrated that Yahweh (rather than Baal) controlled the elements of the storm. For example, when Pharaoh challenged the Lord, God warned him, Exodus 9:13,14. When Pharaoh resisted, Yahweh responded in the forces of nature, Exodus 9:23,24. Instead of defeating the powers of nature, the Lord used them as His instruments of judgment, Exodus 15:8,10,12. His superiority over the popular fertility cult deity was obvious, Exodus 15:11. Furthermore, at Sinai, Jehovah revealed Himself in the elements of the storm as a victorious warrior, Exodus 19:16; Deuteronomy 33:2-5,26-29. And, at Gibeon, He hurled hailstones on the fleeing Amorites, Joshua 10:11. According to Deborah, the Lord used the elements of nature to defeat His enemy, Judges 5:19-21. Hannah also portrayed Him as a strong warrior, I Samuel 2:4,9,10. There was no god but God, I Samuel 2:2. He was the One who granted fertility to the childless, I Samuel 2:5b. Baalism was not an option, I Kings 18:24,37-39. Within Yahwehism there was no room for other gods. Jehovah alone was God. It was irrelevant whether Baal existed. He could not deliver.

b. Against idol gods. The polemic of God continued (though the attack shifted to the heathen idols). The craftsmen made the statues, Isaiah 40:19,20; 41:7. But God created the craftsmen, Isaiah 54:16. The craftsmen used wood to make their gods. God “*planted*” the trees, Isaiah 41:19,20. The craftsmen shaped their gods. Yahweh molded His people, Isaiah 44:2; 48:10,11. The craftsmen exhausted themselves. Yahweh gave strength to the weary, Isaiah 40:28-31. The craftsmen “*overlaid*” their idols with gold. Jehovah “*spread out*” the earth and “*stretched out*” the heavens, Isaiah 40:19,22; 42:5. The craftsmen “*set up*” their idols in shrines, Isaiah 40:20; 44:13. Yahweh “*sits enthroned*” above the circle of the earth (or horizon), Isaiah 40:22; cf. Proverbs 8:27. What a contrast! Jehovah made idolatry look foolish, Isaiah 44:24,25.

2. Confidence. The reign of God was vital to an understanding of the kingdom. The nature of the kingdom was revealed by the unique covenant, exclusive kingship, and unparalleled history of Israel. From Sinai onward, she advanced under the sovereignty of God. Her future rested in the hands of Yahweh. The kingship of Jehovah related to the past, present, and future as Israel moved through time, Isaiah 44:6-8. And, as surely as the basis of her hope was the words and deeds of God, so the content of that hope was Yahweh Himself. He was the hope of the coming kingdom. He was the certainty of the promised Messiah. This undying expectation of Israel was clarified in the titles she used in the coronation of her kings, Isaiah 9:6,7.

a. Wonderful counselor. The counsel (or plan) of God would prevail, Proverbs 19:21. The future king would uphold the purposes of Yahweh. He would take the necessary steps to establish them in Israel. These insights would be seen as “*wonderful*.” People would view them as phenomenal, as from the Lord, Isaiah 28:29.

b. Mighty God. The second honorary title referred to the militancy of the king against all who would attempt to thwart His purposes. The king would be a warrior, Psalms 45:2-5. This

King in the lineage David—the Messiah of Yahweh—would be a mighty warrior like Jehovah, Exodus 15:1-3; Isaiah 10:21.

c. Everlasting father. The king would be like a father around whom the social order was integrated. He would be a protector—especially of the poor and helpless, Psalm 72:1,2,4,13,14. The sense of “*everlasting*” was not unendingness but unlimitedness. In other words, the protection of the king would be without boundaries. It would include all the needy. It would reach the lowliest of the low, Psalm 132:13-15.

d. Prince of peace. The messiah-king would be unimpaired by any force threatening the tranquility of the kingdom. Shalom would reign because the prince of peace occupied the throne, Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:6-9. All of this would be accomplished by the “*zeal of the Lord*,” Isaiah 9:7. The qualities of the messiah-king were the result of the transforming power of the “*spirit*,” the God-given charisma which raises a person above himself. It was the visible token of the anointing of the messiah-king. What that king would be was not by nature but by grace. Therefore, the “*servant*” of Yahweh would submit to the authority of Yahweh. His submission was ultimately the reason for the stability of the messiah-king, the foreverness of his kingdom, Isaiah 26:1-4.

CHAPTER 4

EXILE AND POST-EXILE PROPHETS

The wrath of God had moved decisively against His people. The nation of Israel was demolished. The state of Judah was destroyed. Any hope for establishing the kingdom of God in Palestine had vanished. Their understanding of the kingdom needed to be reworked.

I. Rebirth of Kingdom Hope.

If the kingdom was to be re-envisioned, it would have to be formulated in terms of something more spiritual. Indeed, that was precisely what some of the pre-exile prophets had done. The exile only hastened the process. Though the captivity was a huge blow to popular expectations, the longing for the kingdom was not abandoned. Rather, during the exile, that hope was restated in grander terms.

A. The Exile. Only a few of the people were deported to Babylon, Jeremiah 52:28-30. The conditions in captivity were not unduly harsh, Jeremiah 29:1-7; cf. Jeremiah 52:31-34. Still the defeat was a calamity of monstrous proportions. The Jews were dispersed. The temple was destroyed. Most of the elite people were slaughtered. Only the poor peasantry remained behind, II Kings 25:10-12. The number of Jews living abroad far exceeded the number of those living in the Promised Land. Soon the memory of (and feeling for) the holy city and the sacred temple receded into the background. Several decades later, when the opportunity was given to return from exile, most of the people did not (or could not) do so.

1. Spiritual calamity. The ruin of the nation created severe spiritual stress. The religion of Israel could no longer be a state religion. The state was gone. The faith must be reinterpreted (or suffer the same fate as the nation). Popular sentiment had said the disaster could not happen. God would not allow it. Judah thought she was the kingdom of Yahweh. They were His covenant people. The throne of David was in Jerusalem. But, in spite of their faith, it was not to be. Hope was replaced by confusion. Faith gave way to despair, Lamentations 2:1-6. The people of God struggled to understand, to make sense of the catastrophe, Habakkuk 1:2-4. Yahweh did not raise a finger to stop the slaughter, Habakkuk 1:12,13. Among the exiles, three conclusions were reached.

- The Babylonian gods were mightier than Yahweh.
- Jehovah was unfair, Lamentations 5:7.
- God punished Israel because she had broken His covenant.

The bewilderment of the Jews increased in exile. Judah was obviously smaller, weaker, and poorer than Babylon. How could one still think Jerusalem was the throne room of God? How could one still believe Judah was the kingdom of Yahweh? The gate was open for a wholesale loss of faith. Israel was challenged by tragedy and technology. Though atheism was not an option, paganism was. The temptation to worship idols (and abandon Jehovah) was real. Israel must restate her religion in terms that spoke to a new and different world.

2. Theological adjustment. The God of Israel was sovereign. He was still in control. While some of the Jews had doubts, the prophets tirelessly proclaimed His power and justice, Jeremiah 16:10-13; Ezekiel 14:21-23; 18:1-4. True believers did not give up hope. Instead, they searched their own lives, examined their own hearts. The prophets advocated obedience rather than sacrifice, righteousness rather than ritual, Jeremiah 7:21-23. The temple was gone but Yahweh was near, Jeremiah 29:11-14; Ezekiel 11:16; cf. Deuteronomy 4:25-31. God would not abandon those who obeyed Him. The heart of the faith was faith in the heart, Ezekiel 11:17-20. Hence, paradoxically, the demise of Israel served as the rebirth of Israel. For, in exile, she regained an interest in the law. The faithful systematized it. They taught it. They lived it. Without a nation, without a temple, they had no other way to show they were the children of Yahweh. So they kept the commandments, Leviticus 20:22-26. In captivity, Israel transitioned from a ritual society to a legal community. Yahweh would cleanse His people, Ezekiel 36:24-27. The land of Israel would be transformed, Ezekiel 36:8-12. God would become their king (or “shepherd”), Ezekiel 34:11-16. He would (again) dwell among His people, Ezekiel 43:1-5,9. Hope would not die in Israel because hope was central to her faith.

3. Political upheaval. The expectations of Israel in exile were nourished by certain international developments. Four events—which occurred in rapid succession—heightened the hope of the faithful.

- Jehoichin (the last legitimate king of Judah) was released from prison, II Kings 25:27-20.
- Babylon was defeated by Persia, Jeremiah 50:1-3; 51:1-5.
- Cyrus, king of Persia, issued an edict allowing the Jews to go home, Ezra 1:1-3.
- Zerubbabel, the grandson of Jehoichin, was put in charge of the return.

Things were coming together. The future was looking bright. Believers rejoiced. At long last, the promises of God were being fulfilled.

B. The Return. The return from exile was a new beginning. The prophets saw the ultimate reason for trusting in God. He was a Redeemer. Israel was His people. He rescued her so that she could be His servant. What an awesome thought! What a huge responsibility! The prophets spent centuries trying to make this grand idea clear. Would they succeed this time around?

1. Triumphant hope. The exile and post exile prophets expressed a bold hope in the future, Isaiah 65:17-23. The words of God were brimming with joy. The coming days were full of light, Isaiah 60:1-3. The horror of the exile would be forgotten. The people would hear good news, Isaiah 40:9-11. A glorious future was on the horizon. The hope of Israel rested on

Jehovah. He had embarked on a plan. He would finish it. Nothing was in dispute. Nothing would be left undone. Israel had deserved the exile, [Isaiah 42:24,25](#); [48:17-19](#). But the exile was not the defeat of God. It was part of His design. Israel paid the price for her sins, [Isaiah 40:1,2](#). And, since all of that was so, Israel should stop her complaining, [Isaiah 40:27-31](#). Let her trust Yahweh to accomplish His purpose, [Isaiah 51:12-16](#). There was ample reason to maintain a triumphant hope.

2. New thing. The people of God had a great future. A “*new thing*” was about to happen. The “*new thing*” was so stupendous that it would overshadow all the great events of the past, [Isaiah 42:9](#); [43:19](#); [48:6,7](#). Israel would experience this “*new thing*” because God would succeed. His honor would not let Him break His covenant with Israel, [Isaiah 46:9-11](#).

a. New beginning. What was the “*new thing?*” Obviously, in the foreground, was the release from captivity, [Isaiah 48:20](#); [52:11,12](#). Yet, it was equally evident, that much more was involved, [Isaiah 40:3-5](#); [43:18,19](#). The imagery not only included a safe passage (during the return to Zion) but also a new beginning, [Isaiah 51:10,11](#). Israel would experience a new start. She had a future far more glorious than her past. That was not a novel idea. Earlier prophets had promised the same thing, [Jeremiah 31:15-22](#); [Hosea 2:14-20](#). God would establish His people under His rule—which is what He had originally proposed in calling Israel.

b. New relationship. Israel had broken the Sinai covenant, [Jeremiah 31:32](#). In exile, it appeared that Yahweh had cast off (or divorced) His people, [Isaiah 49:14](#); [Ezekiel 37:11](#). The covenant (or marriage) would be revitalized. Actually, there had not been a divorce, [Isaiah 50:1](#). Rather, between God and Israel, there was a temporary estrangement, [Isaiah 54:4-10](#). Jehovah took back His “*wife*.” He established a new relationship with her, a new covenant with Israel.

c. New nation. The “*new thing*” would move toward the great, end-of-time drama, the consummation of history. The agonies of Israel in exile were the birth pangs of a new nation, [Isaiah 66:7-9](#). Yahweh Himself struggled to give birth to Israel, [Isaiah 42:14](#). The rule of God—long disrupted by sin—would be re-established, [Jeremiah 31:31-33](#). Israel would become a great, new nation—similar to a renovated heaven and earth, [Isaiah 65:17-19](#). When the apostle John spoke of the ultimate triumph of God over the powers of evil, he used the same figure of speech, [Revelation 21:1-4](#).

3. Sovereign rule. The hope for a new nation was more than the revitalization of Israel. It involved the kingdom of God. If there was only one God, if His justice included everyone, then Yahweh was the supreme Lord of lords. The pagan should beware. They should recognize the folly of idolatry. They should submit to God, the only God, who could save, [Isaiah 45:20-23](#). Worship of Yahweh was not merely a Jewish affair. It was an obligation of every nation. The exile and post exile prophets did not invent the idea. It was inherent in monotheism. God intended to bless all nations, [Genesis 12:1-3](#); [18:18](#). He planned to do so through Israel, [I Kings 8:41-43](#). Yet, Israel was prone to imagine that the pagans were her enemies. She misunderstood her place (and the place of the nations) in the scheme of history. The kingdom was not identified with the state of Israel. It referred only to those who were the “*servants*” of

Yahweh—both Jews and Gentiles, Isaiah 65:13-15. God would rule over the whole earth. Foreigners were invited to accept that rule, Isaiah 45:22,23; 49:6. The praise of the non-Israelite would be as acceptable as the adoration of the Israelite, Isaiah 56:6-8. Some of the foreigners would become priests and Levites, Isaiah 66:19-21. The kingdom was universal. The sovereign rule of God included everyone, Matthew 8:11. The Messiah reaffirmed what the exile and post-exile prophets so clearly announced.

II. Reign of Yahweh

The future hope of Israel focused on the rule of God. This included subduing His enemies as a victorious king. The victory would be followed by His enthronement. He would come as a king to take possession of His realm. Through the catastrophes of exile and the traumas of the return, confidence in His reign would steadily grow. As the prospect of an earthly kingdom diminished, the anticipation of a heavenly kingdom increased.

A. Images of His Reign. The prophets did not speak of the kingship of God very often. They used other images. For the prophets were critical of the kings of Israel and Judah. To them, these earthly monarchs were unsuitable symbols of the rule of God, Jeremiah 2:26,27. Hence, the images of judge, savior, and shepherd were frequently applied to Jehovah.

1. Judge. The judgment of God was—whether during or at the end of history—a common theme among the prophets. For instance, His wrath would embrace all nations, Jeremiah 25:15-26. No one would escape, Jeremiah 25:27-31. Both Jews and Gentiles will recognize the justice of His actions, Ezekiel 39:7,8,23,24. His judgment would have cosmic dimensions—a victory over all the powers in heaven and on earth, Isaiah 24:21-23. In the end, all the kingdoms of man will be replaced by the kingdom of God, Daniel 2:44; 7:9-14. Obviously divine judgment included sovereign kingship.

2. Savior. The Lord would move along a royal highway, Isaiah 40:3-5. His arrival would be announced in advance, Isaiah 40:9,10. However, He would appear as a Savior, Isaiah 43:1-3. He would call Himself a king, Isaiah 43:15; 44:6. Yahweh would be a royal redeemer. This was good news of salvation. It would surely come to pass. The Lord reigns, Isaiah 52:7. God was about to do something new, Isaiah 43:18,19. Joy would burst forth when the Lord redeemed His people, Isaiah 49:13-18.

3. Shepherd. Yahweh was also a shepherd-king gathering His scattered flock from exile, Micah 2:12,13; 4:6-8. The return from captivity would be like a second exodus, Micah 7:14,15. The Lord chided the human shepherds (or kings) of Israel for their failure to care for His sheep. In their place, He declared Himself to be the shepherd of His people, Ezekiel 34:1-16. Jehovah would exercise His pastoral care over Israel through His servant David, Ezekiel 34:20-24. The mention of David was a reference to the Messiah. Consequently, the shepherd image merged with the messianic hope. The two ideas became one thought, Jeremiah 23:5,6.

4. King. One of the outcomes of the reign of Yahweh was the nations coming to Zion,

Micah 4:1,2. The Lord would set up His throne there. From Zion, He would rule the world. He would also teach His ways. All people would be subject to His power. The nations would come voluntarily. The journey would not be a hasty flight (like it was from Egypt) but a planned trip (under the protection of God), Isaiah 52:11,12; Jeremiah 16:19-21; Zechariah 2:10-13; 8:20-22. The reign of Yahweh, therefore, was portrayed in various ways. He was a judge, savior, shepherd, and king. Whatever image was used, the message was the same. The rule of God was powerful and universal. It demanded loyalty and resulted in salvation for all who submitted to His majesty.

B. Characteristics of His Reign. The pre-exile prophets regularly criticized Israel for her sins (especially her idolatry). The post-exile prophets tended to focus on her despondency, her lack of faith in Yahweh to protect her, Isaiah 40:27; 42:21,22; 49:14. God responded. He proclaimed His sovereign power. He promised to intervene, Isaiah 40:21-26. The Lord repeatedly defended His rule by calling Israel (or the pagan gods) into court to present their case, Isaiah 41:1-4,21-26; 43:9-13. God stood His ground. He justified His reign. The post-exile prophets communicated His kingdom in imagery that neither toned down nor thinned out His sovereignty.

1. Exclusive king. Before an earthly monarch was crowned in Israel, Yahweh was proclaimed the sole, exclusive king. After the throne was established in Jerusalem, the “*servant of God*,” from the lineage of David, had an important role. He was vice-regent with Jehovah. Jesus adopted and applied this vice-regency to Himself. Hence, His teaching about the kingdom cannot be understood without reference to both the exclusive king and the sovereign co-regent mentioned in the post-exile prophets (and later Judaism).

a. Absolute power. The power of Yahweh was a consistent theme throughout the Old Testament. His absolute dominion was exercised on behalf of Israel (as well as in creation).

(1) On behalf of Israel. The Lord displayed His power against enemy forces that gathered to challenge Him and menace His people in Zion, Psalms 46:1-11. The demonstration of His irresistible power was called a “*sacrifice*.” Pagan opponents were led to destruction like a sacrificial animal to the altar, Zephaniah 1:7-9. Even the birds of prey and the wild animals were invited to a feast that followed the sacrifice, Ezekiel 39:17-20. The show of power was a token of the reign of Jehovah. It included the elevation of an heir apparent to the position of co-regent on the throne, Isaiah 9:2-7.

(2) Within creation. The acclamation of God as king was also stated in terms of His power over nature, Isaiah 40:12; cf. Job 36:24-33. The doubts of the exiles became hymns of praise to their sovereign King, Isaiah 42:10-13. These accolades showered on Yahweh echoed the adulation of the psalms, Psalms 47:1-9. The power of God was absolute. He stood above everything, everyone, everywhere. Nothing (indeed, no one) was greater—in the past, the present, or in the future. That was fantastic news under any circumstance (especially in exile). The message must be proclaimed, Isaiah 40:6-10. The power of God—graphically displayed in the world—was a call to mission and ministry.

b. Complete control. The Lord couched His promises and issued His reassurances on the premise that He was in control. His control was usually expressed in terms of His ordered government and sovereign rule, Job 9:5-10; 37:1-13. When His people began to doubt, Yahweh spoke of His power, His fathomless control over all things, Isaiah 40:27,28. Because the Lord does not grow weary, He was able to give strength to those who hope in Him, Isaiah 40:29-31. During the time of the exile and post-exile prophets, Israel was aware of her sad plight—a ruined nation, a plundered people, Isaiah 42:22. God assured Israel that her condition was not the result of blind chance. It was not the decision of her enemy. Her exile was ordered by Yahweh. The One who controlled the universe decided the destiny of His people, Isaiah 42:24,25. He was the same God who opened the Red Sea and dried up the Jordan River, Isaiah 50:2. Had Israel forgotten? Had she forgotten He was able to do what He planned? Had she forgotten He was able to keep His promises? Isaiah 46:11.

c. Abundant grace. The power and control of God was an awesome reality. So the prophets summoned the people to cease dwelling on the past, Isaiah 43:18. The grace of Yahweh must be experienced anew by each generation. Divine intervention yesterday is intended to stimulate fresh awareness of His grace today. The prophet presented the challenge. Jehovah would create the conditions for Israel to respond, Isaiah 44:1-5. And, when she responded, Yahweh would be with her, would be a “*light*” in her, Isaiah 60:1,2,19,20. His light in her would draw the nations to Him, Isaiah 60:3.

d. Generous mercy. The pre-exile prophets announced the judgment of Israel, Isaiah 2:6-9. The post-exile prophets focused on the remnant that would survive, Ezekiel 34:22. Hence, judgment was tempered with mercy, Isaiah 40:2. Israel would be redeemed, Isaiah 41:14; 44:6; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5. She would experience again the grace of God. Therefore, the pre-exile prophets emphasized the responsibility of Israel. The post-exile prophets spoke of the privilege of Israel, Isaiah 60:10-14.

2. Sovereign co-regent. Israel was directed to recognize Yahweh as her only God, Isaiah 45:14. Though the pre-exile prophets emphasized the obligation of Israel to proclaim her God as the only sovereign Lord, the post-exile prophets substantially heightened that obligation, Isaiah 43:10-13. However, an enormous shift in understanding the kingship of Yahweh had occurred. In the pre-exile era, the king in Israel was a guarantee of the covenant with God, Jeremiah 33:19-21. But, in the post-exile era, there was no hint of a restoration of the monarchy in Israel, Jeremiah 22:28-30; Ezekiel 21:25-27. Rather, the house of David would reign through the Messiah, Isaiah 9:6,7; cf. Luke 1:29-33. Though Christ died, He was raised to sit on the right hand of God, Acts 2:29-34; I Corinthians 15:22-26; Hebrews 1:8-13; 10:11,12. Jesus is co-regent with Yahweh, Revelation 3:21. Therefore, God kept His promise regarding the “foreverness” of the throne of David, II Samuel 7:16. Jesus was the promised king, Micah 5:1-5a. The expected king (and His kingdom) in the lineage of David became the messianic hope of later Judaism. The understandings varied but the idea persisted, Zechariah 9:9,10. Consequently, in order to grasp the situation in which Jesus had to proclaim His kingdom, an examination of the developments “between the testaments” will be made in chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5

PSALMS

A number of ancient Hebrew songs mention their king. These songs are fittingly called the “Royal Psalms.” They describe the intimate relationship of the Jewish monarch with Jehovah. Their content focuses on both the earthly king and the heavenly Sovereign.

I. Worship with Kingdom Faith.

The royal psalms exhibit faith in the kingdom of God. They describe certain occasions in the life of the monarch of Israel. These occasions include establishing the royal dynasty, coronation of his majesty, celebration of his wedding, departure to the battlefield, and the announcement of his victory.

A. Establishing the Royal Dynasty, Psalm 132. This psalm was sung by those who went to Jerusalem to worship. It expressed their faith in Yahweh. The psalm joined together two important promises: (1) the establishment of the dynasty of David, Psalm 132:11,12, and (2) the enthronement of God in Zion, Psalm 132:13,14. The temple was the setting of this psalm.

1. Place for the Lord. Yahweh was asked to remember the vow of David. The giant slayer had promised to find a suitable place for the ark of God, Psalm 132:1-5; cf. II Samuel 7:2. How strange to think of the Lord in one place! Nevertheless, Zion became His “*dwelling*.” This is similar to Jesus “*dwelling*” among us, John 1:14.

2. Invitation of the Lord. The area above the ark was the place God promised to meet His people, Exodus 25:22. Hence, where the sacred box was Jehovah was. Though this little box had been captured by the Philistines, King David, after much effort, had retrieved it, Psalm 132:6; cf. II Samuel 6:1-5. Therefore, in this song, Yahweh is invited to dwell in His house (the temple), Psalm 132:7-10 (quoted from II Chronicles 6:41,42).

3. Choice of the Lord. Yahweh swore to establish the dynasty of David forever, Psalm 132:11,12; cf. II Samuel 7:11b-16. God chose Zion as His residence, Psalm 132:13,14. In Zion, God would raise up a powerful person from the family of David, Psalm 132:17 (referred to in Luke 1:68,69). It is not surprising that the New Testament Church saw in this psalm a reference to the Messiah, the “*anointed one*,” the lion of Judah. The crown would rest on His head, Psalm 132:18. The early Christians saw Christ as their King, Hebrews 1:1-3.

B. Coronation of the King, Psalm 21. It would appear that some of the psalms were sung

during royal coronations. Certainly they were sung at the original crowning ceremony. But, likely, they were also sung at the annual re-crowning of the king. This particular hymn describes (1) the characteristics of the human king and (2) the actions of the divine King.

1. The king in Israel. The Jewish monarch was not worshipped (like his Gentile counterpart). Rather, the king of Israel submitted to Yahweh, Psalm 21:1; cf. 20:6,9. God heard his prayers, Psalm 21:2. It was Yahweh who crowned him king in Israel, Psalm 21:3. The Hebrew ruler relied on God. His success was a gift from above, Psalm 21:4,5. Hence, like every Israelite, he was subject to the Lord. This royal psalm reminded the Jews that there was a King of kings, Daniel 2:21; 4:17; Romans 13:1. Therefore, “*trust in the Lord*” brought “*the grace of the Most High*” near, Psalm 21:7. This grace kept the king of Israel safe. His majesty was not “*shaken*,” not moved or dismayed when Jehovah was present, Psalm 30:6,7. The ancient king was like a modern ruler—he was dependent on God.

2. The King in heaven. The psalm began with what Yahweh did for the king in Jerusalem. Then, it described what the king in Jerusalem would do because God was with him, Psalm 21:8. In spite of stiff opposition, the King of kings would bring success to the king of Israel. The tone of this song, however, hardly sounds like a Church hymn, Psalm 21:9. Two observations may clear up the apparent inconsistency.

- The poetry was couched in exaggerated speech (which was customary). Suffering and defeat were often compared to refinement in a furnace, Deuteronomy 4:20; Isaiah 48:10; Malachi 4:1. The song was simply saying that the actions of the Hebrew monarch were decisive. No vacillation. No truce. No compromise. The enemy was subdued. No captives taken. No paganism allowed, Psalm 21:10; cf. Deuteronomy 13:12-18.

- The psalm upheld the sovereignty of God. For, when the king of Israel acted, the will of Yahweh was done. The earthly monarch was a co-worker of the heavenly monarch. But, like contemporary rulers, the ancient king had to deal with the devious plots and wicked schemes of evil opponents, Psalm 21:11. Though fully armed, the enemy was vulnerable. They “*turned their backs*” when confronted by the army of God, Psalm 21:12. Evil retreats when the believer advances in the power of the Lord, Ephesians 6:10-18.

The psalm ended as it began—honoring Yahweh, Psalm 21:13. All praise belongs to Him, Psalm 18:46-50; 46:10. The victory of the king is due to the intervention of God.

C. Celebration of a Royal Wedding, Psalm 45. This song was a nuptial hymn sung at the wedding of Israelite kings. It had messianic overtones, Psalm 45:6,7; cf. Hebrews 1:8,9. Since it was both a wedding hymn and a messianic statement, the composer correctly introduced it as a “*noble theme*,” Psalm 45:1. The psalm spoke first of the groom and then to the bride.

1. The groom. With restraint and tact, the writer mingled counsel and compliment. The spiritual quality of his words were distinctive among the more ancient, sensual, royal court, wedding poems. The monarch was described as an extraordinary person because Yahweh had

blessed him, Psalm 45:2. He was both a warrior and a king. He defended (or championed) the cause of truth, humility, and righteousness, Psalm 45:3-5. In accord with a common practice in the old world, the king was given a divine title as a viceroy of deity (that is, an appointed representative of the Lord), Psalm 45:6; cf. Psalm 2:7-9; 89:19-29; Isaiah 9:6,7. The groom emerged from ornate “*palaces*” in lavish clothes accompanied by beautiful music, Psalm 45:8,9. The wedding was ready to begin.

2. The bride. The bride also appeared in splendid attire, Psalm 45:13,14; cf. II Samuel 13:18. She was given two words of advice. (1) Separate herself from her past: her home and her country. And (2) be joined to her husband, Psalm 45:10,11. If she was a faithful wife, foreign courts would be delighted to send her wedding gifts, Psalm 45:12. With that counsel, the couple left the wedding and entered the palace of the king, Psalm 45:15. It is easy to see illusions in the royal psalms to the Messiah. Hence, these hymns influenced the early Christian understanding of Christ and His Church, Ephesians 5:22-24. Psalm 45 is full of messianic statements, Psalm 45:2,6,16,17. When perpetuity was promised to the dynasty of David, it was obviously a reference to the throne of Christ, a sign of the kingdom of Yahweh, II Samuel 7:13-16; Psalms 89:4,35-37.

D. Departure to the Battlefield, Psalm 20. This hymn has two parts: (1) a prayer FOR the king and (2) a proclamation OF the king. The song was probably written by David and used whenever the troops went into battle. Believers throughout the ages have sung this psalm to inspire courage in trying times. Weary soldiers, trapped miners, destitute widows, and departing missionaries have voiced these words to brace themselves for their impending trials.

1. A prayer. The song begins with a prayer of the high priest. The king and his troops were headed to battle (or “*distress*”), Psalm 20:1. The priest invoked “*the name of God*.” His name is another way of saying God Himself, Psalm 54:1; 124:8. Where God puts His name, there He resides, Deuteronomy 12:5; II Chronicles 12:13. His help, then, came from the sanctuary of the temple (namely, the holy place above the Ark of the Covenant), Psalm 20:2. It was futile to expect divine assistance unless it was preceded by human submission, Psalm 20:3. A faithful king could expect the King of kings to crown his military exploits with success, Psalm 20:4. Likewise, today, when we undertake His work, we can expect victory, Psalm 20:5. This psalm rallied the people of God to face the rigors of life.

2. A proclamation. With the change in personal pronoun, the king apparently stepped forward to respond. He was fully confident in the power of Yahweh, Psalm 20:6. Everything was done that should be done. The king had made his plans. The soldiers were fully equipped. Prayer had been offered. Thus, having done all to stand, the army stood ready. Their assurance came from their surrender to the Almighty, Psalm 20:7; cf. Deuteronomy 20:1; Isaiah 31:3. The king envisioned the victory before the battle began, Psalm 20:8; cf. I Corinthians 15:57,58. At that point, the congregation in the temple joined in the song with their own petition, Psalm 20:9. This hymn has always had a sobering effect on those who sing it with a believing heart.

E. Announcement of Victory, Psalm 18. The pagan religions believed that the forces of

nature were the playthings of the gods and goddesses. Therefore, heathen festivals dramatized the myths of idol deities dancing on the stage of nature. Psalm 18 was quite different. The success of the king was attributed to God (not the gods). The celebration of victory was sung as a proclamation of the sovereignty of the Lord. Kingdom faith echoed in each of the eight parts of the song.

1. Praise of Yahweh. The king of Israel spoke first. He confessed his weakness. He acknowledged the power of God. In other words, deliverance came from Jehovah, Psalm 18:1-3.

2. Perils of the king. The battle was fierce. But, God heard “*from His temple*” (rather than, like the pagan gods, “*from nature*”), Psalm 18:4-6.

3. Sovereignty of God. The imagery of a thunderstorm was a word-picture to capture in human language the power of the Lord, Psalm 18:7-15.

4. Rescue of the king. During the battle, divine grace was present. In contrast to the blood and gore of heathen poetry, the psalmist emphasized the mercy of God, Psalm 18:16-19.

5. Reason for success. The Lord intervened because the king was a good man, Psalm 18:20-24.

6. Actions of God. The gods are inconsistent. One could never count on their help. Yahweh is steady and predictable. The army of Israel could rely on Him, Psalm 18:25-30.

7. Victory of the king. So, in passionate poetry, the psalmist acknowledged that the King of kings brought victory to His faithful servant (the king of Israel), Psalm 18:31-45.

8. Gratitude to God. In a sudden burst of thanks, the victorious king concluded the song with a joyous messianic overture, Psalm 18:46-50.

The worship of Israel linked together the sovereignty of God and the kingship of the Messiah. These ideas were so intertwined with historical events that a purely mythical interpretation is inadequate. The Lord enthroned above is the same Lord who interacted on earth, that is, at creation, in the flood, through the exodus, at Sinai, during the harvest, in battles, and so on. The temple worship was not like the pagan festivals (which merely dramatized empty myths). Instead, the psalms were a new and vital encounter with the Kings of kings. Otherwise, one cannot account for the hope of Israel during the discouraging days of national impotence in exile.

The psalms are appropriately called a sacred representation of the kingdom of God. They re-presented (or “*made present again*”) the saving acts of Yahweh in the history of Israel. They established His kingdom anew. They anticipated in worship the completeness of His future reign. Consequently, worship in kingdom faith joined past events and future hopes regarding the absolute, universal rule of God. This celebration of the kingship of God was not an intoxication with vague myths but the remembrance of joy-filled reality, Psalm 24:8,10.

II. The Throne of God.

The psalms celebrate the kingship of Yahweh. They emphasize that God is King of kings. They are a tribute to the sovereignty of the Lord, [Psalm 93:1,2](#); [95:3](#); [97:1](#). The hymnbook of Israel gives a vivid picture of the Lord on His throne, [Psalm 47:7,8](#). These songs affirm the universal reign of Jehovah, [Psalm 96:10](#). When they are carefully examined, it becomes clear that the rule of Jehovah over heaven and earth was foremost in the mind of the worshippers, [Psalm 97:9](#). His kingship permeates the entire landscape of the psalms. The Jewish hymnbook strengthened faith in past omnipotence as well as hope in future sovereignty.

A. In Seasons of Suffering. Some of the psalms were “laments.” They were sorrowful songs written for times of profound misery. Through the dark clouds, however, the throne of God came into clear view. Hope blossomed despite the tears.

1. Personal lament, Psalm 22. Because of its moving portrayal of a forsaken individual, Psalm 22 is an example of a personal lament. Its messianic message is unmistakable.

Psalm 22:1	<i>“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”</i>	Mark 15:34
Psalm 22:7	<i>“All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.”</i>	Mark 15:29
Psalm 22:8	<i>“He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord save him.”</i>	Matthew 27:43
Psalm 22:18	<i>“They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothes.”</i>	Matthew 27:35 Mark 15:24 Luke 23:34 John 19:23,24

The psalm has two distinct parts: (1) a song of suffering and (2) a hymn of deliverance. Whether the composition was originally two separate songs is impossible to say. Both parts proclaim the overwhelming sovereignty of God.

a. Cry of a troubled soul. The sufferer was disturbed by unanswered prayer, [Psalm 22:1,2](#). There was help—in spite of anguish—for those who saw the Almighty on His throne, [Psalm 22:3-5](#). God was not deaf. The faithful may cry, “*How long?*” They may ask, “*Why?*” Yet, such questions were not the surrender of a faithless heart. They were the longings of a troubled soul! The silence of heaven was amplified by the mockery of men, [Psalm 22:6-8](#); cf. [Job 30:9-11](#). The psalmist painfully remembered the help God had given in the past, [Psalm 22:9-11](#). The poet endured the vicious attacks of sinful men, [Psalm 22:12-18](#). Life was trying. But there was hope if the saints trusted the Lord, [Psalm 22:19-25](#); cf. [Psalm 103:6-18](#).

b. Praise from a thankful heart. Despair turned to praise. Despite the outward circumstances, the convictions of the writer remained firm, [Psalm 22:22-24](#). The unflinching concern of Yahweh was a secure anchor for the troubled soul, [Hebrews 6:19,20](#). The heart can be thankful when the head is trustful. The song concluded with a grand crescendo: “all will be well,” [Psalm 22:25-27](#). People from every corner of the globe will turn to the Lord. In spite of temporary setbacks, the purpose of God would succeed. “*For dominion belongs to the Lord. He*

rules over the nations,” Psalm 22:28. With confidence, then, we march into the future. The throne is occupied. Though there will be hardships, Yahweh will keep us safe. “*For He has done it*” (before) and He will surely do it (again), Psalm 22:29-31.

2. Communal lament, Psalm 44. The Jews were under siege. The army had been defeated. The Lord had apparently abandoned His people. Ruthless slaughter and cruel contempt was everywhere. And, worst of all, the enemy was pagan! How could Yahweh allow His holy people to be crushed by a godless nation? And, in a similar vein, how can God be silent when Christians are hassled by heathens?

a. Mercies of God. The song begins with a description of the concern of Yahweh for His people. Their success was His achievement, Psalm 44:1-3. It was God who “*drove out*” the pagans. It was God who “*planted*” Israel in the Promised Land, Exodus 15:17; Deuteronomy 4:37,38; Joshua 24:11,18; Psalm 80:8,9. Hence, Jehovah was their King, Psalm 44:4. History abounds with confirmations of His graciousness toward Israel, Psalm 44:5-7. The record of the past was clear. There was reasonable certainty of His continued mercy. Consequently, instead of putting confidence in human ingenuity, the faithful should put their trust in the Lord, Psalm 44:8.

b. Suffering in defeat. Is life that simple—man believes and God blesses? Is not a partnership with Him more realistic, more noble, more rewarding than merely accepting His favors in return for our faith? In other words, are we spectators of history or participants in history? As soon as one becomes a co-worker with God, he or she becomes a sufferer for God, I Peter 4:12-19. The glory of past victory is easy to savor. The pain of present hardship is another matter, Psalm 44:9. It is difficult for one to hide disappointment when God seems aloof, distant, and unconcerned, Psalm 44:10-12; cf. Jeremiah 15:13-18. It is confusing to suffer senselessly. Man is prone to blame God. For, if, to the Lord belongs the glory of victory, to Him also belongs the agony of defeat, Psalm 44:13-16.

c. Confusion of faith. Israel had not abandoned her religion, had not ignored Jehovah. Yet, He was ignoring them! And, in so doing, “*this*” calamity had come upon them, Psalm 44:17. Sincerity of faith and consistency of obedience had meant nothing to God, Psalm 44:18,19. The promises of Yahweh and the performances of Yahweh contradicted one another. Loyalty to the Lord had been very costly to the Jews. And, as a result, their faith was being severely tested, Psalm 44:20-22. However, is not Yahweh King? Is He not sovereign in victory AND in defeat? Should not the believer say—in good days and bad days—that the love of God is unfailing? Romans 8:35-39.

d. Prayer of deliverance. Certainly there are times when it seems the Lord sleeps, Psalm 44:23,24; cf. Psalm 7:6; 10:12. But such statements are only poetic exaggerations, Psalm 121:3,4. God would not permit disaster to overcome His people unless there was good reason to allow it. The sovereign King is in control. Hence, we must surrender to Him in order to protect His reputation as a gracious God, Psalm 44:25,26. How much easier it is to maintain faith in past memories than in present struggles, in future hopes than in contemporary

experiences. But, in order to truly be our King, He must be seen as our majesty come rain or come shine.

B. In Times of Certainty. Different occasions prompted Israel to sing different psalms. Though the occasions varied, the worshippers were reminded of the same grand theme—the throne of God. This was true in seasons of doubt as well as in times of certainty. Yahweh was King—King of kings. His universal dominion was joyfully celebrated in messianic hymns and covenant songs.

1. Messianic hymn, Psalm 2. God had vowed to establish the dynasty of David “forever,” II Samuel 7:11b-13,16. He promised to be a “father” to the sons of David who occupied the throne, II Samuel 7:14,15. Hence, when the priest crowned a king in Jerusalem, he hailed him as a son of God! Likely Psalm 2 was one of the songs sung during these coronation ceremonies.

a. Reaction of pagan rulers. In the ancient world, neighboring kings tried to overthrow a new king before he could solidify his authority, Psalm 2:1. The tone of the conversation between these pagan monarchs was one of grasping power. Such political gangsters were godless villains in positions of temporary eminence. They conspired against the anointed (or chosen) of God. Therefore, in effect, they were plotting against God Himself, Psalm 2:2. These rulers planned to break free from the restraints imposed by the king of Israel, Psalm 2:3.

b. Response of Jehovah God. Suddenly the Lord spoke. The self-importance of the heathen conspirators became an object of derision in heaven, Psalm 2:4,5. Why did Yahweh laugh? Because He, as King of kings, installed the new monarch in Israel, Psalm 2:6. A higher power was in control. Another plan already existed. The conspirators were in for a surprise, a rude awakening!

c. Decree of Jewish king. The scene switched back to earth. The newly crowned king of Israel issued a decree from the Lord, Psalm 2:7. The words “*you are my son, today I have become your Father,*” were recited at the legal adoption of a child in the ancient world. Yahweh adopted each Israelite monarch as His very own son, Psalm 89:26,27. Hence, as long as the king depended on God, the future of the nation was secure, Psalm 2:8,9. So the psalmist warned the rebellious heathen rulers, Psalm 2:10,11. Opposition to the King of kings was futile. A prudent ruler would “*kiss the feet*” of the king in Jerusalem (because he was the son of God), Psalm 2:12. Yet the worshipper knew many kings in Israel had not been sons of the Most High. Who would the one just crowned serve—man or God? The answer lay in the word “*anointed,*” Psalm 2:2. Certainly all Israel was the son of God, Exodus 4:22. Yet, when a king was anointed, he became, in a special way, a son of Yahweh, a symbol of the covenant. Consequently, when the pagan rulers conspired to thwart the plan of God, this psalm became the rally cry of the saints, Acts 4:23-29. The peasant villager in Israel returned home from this coronation ceremony with a renewed faith in the “*anointed*” (or messiah) coming some day. The seed of hope was sown (though the mature plant had not yet appeared).

2. Covenant song, Psalm 50. Vassal treaties were commonplace in the ancient, middle eastern world. A powerful king would offer a covenant to a nation over which he ruled. It was an offer prompted by grace, an undeserved gesture of kindness. The covenant emphasized the benefits of the agreement. It imposed strict obligations and expected faithful obedience. Heaven and earth was called to witness the covenant transaction. The agreement threatened to punish those who neglected the stipulations of the treaty. The Sinai covenant was a typical old world agreement. The people of Israel knew full well what was involved, Amos 2:10-16.

a. The King. Jehovah had established a covenant with Israel. The time had come for an evaluation. Had Israel been faithful? She was issued a summons to appear in court. Judgment was about to begin, Psalm 50:1-3. Yahweh, the Judge, was depicted as an irresistible, consuming fire, Psalm 21:9; cf. Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29.

b. The court. Heaven and earth was called to jury duty, Psalm 50:4; Deuteronomy 30:19,20; Isaiah 1:2,3. The court heard that Jehovah had been faithful to His part of the covenant, Psalm 50:5,6. Did Israel keep her end of the bargain?

c. The judgment. The Lord testified against His own people, Psalm 50:7. Yahweh was sick of their hypocritical charade, Psalm 50:8,9. He had had enough of their meaningless rituals, Isaiah 1:11-17. The Almighty would not tolerate being mocked. He did not need their sacrifices, Psalm 50:10-13. God asked for thanks not things. He responded to appreciation rather than pretension, Psalm 50:14,15. The covenant people were “*wicked*,” Psalm 50:16-18. They talked the talk but did not walk the walk. God demanded obedience, Exodus 19:5,6. They thought that God was like them, Psalm 50:19-22. The Lord was not amused. He wanted gratitude more than gifts, Psalm 50:23. Judgment was coming. It was coming not because of the goodness of the covenant but because of the grandeur of God, Psalm 47:1-8.

CHAPTER 6

APOCRYPHA

The apocrypha is a collection of fourteen books written during the last two centuries before Christ. It included historical documents, romantic stories, worship songs, and wisdom literature. It was very popular during the time of Jesus. The apocrypha is a valuable source of information concerning the culture and religion of pre-New Testament Judaism.

The word *apocrypha* meant “hidden.” These documents were initially kept from the public because they were considered heretical. However, little by little, they gained a wide audience. Since these writings were never given equal status with the law and the prophets, the apocrypha was eventually designated “outside” (or non-canonical) material. When Jerusalem fell (in 70 AD), the “outside” books were banned (and systematically burned) by the Jews.

I. Struggle during Kingdom Delay.

The end of the exile ushered in a renewed expectation of the kingdom. The prophets spoke often of the sovereignty of God. The Israelites were to work faithfully to proclaim the rule of Yahweh unto the ends of the earth. Did they keep that assignment when they met the drab realities of the return from exile?

A. Disappointment of the Return. The homecoming from captivity was a bitter experience. Only a very small number of exiles actually returned. The summons to come back was an invitation to hardship. The first few years in Palestine were incredibly difficult.

1. Social chaos. The little nation was dogged by successive crop failures, Haggai 1:9-11; 2:15-19. It was surrounded by hostile neighbors, Ezra 4:1-3. These neighbors tried to frustrate the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra 4:4,5. The remnant became discouraged. It could hardly be otherwise. The people were exhausted, Zechariah 8:9. The economy was in shambles. Where was the kingdom of God? Even when the Almighty intervened, the enemies of Israel continued to harass them, Nehemiah 6:1-9.

2. Spiritual crisis. The Jews became concerned with their own affairs. Material interests took the spotlight. Their spiritual needs were neglected, Haggai 1:2-4. They ignored the Sabbath, Nehemiah 13:15-18. They offered unacceptable sacrifices, Malachi 1:6-8. They believed there was no advantage in being a child of God, Malachi 2:17. There was no profit in serving the Lord, Malachi 3:14. The remnant did not see themselves as servants of the kingdom (but as recipients of welfare from the King)! It was feared that the little nation would be

absorbed by its pagan neighbors, Nehemiah 13:23-27. A narrow exclusivity soon engulfed the the post-exile community. They focused on themselves. The world mission of the Servant was forgotten. Judaism never became an evangelistic religion. While proselytes were welcomed, they were rarely sought.

B. Development of the Apocalypse. The thought of full pagan participation in the kingdom (and a mission of suffering to win them) did not gain widespread favor. The hope of the kingdom found other channels of expression, namely, the heightened expectation of the end of time.

1. Nature of the apocalypse. The word *apocalypse* meant “revelation.” It described in dramatic fashion the concluding events of history. It showed how God would wind up His affairs. It stated how He would set up His kingdom. The apocalyptic writings were a testimony to both the faith and the frustration of the Jews during this difficult time. The faithful remnant believed Yahweh would move everything to its appointed destiny. The apocalyptic literature overwhelmingly believed in the kingdom of God. It showed this confidence in strange visions, awesome beasts, mysterious numbers, and fierce battles. In a bizarre fashion, it provided the program notes for the great end time drama. It depicted the victory of God over all evil powers. The kingdom would finally be established. The eager expectation of this epic event was nurtured by the post-exile despair of the remnant. It was believed that Israel had been cleansed by her captivity. She longed for Yahweh to judge His foes (the pagans) and establish His kingdom (among the Jews).

2. Hope for the kingdom. The anticipation of the coming kingdom reached full bloom between the Old and New Testament. With the collapse of Babylon, the return to Palestine, and the promise of the “new thing,” the faithful Jews expected the imminent arrival of the kingdom. Their hope was linked to the coming of a messiah—a prince in the lineage of David—who would rule the kingdom from Jerusalem as the viceroy of God.

a. The kingdom now. With the return of the first group of exiles, it seemed like the conditions for the establishment of the kingdom were in place. For, the leader of the remnant was none other than Zerubbabel, the grandson of king Jehoiachin, a descendant of David. Zerubbabel was described in messianic language, cf. Isaiah 11:1 and Zechariah 6:12,13. In other words, the kingdom of God was about to appear. Could this really be true? Persia remained a mighty world empire. But Yahweh had sent angelic “horsemen” throughout the earth. The pagans were undisturbed, Zechariah 1:7-11. All of that was soon to change. God was displeased with the heathen empire (though He was pleased with Israel), Zechariah 1:12-17. Everything was set. The great end time event was about to begin, Haggai 2:4,5. The Lord would “*shake the heavens and the earth*,” Haggai 2:6,7. Zerubbabel would become the “*signet ring*,” the earthly representative of God. The kingdom was here at last, Haggai 2:21-23.

b. The kingdom later. The hope of the kingdom “now” quickly turned into the kingdom “later.” Zerubbabel mysteriously dropped out of sight. Joshua, the high priest, became the “*branch*,” the one to wear the crown, Zechariah 6:9-15. Perhaps Zerubbabel

become a threat to the Persian authorities (given he was a legitimate heir to the throne). Whatever the reason, the messianic age did not dawn. The kingdom did not come. Moreover, Persia remained in power for two more centuries! Under these conditions, one would think the hope for the kingdom of Yahweh would die. Quite to the contrary, it lived on. For confidence in the ultimate victory of God was central to the faith of Israel. Hope in the kingdom could not be surrendered without giving up the faith itself. Disappointment only intensified the longing. Hence, in the apocrypha, the yearning for a catastrophic divine intervention became an obsession. The descriptions varied. The outcome was the same. GOD WOULD TRIUMPH. His glorious reign would emerge in the end, Zechariah 14:1-9. Apocalyptic literature gave little attention to the Messiah in the lineage of David. There was no mention of the Servant whose kingdom was “*not of this world*.” Therefore, as the kingdom delay stretched into centuries of frustration, a dark pessimism hovered over the faith of Israel. It smothered all thoughts of mission, all outreach to rescue the perishing. Instead, the apocalyptic material condemned the pagans. It described the annihilation of the heathen (so that the righteous might be saved), Daniel 12:1-4. The apocalyptic said the kingdom would appear in the last days. It would be a creation of God. Human effort would account for nothing more than a “*little help*” (which some believe was the Maccabean Revolt), Daniel 11:33,34. The apocalyptic, then, was a rebuke of human ingenuity—political maneuvering, social planning, and economic investing—without reference to God. Humankind can proclaim the kingdom but they cannot produce the kingdom, Mark 4:26,27.

C. Dependence on the Law. After the exile, the Jews tried to become the children of God by scrupulous observance of the law. Though Yahweh alone could establish the kingdom, the saints would participate in it, Daniel 7:21,22. Law keeping was assumed to be the path to sainthood.

1. Community of law. It was no accident that the post-exile remnant became a legal community. It was a predictable development. The prophet had explained the captivity as a direct result of failure to obey the law, Isaiah 56:9-12. During the exile, the temple lay in ruins. The priesthood was decimated. How, then, was Israel to distinguish herself from the pagan? Only the law remained as a distinctive element in Judaism. The remnant turned to the law. They prepared themselves for the kingdom by carefully observing the commandments, Malachi 4:1-4.

2. Function of the law. The law took over the function of prophecy. During the inter testament period, the voice of the prophet was muted. The way was open for externalizing religion. The written commandments were exalted as the will of God. To be religious meant to study, discuss, teach, and keep the law. And, since every commandment needed clarification, layer upon layer of interpretation was supplied by the rabbis, Nehemiah 8:4-8. The followers of God became burdened by the multitude of human additions to the covenant of Yahweh, Isaiah 29:13. Those who supplied the explanations of the law were elevated to the status of super saints, Matthew 23:2. Pride was not far behind, Matthew 23:5-7. Externalization of religion failed to internalize the kingdom of God. For the kingdom is a matter of the Spirit not the flesh, a matter of grace not works, Romans 14:17,18; Galatians 3:10-14. Nevertheless, many, repelled by legalism, went to the other extreme. They apologized for any duty religion seemed to require. They contended for a spirituality that made little demand for obedience. They were

slow to learn. The experience of Israel had taught them nothing. Aside from what religion might do for man, it lays on him a duty. We must obey God—not in general—but in every detail without exception, Philippians 2:12,13. Apocalypse and law pointed to an inescapable paradox in the understanding of the kingdom. Apocalypse affirmed that the kingdom was beyond human doing. The law said the kingdom demanded things done. Both of them expressed the deep conviction that God would rule over an obedient people. This was what made Israel the true Israel, the righteous remnant, the people of God, I Corinthians 6:9-11.

D. Disenchantment with the Revolt. The narrow fanaticism of the law community provided strength for the times of testing. It supplied the stuff to survive, to stand firm. Would a nicer, politer religion do the same? The testing had already begun. The wheat was being separated from the chaff, I Peter 4:17-19.

1. Advance of Hellenism. The sprawling empire of Persia collapsed when it confronted the military genius of Alexander the Great. Eventually Palestine came under the rule of Antiochus (a pompous, prideful, Greek administrator).

a. Cultural invasion. Antiochus aggressively forced the Greek culture on Israel. Hellenism advanced at an alarming rate. Judaism could not withstand the secular influence of Greece. Tensions mounted. Some Jews dug in their heels. Others capitulated. The latter group participated in sports events at the gymnasium at Jerusalem. This was blasphemy to the law keeping community in Israel, I Maccabees 1:13-15; II Maccabees 4:10-15.

b. Spiritual subversion. Opposition increased when Antiochus claimed to be the incarnation of the Greek god Zeus, Daniel 11:36,37. Antiochus expected the Jews to worship him. They refused. To them, such worship was idolatry. Antiochus launched a counter attack. His army invaded Jerusalem. Pigs were sacrificed on the altar of the temple. The Jewish religion was banned, I Maccabees 1:41-43. Copies of the scripture were destroyed. Sabbath observance was forbidden. Circumcision was outlawed—punishable by death. An idol of Zeus was set up in the temple (which was the “*abomination of desolation*”), Daniel 11:31; cf. I Maccabees 1:54-57. A violent persecution followed. It became a virtual blood bath, I Maccabees 1:62-64.

2. Defiance of Judaism. The Book of Daniel was a source of courage for resisting this cruel aggression. The kingdom of God would not be defeated. His people should not be discouraged during a most difficult time. The Lord was their refuge.

a. Resistance of man. Loyalty to God reverberated throughout the apocalyptic writings, Daniel 3:16-18. The sovereignty of God triumphed over the authority of men, Daniel 4:34,35. Even Antiochus was subject to His control, Daniel 8:23-25. The victory of the kingdom of Yahweh was at hand, Daniel 7:13,14. Antiochus tried to enforce his policies, I Maccabees 2:15-18. Mattathias flatly refused, I Maccabees 2:19-28. His followers were called the “Maccabees.” The name meant the “hammer.” They launched guerrilla attacks against the army of Antiochus. Though greatly outnumbered, the Maccabees eventually drove the pagan forces out of Palestine.

b. Power of God. Did the revolt of the Maccabees usher in the kingdom of God? No! It produced a state of chaos—mayhem, intrigue, and murder. The reign of Yahweh did not materialize. Indeed, the kingdom can never be established by the effort of man, Daniel 2:44,45. Humans try to establish the sovereignty of Jehovah. They do not succeed. They never will. Only the Lord can make His rule a reality on earth.

II. The Reign of God in Apocalyptic Expectation.

Another set of Jewish apocalyptic writings composed between the testaments—two hundred years before Christ—was the pseudepigrapha. It was a different collection from the Old Testament and the apocrypha. The pseudepigrapha referred to material attributed to—but not actually written by—various Old Testament persons. Like the apocrypha, these books were considered “outside” the canon. Still they significantly shaped Jewish thinking about the kingdom prior to the birth of Jesus.

A. Reign of God. The kingship of Yahweh was a central theme in the pseudepigrapha. Israel would become a land of peace, justice, and prosperity. Opposition from foreign nations would cease. Security would abound. Life would be good. A completely transformed world was envisioned. In the pseudepigrapha, the reign of Jehovah took two forms: the universal and the redemptive. It distinguished the universal reign of God throughout history from the redemptive reign of God at the end of time. Each was distinct from the other (though both included the sovereignty of Yahweh).

1. Universal sovereignty. The absolute control of God expressed in the pseudepigrapha reflected the message found in the Book of Daniel.

a. Power of the kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar, a Babylonian king, had a dream, Daniel 2:31-33. The interpretation of that dream became the pattern of inter testament apocalyptic. The statue in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar symbolized the governments that would be destroyed “*in the days to come*,” Daniel 2:27,28. And, at the end of this parade of nations, God would set up His kingdom that “*would never be destroyed*,” Daniel 2:44. The prophet made the same point in the vision of the four beasts, Daniel 7:2,3. After the collapse of these powerful nations, “*one like the Son of man*” would appear. God would give Him a kingdom that would not be “*destroyed*,” Daniel 7:13,14. These visions did not say where this kingdom would be located. However, the saints, “*the people of the Most High*,” will be given “*power and greatness*,” Daniel 7:27. It appears that the kingdom would be set up in Jerusalem, Daniel 9:25. Without a doubt, from these passages, Yahweh was in complete control, Daniel 4:17.

b. Blessedness in the kingdom. Daniel stated when the kingdom of God would be established. The pseudepigrapha described what the kingdom would be like. For example, the kingdom would become “*visible*,” Henock 38:1. All earthly rulers would be annihilated, Henock 38:5. The “*Chosen One*” would sit on His throne. He would “ *dwell among the saints*.” Yahweh would bless the earth. The saints would be permitted to abide there. Sinners would be refused entry, Henock 45:3-5. The sovereign Lord would make it happen. The “*Chosen One*”

would be given wisdom and understanding by the Most High. God would glorify (or honor) Him, Henock 51:3. The earth—which would become the footstool of the King of kings—will be filled with joy when the dead are raised, Henock 51:1. When the saints come forth from the grave, they will be clothed with robes of glory, robes given to them by the Most High, Henock 62:15,16. Such was the apocalyptic vision of the kingdom in the pseudepigrapha, Henock 58:3; 62:16. Only the elect would experience it.

2. Redemptive sovereignty. The rule of God (in which the faithful participated) was mentioned throughout the pseudepigrapha. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that the pseudepigrapha emphasized ethical behavior (rather than ethnic origin) as the basis of salvation. The company of the redeemed stood firm in the severe trials at the end of time. The Diaspora experience surely contributed to this understanding. For, much to their shock, the exiles discovered godless folks in Israel and God fearing pagans among the Gentiles. Hence, the lines between the saint and the sinner were redrawn. Jewish pedigree became secondary. Righteous conduct became primary.

a. Location of the saved. The exact place where the saved would gather in the next world was not specified in the apocrypha. Heretofore, the Jews had focused on the earthly Jerusalem. In the pseudepigrapha, the earth would be purified, made ready for the elect to dwell there, Matthew 5:5; Romans 8:18-21; II Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 21:1,2. In the Assumption of Moses, the people of God were pictured as raised aloft, set in the starry firmament above. From there the saved would look down on the fiery hell of sinners, 10:8-10. The Book of Henock called the dwelling place of the saints “*the third heaven*.” It was located in paradise, a beautiful place beyond description, 8:1; cf. II Corinthians 12:2.

b. Circumstances of the saved. According to the pseudepigrapha, the redeemed will go to a place where “*time and season*” would disappear. The saved would be immortal. They would never be sick or anxious. They would not grow weary. They would occupy a bright paradise that will never pass away. All perishable things would vanish. Only eternal life would remain, Henock 65:6-10. The Apocalypse of Baruch said “*the faces of the just will be transformed into radiant beauty (like the stars in heaven)*,” 51:3-10. The redeemed will “*receive a royal crown, a diadem of glory from the hand of the Lord*,” Book of Wisdom 5:16. Then they will judge the earth, rule over the nations with the King of kings, Book of Wisdom 3:7,8; cf. Matthew 19:28; II Timothy 2:12; Revelation 3:21; 20:4,6.

c. Identification of the saved. The apostasy of many Jews in exile raised an important question: Who will be saved? cf. IV Esdras 7:10,11,46,47. The pseudepigrapha repeatedly said that all people will be judged without regard to their blood kinship with Abraham. They would be judged without any reference to the rite of circumcision, possession of the Torah, or the merits of their forefathers. In other words, not all who descended from the man named Israel was part of Israel, Romans 9:6b. Everyone would be examined for who he was, IV Esdras 1:33; Sibylline Oracles IV, 40-46; Henock 65:6; Apocalypse of Baruch 51:8; cf. II Corinthians 5:10. Salvation, then, was assured to all who were good (both Jews and Gentiles). Or, as the Apocalypse of Baruch said, “*This world came into existence for the sake of those who*

were righteous,” 15:7. And, for their sake, “*the world to come*” will appear.

B. Doom of Sinners. The psudepigrapaha placed the strongest possible emphasis on the sovereign action of God at the end of time. In the Assumption of Moses, “*the King of kings is above all creatures,*” 10:1. The “*Most High will move without help to punish the heathen,*” Assumption of Moses 10:7. “*The mighty One will come forth, the eternal God will tread the earth in His own strength,*” Henock 1:3. He will come “*with His holy angels to pass judgment on everyone,*” Henock 1:9. The righteous should pray that that judgment comes quickly since “*God will bring suffering on the wicked rulers who have exploited the saints,*” Henock 104:3. According to the Sibylline Oracles, God will take control of all things, V, 348. The conclusion of history will be the exclusive action of God (like the seven days of creation), IV Esdras 6:6. “*The Lord—with the help of no one else—will bring the godless powers into judgment,*” IV Esdras 11:44,45.

1. Discovering the end. The pseudepigrapaha had a lofty view of the end-time reign of Jehovah. Notwithstanding, it focused on a question which was typical of apocalyptic literature: When will the end come? Conscious of living in the last days, the pseudepigrapaha attempted to predict the end, the conclusion of time. It often divided history into four periods (similar to the four empires mentioned in Daniel, Daniel 2:37-45; cf. IV Esdras 1:11,12; Apocalypse of Baruch 15:36-40). On some occasions, it divided history into seven segments (like the “*seven times seven*” in Leviticus, Leviticus 25:8-12). But, at other times, it divided history into ten epochs, Henock 11:12,17; Sibylline Oracles IV, 47,48, or into twelve epochs, IV Esdras 14:11,12; Apocalypse of Baruch, 15:53,54. The pseudepigrapaha tried to calculate how much time had passed in order to figure out how much time remained. According to IV Esdras 14:11,12, nine and a half out of the twelve periods of history were gone. Only two and a half were left. The meaning of all of this is quite obscure, cf. Daniel 9:24-27; 12:8-10. No definitive dates were issued. As Jesus said, “*Only the Father knows,*” Acts 1:7.

2. Experiencing the end. The end of history will not pass unnoticed. “*Earthquakes will occur. People will be confused. Rulers will be bewildered. Then the time will come for the Most High to visit the earth,*” IV Esdras 9:1-6. It will be a time of great distress, of frightful affliction, Daniel 12:1; Matthew 24:15-22. “*Plague will follow plague, wound after wound, sadness upon sadness, evil report will follow evil report, sickness after sickness, and punishment upon punishment. They will occur one after another (including upheaval, snow, ice, fever, cold, stiffness, disease, hardship, misery, suffering, sword, captivity, and death),*” Jubilees 23:13. “*All of this will fall on the evil generation living at the end of time,*” Jubilees 23:14. The Apocalypse of Baruch indicated that this distress would occur in twelve successive events—each worse than the preceding one. This would happen “*so that those who dwell on the earth at the end will be unaware that the last hour has come,*” 32:1. And, according to the Sibylline Oracles, “*God will send a blazing fire on the earth from which only a third of mankind will escape,*” III, 528-544. Morality will disappear, Sibylline Oracles IV, 152-161. Injustice will prevail, IV Esdras 5:1-12. This attention to fearsome detail, loathsome anxiety, and inescapable suffering created a melancholy outlook. A mood of defeat descended on Israel. The punishment of the wicked spawned a spirit of revenge. An ominous cloud, a brooding doom hovered over

the people of God. These dark shadows were cast over an otherwise bright landscape. Yahweh was in control. His glorious reign was on the horizon. The pseudepigrapha had a noble grasp of the kingdom. Unfortunately, it portrayed a human pettiness that was quite unbecoming to the children of the sovereign Lord. Its apocalyptic fervor was appropriate. Its attempted calculation of the end did serious harm to the vision of a transformed people in the kingdom of the Most High.

Section II

NEW TESTAMENT

CHAPTER 7

JESUS

The Old Testament chronicled the journey of Israel. It traced her history from the reception of the covenant, through her development as a commonwealth, to her practice of Judaism. Throughout these momentous changes, she maintained a hope for the coming kingdom. Though this hope was often frustrated, it was never abandoned. For, as long as Israel regarded Yahweh as the King of kings, she expected His kingdom. And, in the fullness of time, Jesus came. He came as the Messiah, the long anticipated king. Hope became reality. Faith turned into fact. Prediction reached fulfillment.

I. Question Concerning Kingdom Imagery.

Who was this Christ? His name was "*Jesus.*" His title was "*Lord,*" Acts 10:34-36; Romans 1:1-4; 10:9; Philippians 2:6-11. The "*new thing*" proclaimed by the prophets had begun. The Messiah had come. Jesus healed the sick. He calmed the storm. He raised the dead. He is now seated at the right hand of God in heaven. Soon He will return to judge the world, Acts 17:29-31. While on the earth, He announced the Good News. It was the best news that Israel had ever heard. "*The kingdom is near,*" Mark 1:14,15. The audience of Jesus was called to "*repent and believe.*" Those who believed were admonished to "*bear fruit in every good work,*" Colossians 1:9,10.

A. The Kingdom Hope. The Old Testament by itself is an incomplete story. It expressed an awareness of the sovereignty of God. It spoke of the coming kingdom. It stirred a hope that crystallized into various dreams. For the Zealots, it was independence from Rome accomplished by military action. For the Pharisees, it was an ideal commonwealth whose citizens were law keeping people under the rule of the Messiah. For the common man, it was the catastrophic intervention of God to set up His everlasting kingdom on earth. These dreams kept Israel going. Unfortunately, though a blessing, they spawned a rash of false messiahs. The people waited for a sign—any sign—of the approaching kingdom. They scanned the news for an omen, for a portent that would suggest the beginning of the great end-of-time drama, Matthew 12:38-42; 16:1-4; 24:3. In their eagerness to know, Israel looked in the wrong places, Luke 17:20,21. She misidentified the signs because she looked for the wrong thing. Her expectations did not come to pass. The kingdom she longed to see did not appear. The Old Testament had fathered an incredibly durable faith. Even under the harshest circumstances, it refused to die. But, still, the kingdom had not come. The story remained incomplete. The conclusion was yet to be written. The reign of Yahweh tarried. It was a noble idea. It was a grand hope. Yet it continued to be nothing more than an unrealized dream.

1. Continuity of the covenant. The Old Testament found completion in the New Testament. However, the New Testament could not be understood without the Old Testament. Each needed the other. To ignore this fact resulted in serious error, a grave mistake concerning the inspired word. Indeed, there is a considerable time lapse between the testaments. Each was originally written in a different language. Each had a different audience. But, clearly, something “new” was happening in the New Testament. Was it a new ethic? No! Was it a new concept of God? No! Still the New Testament was called “*better*,” Hebrews 7:22; 8:6. Certainly Christ did not come to replace a covenant of works with a covenant of grace. Jesus did not come to replace the religion of Israel with a religion for all nations. He came to fulfill (or complete) the agreement God had made with the people of Abraham, Matthew 5:17. Therefore, the two covenants stand in continuity with each other. The kingdom in the New Testament cannot be understood in isolation from (but, rather, in light of) the hope of Old Testament Israel.

2. Presence of the kingdom. The relationship between the Old and the New Testament is not one of beginning and completion. THE GLUE THAT MAKES THEM A UNIFIED MESSAGE IS THE RULE OF GOD. What, then, is the “*new thing*?” The kingdom of hope in the Old Testament is the kingdom at hand in the New Testament. The “*new thing*” is the change in verb tense. In the Old Testament, the future tense was applied to the kingdom. In the New Testament, the present tense is used. The change is huge: from “*it shall come to pass*” to “*it is among you*.” Hope gave way to reality. The kingdom is here! Luke 10:23,24. God did what He promised to do. The two testaments are like a two act play. Act I prepares for the conclusion in Act II. Act II completes what was mentioned in Act I. Both acts must be read in light of the other. Each is incomplete (or fragmentary) without the other. The play is a unit. Likewise, the Bible has one message: the sovereignty of God. The New Testament presents Christ as the anointed of Yahweh. He is the promised occupant of the throne in the lineage of David. He is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. He is the suffering Servant, Acts 13:32-41. The hope of Israel found its completion in Him.

B. The Messianic King. The New Testament hailed Jesus as the Messiah. The Jews thought otherwise. It is easy to see why they did. He took messianic titles but did not fulfill their messianic dreams. Rather than oppose Rome, He submitted to a Roman crucifixion. Rather than set up His kingdom in Jerusalem, He said His kingdom was “*not of this world*.” Still He claimed to be a king, Mark 15:2; John 18:33-37. No wonder some of His followers tried to make Him king, John 6:15. No wonder His disciples longed for Him to restore the kingdom to Israel, Acts 1:6. To those who entertained such hopes, Jesus was a disappointment. Perhaps, for this very reason, He was reluctant to announce His messianic mission early in His ministry. He knew it would be misunderstood, Mark 8:29,30. However, at His trial, in the waning hours of His life, He openly declared His kingship, Mark 14:60-62. Still, for most Jews, He was an enigma. They did not expect a vicarious sufferer to sit on the throne. Albeit, He sealed His messianic claim wearing a crown of thorns, dying on a cross that proclaimed His kingship, John 19:19.

1. Son of Man. The Jews had an apocalyptic hope that the kingdom would appear suddenly in history. The Son of Man was linked to that hope, Daniel 7:13,14. In the apocrypha, the Book of Enoch said the Son of Man would come at the end of time as a political deliverer.

Jesus described Himself as the Son of Man, Matthew 16:28. In so doing, He claimed to be the long awaited Messiah. But He was not what the Jews expected. He did not send legions of angels to destroy the Romans. Certainly He had the power to do so, Matthew 26:53,54. But He refused to fulfill that part of their hope. For, He said, the Son of Man must suffer, Mark 8:31; 9:11,12,30-32; 10:33,34,45. The Son of Man had to be humiliated, executed as a criminal. To those nurtured on apocalyptic hope, crucifixion was an insult. Jesus did not fulfill the popular dream of a powerful Son of Man. For the Jews, then, Christ could not be the Messiah, the King of kings.

2. Prophet like Moses. The Pharisees also rejected Jesus. These scrupulous law keepers wanted Israel to be a kingdom of priests. They wanted her to meticulously keep the commandments, Exodus 19:5,6. If that was done, Yahweh would send the Messiah. According to the Pharisees, the Chosen One would be like Moses (or even Moses himself). Who could better deliver the people of God? If there was to be a new exodus, surely there must be a new Moses! If there was to be a new covenant, surely there must be a new Moses to deliver it! Indeed, a prophet like Moses was predicted, Deuteronomy 18:14-18. Therefore, not surprisingly, in the first century, there was an expectation of that prophet, John 1:19-25. Some thought Jesus was “*the prophet*,” John 6:14; 7:40. Even Peter, shortly after Pentecost, identified Him as the prophet, Acts 3:22-26. But Christ was actually “*greater*” than Moses, Hebrews 3:1-6. Notwithstanding, for those in Israel who looked for a new Moses, Jesus did not fulfill their expectations. He knew the law but did He not keep it (as the Pharisees thought He should), Mark 2:23-28; Luke 11:37-41. Moreover, Jesus said law keeping would not prepare one for the kingdom, Matthew 5:20. He emphasized a righteousness not of external conformity but of internal motivation, Mark 12:28-31. Hence, for the Pharisees, He could not be “*the prophet*.” Instead, to them, He was an imposter worthy of death.

3. Son of God. Of even greater importance, however, Jesus claimed to be divine, John 8:58. He never said He was God, but He made numerous references to His deity. As a preexistent being, the conception of Jesus was not an ordinary event, Matthew 1:18-25. This fact raised doubts about His pedigree. It prompted slurs of illegitimacy, John 8:41. Jesus was the son, “*so it was thought*,” of Joseph, Luke 3:23. But, without question, He was the Son of God, Luke 1:26-33. Therefore, He could rightfully say He was from heaven, John 3:13; 17:5,24. Moreover, He displayed a supernatural knowledge, Matthew 21:2; 26:34; Luke 5:4-6, and a supernatural power, Matthew 9:6; Mark 4:39-41. Hence, Jesus was hailed as the Christ, the Son of God. The early Church unanimously regarded Him as more than human. He was the preexistent Son who “*emptied Himself*” to take human form, Philippians 2:6-8. He was “*the exact representation*” of God, Hebrews 1:1-3. He was the cosmic logos (or expression) of God, John 1:1,2. Indeed, Jesus was God, John 20:28; Romans 9:3-5; Titus 2:11-13; II Peter 1:1; I John 5:20. He was God in the flesh. He was the messianic king. But, to Judaism, this was heresy. It was absurd to think of their Messiah as God (or even the Son of God), John 19:7. Since Jesus died on a cross, there was no other proof needed. He was simply a pretender, Matthew 27:41-43. Nothing could be more ridiculous to a Jew than claiming that the Messiah (or the Son of God) must die. Consequently, the cross became a major “*stumbling block*,” I Corinthians 1:23.

C. The Suffering Servant. In messianic terms, Jesus consciously adopted the characteristics of the suffering Servant. Judaism never conceived of the Messiah in that way. Lacking this understanding of the promised Redeemer, they rejected Him who suffered for them.

1. Call of the Servant. In spite of His looming rejection, Jesus summoned people to serve in His kingdom. Servant hood was an essential ingredient for membership in the kingdom, Mark 9:35; cf. John 13:12-17. Followers of Christ—the suffering Servant—accepted the yoke of their Master, Matthew 11:28-30. Wealth would not get one into the kingdom. Rather it would more likely keep them out, Mark 10:17-25. External piety was not a ticket of admission. The Pharisees had plenty of piety but “*tax collectors*” (who were the equivalent of thieves) “*and prostitutes*” would enter the kingdom ahead of these religious rule keepers, Matthew 21:28-31. The kingdom, in the final analysis, belonged to those who submitted to God—as the suffering Servant did. Entrance required becoming like little children, Mark 10:14. The kingdom was for the humble, I Corinthians 1:26-29. The call of the kingdom was an invitation to self-denial, Matthew 19:28,29. It was a call to suffering, Matthew 5:10-12. No wonder, then, the kingdom of the suffering Servant required carrying a cross, Matthew 10:38. Indeed, suffering is the will of God for all citizens of the kingdom, I Peter 2:19-21.

2. Character of the Servant. The Servant was to be a light to the world, Isaiah 49:6. So His disciples were to let their light shine, Matthew 5:14a. The Lord asked His followers to hold forth the light in a dark world, Matthew 28:19,20. Christ was the servant of Yahweh, Philippians 2:5-7. And, because of His faithful obedience, God gave Him an exalted name and an exalted place, Philippians 2:8-11. Jesus was Lord. He was a descendant of David, the promised Messiah, the Prophet, the Son of God, and the Suffering Servant. These messianic labels were not isolated predictions. They were expressions of faith in a redeeming God. Therefore, to see the Messiah as a mere prediction, was to miss the message of the scriptures. The Messiah—regardless of the messianic terminology employed—was the embodiment of Yahweh. In the profoundest sense, the Messiah—as the radiance of His glory and exact representation of His being—was a suffering Servant. He was the highest and truest form of the Almighty. Yahweh is a God who gets involved, a God who is part of the struggle to establish the kingdom. Jesus fulfilled the messianic hope of Israel. He was God incarnate, the divine Servant. As the long awaited Messiah, He asked us to follow in His footsteps, to do as He did. This thought deserves further discussion, especially in regard to how the pre-New Testament Jews let their light shine in mission activity.

II. Jewish Missionary Activity.

Jewish mission preceded Christian mission. And, in some ways, the former influenced the latter. What sort of relationship did the Jews have with the Gentiles? Why were Gentiles attracted to Judaism? Who invited them? Were they welcome? With what ceremonies were Gentiles admitted into synagogue membership? Answering these questions will enhance our understanding of the expansion of Christianity.

A. Proselytes in the Synagogue. The Hebrew term “*ger*” originally meant “a resident

foreigner.” Over time it came to signify “a person from another nation who joined himself to the Lord.” During the exile, the synagogue presented an opportunity for foreigners to attach themselves to the Jewish faith. Many did. They were called “proselytes.” Later, in the first century, they were fertile soil for the Gospel. They were described as “*God-fearing Gentiles*,” “*devout converts to Judaism*,” or “*Gentiles who worship God*,” Acts 10:1,2; 13:16,26,43; 17:4,17. Proselytes were often accepted as full members in the synagogue. They were regarded as children of God in every respect—including burial in a Jewish cemetery.

1. Requirements for membership. Gentile converts were required to keep various commandments (just like their Jewish counterparts). They were to abstain from idolatry, blasphemy, murder, fornication, robbery, and blood. Circumcision was also required. The latter stipulation was the greatest test of their commitment. Many Gentiles found it to be a major obstacle. Since Christianity did not demand “*mutilation of the flesh*,” numerous uncircumcised Gentile believers were persuaded to follow Christ, Acts 15:22-29.

2. Reasons for membership. Apparently more females than males affiliated themselves with the synagogue. Likely, this was due to the circumcision regulation (which did not apply to women), Acts 13:50; 16:14; 17:4. Notwithstanding, the synagogue placed its highest priority on moral conduct. Because the synagogue service was relatively free of ritual, the interested Gentile would not feel out of place. Synagogue worship was mostly reading scriptures and preaching sermons, Luke 4:16-21; cf. Acts 15:21. As a result, membership in the synagogue was made up of two distinct cultures gathered under one roof.

- Jews—some strict keepers of the law and others little more than closet hypocrites.
- Gentiles—some genuine converts and others merely attending with ulterior motives.

The proselytes comprised a significant portion of the synagogue community—a fact clearly reflected by the audience at Pentecost, Acts 2:5-11; cf. Acts 6:5. Their number was apparently quite large—a testimony to the vigor of Jewish mission activity, Matthew 23:15. Horace, a Roman poet, wrote, “Once they (the Jews) fixed their eyes on a possible proselyte, they surrounded him with prayers, invitations, enticements, and attentions of all kinds until they (the proselytes) succumbed to the gentle pressure to convert.” According to Horace, “If kindly persuasion failed, the Jews resorted to unrelenting force until the prospect yielded.”

3. Advocates of membership. One must not conclude, however, that Judaism was a missionary religion (in the New Testament sense). Although there was a definite desire (and an occasional attempt) to win the pagans, the effort always remained on the fringe of synagogue life. At no time were there specially selected persons trained and supported as missionaries. Whenever evangelism occurred, it was an individual effort among the exiles (not in Jerusalem). Jewish proselytism was a private enterprise. JUDAISM WAS A RELIGION WITH A MISSION BUT NOT A MISSIONARY RELIGION. Notwithstanding, when Christian missionaries ventured into the world, they met proselytes in the synagogues. Christianity went where the Gentiles were already accustomed to worshipping God. The synagogue provided a ready-made audience for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Acts 13:13-15; 14:1,2; 17:1-4.

B. Attitude toward the Proselytes. The missionary consciousness of the early Church was likely due in part to the Jewish attitude toward proselytes. For example, the proselyte had the same legal status as a Jew. If a proselyte was robbed, restitution was the same as that for a Jew, cf. Numbers 5:5-8. Those who kidnapped a proselyte were subject to the death penalty. Moreover, a proselyte could be a witness and a judge in a Jewish court. Regarding the Sabbath—in matters of cleanness, vows, and offerings—the proselyte was bound by the same regulations as a natural born Israelite. The righteous among the Gentiles were considered “*priests of God*.” These attitudes originated in (and were supported by) various passages in the Old Testament. For example, proselytes were obviously included in the old covenant, Deuteronomy 29:14,15. They were allowed to offer sacrifices. And, on a number of occasions, proselytes were held up as encouraging examples for Israelites to follow, Jeremiah 35:19. Therefore, converting Gentiles was approved and encouraged. In all cases, the unconverted pagan was considered impure, cf. John 18:28; Acts 10:27,28; Galatians 2:11-13. In order, then, to be included in synagogue membership, the proselyte was required to become a Jew (in religious belief and practice).

C. Reception of the Proselytes. Some from every class within heathen society converted to Judaism. The first mention of such a conversion may have been Ruth—though the reference is vague at best, Ruth 2:12. The Hebrew word for conversion was first used in connection with pagans turning to Judaism during the exile, Esther 8:17. At that time, the only requirement apparently was circumcision, Judith 14:10. Later, the Talmud clearly and unequivocally mentioned three stipulations every proselyte must meet.

1. Circumcision. The law laid down one demand when Gentiles participated in the Passover, Exodus 12:48. And, until the second century before Christ, it was evidently the only requirement for membership in Israel. Every male must be circumcised. There were a number of occasions, in the centuries after Christ, when the Jews—under the threat of death—were forbidden to circumcise Gentiles. This prohibition is solid evidence for an ongoing effort to gain proselytes.

2. Sacrifice. An offering was also required. The sacrificial regulation remained until the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. A burnt offering was made by the proselyte. It provided an atonement for his sins.

3. Baptism. The ancient world had many religious ceremonies which were supposed to spiritually change those who submitted to them. Baptism was common in Palestine among the tribes living in the Jordan valley. Consequently, proselyte baptism was a relevant form of ritual to transform a pagan into a follower of Yahweh. Though there is no data on the origin of proselyte baptism, it surely preceded Christian baptism. Proselyte baptism was an entrance into a new life at several important levels. For instance, the proselyte was baptized “*in the name of God*.” The immersion was self-administered (though witnesses read pertinent sections of the law to the proselyte during the ceremony). The baptism could take place almost anywhere (except in baths dedicated to pagan gods). Baptism freed the proselyte from the pollution of his former life (often referred to as “*coming forth from the dead*”). The images which described the

transformation in proselyte baptism were used in connection with Christian baptism. For example, the Gentile was considered far from God. Yet, when converted, he was pictured as drawing near to the Lord, Acts 2:39; Ephesians 2:13. In other words, the pagan had been dead but was raised to live a new life, Romans 6:1-4; Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 3:1-4. The convert was a new creation, II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15. His sins were forgiven, Colossians 2:13. He was like a new born child, I Peter 2:2. The images of conversion used at proselyte baptism became the language of conversion employed at Christian baptism.

D. Defense of Proselyte Conversion. By the time of Jesus, the Jews had developed an exclusivity unique in the ancient world. They expressed a singular interest in (and adherence to) their own culture and religion. The emergence of this exclusive attitude was a counter measure against pagan influence on the faith of Israel, cf. Ezra 9:1,2,10-12.

1. Jewish exclusivists. This excessive interest in themselves became an aid to the kingdom of God. It arose out of necessity. It served the purpose of Yahweh toward the nations. It preserved the faith of Israel through whom God would bring life to the world. It is easy to condemn the spirit of religious intolerance without either understanding it or considering the conditions that produce it. An exclusivist is far more beneficial to the world than a relativist. The Pharisees, for instance, were not just hypocrites (though hypocrisy was involved). They were loyal—sometimes to the point of fanaticism—to the will of God (as they understood it). Proselytes were not made by those who compromised their beliefs. They were made by those who were loyal practitioners of Judaism. Only those who sacrificed for the truth bothered to share the truth. People came to faith through contact with the faithful.

2. Jewish defense. Most Gentiles learned about Judaism from the literature written in defense of the Israelite faith. These treatises responded to the public ridicule leveled at the Jews. The derision often focused on Sabbath observance, dietary rules, and religious intolerance. The defense included not only the absurdity of the charges but also the reasonableness of the truth. The Jewish defense—like the later Christian defense—demonstrated the superiority of their faith over paganism. The prominent theme was forsaking idolatry and worshipping the true God, I Thessalonians 1:8,9. A real danger resided in these written debates. It became common among missionaries—whether Jewish or Christian—to think that conversion to their religion included conversion to their culture. Hence, Jews expected Gentiles to become Jews in order to be followers of Yahweh. They sought to make others what they already were. The Jewish evangelist forgot that pagans were the people of God as much as Israel was the heritage of God, Isaiah 19:25; cf. Acts 15:5-11. Likewise, Christian missionaries are to make their converts disciples of God rather than imitators of the west, Acts 15:19. This issue, then, was the setting of Jesus' words about winning proselytes, Matthew 23:15.

E. Scope of Jewish Mission. Obviously the Jews were interested in making converts. Otherwise, the words of Jesus made no sense. Yet, His words have been distorted by both Jewish and Christian scholars.

1. Jewish evangelism. Jesus lived in a time when the Jews shared their faith with

Gentiles. The Lord did not criticize their evangelistic zeal. He was negative toward their pretended spirituality that expressed itself in a legalistic keeping of rules legislated by human beings. The essence of His critique centered on the kingdom, Matthew 23:13. The Pharisees ignored the sovereignty of God. They enthroned man-made righteousness, Matthew 23:15. The test of mission is not the zeal with which prospects are pursued. It is what the converts become after a successful pursuit! Do they enter the kingdom? Are they disciples of the missionary or the Messiah? Romans 2:17-24. There were Jewish evangelists but never a general sending of Jewish missionaries. Mission seemed to be the result of individual initiative.

2. Jewish mission. Jewish mission activity is often misunderstood. The mistake applies mostly to its influence on the early Church. A detailed account of it is not available. But it was significant enough to catch the attention of Jewish writers—Philo and Josephus—conspicuous enough to be noticed by Roman scholars—Tacitus and Horace. Proselytes comprised the major portion of growth in Judaism during the post-exile era. The rapid development of Christianity seems inexplicable without recognizing the proselyte conversions to Christ. The Jewish mission was so vigorous that it continued for centuries after Christian mission came on the scene. Greek, Roman, and Jewish sources show that Judaism was eager to make converts. And they show that the Jews were successful in doing so well into the fifth century after Christ. Yet, most importantly, the New Testament shows that Christian mission did not fall out of thin air. However, with all that said, one should not assume that Christian evangelism was merely an extension of Jewish mission. There were certainly influences. There were also major differences. The two have a very limited historic commonality. They have no genetic continuity.

CHAPTER 8

MATTHEW

Jesus said the kingdom was both a present and a future phenomenon. The majority of His references to the reign of God pointed toward the future. The Lord prayed as if the kingdom was down the road, Matthew 6:10, (though He did not mean a long way down the road, Matthew 16:28). Still, a few hours before His death, Jesus continued to look ahead to the kingdom, Matthew 26:29. As a consequence, the Gospel of Matthew is full of statements about entering the kingdom, Matthew 5:20; 7:21; 18:3. However, many would learn it was difficult to do so, Matthew 19:23,24. The Lord also encouraged His hearers to “*seek*” the kingdom, Matthew 6:33. Again, He knew that many who tried to find it would fail, Luke 13:24. Yet, those who prevailed, He described as inheriting the kingdom, Matthew 25:34. Obviously, then, in the final analysis, the kingdom was a gift, Luke 12:32. The rule of God was certain. It was identified with eternal life. And, by any standard, it was a dominant theme in the ministry of Christ. Over 80% of the times it was mentioned in the New Testament, the idea came from the lips of the Lord. It was not a passing thought, a minor topic in His teaching. The kingdom was the focal point of His message. The reign of God gave the Good News its direction, its structure, and its power.

I. Disbelief in Kingdom Sovereignty.

The announcement of the coming kingdom signaled divine action, an intervention in history. The kingdom demanded a response. Neutrality was impossible. A look at the reaction to the original announcement is instructive. Once God revealed His plan of redemption, human beings responded to His challenge. Their action resulted in His reaction (though one must not assume God depended on human behavior). The King adjusted His initiative to the attitude of His subjects. Humans can neither hasten nor hinder the advent of the kingdom.

A. Rejection of Jesus. There is little doubt about the response of Jesus’ audience. His arrest and trial are clear indications of their negative reaction to Him, Acts 2:22,23. As John said, “*Even after Jesus had done many miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in Him,*” John 12:37. The outcome of His ministry was general disbelief among His hearers.

1. The people. On closer inspection, notable variations in the response to Jesus are discernible. Different groups responded in different ways. The common people tended to accept Him more readily than the government authorities. The people sought His healing power. They were amazed at His teaching about the law. But, though they listened eagerly to His words, they demonstrated little understanding of His messianic claims, Mark 1:21-28; cf. Mark 6:14-16. The people remained uncertain and afraid, John 7:12,13,26,27,30-32,40-48; 10:19-21,24,40-42.

2. The leaders. The populace fluctuated between admiration and misunderstanding, between astonishment and unbelief. The leaders were different. They remained strongly hostile throughout His ministry. As the prologue to the Gospel of John said, *“The world did not recognize Him.”* Therefore, they did not *“receive Him,”* John 1:10,11. Yet, the cross purchased eternal life for all who believed in Him, John 3:14,15. His vicarious atonement would draw people to Him, John 12:32,33. The announcement of His impending crucifixion bewildered the disciples, Matthew 16:21-23. They were afraid to ask Him what He meant, Mark 9:30-32. The crowd was equally incredulous, John 12:34. Nonetheless, when all was said and done, it was the Jewish leaders and the Gentile politicians that ordered His humiliation, Mark 10:32-34.

B. Humiliation of Jesus. How did the death of Christ and the reign of God go together? How do the Son of Man passages relate to the proclamation of the kingdom? To answer these questions, a look at Jesus’ reaction to the Jews’ unbelief is implied.

1. Potential of His acceptance. What would have happened had the majority of the people accepted Jesus? What would have happened had they refused to let Him die? Would the kingdom have come? Some scholars think Jesus expected to be *“received,”* Matthew 3:2. As far as He was concerned, the kingdom was ready to appear, the *“new thing”* was about to happen.

a. A hypothetical assumption. This position assumes two distinct stages in the ministry of Christ. (1) He thought He would be accepted. Therefore, He announced that the kingdom was *“near.”* (2) Later, realizing that He would be rejected, Jesus amended His plan in order to incorporate His death. Thus, He delayed the kingdom. This two-stage development in His kingdom teaching is inconsistent with the text. For Jesus announced His death in the same passage He declared that the kingdom was near, Mark 8:31-9:1. Furthermore, the inspired writers knew nothing of an *“original”* plan or a *“revised”* promise. Plus a so-called original plan would have required a conditional qualification: *“If you believe, then, the kingdom is near.”* But Jesus uttered no such disclaimer. He issued a straight forward, unequivocal, absolute fact: *“the time has come, the kingdom of God is near,”* Mark 1:15. The reign of God was at hand (in spite of human attitudes toward its arrival). All that humankind could do was decide if (for them) the kingdom would result in salvation or judgment, Luke 10:8-12.

b. A practical explanation. From the outset of His ministry, Jesus knew many would reject Him, Mark 4:10-12. They were called outsiders. *“Those on the outside”* were unbelievers, I Corinthians 5:12,13; Colossians 4:5; I Thessalonians 4:11,12. Clearly Jesus meant those *“outside”* the circle of His disciples, Mark 4:1,2a,33,34. Many people assume Jesus used parables to conceal the meaning of the kingdom. Such a conclusion makes Jesus liable. In truth, the kingdom remained hidden from the crowd because they had calloused hearts, Matthew 13:10-15. This is why the crowd was *“ever hearing but never understanding...ever seeing but never perceiving.”* They were unresponsive. They deliberately shut their eyes. They willfully closed their ears. Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, God rejected the Jews, John 12:37-41. Since the people determined not to hear, Yahweh made sure they would not. From the beginning, then, Jesus was acutely aware of His limited acceptance. That rejection was

more sharply pronounced in the experience of the early Church, Acts 28:23-28. Clearly, for the first century believers, the fault for the rejection of Jesus lay at the feet of the rejecters. Lack of faith was not caused by an intentional disguising of the message by Christ. It was solely the responsibility of His obstinate audience.

2. Prediction of His death. The Lord increasingly spoke of His rejection as His ministry progressed. In the early stages, He taught His disciples “*in private*.” These special teaching sessions were in “*quiet*” retreats away from the crowd, Mark 6:31. Sometimes He instructed the twelve “*in a house*,” Mark 7:17; 9:33; 10:10. He also talked to them alone in the desert, on mountain sides, and in remote places. However, after the confession of Peter, regarding His messiahship, the Lord spoke openly of His death, Matthew 16:21. Though He continued to converse with the crowds in parables, He taught plainly about the kingdom to His disciples. The “*secrets*” of the kingdom were revealed to a few, chosen insiders, Matthew 13:11. It remained hidden from the masses, I Corinthians 2:6-10. Because of their hard hearts, the outsiders were excluded from the information about His death and the future manifestation of the kingdom, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43. Nothing was said about what would happen between the presence of the kingdom in Jesus and the future manifestation of the kingdom at the conclusion “*of the age*,” Matthew 13:47-50. Obviously, there was room for the atoning death of Christ. But nothing was said to the crowd. No hint was given to the masses about His crucifixion.

a. Mystery of the kingdom. God distinguished between those to whom the “*secrets of the kingdom*” were revealed and from whom the kingdom was concealed, Luke 10:18-21. It was “*hidden*” from the “*wise*” (most likely meaning the scribes who were scholars of the law). The “*little ones*” were the common folks (including His disciples), Acts 4:13. The knowledge of salvation in Jesus Christ was confined to a small, inner circle of followers. The scripture indicated that there was little understanding of the kingdom, little acceptance of His messiahship, Luke 12:32. The Lord finished His ministry with only a small band of believers, Matthew 22:14. Though Jesus appealed to everyone, only a few elected to follow Him.

b. Announcement of the passion. After the confession of Peter, after the disclosure of His death, several passages associate the suffering of Christ with the kingdom, Matthew 20:20-23. The Lord mentioned the fate that awaited Him (and His disciples). In this context, “*drinking the cup*” (and, elsewhere, “*being baptized with a baptism*”) was a pre-condition for Jesus’ rule (and His disciples participation in that rule). These phrases refer to what He announced when Peter confessed, Matthew 16:21. Lest He might be misunderstood, Jesus clarified His message, Matthew 16:24-28. No wonder, then, the Lord said, “*You do not know what you are asking!*” For, instead of life in the throne room of God, the kingdom demanded death in the courtyard of man. Places in the kingdom belong to those who are prepared by the Father. Jesus leaves no doubt that the path between His present ministry and His future reign was strewn with suffering, Luke 17:20-25. Men were curious about “*when*” the kingdom would come. Jesus focused on “*how*” the kingdom would be entered.

c. Institution of the supper. The words of Jesus at the last supper clearly show that the kingdom would come after His death, Matthew 26:29. Christ would reunite with His

disciples in the future kingdom. This presupposed a temporary separation from them. It also contained a prophecy of His death, Luke 22:14-16. He depicted His suffering as a vicarious atonement, Luke 22:19,20. Jesus indicated that that atonement was not only for His disciples but also for “*many*” others, Matthew 26:27,28. Hence, in His last hour, when the cross loomed ahead, He was confident God would inaugurate His kingdom, which was made possible by His death. The plan of salvation, designed by God, included the obstinate leaders and the unbelieving commoners. Despite their rejection, the kingdom would not come as a destroying judgment but as saving power. His vicarious death brought new possibilities of redemption for everyone (including those who nailed Him to the cross), Revelation 3:19-21. He who made His sovereignty present in the ministry of His Son, offered grace and mercy to all men. Few have accepted His offer. Still He pleads for sinners to come, Revelation 22:12,17. The Church, entrusted with this Good News, continues to proclaim His passionate concern. The kingdom continues to be an amazing gift of God. It promises salvation for all who believe in the suffering Servant, John 3:31-36.

II. Motivation for Contemporary Ministry.

Motives for ministry have varied throughout the millennia. To finish the task, to announce the Good News “*to all nations*,” has been a reoccurring rationale, Matthew 24:14. In other words, the sooner the Gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, the sooner the kingdom will supposedly appear. Nineteenth century American churches were especially fond of this motive. They became involved in order to hasten the second coming of Christ, Mark 13:10. To avoid the crippling consequences of defective reasons for evangelism, motives for ministry must be evaluated in light of scripture. If missionary purpose is based on texts used out of context, the method of mission can be greatly skewed. Biblical theology must inform missionary practice.

A. Words of Jesus. Christ and His followers were in the temple courtyard. The disciples called attention to the grandeur of the buildings, Luke 21:5. Jesus responded with a prediction of their destruction, Matthew 24:1,2. Apparently stunned by what appeared to be a curse on the sacred sanctuary, the disciples said nothing until they had walked the half hour journey to the Garden of Gethsemane. As they sat down, looking back at the temple, they asked when the destruction would occur. They also asked what signs would precede this catastrophic event, Matthew 24:3. The Lord said false messiahs and military battles would come first, Matthew 24:4-8. Moreover, He continued, the disciples would be persecuted. Many believers would abandon the faith, Matthew 24:9-13. The end would not come, He said, until the Gospel was preached “*to all nations*,” Matthew 24:14.

1. Contemporary interpretation. The popular understanding of this passage says that before Christ returns, “*the whole world*” will be evangelized. There are numerous contemporary examples which either hint or claim that there will be an assembly of saints in every tribe, tongue, people, and nation on earth prior to the reappearance of Jesus. The most definitive indicator of the end—according to this view—is “the extent of the spread of the Gospel.” Indeed, it is confidently stated, “there is something we can do to bring that day closer.” Really? Those who adhere to this notion are adamant. Since mission moves ahead at an accelerated rate,

“we are increasingly certain that the end of history is just around the corner!” Are such statements justified? Does such pragmatic optimism give due consideration to the inaccessibility of the unreached? Before evaluating the practicality of these confident assertions, further attention must be given to the biblical accuracy of such an interpretation.

2. Practical misunderstanding. A careful study of the words in the text call for caution. The diligent reader of scripture soon realizes that more than one meaning is possible, Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:10.

a. “Gospel must.” The imperative “*must*” is often interpreted to mean that every nation has to be evangelized before the Lord can come back. But, it can also signify that preaching to the Gentiles is what must be on the disciples’ agenda. This would keep mission within the sovereign will of God. Otherwise it would depend on human effort. If this explanation is adopted, it would show that Jesus did not answer the “when” question. Rather, He fleshed out “what” would occur before the end. In other words, a Gentile mission was an end-of-time necessity regardless of “when” the Lord returned, John 10:16. The second coming, then, is more dependent on the existence of Gentile evangelism than on the extent of a Gentile mission.

b. “First be preached.” The term “*first*” can have a chronological significance, namely, this “now,” that “later,” and so on. Or it can indicate a level of importance, such as, this “above all,” that “next,” and so forth. If the chief assignment of the apostles was to go beyond Jewish exclusiveness, then the Gospel would be proclaimed to Gentiles because “*the end is still to come,*” Mark 13:7. It is the will of God. The present age will not end before the Good News—amid all manner of persecutions—reaches the heathen.

c. “To all nations.” The words “*all nations*” and “*whole world*” seem to point to a quantitative expectation—all people will be evangelized before the second coming. Yet, since the Jews generally preferred “none of these nations,” Jesus may have been clarifying the plan of Yahweh for saving humankind. The Lord was not suggesting the extent of mission. He was not indicating the time involved for completing the mission. He was simply stating the fact that the Gentiles would hear the Good News, Luke 21:24. The Jews had their turn to accept Jesus. Now the Gentiles must have their chance to believe. God wanted to build a community of saints among the pagans just like He did among the children of Abraham. The end will not come until the Gospel goes “*to the ends of the earth,*” Acts 1:6-8.

d. “Then the end will come.” While the disciples were interested in when Jerusalem would be destroyed, we focus on how much of the missionary task will be completed. Either way, the response of the Lord applies: REDIRECT YOUR ATTENTION TO THE WORK AT HAND. He wanted to foster an end-of-time hope rather than satisfy apocalyptic curiosity. The confusion arises over the conflicting signals from the same passage: “*the end is still to come,*” Matthew 24:6. The confusion is diminished when it is remembered that references to the imminent end point to the demise of Jerusalem while references to the distant end point to the conclusion of the age. The disciples assumed the fall of Jerusalem and the end of time were the

same. Jesus warned that there would be an interlude between the two events in which the Gentile mission would occur, Matthew 24:14.

3. Important clarifications. Jesus included the Gentile mission in His parting words to His followers, Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46,47; Acts 1:8. Worldwide evangelism is not an option. It is an absolute necessity. History will not end until the pagans hear the Gospel. Yet, who can precisely define “*all nations*” (as the disciples understood those words)? Who can say for sure what “*all creation*” meant (to them)? Who can accurately interpret “*the ends of the earth*” (as the first century, Mediterranean world saw it)? Only God knows. But, certainly, when the objective is reached, Christ will return. Obviously, the task is not finished. When it is, He will appear. Human responsibility must not insist on defining the extent of mission. It must not insist on predicting the end. Our assignment is to complete the job. It is time to get busy. The Lord calls us to move ahead, to keep the faith, to tell the story of saving grace.

B. Motivation for Missions. We are living between Jesus coming as Savior and His return as Judge. The disciples believed in an imminent return, I John 2:18. But over two thousand years have passed. For many people, the “Good News” has turned into “boring history.” Belief in His immediate coming has waned. Motivating this generation to evangelism is a huge challenge. Without understanding the rationale for mission, it is not likely many will contribute to (or volunteer for) missionary work.

1. Honoring God. The basis of all mission activity is the Lord. Though He is Sovereign, He did not ask for blind obedience or mindless compliance. Jehovah wants believers to do for Him what is worthy of His name, I Corinthians 10:31.

a. Nature of God. God Himself stands in the foreground of mission. Evangelism is His effort to save the lost, II Corinthians 5:18-20a. There is no other endeavor like it because there is no other God like Him, Deuteronomy 33:26.

(1) He is one. He is the God of all humankind, Romans 3:29,30; 10:12; Ephesians 4:6. If there was no other motivation for ministry, belief in one God—who is the God of everyone—should be sufficient to generate an outpouring of mission activity, Isaiah 45:21,22.

(2) He is Lord. Yahweh is Master because He is Creator, Isaiah 43:1; John 1:3. Those who acknowledge Him as Lord will be saved, Romans 10:9. And, because they accept Him as their Master, they refuse to remain silent when His Lordship is challenged, Acts 17:16,22,23. Submission to the Master includes mission. It is expressed in proclaiming the sovereignty of God to the end of the earth.

b. Message of God. Mission involves sending messengers, Romans 10:14,15. Missionaries are on the errand of God. They proclaim breaking news from heaven.

(1) Revelation. No one can imagine what God is like. There is nothing on earth with which to compare Him, Isaiah 40:18. His thoughts are above our thoughts, Isaiah 55:9. If

He had not revealed Himself, humans would not have known Him, I Corinthians 1:21; 2:6-8. But the “*long kept secret*” is now “*disclosed in Jesus Christ*,” Romans 16:25-27. This revelation is the final truth for all men everywhere, Jude 3. We are driven out (by the exclusive message) to the frontiers of the kingdom.

(2) Proclamation. The Gospel is Good News. It is so good that we must (under all circumstances) announce it, Acts 4:20. How can we be silent? In a day of Good News, how can we say nothing? II Kings 7:9.

(3) Invitation. God is the great “extrovert” who seeks all men in relentless love. Our salvation is His consuming interest, II Chronicles 16:9. This is fantastic news. And, if God is a searching God, should not His children be a missionary people? I Chronicles 28:9.

c. Church of God. The nature of God also determines the nature of His Church. What He is she should be.

(1) Body of Christ. The Church inherited the purpose of Israel, Isaiah 43:20,21. She is called to declare the deeds of her Lord, I Peter 2:9. She must make the word of God fully known, Colossians 1:25. Sharing the wisdom of heaven is the responsibility of the Church, Ephesians 3:10.

(2) Servant of the King. A slave does not determine his own tasks. Work is assigned by his master. The Church has an assignment. However, in this case, her master is a servant, too, Mark 10:45. Since Jesus is a servant, His followers must also be servants. They are a channel through which the King can contact the world. Mission is His means of informing the earth of His plans. There is no room for argument, no place for excuses, Ephesians 6:5-8.

(3) Debtor of men. The Christian has a debt, Romans 1:14,15. The world gave nothing to the believer. Yet the believer owes everything to the world. He has a stewardship entrusted to him, I Peter 4:10,11. A steward manages the possessions of his master—using the estate in the way the owner specifies, Luke 16:1,2; Titus 1:7-9. If the Church does not proclaim the Gospel, she is disloyal to Jesus. The wealth of the Church, then, is her debt to society. Her whole life is payment. Her payment is her missionary obligation, I Corinthians 4:1,2.

d. Creatures of God. The needs of the lost are also a motivation for ministry. As a Christian parent once said, “I present the Gospel to the non-Christian for the same reason I share it with my child—he needs it!”

(1) Futility of alienation. Human beings have rejected God, Romans 1:21. The Lord offers to rescue those who trust Him, Colossians 1:13,14; I Thessalonians 1:8-10. The saints must watch in readiness for His return, Matthew 24:42. For, when the Lord comes, time will have run out. There is a second coming but not a second chance!

(2) Certainty of judgment. The judgment is inevitable, Colossians 3:6;

II Thessalonians 1:7b-9. Consequently, we go in mission so sinners can come in faith. If we do not go, how can they come? Romans 10:14. How can they be rescued from eternal destruction? This may be a negative reason but we do well to ponder it, II Corinthians 5:11a.

2. Serving God. Jesus' disclosure about the destruction of the temple was prefaced with a warning. "*Watch out!*" "*Take heed!*" "*Pay attention!*" Matthew 24:4. He was warning His followers so they would not quit when the destruction occurred. He charged them to "*stand firm*" or "*endure*" to the end, Matthew 24:13.

a. Proclaiming the Gospel. The disciples were enamored with the beauty of the temple, Mark 13:1. Their priorities needed adjusting. So do ours. We delight in our grand structures and solemn assemblies. Our eyes should be on the fields "*ripe for harvest*," John 4:35. God holds us accountable, Mark 13:10. We are called to endurance and faithfulness in the ministry of reconciliation. Mission is no more optional than breathing is optional.

b. Honoring the Lord. Jesus was not preoccupied with the time of the end nor the extent of evangelism. He simply riveted His attention on the need for faithful service until He returns. The disciples were sent "*for the sake of His name*," Romans 1:5. And others went out for the same reason, Acts 5:41; III John 7. They were concerned for the honor of the Lord, Psalm 115:1. His name is special because it represents Him. It speaks of all He is, Ephesians 1:21; Philippians 2:9-11. Idols are false gods. They are imposters, Isaiah 42:8. How can we remain silent? Do we love His name so little we can bear to see it ignored? Surely not! There are many reasons for our failure to evangelize. Sadly none of them will glorify His name.

CHAPTER 9

MARK

From a human standpoint, the crucifixion of Christ was caused by the rejection of the Jews. And, some would argue, that that rejection prompted the formation of His followers into a community of believers. However, the death of Christ was not a surprise, Revelation 13:8. Likewise, redemption in the Lord and proclamation of the Gospel were not after-thoughts. All of this happened “*according to the eternal purpose of God,*” Ephesians 1:4,5; 3:10,11. These plans were a “*mystery*” until the Lord, according to His sovereign pleasure, in the fullness of time, made them known, Ephesians 1:9,10; cf. Romans 16:25-27. The Church, then, is not a stop-gap, spur-of-the-moment invention. She was not a temporary measure based on an unexpected rejection of Jesus. For, in truth, Christ began gathering His followers into a group—which would preach the Gospel—long before the Jews turned against Him, Mark 3:13,14.

I. Significance of the Kingdom Community.

The Lord came in order to proclaim the approaching reign of God, Mark 1:14,15,35-38. Demons were subdued to demonstrate that the kingdom had come, Matthew 12:28. The disciples were sent to “*the lost sheep of Israel,*” Matthew 10:5,6. Jesus focused on the twelve tribes, Matthew 19:28. The formation of a community of believers was not a response to Jewish disbelief but a pre-condition to the coming of the kingdom.

A. Importance of the Community to the Kingdom. The plan of God included the Church. Jesus attempted to form that community in Israel. When Israel turned a deaf ear, He did not abandon His effort. Rather, He turned His attention to the Gentiles, Romans 11:11,12.

1. Members of the community. The first believers were the initial members of His community. He called them His “*little flock,*” Luke 12:32. Because the Jewish nation rejected Jesus, they were no longer considered His children, Romans 9:6-9. Israel was no longer the basis of His redemptive enterprise. The “*little flock*” was. The plan of God shifted in the direction of these early followers of Jesus—both Jews and Gentiles, Romans 9:30-33; 10:10-13.

a. Jews. The followers of Christ were very different from the exclusive groups in first century Judaism. Jesus made His appeal to all of Israel through the “*little flock.*” He demanded an unwavering commitment, Luke 14:27. They were the ones who (eventually) stood by Him during the dark times of His rejection, Luke 22:28-30. It was to this faithful band of followers that the kingdom was given. These brave disciples announced the Good News, Mark 16:19,20. They ventured forth to the Jews, then to the Gentiles, Romans 1:16.

b. Gentiles. The despised pagans were included, Matthew 8:11. The “*elect*” would be gathered from all parts of the earth. They would be ushered into the kingdom, Mark 13:27. The death of Jesus was significant for “*many*,” Mark 10:45, for “*the scattered children of God*,” John 11:51,52, for “*all men*,” John 12:32. Throughout His ministry, Christ envisioned the formation of a community of the redeemed—both Jews and Gentiles—through whom He would reach out in mission to the distant regions of the world.

2. Character of the community. What is the relationship of the “*little flock*” to the Church? Was the band of disciples merely a provisional group? Or were they the “*first fruits*” of the company of the blessed? And what is the relationship of the Church to the kingdom? Is she merely a temporary expedient until the Lord tries again to establish His kingdom in Jerusalem? Or is she the instrument of God for proclaiming the Gospel between the announcement of the kingdom in the incarnation and the full realization of the kingdom at the second coming?

a. Work of God. The company of disciples that gathered around Jesus was the direct result of the work of God (as much as it was the work of Christ). Yahweh made known to the “*little flock*” the mystery of the kingdom, Mark 4:11; cf. Matthew 11:25. God was collaborating in the formation of the community, John 6:39,44,65; 17:6. The band of disciples was the foundation of the Church. Christ was the chief cornerstone, Ephesians 2:19,20. Together with them, we—as the super structure—have become “*a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit*,” Ephesians 2:21,22.

b. Authority of God. The connection of the Messiah to the Church and to the kingdom is clarified in the confession of Peter, Matthew 16:13-20. Though Jesus addressed the twelve, Peter spoke first. His words were few, simple, and direct. They were born out of what the apostle had seen and heard. His confession was not the product of human reason. It was a divine revelation. And, upon the truth expressed in that confession, the community of believers would be built. The Church does not rest on Peter (or any other human being) but on the messiahship of Jesus. Christ is the foundation, I Corinthians 3:10,11. And, should the “*gates of Hades*,” namely, “*death*,” Job 17:15,16, try to overwhelm the Church, she will prevail, Revelation 20:7-10. Likely, the Lord referred to all forces that opposed Him and His followers. The Church will more than survive. She will be the mouthpiece of God—“*speaking the truth in love*,” Ephesians 4:11-16. The mission of this community was to proclaim the saving grace of God. So the “*little flock*” was given the keys (or the “*power to bind and loose*”). The keys referred to the authority to teach, Luke 11:52. They included the right to forgive sin (in Christ), John 20:23. They pointed to an authority of decision, Matthew 18:17. When the community of believers either condemned or condoned behavior (according to the will of God), she had the seal of approval from heaven, Acts 15:19-21; II Corinthians 2:6-8.

3. Relationship to the kingdom. The community of proclamation is the Church, the people of God. Her citizenship is in heaven—from whence Christ rules with sovereign power, Philippians 3:20-22. How, then, is the kingdom and Church related?

- The Church and the kingdom are similar but not the same. The sovereign control of God was present in the person of Christ, Matthew 12:28. His power will manifest itself at the second coming, II Thessalonians 1:5-9. The community established by Him will have a share in the coming kingdom, Hebrews 12:25-29.
- The main significance of the Church consists in her orientation toward the future kingdom. The imperfect Church will one day be absorbed into the perfect reign of God. She is promised a share in His sovereign rule if she perseveres to the end, James 2:5.
- The power of the kingdom is present in the community, I Corinthians 4:20. The juridical authority of the future is already present in her power to bind and loose on earth, Matthew 19:28.
- Despite the opposition from the “*gates of Hades*,” namely, persecution that results in the death of believers, the saints will be “*more than conquerors*,” Romans 8:35-39. The Church will endure till the kingdom (in its fullness) appears. In the meantime, she must stand against the “*power of the enemy*” in the strength of the Lord, Luke 10:18-20. The Church is a militant community, a people under the cross.
- Membership in the congregation of saints is by divine invitation, I Thessalonians 2:10-12. It is a matter of birth (or, better, rebirth), John 3:3-5. As a child becomes an heir at birth, that is, has a right to the possessions of the father, so a child of God inherits the kingdom of his heavenly Father. But members of His family must remain loyal to Him. Otherwise, their inheritance will be forfeited, I Corinthians 6:9,10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5,6. Christians must be resolute through the trials that result from being a child of the King, Mark 8:34-38.
- The Church is the flock of Jesus—the messianic Shepherd—who gave His life for their salvation, John 10:14-18. The Church is a visible representation of the reign of God in so far as His power and grace operates in her. Nevertheless, it is equally true that the kingdom is not the Church in her mundane organization, her human frailty, or her cultural differences. The one is infinite. The other is finite. The one is independent. The other is dependent. Similar? Yes—in some ways! Different? Absolutely—in many ways!

B. Significance of the Kingdom to the Community. As the Church is important to the kingdom, so the kingdom is significant to the Church. She saw in the idea of the kingdom her obligation, her governance, her mission, and her hope.

1. Moral obligation. There are several texts in which the moral demands of the reign of God clarify the exhortations given to the community of saints. For instance, the first and last beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount mention the kingdom, Matthew 5:3,10. Fortunate is the person who realizes his utter helplessness. And happy are those who put their complete trust in the power of God. In short, humble submission is the spiritual DNA of all citizens in the kingdom of God, cf. Luke 12:16-21. Moreover, the kingdom is used to clarify the demands for moral living. It is not enough simply to invoke the name of the Lord. It is not adequate to merely list deeds done for Him. It is not sufficient to appeal to an association with Him. None

of these will save. Redemption requires obedience, Matthew 7:21-23; cf. Luke 13:24-27. Furthermore, the man without a wedding garment—the clothes provided by the king, Revelation 19:1,6-9—is dismissed from the banquet, Matthew 22:1-14. This is a warning that believers must show themselves worthy of their calling, II Peter 1:10,11. The king invites. Those who enter must come on His terms, must respond to His summons, and must put on His garments of righteousness, Revelation 7:9-17.

2. Leadership qualities. Jesus reminded His followers to respect their leaders. He couched His teaching in references to the reign of God. The disciples argued about “*who was greatest in the kingdom*,” Matthew 18:1; Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46. The quarrel centered on two ideas: (1) who was greatest in their group and (2) who would be greatest in the coming kingdom, Mark 10:35-37. Perhaps, they thought, the community on earth foreshadowed the kingdom in heaven. At any rate, the paradox of leadership was clarified: he who desires to rule must first be a servant, Mark 10:45. The disciples were shocked. It did not make sense to them. Jesus explained that they were called to be different, Mark 10:42-44. Bigness in heaven is preceded by littleness in the Church, Matthew 18:2-4. In other words, a leader in the community of saints is called, led, and loved in simple trust. The leader will act as one who possesses nothing, who needs everything. He will be modest. He will present himself as one who can do nothing but is willing to do everything. Such a person is qualified to lead the “*little ones*.” He is ready to shepherd the insignificant and feeble, the ignorant and sinful, Matthew 18:10-14.

3. Missionary goals. Jesus foresaw the conversion of the heathen, Matthew 8:11. He discussed the Gentile mission in the story of the evil vinedressers, Mark 12:1-12. It is obvious that Christ applied the parable to mission among the pagans, Matthew 21:43. The meaning is clear. The Jews will be rejected because they rejected the prophets and the Son. The vineyard was leased to another people. It was given to the “*new Israel*,” the responsive Jews and Gentiles. The surprise in the story is the mention of the kingdom being “*taken away*.” This indicates that the kingdom had already been given—a notion which contradicts the exclusive end-of-time interpretation of the kingdom. The importance of the kingdom in the mission of the Church is reflected in the frequent melding of the two ideas into one concept: “*the Gospel of the kingdom*,” Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14.

4. Future expectations. The early Church had a keen interest in the second coming. The return of the Lord will be accompanied by the appearance of the kingdom in power. Therefore, the disciples were cautioned to “*be alert*,” to “*be ready*.” In a parable, Jesus indicated He would be gone for awhile, Luke 19:11-13. The heir to the throne “*went to a distant country*.” No doubt He referred to heaven. Therefore, rather than focus on the imminent appearance of the kingdom, one should pay attention to the tasks the servants were assigned to do in the interim. Matthew emphasized the duration of Jesus’ absence, Matthew 25:5,19. The Lord will return unexpectedly. The saints must be ready. They “*do not know the day or the hour*,” Matthew 25:13. His coming will be a surprise, Matthew 24:48-50; Mark 13:35-37. Though the Lord was asked on four different occasions “*when*” He would return, He never responded with specific details, Luke 17:20; 19:11; 21:7; Acts 1:6. His lack of particulars about His reappearance was not an accident. The time is uncertain. Only the Father knows. Still the event

is guaranteed to happen. Though delayed, it will assuredly come to pass. The kingdom obviously had significant impact on the believing community—on her ideas, her teachings, and her aspirations. The reign of the King of kings made the early Church realize her nature and her dignity, made her see her duty and her responsibility. Hopefully, it does the same for us.

II. Power of the Kingdom in the Believing Community.

During the interim, before Jesus returns, the Holy Spirit was sent, John 14:15-20. Among other things, the Spirit is a sign of the kingdom in the here and now, Acts 1:6-8. Mission is a witness to the kingdom throughout the world. Men and women go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the sovereignty of God over all things, I Corinthians 15:20-28. The reign of Yahweh is present in the Church (though His kingship is not the property of the saints). In other words, His sovereignty is not domesticated in the community of believers. Or, to say it differently, mission is not simply the self-propagation of the Church. To believe that would be an appalling distortion of mission. On the contrary, the power of the kingdom motivates, rules, and leads the Church. Mission is not something the Church does. It is something the Spirit does in and through the Church. He works with the community of believers in her missionary effort. Hence, it is not enough to speak of the proclamation of the kingdom. It is not enough to speak of the presence of the kingdom. We must also acknowledge the power of the kingdom. In this power, the mission of God is carried out by the Body of Christ.

A. The Spirit and Jesus. A quick glance at the New Testament will serve as a reminder of the central place which the Holy Spirit must occupy in the outreach of the faithful. From the start, the life of Christ was directly connected to the Spirit, Luke 1:26-35. The Lord was anointed by the Spirit at His baptism, Luke 3:21,22. Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, Luke 4:1,2. The power of the Spirit entered Christ as He began His ministry, Luke 4:14-21. Though persistently present with Jesus, the Holy Spirit did not interact with the disciples until after the crucifixion. The apostles were, on several occasions, promised the Spirit, Luke 11:11-13; 12:11,12. But they did not receive the Holy Spirit until after the resurrection, John 20:21,22. And, apparently, the Spirit did not abide with them until after the ascension, Acts 1:8; 2:1-4.

B. The Spirit and the Apostles. At the beginning of His ministry, John told his audience that Jesus would baptize by the Holy Spirit, Matthew 3:11. After His resurrection, Jesus restated the imminent fulfillment of that promise, Acts 1:5. The baptism of John was a sign pointing to the coming kingdom, Matthew 3:1,2. In Jesus' instruction on baptism, sign and reality met, John 3:5. Did this mean, then, that the waiting was over? If the sign and the reality have become one, does that not indicate that the day of the Lord had arrived? Should not the kingdom come? The disciples certainly thought so! Acts 1:5,6. The question of the disciples was a reasonable one. The answer, nevertheless, was a warning and a promise. The warning was that God controlled history. He had His own time table. It is not within the domain of human beings to know such matters, Acts 1:7. The promise was that the disciples will be given the presence of the Spirit as a pledge, a foretaste, a guarantee of the kingdom, Acts 1:8. The apostles were not promised the kingdom in its fullness. Rather they were given the first installment of the reign of

God, II Corinthians 1:21,22. The disciples would be living evidence of the reality of that kingdom. The evidence would be their testimony, through the enabling power of the Spirit, the Good News of Jesus Christ among all nations. However, what the Lord gave them was not a command but a promise—a promise to make them witnesses. In other words, it was something they would BE not something they would DO, Luke 24:48. When the Spirit came upon them, the apostles knew “*the last days*” had dawned, Acts 2:16,17. The promise of God to all people was now available, Acts 2:21,38. The gathering of all nations had begun.

C. The Spirit and the Church. The Church was launched on her missionary enterprise by the sovereign Spirit. The spread of the Gospel has always remained the mission of the Holy Spirit. He is central. He empowered the first Christian martyr, Acts 6:3-5a,8-10; 7:54,55. The Spirit arranged the meeting between Philip and the financial minister of Ethiopia, Acts 8:26-29. The Spirit also prepared Peter to preach to a pagan army officer, Acts 10:19,20. The Spirit initiated the first mission into Gentile territory, Acts 13:1,2. The Spirit guided Paul and Barnabas on their journey, Acts 16:6,7.

1. Conversion of Cornelius. The sovereign work of the Spirit in mission is especially significant in the conversion of Cornelius (or, as some prefer, the conversion of Peter). The apostle firmly rejected what seemed like an assault on his allegiance to the law, Acts 10:9-14. The identity of Peter was bound up in his Jewishness. Yet, despite his hesitancy, Peter was persuaded to go to the home of a pagan and proclaim the Good News. Before he finished, the situation past beyond his control. Like the apostles on Pentecost, Cornelius and his family were overcome by the Holy Spirit, Acts 10:44-46. Peter realized that he was not in control of the situation. The sovereign Spirit was. The apostle yielded, Acts 10:47,48. Later, before the Jerusalem Church, Peter had to defend his actions. His defense was simple and direct. “*Who was I that I could oppose God?*” Acts 11:17.

2. Conversion of the Church. Clearly mission changed the Church as well as the world. For, in the conversion of Cornelius, there was a conversion of the believing community. The Jerusalem Church not only welcomed Gentiles but also encountered her racial prejudice. The Spirit convicted the world of sin, John 16:8-11, and lead the Church to new truth, John 16:12,13. Mission work was not merely the effort of believers. It was the action of God in the power of the Spirit to bring the redemptive work of Christ to completion. The exclusive Church (before the conversion of Cornelius) became the inclusive Church (after the visitation of God), Acts 10:27,28. The door was now open for Jews and for Gentiles, Acts 11:18; Ephesians 2:11-18.

a. Problem with tradition. The story of Cornelius was a preface to a wider struggle. How should pagan converts be admitted into the Church? Those who insisted on circumcision had an enormously strong case. Circumcision had been fundamental to membership in the family of God since the time of Abraham, Genesis 17:14. Martyrs had sacrificed their lives for this ancient requirement. Jesus was circumcised, Luke 2:21. He never suggested that it should be discontinued. To talk of uncircumcised heathens becoming members of the community of faith appeared to set aside scripture, tradition, and Jesus. This was a serious matter!

b. Argument from experience. What reason could lead the Church to break with such an overwhelming weight of authority? Only one thing did—the sovereignty of God. The Church stood against centuries of doctrine and practice because of the unmistakable presence of the Holy Spirit among uncircumcised pagans, Acts 15:8. The action of the sovereign Spirit silenced the opposition, Acts 15:12. Paul made a similar argument, Galatians 3:2-5. The Church was not in control of the Church. God was! The surprises of the Lord compelled the believers to stop talking (and start listening). Since the Spirit is Lord, the Church must be an attentive servant, II Corinthians 3:17. Obviously, then, the witness of the Church is derivative, namely, the community of saints are witnesses insofar as they obediently follow where the Spirit leads them.

D. The Spirit and Mission. The mission of God was not complete in the sending of Jesus. The Church would never have come into existence if God had not sent the Holy Spirit. The Spirit continued what Christ began. He made real to the world, what Jesus made real for the world. He carried to completion the redemptive work of the Messiah. Therefore, like the Son, the Holy Spirit was sent, John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7. Where the Spirit works, God is at work. He is a co-witness in the proclamation of the Gospel, Acts 5:32. The disciples were filled with the Spirit, Acts 2:4; 4:8,31. We are, too, Ephesians 5:18. Back then, being “*filled with the Spirit*” manifested itself in an irrepressible speaking about the Lord. Should it not now?

1. Spirit as counselor. Jesus promised to be with His disciples, Matthew 28:20. And, when He announced His ascension, He said He would send “*another counselor*,” John 14:16. As a counselor, the Holy Spirit will help, encourage, intercede, and defend the messengers of the Good News, Mark 13:11. Indeed, the Spirit would be their companion or partner in proclamation, John 14:16-18. He would remind the disciples of the words and works of Jesus, John 14:25,26. The world would reject the message about the Messiah. Hence, the disciples were to wait for the “*power*” of the Holy Spirit, Acts 1:4,8. He would prepare them to “*stand against the devil’s schemes*,” Ephesians 6:10-12. To “*go*,” then, without “*waiting*,” would have made the going futile. To “*wait*,” however, without “*going*” would have made the waiting useless. It is as essential to wait as it is to go. In other words, the Spirit and the mission are inseparably related. The Spirit is the essential preparation for mission. Mission is the inevitable result of the indwelling Spirit, John 15:26,27. The counselor led the apostles into all truth, John 16:12,13. So the disciples went out. They preached everywhere. And, most important, the Lord worked with them, Mark 16:20. What a contrast! Before the Spirit came, the community of believers “*said nothing to anyone because they were afraid*,” Mark 16:8. Evangelism, then, is far removed from the typical idea of a brave band of messengers. The disciples did not go forth under their own strength to engage Satan on his turf. The truth is completely the opposite. The disciples were frail. They were frightened. They did not know what to say or what to do. They were powerless before the menacing stare of their pagan accusers. Likewise, missionaries are not (and never will be) adequate for the task to which they have been called. Thank God for the impossibility of mission! For, when we are weak, then we can be strong in the power of the enabling Spirit, II Corinthians 12:9,10. The secret of an effective evangelistic effort begins with the sovereign Lord. One greater than us is at work in and through (and, on occasion, in spite of) us. Our task is to faithfully follow Him.

2. Spirit as a deposit. The Holy Spirit is not only a counselor but also a first payment. He is a senior partner as well as a guaranteeing deposit, Ephesians 1:13,14. The gift of the Spirit is related to the coming kingdom as cash-in-advance is related to the full payment of an account. The Spirit is a foretaste of the kingdom, Hebrews 6:4-6. The presence of the Spirit is a sign that the last days have arrived, Acts 2:17. Consequently, the deposit both assures us of the end and propels us toward the end. In the Spirit, we have been liberated from the slavery to sin, Romans 8:12-14. Because we are children of God, we can address Him as “Daddy.” And, as sons of the sovereign Lord, we are assured of a future inheritance, Romans 8:15-17. Our true standing as sons (and, therefore, as heirs) is authenticated by our participation in the sufferings of Christ, in the rigors of ministry. For the deposit, as a “*first fruit*,” guarantees the coming harvest. So we wait patiently in hope, Romans 8:22-25. Yet we do not wait alone. The Spirit helps us in the interim, Romans 8:26,27. From this point of view, then, ministry can be defined as “*hope in action*.” It is a way of living which arises out of having already received the first installment of the promised treasure. It enables us to work and wait with both eagerness and patience. It is a sample of the kingdom which will be revealed in its fullness at the glorious return of Jesus. Evangelism, then, is a gift of God rather than an accomplishment of men. Hence, we should not speak with enticing words of (human) wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit, I Corinthians 2:4,5. It means speaking words which the Holy Spirit teaches, I Corinthians 2:13. For the Spirit alone makes us able ministers, II Corinthians 3:6; cf. I Thessalonians 1:4,5; I Peter 1:10-12. There is a unanimous testimony in the New Testament to the relationship between the third person of the godhead and a human messenger. The Holy Spirit is the power behind the mouthpiece. Heaven and earth work together as comrades in proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom.

CHAPTER 10

LUKE - ACTS

Did Jesus expect the end to come soon? How near was the kingdom? Were the first century believers mistaken in their interpretation of His words? The time of the advent of the kingdom is a most puzzling question. The difficulty is deepened when the words of Jesus and the understanding of the early Church are treated as one and the same. Moreover, to further complicate matters, various passages seem to contradict each other. Some suggest an imminent kingdom. Others point to the distant reign of God.

I. Recognition of the Kingdom Not Yet.

Many people think the first generation of Christians expected an immediate appearance of the kingdom, Luke 9:27. Therefore, passages that seem to contradict this soon-to-happen event are seen as later explanations for the delay of the second coming, Mark 13:10. Yet, why should we blame our confusion regarding these verses on the supposed expectations of the early saints? The theory of progressive development, among the first believers in the doctrine of the end-of-time, raises substantial concern. Does not God expect us to accept all of His inspired word? Progressive development renders various passages useless. That, in itself, is a precarious approach to a study of the text. It leaves to the whims of human bias the understanding of the scripture. There is a better approach. Every text should be studied in its context.

A. The End is Near. Without question, Jesus proclaimed the imminent approach of the kingdom. His miracles were signs that the reign of God had broken into the here and now. His powerful deeds were a foretaste of the kingdom of Yahweh. However, we must resist attributing to Jesus a twofold notion of the kingdom. Christ did not speak of the present reign as different from the future reign of God. Still He was aware of both the “now” and the “not yet” of the kingdom. The urgency of His words was authentic. The time of decision was now. The reign of God was at hand. There was every reason to act quickly. Anyone wanting to enter the kingdom must do so at once. If the kingdom was not imminent, a significant part of the teaching of Jesus was superfluous. His warnings to “*be alert*,” “*watch*,” or “*be ready*” lose their meaning, Luke 12:35,40,47. The language of the parables is even more forceful. People must not be caught unaware of the end, Luke 17:26-36. The “*last hour*” had come, I John 2:18,19. Prudence demanded action, Luke 12:54-56. That was the significance of the fig tree story, Luke 13:6-9. The Lord was speaking plainly in the context of specific events at that time, Luke 13:1-5. He combined the crisis of the present with the threat of the future in an urgent appeal to His contemporaries to enter the kingdom.

B. The End is Distant. How can we explain Jesus' saying the kingdom is "now" in view of His teaching that the kingdom is "not yet?" In other words, how can the reign of God be "*at hand*" and "*delayed*," be "*near*" and "*distant*" at the same time?

1. No definite time given. In all the passages cited so far no definite time is given, no temporal frame of reference is stated. After careful examination of His teaching, we are compelled to believe this was Jesus' style. He issued an urgency that emphasized the seriousness of the hour. He spoke about the necessity of a decision. He did so without foretelling events that could be used to calculate the end.

a. Jesus' purpose. The Lord wanted to confront His audience, to awaken them from lethargy. He endeavored to move them away from trivial preoccupations. He hoped they would passionately search for God. The nearness of the kingdom was one of the strongest motives for exciting human action, Luke 6:20-23. If He was to convince them, He had to address them in their contemporary circumstances, Luke 18:29,30; Romans 8:18.

b. Jesus' manner. In the Old Testament, the prophets addressed their contemporary audience. They focused on their particular time and place. They spoke to the assumptions, ideas, needs, and problems of their hearers. Therefore, they said "*the day of the Lord*" was near (though it was actually delayed for some time), Isaiah 13:6; 51:5; 56:1; Jeremiah 48:16; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 2:1,2. Because the event was so certain, it was near (in the mind of God) while very far away (in the minds of men), Jeremiah 29:10-14. The prophets also spoke of the "*last days*," Isaiah 2:2; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1. One could easily assume this referred to the end of time. Actually, however, these prophecies were fulfilled long ago. And time still marches on! Jesus talked in the same way. Because the end-of-time (in His mind) was certain, the end was near. The last days had begun. Immediate action was necessary.

c. Jesus' prophecy. The words of Christ combine this near and far quality in a powerful message.

(1) Content. The Lord was preparing His disciples for what was coming (in their lifetime). His instruction was filled with warning and comfort, Luke 21:8,9. And, within the same context, Jesus spoke of His second coming, Luke 21:25-28. The present was joined to the future as if they were one, continuous event. Lapsed time was obscured in order to heighten the intensity for being on alert, for being ready, Luke 21:34-36.

(2) Interpretation. Jesus uttered an end-of-time prophecy illustrated with contemporary, historical facts in the manner of the Old Testament prophets. He made future events appear close at hand in order to strengthen the impact of His message. This vivid prophetic style addressed the here-and-now with urgency. It clarified the future with present time events, Mark 13:18,19.

2. A definite time given. The Lord also mentioned an event that would happen in the generation of His hearers, Matthew 10:23. This passage is thought to apply to either the

resurrection, the day of Pentecost, the fall of Jerusalem, or the worldwide mission of the Church. Most likely it alluded to the destruction of Jerusalem.

a. The statements. Three texts are crucial in establishing the connection of Jesus' words with the disaster that fell on the holy city in 70 AD.

(1) Luke 9:27. The idea is stated in slightly different ways. Matthew said, "*before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom,*" Matthew 16:28. Mark wrote, "*before they see the kingdom of God come in power,*" Mark 9:1. And Luke said, "*before they see the kingdom of God,*" Luke 9:27. Each verse is saying the same thing. Where the king is, the kingdom is, Luke 1:29-33. The demise of Jerusalem, the fate of the Jewish nation was a foretaste of the sovereign reign of God, Matthew 22:1-7. The ordinary workings of the kingdom were quiet and invisible, Luke 13:20,21. The destruction of Jerusalem was an exception. It would reveal in clear view—in stunning display—the royal power of God before the very eyes of those in the audience of Jesus.

(2) Matthew 10:23. According to Acts 1:8, the twelve would begin their mission in Palestine. Jesus informed them that before they finished evangelizing that territory, the Son of Man would come, Matthew 24:30-34. The coming of the Son of Man referred to the terrible judgment of the Jews, that is, the Roman conquest of Jerusalem. Jesus was not speaking of His second coming at the end of history. "*This generation*" meant the audience the Lord was addressing on the day He spoke those words, Mark 13:30; cf. Luke 11:29-32.

(3) Mark 9:1. Though the judgment day (at the end of time) was just mentioned, Mark 8:38, the next verse refers to the wrath of God that fell on Jerusalem in the first century. Luke also mentioned both subjects back-to-back, one after the other, Luke 9:26,27. This is an example of intensifying the certainty of a present crisis by mentioning the reality of a future event. In other words, the fulfillment of the prophecy in that generation was the guarantee of the fulfillment of the prophecy about the future. Heaven and earth may pass away but His words will never pass away, Luke 21:32,33. The kingdom will assuredly come. However, it is unwarranted to think Christ said the "end" would come before some of His hearers died. For, elsewhere, He admitted He had no idea when the end would happen, Mark 13:32.

b. The interpretations. Several scholars conclude from these passages that the second coming of Jesus was expected in the generation living at that time. Furthermore, these scholars say that Christ believed the same thing (though He did not know the exact hour). However, there are major difficulties with these assumptions.

(1) Various positions. The Lord expressly denied any knowledge concerning the time of the end, Matthew 24:36-44. Instead, Christ alluded to a lengthy mission among the Gentiles, Matthew 28:19,20; Luke 24:46,47. Jesus had no desire to predict the end. He deliberately avoided questions about when the kingdom would come, Luke 17:20,21. Certainly end-of-time events are mentioned by Christ—sufferings, persecutions, and temptations. Yet, these were not issued to provide data for determining the end of history. Rather, they were

stated to warn the disciples of situations they were soon to confront. The Lord said categorically He did not know when the end would occur, Mark 13:32. The Father committed to His Son everything the Son needed to know, Luke 10:22. Evidently He did not need to know the exact time when history would conclude. The Father knows, Acts 1:7. The end is in His hands. That is sufficient.

(2) Possible explanations. How, then, is the ignorance of Jesus regarding the end to be explained? There are two possibilities. His lack of knowledge can be understood both absolutely and relatively. For instance, on the one hand, Jesus did not give an exact date for the demise of Jerusalem (though He knew it would be within the generation living at that time, Mark 13:30). Therefore, His lack of knowledge was relative to the “*day*” or the “*hour*,” Matthew 24:50; 25:13. But, on the other hand, His lack of knowledge about His return at the conclusion of history was absolute, Luke 12:40,46. In other words, the day of the Lord would be like a thief in the night—a complete surprise, Luke 17:26-30; 21:34-36. Jesus left His second coming in total obscurity. The end-of-time event was not relatively unknown but absolutely unknown to everyone except the Father, Mark 13:32. Hence, the devastation of Jerusalem would occur during the lifetime of some of His audience, Mark 13:30. But, the end-of-time, in the distant future, beyond the life span of His hearers, was unknown (and could not be calculated), Acts 1:7; I Thessalonians 5:1-3; Revelation 3:3; 16:15.

(3) Final conclusions. It is obvious that the Messiah announced the coming of the kingdom, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the return of the Son of Man in vague terms. This was intentional. The Lord refused to satisfy human curiosity. He did not provide precise details. Notwithstanding, a few passages contain a reference to the first century generation. All of these texts allude to the demise of the holy city. As to the other verses that point to the second coming, the early Church exercised unwavering faith without succumbing to spurious speculations. The community of believers held a living hope based on the prophetic utterances of Jesus. She did so without drawing false conclusions about the day or the hour of the end. There is a lesson here. An appropriate approach to this issue demands the abandoning of western concepts of time.

(a) Old Testament time. The Hebrew word for time does not mean a point of action but a framework for action, II Chronicles 25:27. The situation could be short or long in duration, Esther 4:14; Psalm 62:8. In most cases, the Hebrew language designated the suitable or favorable circumstance for something to happen, II Samuel 11:1; Psalms 104:27; 119:126; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Hence, in the end-of-time passages, the approaching “*day of the Lord*” was foretold in terms of what would happen instead of when it would happen, Isaiah 13:22; Ezekiel 7:7. The Old Testament concept of time leaned toward the framework of an event rather than the precise moment of its occurrence, I Chronicles 29:29,30; Psalms 31:15.

(b) New Testament time. The Greeks had two words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. Chronos referred to the measurement of action. Consequently, another name for a wrist watch is a chronometer. The term *chronos* is rarely employed in the New Testament, Luke 1:57; 20:9. The disciples wanted to know the *chronos* of the kingdom, Acts 1:6. But, Jesus said, the *kairos* resided in the jurisdiction of God alone, Acts 1:7. The emphasis in the New Testament

was on kairos. It referred to a favorable condition for something to occur, Acts 17:26; I Corinthians 7:5. Kairos was the word used in the end-of-time contexts, Luke 21:8; Revelation 22:10. Hence, the terms “now” and “today” often point to a general time or favorable situation for doing something, Colossians 1:25,26; Hebrews 3:7,13,15. The faithful must make the most of every opportunity (or kairos), Ephesians 5:15,16. For God alone has the authority over the kairos, Mark 13:32,33. Therefore, though we measure time (chronos), we are clueless about the end-of-time (kairos). We are aware that the last day has dawned, Ephesians 3:8-10. The incarnation was a decisive moment in time (or kairos), Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:7-10. God in-the-flesh was a unique, once-for-all happening, Romans 6:10; Hebrews 7:27; 9:12,28; I Peter 3:18. The interim between His first coming and His second coming acquire both their “no longerness,” Galatians 3:25; Ephesians 2:19, and their “not yetness,” Philippians 3:13; I John 3:2, from the biblical understanding of time: a divine framework rather than a human stopwatch!

II. Kingdom and Salvation.

Uncertainty about the kingdom also comes from questions regarding “what” it will be like. John the Baptist spoke of fiery judgment, Matthew 3:11,12. But where was the winnowing fork in the ministry of Jesus? The Lord seemed to be gracious toward most everyone. He healed the sick. He blessed the children. He forgave sinners. He was kind to the poor. He loved His enemies. Was Jesus the Messiah? Was He ushering in the kingdom? Luke 7:18-23. Though judgment was not absent, salvation was obviously foremost in His words and works.

A. What Salvation Is Not. In order to understand the kingdom, one must comprehend the significance of salvation. The Messiah came to rescue His people. He took the initiative to save the lost, Luke 19:10. Yahweh and Savior were synonymous throughout the Old Testament, II Samuel 22:3; Psalms 106:21; Isaiah 43:3,11; 45:15,21; 49:26; 63:8; Hosea 13:4. The same is true of Jesus in the New Testament, John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23; Ephesians 5:23; Philippians 3:20; I Timothy 1:15; II Timothy 1:8-10; Titus 1:4; 2:11-13; 3:3-6; II Peter 1:10,11; I John 4:14. The very name of Jesus—which meant “*the Lord saves*”—embodied His mission, Matthew 1:21. Hence, the full designation of the Messiah was “*Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*,” II Peter 3:18. The Bible is a virtual history of the mighty saving mission of heaven. It is more than a chronicle of the past. It is a contemporary handbook for salvation, II Timothy 3:14,15. Consequently, the Good News is called the “*Gospel of salvation*,” Ephesians 1:13. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, Romans 1:16. The obvious prominence of salvation in the Bible obligates us to ask what God intended, what Christ achieved, what the scriptures offer. And, to do so, we will begin with what salvation is not.

1. Physical health. Soon after World War II, in the mind of many ministers and missionaries, physical health and spiritual salvation became one and the same thing. Healing of body and soul was called “the essence of the Gospel.” Certainly disease is an alien intrusion into the creation of God, a malicious activity of Satan. And, it is affirmed with equal certainty, Jesus had compassion on the sick. His miraculous healings were a sign of His sovereign power. However, physical healing—natural or supernatural—was not (and must not be) equated with

salvation offered to humankind by Christ through the Gospel. One result of confusing physical health and spiritual redemption is misunderstanding the roles of the healer and the minister (or the missionary). Either the healer replaces the evangelist or the evangelist becomes a healer. This ought not to be. The task of the evangelist is not primarily to make people healthy but to make people holy—to restore them to a saving relationship with God, II Corinthians 5:18-20. It is true that the word “salvation” is used in the New Testament (and especially in the Gospels) to denote physical deliverance, Mark 6:56; Acts 14:9,10; James 5:15. Thus, salvation indicated a rescue from drowning, Matthew 8:25, from disease, Luke 17:19; and from death, Hebrews 5:7. But what does this prove? Since the New Testament promises salvation, does it offer protection from drowning, refuge from disease, and escape from death? No! Salvation by faith in Christ is not physical but spiritual. It is a rescue from sin that destroys the soul. The miracles of Jesus were intended to illustrate redemption rather than offer safety. They were to demonstrate His sovereign power rather than deliver physical well being.

2. Political liberation. The second major attempt to reinterpret the doctrine of salvation assumes that the chief predicament of humankind is not physical sickness but social illness. Salvation (in this view) becomes liberation of deprived and disadvantaged people from hunger, illiteracy, poverty, and war. It strives to free folks from colonial domination, political tyranny, racial bias, and gender discrimination. It condemns economic exploitation. It champions the cause of ghetto dwellers, political prisoners, and victims of soul-less technology. Salvation becomes liberation. Oppression (of every stripe and kind) is the problem. Redemption is redefined as justice. It is socio-political deliverance. The goal of ministry, then, is relabeled “humanization,” “development,” “wholeness,” and “shalom.” Certainly there is much that is desirable here. God loves everyone. Christians should, too, Galatians 6:10. The Lord wants human beings to live together in peace, love, and justice, Psalm 82:3,4; 89:14,15; Matthew 5:7-9. Heaven is concerned about the economic, social, personal, and political inequality in life. Undeniably, Yahweh hates the tyranny, oppression, cruelty, and indignity the “haves” thrust on the “have nots,” Proverbs 6:16-19; cf. Proverbs 21:3.

a. Liberation theology. Beginning with historical reality (rather than the inspired scripture), the “theology of liberation,” drawing on the social sciences, registers its protest against the oppression of the masses. Liberation theology is not merely an attempt to interpret the world but to change the world. The battle cry of liberation theologians is “cultural revolution!” Humans must take control of their destiny. Society must be restructured. Salvation comes through political action. The kingdom of heaven will be realized in a kingdom on earth. Or, as these liberation theologians say, socio-political liberation is the salvation of Christ! There is absolutely no biblical justification for such a statement. On the contrary, the New Testament constantly contradicts this notion. It does so by insisting on a distinction between those in Christ and those in the world, Romans 8:9; Ephesians 2:1-5; I John 2:15-17; 5:12. The goal of liberation theology is to create a “new man” (which is both a Marxist and a biblical expression). The “new man” of the Bible is a creation of God through the death of Christ. The “new man” is a gift from God for those who put their trust in Jesus, II Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:14-16. Hence, the scriptures critique (rather than champion) the basic tenets of liberation theology.

b. Biblical critique. Though liberation from oppression is definitely the will of God, it is not the “salvation” which He offers the world through His Son. To call socio-political liberation “salvation,” to label social activism “evangelism” creates a grave confusion. The Bible distinguishes between the world and the Church, between justice and justification, between social reformation and spiritual regeneration. New Testament salvation focuses on human souls rather than social structures. The current uneasiness with liberation theology is caused by its approach to biblical interpretation. In their use of scripture, liberation theologians are arbitrarily selective (omitting some things) and extremely careless (twisting other things) in order to support their preconceived theories. For instance, liberation theologians lean heavily on the exodus story, Exodus 3:7-10. The rescue of these exploited slaves was called “*salvation*,” Exodus 14:13,30; 15:13. This type of liberation—these theologians claim—is intended for all the downtrodden of the world in our day. But, the rescue of Israel from Egypt was a unique event in history based on a special covenant relationship between Yahweh and the Jews. It was a relationship that brought salvation as well as judgment, Amos 3:2; cf. Psalm 147:19,20. God rescued Israel from Egypt to fulfill His agreement with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Exodus 2:24,25. It was a unique demonstration of His grace to one specific nation, Exodus 19:4-6. Yahweh was active in the history of every nation but He did not make a covenant with every nation, Amos 9:7. “Salvation” and “covenant” always go together. In other words, God saves those with whom He has covenant relationship. Hence, the Exodus is analogous to the redemption from sin found in Christ (rather than a promise of rescue for all political minorities), I Corinthians 10:1-12. Furthermore, Jesus was anointed to preach Good News to the downtrodden, Luke 4:18. Yet, He did not empty the prisons. He did not heal all the blind. He did not liberate all of the oppressed. What he did, however, was deliver them from their spiritual bondage. No one should interpret biblical salvation in terms of social liberation. Though slaves should be treated fairly, Colossians 4:1, Paul encouraged slaves to remain slaves (who, as believers, were free in Christ), I Corinthians 7:20-24. Reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God. Social action is not biblical evangelism. Political liberation is not spiritual salvation. Notwithstanding, Gospel proclamation and social involvement are both Christian responsibilities. Each expresses a love of neighbor and obedience to Christ.

B. What Salvation Is. Salvation is freedom. It is freedom from sin and liberation for service, Romans 8:19-21. In the Old Testament, salvation commonly indicated deliverance out of cramping oppression. It was always an act of God. It was always a steppingstone for serving the Almighty. Hence, the salvation of God rescued Israel from Egyptian slavery for divine service, Exodus 19:4-6; cf. Revelation 5:9,10. Like salvation, the word freedom is frequently a negative term. It suggests an absence of restraint, hindrance, confinement, or repression. However, freedom and salvation must never be defined in purely negative ways. We must recognize what we are freed from as much as what we are freed for! In other words, we are saved from someone in order to serve Someone else. We are freed from self in order to serve God, Romans 6:1-13. It is appropriate, then, to examine the New Testament doctrine of salvation in the past, present, and future tense. And, in such an examination, we should carefully consider both the negative and the positive aspects involved.

1. PAST TENSE: Rescue from judgment for sonship. Believers have been liberated

from the wrath of God. This is more than freedom from guilt. It is a new relationship with the sovereign Lord, Romans 1:16,17. The “*righteousness of God*” is the equitable way He declares His enemies His friends. The Good News is the announcement of the grand deliverance from His infinite wrath. The linking of the power of God with the righteousness of God in view of the wrath of God is the essence of salvation. In the past tense, then, salvation is really justification overcoming condemnation. In scripture, “*to be justified*” does not signify “to be acquitted” but to be brought into right relationship with others. It is impossible for man to overcome his estrangement from God, Job 25:4; Psalm 143:1,2. Human deeds cannot placate divine wrath, Isaiah 57:12; 64:6. The undeserved favor of God in sending Jesus Christ to suffer the penalty for human sin is the only escape from the anger of heaven, Galatians 2:15,16; Ephesians 2:8,9. Justification is “*in Christ*,” Romans 5:1,2. Obedience to commands—accompanied by sincere devotion—can only maintain a right relationship with God after it has been received through faith in Jesus’ vicarious death, Romans 3:21-26. “*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*,” Romans 8:1-4. Jesus is our sin offering. We are not asked to offer a sacrifice for our sins. Instead, we are to believe in the One who was sacrificed for our sins, I John 2:2; 4:10. We are saved from wrath for sonship. God sent His Son not merely to redeem us but to adopt us into His family, Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 4:4-7. In short, then, salvation, in the past tense, is adoption through redemption.

2. PRESENT TENSE: Rescue from self for service. Salvation is as much a present process as it is a past gift. If one is asked, “Are you saved?” the reply should be “Yes” and “No.” Yes, one is saved from the wrath of God, but not yet redeemed in heaven. The believer is still being saved, Acts 2:47; I Corinthians 1:18; II Corinthians 2:15. Between justification and glorification lies sanctification—the gradual transformation of a believer by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ, Romans 8:29; II Corinthians 3:18; I John 3:2. Salvation—as a present process—requires the Christian to “work out his own salvation,” Philippians 2:12,13; I Peter 2:1-3. Salvation, then, includes a rescue from self. Only when the believer is prepared to lose himself—by giving himself away to serve God and others—can he ever truly find himself, Mark 8:35. It is only when we die to self that we can live for God. It is only when we are servants that we are freemen. Unless we are delivered from a slavish conformity to tradition, from secular materialism, and from selfish pursuits of happiness can we be free. Unless our discipleship is radical enough to make us indignant over all forms of oppression, unless we are selflessly devoted to Christ, we cannot claim to be saved. Salvation and the kingdom are two aspects of the same thing, Mark 10:23-27. In the kingdom, the authority of Jesus Christ is absolute. The saved have yielded to that authority.

3. FUTURE TENSE: Rescue from decay for glory. Salvation—which is a past gift and a present process—is also a future hope. We are saved in hope of being saved, Romans 8:24,25; I Thessalonians 5:8,9. Each day brings salvation closer, Romans 13:11; I Peter 1:3-9. Christian confidence does not rest in an earthly utopia but in a heavenly kingdom—a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell and God will reign forever. This future salvation will be a deliverance from the wrath to come, Romans 5:9; I Thessalonians 1:9b,10. It includes the “*redemption of our bodies*.” At the present time, our bodies share “*a bondage to decay*” with the whole creation. It makes us groan inwardly. In other words, we eagerly wait for “*our*

adoption as sons” of God, Romans 8:22,23; II Peter 3:13. In each phase of salvation, then, the emphasis is not so much on our rescue from judgment, self, or decay (though these are included). Rather the emphasis is on the freedom to live with God as His children. It is the release from self to serve others, the liberation from our flesh-and-blood existence to an unreserved devotion to the King of kings in the new heaven and new earth. In order to be citizens of the kingdom, we must give clear evidence of our salvation in a changed life (or lifestyle). To have an authentic message, we must have a genuine salvation.

CHAPTER 11

JOHN

Though not exactly what the Jews anticipated, Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. And, since the Messiah had come, the kingdom had come! What was the nature of His kingdom? How did one get into it? Over what did the kingdom rule?

I. Affirmation of the Kingdom Come.

The future expectation finally became a present reality. As Jesus said, “*the kingdom was at hand*,” Mark 1:15. He clearly stated that the kingdom of God resided within His hearers, Luke 17:21. The final drama had begun. The messianic age had dawned. He who was more resplendent than Solomon and more compelling than Jonah was there! Luke 11:31,32. The Father, Christ said, was pleased to give His disciples the kingdom, Luke 12:32.

A. Elements of the kingdom. The promised servant was on the scene, Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 4:17-21. The kingdom was ready to burst forth in power, Mark 9:1. There was no need to look for signs and portents, Matthew 12:38-40. The kingdom had arrived. It was present. It could be seen. And, beyond any doubt, there was no other kingdom like it anywhere.

1. Authenticated by miracles. The powerful deeds of Jesus were proof of what He claimed to be, Acts 2:22. The Lord never performed His miracles to gain attention, dazzle followers, or entertain skeptics, Mark 8:11,12. Only false messiahs do those things. The miracles of Jesus were the mighty works of God, Luke 11:20. In the powerful deeds of Christ, Satan met his match. The kingdom of God had invaded the world of men (though the greater blessing was having their names “*written in heaven*”), Luke 10:17-20. The cosmic end-of-time struggle had commenced. The “*powers of the age to come*” had arrived, Hebrews 6:5. Though the beginning was small, nothing would stop the advance of the kingdom, Matthew 13:31-33.

2. Entered by submission. The kingdom was not a figment of human imagination. It was not an empty territory. The Messiah did not rule in solitary majesty. He ruled over dedicated people. He was the King. Believers were His subjects. He was the new Moses. Believers were the new Israel. The mission of the Messiah was not to teach a better ethic. Certainly He did that. But He did it in light of the kingdom. His subjects were to submit to the urgency of His call. They were to put the kingdom first. They were to take drastic action (if necessary), Matthew 6:33; 13:44-46; Mark 9:47; Luke 14:26. His invitation was not a trifling matter, Luke 9:62. To enter the kingdom required more than a mediocre moral improvement. It demanded more than a burst of uncommon zeal. It was more than a New Year’s resolution. It

was a call to radical obedience, to an utterly impossible righteousness, Matthew 5:48. Those who answered His invitation had entered the kingdom. Indeed, they were the kingdom! However, kingdom righteousness was not a result of human obedience. It was a product of divine grace, Romans 3:22-24; Galatians 5:4,5. We are in the kingdom solely by the grace of God received through faith in Jesus Christ, Romans 5:1,2. And, having entered the kingdom, we must obey the King, Matthew 7:21-23; 25:31-36.

3. Characterized by righteousness. The ethics of Jesus can only be understood in light of the kingdom. The Lord did not present His moral teachings as a program which He expected secular society to obey. He did not set out to reform the world. Instead, He summoned people to enter the kingdom. He invited them to submit to His standard of behavior, Matthew 6:33. The ethical instructions of Christ are the righteousness of the kingdom. His commands are to be obeyed by all its citizens. His life is the pattern of conduct for everyone who claims membership. He expects His followers to love Him (and to love each other), I John 4:20. The kingdom of God is the new order which supersedes the old way, II Corinthians 5:16,17; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:5-10. Hearers are summoned to submit to the King of kings. Their place among the saved is determined by their compassion for the less fortunate, Matthew 25:37-40; cf. I John 3:14,15. The Lord calls us to kingdom living.

B. Members of the Kingdom. Christ announced the arrival of His kingdom. He summoned believers to enter it. He demanded that they live like they were citizens of it. He promised that those who heeded His call would be heirs of His promise, Galatians 3:29; Titus 3:4-7; James 2:5.

1. Israel of God. The Messiah came to call the lost sheep of Israel, Matthew 10:6; 15:24. Those who responded to His invitation were the true Israel. They were the real children of God. This band of faithful followers was the seeds of the Church—the “*called out ones*.” They were the long awaited Israel. They were the remnant fit to inherit the promised kingdom. Israel was not Israel simply because she was a descendent of Abraham, Romans 9:6-8. The Church was the true Israel. She was a remnant chosen by grace, Romans 11:5,6; Galatians 6:15,16. All who belong to Christ are in the lineage of Abraham, Galatians 3:29. Like Israel, she was called to show the world the glory of God, I Peter 2:9,10. In other words, the Church is a “*kingdom of priests*” summoned to reign with God, Revelation 1:5b,6; 5:10. As Old Testament Israel was the wife of God, Isaiah 54:4-7, so the New Testament Church is the bride of Christ, Ephesians 5:22-24; Revelation 21:9. Thus, Christ and the Church are one, corporate body, I Corinthians 12:27. As vine and branches, each is part of the other, John 15:5. The believer is “*in Christ*.” He is organically related to the Messiah and to every other believer in the new Israel. They are members of the Church. They are citizens of the kingdom. They are one body, Romans 12:5; I Corinthians 6:15a; 10:17; 12:12; Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:15.

2. People of covenant. If the Church is the Israel of God, then, she must also be the people of the covenant. The New Testament insists that that is so. The old covenant was the charter for the first Israel. God made the Jews His people, Exodus 19:4-6. To accept that agreement was an act of solemn gravity. It bound them to God. It tied them to each other. Unfortunately, the first Israel failed. Their idolatrous behavior broke covenant with Yahweh.

But the purpose of God could not be stymied. For, out of the scattered pieces of the first Israel, the Lord raised up a second Israel. With this new Israel, God made a new covenant, Isaiah 42:5-9; 49:8,9; 54:9,10; 55:3; Jeremiah 31:31-34. These predictions were fulfilled. A humble supper in an upper room announced a new beginning—a new Israel with a new agreement, Luke 22:20; I Corinthians 11:25. It was a watershed moment—the inauguration of the new covenant, II Corinthians 3:4-6; Hebrews 8:13. What seemed long in coming had finally arrived! The Church is the people of covenant. They are the new Israel who received the new agreement. They bear a new responsibility. The keeping of that agreement is directly related to membership in the kingdom, Matthew 5:19,20. These words were spoken by the new Moses. The best hope of Israel had been realized. As the covenant at Sinai bonded the first Israel to Yahweh, so the new covenant meal unites new Israel to His kingdom. The kingdom is entered by all in whom the Messiah lives, Galatians 2:20. They are baptized into His death. They are raised to walk in newness of life, Romans 6:1-10. They are a new creation in Christ, II Corinthians 5:17,18. They have put off the old man and have put on the new man, Colossians 3:9,10.

C. Realities of the Kingdom. The New Testament, then, speaks of the kingdom of God as a present reality. The waiting is over. Christ—the promised Messiah—has come. The reign of God is here. The Church is the new Israel, the true remnant bound to God (and to each other) by a new and everlasting covenant. But, to speak of the kingdom as a contemporary phenomenon, is to introduce an apparent contradiction. For, on the one hand, the kingdom is besieged. And, on the other hand, the kingdom is triumphant. So which is it? Can it be both at the same time?

1. Present tension. The Church is often harassed. Setbacks are common. Is the faith of believers merely whistling in the dark? No! There is every assurance of complete victory. Because the Church is the new Israel, the promises are sure.

a. Victory has been won. The kingdom of God has broken the power of Satan. The devil is retreating, Luke 10:18; Hebrews 2:14. The banner of Christ has been raised in enemy territory. The Christian is encouraged to participate in that victory here and now, II Corinthians 1:21b,22. We have been delivered from the present evil age, Galatians 1:3,4. We have gained a new citizenship, Philippians 3:20,21. We have been rescued from the demonic power of evil, Colossians 1:13,14. We have “*tasted of the kingdom to come*,” Hebrews 6:5. Our natural animosity toward God has been removed. We have been reconciled to the King, Romans 5:10,11. We have been adopted into the family of God, Galatians 4:6,7. We are being transformed into His likeness, II Corinthians 3:18. We are the people of the kingdom, members of the end-of-time community. We are called to take up the cause of true Israel, to become the missionary people of God. Our mission is not a forlorn hope doomed to defeat. It is a calling to victory. The victory has already been won. The cosmic struggle continues—with undiminished fury—but it is only a mop-up operation. The outcome is not in doubt. The surrender of the oppressor is certain, I Corinthians 15:24. The Church, then, is sent as a witness to a kingdom already established. On her mission, she will meet stiff resistance. But she will not be defeated, Matthew 16:18. She does not go alone, Matthew 28:20. She marches in confident trust, Isaiah 50:7-9; Romans 8:31. All will be well.

b. Victory will be won. The Church is confident of victory. She is sure that the kingdom is present. God reigns. But this is where the tension develops. For it appears equally true that the kingdom has not come, that the victory has not been won. From a human perspective, there is no way to produce the kingdom, to secure the victory. What, then, is this kingdom that has come AND that has not come? What is the victory that has occurred AND has not occurred? The early Church felt the tension. Rome stood unbroken, unbending—in no way subject to the kingdom of God. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any brave talk of winning the world for Christ. Nowhere is there mention of ushering in the kingdom. Rather, there was repeated urging to submit to the state, to obey the civil authorities, Romans 13:1,2. There was no hint of an assault on the tyranny of Rome. There was no suggestion of an attack on the abuses of the government. The followers of Christ were to be the holy people of God, I Peter 2:9,10. They were to stand firm and avoid giving offense, I Peter 2:13,14. Their good behavior would defeat the charges brought against them, I Peter 2:15,16. The saints were to “*prepare for action*” by depending on “*the grace*” that would come “*when Jesus is revealed*” at His return, I Peter 1:13. In other words, the Church was not a victorious army. She was a pitiful, helpless minority. She was the disinherited of the empire, I Corinthians 1:26-29. It is not surprising, therefore, to find no references in the New Testament that identifies the Church as the kingdom. Indeed, the Church is the people of the kingdom. However, the people of the kingdom are not the kingdom. Instead, the Church is a martyr Church. On earth, she will have no victory (except the victory of her sovereign God), Revelation 6:9-11.

2. Future hope. The now and the not yet of the kingdom is not altogether strange. It can be observed to a certain degree in the Old Testament. The rule of God was always considered a fact though its completeness was viewed as an end-of-time event. In Christ, however, the now and the not yet are brought together—the future made present. The kingdom is here now. Therefore, the kingdom was no longer a passive longing but an active experience.

- End-of-time community. The ministry of Jesus was the beginning of a new era. It embodied an end-time hope which was not fully realized in the earthly career of Christ. Thus, the kingdom was victorious but not entirely in control. The complete victory was still to come, Acts 3:21; I Corinthians 15:25,26; Philippians 1:6. These are the last days. The Church is an end-of-time community of believers, Romans 13:11,12. Time (from a human point of view) was short, I Corinthians 7:29a. Immediate action was required. The final day was approaching, Hebrews 10:25. Our salvation “*is ready to be revealed in the last time,*” I Peter 1:3-5; 4:7a; Revelation 1:3; 22:6,7. As decades turned into centuries, as centuries turned into millennia, it was inevitable that some of the tension between the now and the not yet was lost (though never entirely forgotten). The agonized cry of “*how long?*” was answered by the soothing whisper “*be patient!*” James 5:7,8; cf. Hebrews 10:35,36; II Peter 3:4,8. That hope has been carried by the Church through her tortured history. In doing so, she recognizes that it is important she stand firm. Each martyr was a witness to the sovereignty of God. Someday they will know that their efforts were “*not in vain,*” I Corinthians 15:58.

b. Triumphant Church. The first century saints had to live between the victory already won and the victory still to be won. The struggle could not be escaped unless hope in the

future was abandoned. However, that meant surrendering her God. It meant forsaking her Messiah. It meant denying her Gospel. It meant betraying her call. The tension was inevitable. It will not go away until Christ comes again. Believers were summoned to remain faithful, to stand firm. They were also asked to stay calm. They were called to be confident in the Lord, Jeremiah 17:7. The devil is at war. The antichrist rages. He vents his fury on the saints. The end approaches, Revelation 12:12. The outcome is beyond question. The battle was already won at Calvary, Revelation 5:9,10. Regardless of who threatens, the sovereign God is on His throne, Revelation 19:6. The powers of evil simply cannot win. Their present commotion is only the thrashing of a dying beast, the convulsions of the mortally wounded enemy. Such is the birth pangs of the new heaven and the new earth, Mark 13:8; Revelation 21:1-5. The devil is finished, Revelation 12:10. The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of God, Revelation 11:15. Therefore, we can enter the kingdom. We can submit to its demands. We can witness to its power. We can pray for its victory and brace for its struggle. But we cannot escape its tension. It is a kingdom we can neither create nor abandon—and remain the triumphant Church. It is up to us to find again in our time that holy tension between the now and the not yet. And, if we do, we will hear it said, *“Enter good and faithful servant!”*

II. Vocabulary of the Kingdom Assignment.

For many, life has become incredibly empty and sadly meaningless. Even Christians have lost their sense of ministry. They are absorbed in accumulating things. Survival, escape, and pleasure (not evangelism) is their personal preoccupation. A study of the Gospel of John is in order (especially the term “*sent*” from whence, through Latin, we get the word “*mission*”). The term “*sent*” is found 57 times in John. This Gospel is a great missionary document. It is an obvious place in which to rekindle a sense of ministry, to deepen an understanding of mission.

A. The Sent. The first step in finding (or maintaining) a sense of service is to consider those who were sent.

1. Jesus. The Lord did not come as a self-appointed Savior. He came with a profound sense of mission, a conviction that He had been sent, John 7:28,29; 8:42. The realization of being sent lies at the core of His ministry, John 5:37,38; 6:29; 17:3. The other Gospels were equally as emphatic about Jesus’ sending, Matthew 15:24; Mark 9:37; Luke 4:43. The question “Who is Christ?” is not answered with a noun but a verb! More than a title, being “sent” is His essential identity.

a. Who He was not. When John wrote his account of Jesus’ life, a strange religion was sweeping across the Roman Empire. It was a religion concerned with salvation by gnosis (or knowledge). Thus, it was called “*Gnosticism*.” The Gnostics believed the world was a place of utter darkness. It was essentially evil. Therefore, God, who is light, could not have created it. The creator had to be Satan—the ruler of darkness, the evil one. Humans are trapped in this world. They cannot get to God. So God sent a messenger, an alien, to free those in the know (or the Gnostics). It appears that John reacts to these teachings. For Jesus was not an alien. He became one of us. He lived on earth. He experienced what we experience, Hebrew 4:15.

b. Who He was. Jesus identified Himself as the sent one. His sending organized His life and His ministry.

(1) He obeyed God. Jesus did the will of the Sender, John 4:34; 6:38; 8:29. This was not grudging submission. It was a glad embrace of the mission of God.

(2) He spoke for God. His words were the words of God, John 7:16-18; 8:28; 12:49; 14:24; 17:8. The One sent heard the Sender, John 5:30; 8:26,40,47; 15:15. Since Jesus spoke for God, He knew God, John 8:55; 17:25. The Lord did not make-up what He said. His words were a gift from above. What He was given He shared with others. We are to do the same, Matthew 28:19,20.

(3) He worked with God. The works of Jesus were not His own, John 5:36; 9:4. His works recorded in John are called “*signs*” or pointers, John 2:11,23; 20:30. To what do these signs point? They draw attention to the Sender who was working through the One He sent, John 5:17-19. The word “*send*,” then, is a model for ministry and mission. It is the vocabulary of the kingdom.

(4) He depended on God. Jesus relied on the Sender, John 6:57. This is also an essential attitude in contemporary evangelism. Jesus was the embodiment of humanity depending on deity. In the activity of His ministry, people caught a glimpse of the kingdom of God. In other words, the infinite glory of the sovereign King shined through the finite dependence of Christ. Jesus expressly commanded us to embark on the same mission. He called us to imitate the same dependence on the Father, II Corinthians 1:9; cf. Psalms 37:3-5; 40:4; 56:11.

2. Church. In one powerful sentence, Jesus signed His mission over to His followers, John 20:21. If being “*sent*” defined who Jesus was, then it must define who His disciples were. Christ was unique because He was sent into the world. His disciples (and after them the Church) were unique because He sent them into the world, too. So, as mission was the self-understanding of Jesus, mission should be the self-understanding of the Church.

- She obeys God. In the body of Christ, the function of meetings is not to sway human votes but to determine the will of God, Romans 12:2; Ephesians 5:17; Hebrews 13:20,21; I Peter 4:1,2. A missionary Church—that recognizes she is sent into the world by the Lord—will seek His will. It may be difficult to discern, but it will never be discovered if she is seeking something else.

- She speaks for God. Like the speaking of Christ, the speaking of the Church must be preceded by attentive listening, Galatians 1:11,12. The closing of the canon of scripture was necessary but problematic. We can fall under the illusion that the time of listening is over. Do we have God “all figured out?” It is never a sign of health in the Church when the members stop listening, I Corinthians 1:21. The Church cannot speak for God if she does not first listen to God.

c. She works with God. As we are tempted to take the words of God and make them our own, so we are inclined to take His mission and make it ours. We set goals, determine strategies, and impose timetables of our own devising. Nevertheless, we will serve best if we first discern what God is doing and, then, join Him in His work, Colossians 1:28,29.

d. She depends on God. The Church must do what results in eternal life, John 6:27,35,51. The word “*flesh*” was clearly an anti-Gnostic term. Gnosticism said that Jesus was an alien. John disagreed, I John 4:1-3. The Church is made up of flesh. She is shaped by human institutions—customs, practices, and behaviors important to the community of faith. These institutions must not become the will of God. They are merely human arrangements that have meaning to those who have adopted them. They are the ways of man. The Church is flesh. She depends on the Lord. She must follow His lead. The life she receives from Him must send her into the world. Any expression of that life which fails to include the lost is a gross distortion of what God intends.

3. Missionary. The idea of a Christian without a community is as unbiblical as a missionary without a mission. In the kingdom of God, the missionary has a crucial role. The gathered Church often has little direct impact on the world. It is the scattered saints that most influence the lost, Acts 8:1b,4. The identity of Jesus involved being sent. The identity of the missionary also involves being sent, John 17:18. The missionary is commissioned to go Matthew 28:19,20. Like Paul, he is appointed “*as a servant and as a witness*” of Jesus Christ, Acts 26:16. A missionary cannot stay at home anymore than a sailor can remain in port. In a self-centered world, the missionary is sent to please the Sender, John 5:30. And, since being sent included suffering for Him, it will likely include some pain for us, John 15:18-21. If we use our position as a missionary to call attention to ourselves, then we can hardly claim to have been sent by Jesus. But, if we go in partnership with the Sender, He will be with us, John 14:23; 15:4; 17:20,21. He will answer our prayers, John 14:13,14. There is peace in being sent, John 14:27; 16:33. There is joy in obeying the Sender, John 15:11.

B. The World. The sending of Jesus into the world illuminated who He was. Likewise, the sending of the missionary into the world demonstrates who he is. In all of this, however, little has been said about the world. The term translated “*world*” throughout John is cosmos. Cosmos is the opposite of chaos. Thus, inherent in the word cosmos (or world) is the idea of order, structure, or system. Since it appears 78 times in the Gospel of John, cosmos is central to its message. It can refer to the entire universe, John 1:10, as well as the whole human race, John 12:18,19.

1. Opposing God. Most often, in John, cosmos indicates human society in opposition to Christ (and His followers). In order to understand our mission, we need to see the world as a series of structured, interlocking systems that actually (or potentially) destroy human beings. Because God holds the world accountable for its actions, the world is opposed to God, John 3:19; 14:15-17; 16:33; 17:14; 18:36. The world is a systematic, aggressive, and cruel oppression that imprisons people in sin, abuse, and poverty. The world hates the truth. It despises God. It opposes mission, John 3:20; 7:7; 15:18. That is nothing new. We have heard it many times

before. But what can we do about it? In this world, lovingly fashioned by a gracious God, dehumanizing structures, invented by man, roll over helpless victims, grinding them into broken pieces. That is the world into which missionaries are sent. It is the world where we must go, Mark 16:15,16.

2. Needing Christ. Jesus repeatedly stated that the world is hopelessly lost. It fought against God. It rejected His Son, John 5:37-40. The opponents of the Messiah slandered His name, John 8:48. They refused His message, John 10:19,20. The Lord correctly concluded that the world was in dire straits, John 5:41-44; 7:19; 8:47. It was a sinful place, John 8:23,24. When the sayings of the Lord are laid beside the descriptions of the world, the comparison of the two lists is a stark reminder that the world needs Jesus.

a. The world is blind. Jesus was rejected. God was ignored, John 1:10; 17:25. The blindness of the world was most obvious in its inability to comprehend the words of Christ, John 2:19-21; 3:3-9. The bias of the world blinded people to the truth, John 6:36. The world could not see. Its blindness caused its guilt, John 9:39-41. The ignorance of the world was willful—a deliberate choice not to see! John 12:37-43.

b. The blind hate God. Evangelists are sent into enemy territory, John 15:23-25. The animosity toward Jesus gives us ample reason to be cautious. This is especially true of the slogan: “Let the world set the agenda.” Some believers have leaned over backwards to accommodate the world. They forget that the world hates the Lord. If we embrace the world too tightly, we may fall in love with its notions. God wants us to keep a safe distance from the opposition, John 17:15-17.

c. The Lord loves them. Surprisingly, the world is the beloved enemy of God, John 3:16. Despite all the willful blindness and unreasonable hatred, heaven cares for them, II Peter 3:9; I John 4:7-10. Love invaded the world as light, John 8:12; 9:5; 12:46; I John 1:5-7. God could have come as a raging fire—burning and killing His adversaries. Instead, He entered the territory of His enemies as a baby, as a gentle, harmless lamb, as a soft, quiet light!

d. The truth brought judgment. The very presence of Jesus in the world threw the organized opposition into despair, John 3:19,20. They cowered in fear. They preferred to remain blind, ignorant of the truth. The light exposed the condition of the world—not just on the soft edges of its resistance but inside its powerful core of disdain, John 12:31; 16:8-11. Believers are sent into the bastions of hell to bring judgment on the forces of evil. Judgment is not the final word. God does not want the world to perish, John 3:17. Jesus did not come to judge but to save the world, John 12:47b. The Lord prefers life rather than death, salvation rather than condemnation for the world, Lamentations 3:33; Ezekiel 18:32; 33:11. The role of the missionary is to lead the world to that Person who makes their salvation possible, John 17:20,21. That is our challenge. It is our calling. It is our mission.

C. The Sender. God sent Jesus into a blind and hateful world. Jesus sent us into the same world, John 17:18. It is a tough assignment. We will fail without help from above.

1. Spirit. We are grateful that there is another sending, John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7. The Gospel of John called the Spirit a “*paraclete*.” A paraclete is “one who comes along side” to defend, encourage, comfort, counsel, or help. Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit does all of these things, Mark 13:11; John 16:12-14; Romans 8:26. Thus, because Christ returned to heaven, the paraclete does what Jesus did. In other words, the Holy Spirit was sent by the Lord in order to assist the Church.

a. Successor. Since the Spirit took Jesus’ place, some argue that further study of Jesus’ teaching is unnecessary. The Gospel of John states otherwise, John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13,14. The Spirit was subordinate to Christ, John 16:15. The Spirit no more displaced Jesus than Jesus displaced the Father.

b. Helper. As a helper, the Holy Spirit gives special assistance to those in ministry. First, the Spirit is an honored guest in the house of God, I Corinthians 3:16,17. He dwells in believers to help them worship, I Corinthians 6:19,20. Second, the Spirit encourages mission, Acts 13:2,3. He is not an adjunct to evangelism but the director of outreach, Acts 16:6-10. And, third, the Spirit confronts the world, John 16:8-11. He challenges the conclusions of those who oppose the kingdom of God.

2. Father. The term “send” is a thread woven throughout the Gospel of John. The reader is lead to reevaluate His understanding of Christ, the Spirit, and missionaries—all from the stand point of being sent. Finally, we are lead to reexamine our understanding of God. In other words, who is God in light of the sending. First, He is the initiator of mission. God remains busy, John 5:17. John represented God as a doer, a sender, a missionary God. God sent Jesus. He sent the Spirit. He sends missionaries into the world—the world that opposes His plan of salvation, John 1:11. And, second, He is companion of missionaries. God knows the struggle of ministry. He has been there and done that. Therefore, as the King of kings, He not only sends us, He accompanies us. He stands at the center of the fray, II Corinthians 5:18-20. God is both the Sender and the Goer, both a Companion of missionaries and a Lover of the lost. The evidence is overwhelming. The word “send” is beyond all doubt the vocabulary of the kingdom assignment.

CHAPTER 12

PAUL

The Church stands mid-point between the kingdom now and the kingdom later. The saints are all too painfully aware of the tension between their present struggle and their future victory, between the power of Satan and the power of God. This tension is the dilemma in which the Church exists, in which believers serve.

I. Nature of the Kingdom People.

The early Church understood herself as the new Israel, the true remnant, a kingdom of priests, a royal nation, and an end-of-time community. All of that the Church still is. Anyone who denies, ignores, or belittles these qualities fails to grasp the real nature of the Church.

A. The Predicament. The first century saints believed time was short. To them it was the last days (or the last hour), Hebrews 1:1,2; I John 2:18. Few Christians today have the same intense expectation of the end. There is little preoccupation with the second coming and the judgment day, II Peter 3:3,4.

1. Lost urgency. The return of the Lord, the conclusion of time seems to be a remote dream, a distant thought. Talk of the last hour appears “out of sync” with present reality. For, in the mind of many, man is essentially good (and getting better). Sin is an excusable ignorance which education and technology will eliminate. The future is one of unlimited progress. Salvation applies to physical well being, moral improvement, and mental peace—all of which are within easy reach of human accomplishment. In other words, we are surrounded by religion without expectancy of the end, without a New Testament tension, Matthew 24:37-39. By and large, Christians have lost their urgency. The nerve of mission has been badly bruised.

2. Weak faith. The present generation is rather sheepish about matters of faith. It may long for the kingdom, but it is shy about proclaiming it. It is an idolatrous generation. Its error is looking to false gods to usher in the reign of God. This may seem strange to a generation that has never made an idol (nor held one in its hands). The ancient polemic against paganism appears irrelevant for today. But wait! There is the cult of material well being provided by medical care, entitlement programs, and computer software. Against this so-called “gospel,” faith in the kingdom seems unrealistic. It seems out of date and old fashioned. Has the Church outlived her purpose? Has the Gospel become a relic of former times?

3. Impossible task. The more seriously the Church takes her task, the more deeply she is

thrown into a tension she does not completely understand nor fully wish to participate. Yet, the grip of that dilemma is part-and-parcel of the nature of her message. This is her predicament. The Church lies between her estrangement from the world and her imprisonment in it. On the one hand, she declares the power of the kingdom moving irresistibly toward its ultimate victory. On the other hand, she sees few signs of the triumphant presence of that kingdom. Obviously the Church, in spite of all her marvelous efforts, cannot bring the victory to pass. This suggests a certain futility. We gallantly try, but we embarrassingly fail. What frustration! What agony! We are not winning. For all the size and wealth of the Church, she remains as helpless before the powers of this age as the ancient Church in the presence of Rome. She remains so small, so weak, so torn asunder among the pagan billions. The task is discouragingly impossible. Many of her members have come to expect little from her evangelistic endeavors. Nevertheless, when we view the Lord on His throne, when we realize His sovereign control over all things, we are driven to press on, Philippians 3:12-16.

B. The Reality. What, then, ought we to do? An examination of the New Testament is disappointing. It tells us what to believe, how to live, and how to worship. It offers no suggestion for escaping the tension. We simply are told to be the Church!

1. A faithful people. The New Testament calls the Church a “*remnant*,” Romans 11:5, the “*Israel of God*,” Galatians 6:16, “*a people belonging to God*,” I Peter 2:9,10, as well as “*a kingdom and priests*” to serve God, Revelation 5:10. The thought of being like ancient Israel is offensive to some folks. For Israel was so sure she was right she became an intolerant group of religious bigots. This is not inviting. Therefore, many are driven to demonstrate a Christian acceptance that is content to embrace everyone who calls on the name of Jesus. They engage in a myriad of good deeds but are turned away by Christ, Matthew 7:21-23. The Church must remain the new Israel. She must seek His righteousness. She must keep His covenant. She must do His will, I Corinthians 7:19. The Church is to preserve and propagate the faith, Jude 3. Certainly the people of faith are not a perfect people. Israel was not a perfect nation. Still, for all her grievous failures, the remnant of Israel kept the faith. Indeed, faith, whether true or false, survives through people who practice it. The truth of Jesus Christ will survive only in a faithful people who are dedicated at all costs to keep it alive. The Church, then, is not merely an organization but an organism—the embodiment of the kingdom of God on earth. For this Church, we have no fear regarding her survival. We have no concern for her continuing existence, Revelation 11:17,18. Yet, we are appalled and ashamed at the shortcomings and weaknesses of the struggling congregations we see around us. They cannot win the victory. In time, many of them will disappear. Albeit, the faithful saints, the new Jerusalem will march on triumphantly, Revelation 21:2-4. The latter is the new Israel, the kingdom of God, the Church we are called to be.

2. An evangelistic people. We are not only called to be—we are called to act! The Church is right when she understands that her reason for existence is an evangelistic reason, Ephesians 3:10,11. Her mistake is forgetting that she is a missionary people. Her mistake is waiting idly for the kingdom to come. The Church must get busy. She is designed to be a conquering army—fighting the ruler of this world for the souls of men, II Corinthians 10:3-5.

Humans are incomplete until they find something beyond themselves to give them meaning. There is no hope for man until he can find a citizenship higher than national loyalty, political ideology, class interest, or monetary investment. Salvation is found in an ultimate allegiance to the King of kings. This implies mission, Romans 10:11-15. The missionary task of the Church is absolutely essential. It is the pivotal activity of history. There is no salvation without hearing. There is no hearing without speaking. There is no speaking without sending. Surely we have learned by now that all programs which promise peace, justice, and equality are uniformly a delusion. They do some good, but they do not save humankind. The only hope for a dying world is an evangelistic Church. She may be weak but she belongs to a sovereign Lord, I Corinthians 3:1-3; II Corinthians 13:4.

C. The Answer. The question still begs for an answer. What is the Church to do? She is to be the Church! However, is the Church, as we know her, the covenant people of the gracious King? Yes! And that is the clue that answers the question.

1. Accept correction. To submit to the discipline of God is hardly inviting. Yet it sets boundaries for all ecclesiastical activity. There is no suggestion here that ministry is useless. For it represents an obedience of the Master. Though often puny, it is still a gift given to the Lord. God has asked His people to labor in His name. To refuse to work in the kingdom is to replace faith with futility. Our efforts are the tangible means by which the Church discharges her ordained service, by which she demonstrates her citizenship in the kingdom, Ephesians 5:8-17. The Church exists so that missions may exist. Every ministry in the Body of Christ must reflect that truth. Otherwise her programs will become an end in themselves, a senseless expenditure of energy. It is too easy to identify the visible Church with the invisible kingdom. Once that happens our service becomes self-serving. We launch big programs to become a big Church. And, in the process, a new generation of believers comes along that does not know the first principles of the faith, Hebrews 5:11-6:3. Our primary assignment is to accept correction so that the Church may receive grace and live in righteousness. It is the map that gives direction to all our programs.

2. Be holy. The members of new Israel are to be sharply distinguished from the world. Christians must submit to the King of kings, Ephesians 4:17-24. The Church scarcely needs to be reminded of that. Yet, our success in this area has concealed our failure. We have emphasized matters of morality until morality has often become our consuming emphasis! But morality without mission gives birth to malformed saints. Ethics are not evangelism. We are not the Church of Jesus Christ merely because we are good. We are the Church because we let our light shine, Matthew 5:14,16, because we hold forth the light in a dark world, I Peter 2:4,5,9,10. The Church is the people of the kingdom. She is the voice of the King. She testifies by word and deed so that others may do the same. She is holy so that others may find holiness.

3. Practice unity. The Church is the Body of Christ. She is composed of many members. The New Testament Church is a unit. The little congregations scattered across the Roman Empire saw themselves as one Church. She was to live in harmony, John 17:20,21; Romans 15:5,6; I Corinthians 1:10; 12:12,13. Division in the Church is a contradiction. It

destroys the unity of the Spirit, Ephesians 4:1-6. All Christians serve the same Lord. They are citizens of the same kingdom. They are messengers of the same King. If they refuse to be one, they deny the reconciliation of Jesus Christ, Ephesians 2:14-18. The Church—as the redemptive society of God on earth—is to transcend all barriers that divide humankind. She should no more keep the agape of God for herself than she should keep the Gospel of God to herself, I John 4:19-21.

4. Proclaim redemption. The Church is to be the missionary people of God. Here, at last, we speak of a tangible program. There is little need to argue about “going into all the world.” This is not a novel idea. Yet, precisely at this point, we must accept the correcting hand of God. We must stop trifling with the obvious. We must get on with the task that defines our reason for existence. Of course, we are more than a missionary Church. There are ideological struggles. There are cultural differences. Still we must fulfill our calling. A Church that does not contend for the minds and spirits of the world is not a Church of God. We know that. But we scarcely do much about it. We wish for the Good News to go as long as someone else takes it. We asked for a program of action by which we could identify the genuine Church. Mission is that program. To be the people of God, we must be a missionary people. And, when we are a missionary people, we are destined to be participants in the victory of the kingdom, Revelation 5:9,10.

D. The victory. We do not despair. For, whatever the failures of the Church, there is in her, like in ancient Israel, a righteous remnant, the true people of God. However, in speaking of victory, there is no immunity from the blows of adversity, from the disappointment of occasional defeat. On the contrary, the path of the kingdom is strewn with tension. The tension raises over what is promised and what is experienced, what is commanded and what is done. The early Church felt the same tension. She found no relief but to lay down her life, Matthew 16:24,25.

1. Die to self. The victory of the Church is in the cross. As Jesus was a suffering servant and a conquering king, so the Church is to take up her cross in order to win a crown. Jesus was crushed before He saw His offspring. The cross was not a defeat for Christ. Rather His crucifixion released the power of God to build a kingdom, Ephesians 1:18-23. Likewise, the cross is the road to conquest in mission, Romans 8:35-37. The greatest moments in Christian history have been those that included suffering, Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:20,21. The kingdom is entered on the cross and is victorious by staying there.

2. Live for Christ. The mere bearing of our burdens bravely is not really carrying our cross. His cross was more than pain. It was much more than wood and nails. His actual crucifixion began in Gethsemane. He took up His cross when He laid down His life: “*not as I will but as You will*,” Matthew 26:39. Without His submission, Calvary would never have happened. Our crucifixion is the same. We must die to self and live for Christ. It requires unconditional surrender. It is the power of the kingdom released in our life. Selfishness is conquered. God is enthroned. Our cross is our surrender to His rule. Faith in Him becomes our victory, I John 5:3-5. We no longer cry “spare us.” We beg Him to “use us.” No longer do we suffer a minimum inconvenience. Instead, we make a maximum surrender to the sovereign Lord, Romans 14:7,8.

3. Yield to God. All of this calls for a major adjustment in our thinking. The cross belongs to us as much as it belonged to Christ. The business of the Church is not removing crosses. God does not protect us from Calvary. He assigns us crosses to carry. Faith does not lead us around dark valleys but through dark valleys, I Peter 4:12-16. The question is not if we will face hardship but how we will endure hardship (when it comes), II Timothy 3:12; I Peter 5:8,9. If we wait for a divine exemption from suffering, we will be disappointed. The purpose of God is not to give us comfortable bodies but disciplined spirits. The Lord is molding us to be obedient children of the kingdom, Hebrews 12:7-11. While His cross purchased our redemption, our cross deepens fidelity in Him. Each is a sign of the kingdom. Each is a road to ultimate victory.

4. Walk in faith. Where is that victory? It is “at hand” but beyond our grasp. It is a matter of faith. The kingdom is here though we cannot see it. Faith perceives things beyond sight, Hebrews 11:1. There is no scientific proof that the victory is out there. There is no tangible evidence that the kingdom has come. We accept it by faith—an incredible leap into the uncharted, unproven, unverified. Faith is simply a commitment to that which cannot be conclusively demonstrated (yet). The very act of obedience—doing what we believe—is the confirmation that our faith rests on reality, Romans 12:1,2; Hebrews 6:10,11; I John 3:18,19. In light of that assurance, we labor, performing those tasks the Lord set before us. We work in confidence because we know our labor is “*not in vain*,” I Corinthians 15:58.

II. The Kingdom Community.

In order to survive, a social organization must be formed into a close knit fellowship. It must possess an adequate structure. And it must have a clear understanding of itself. In all three areas, the Church—as the kingdom community—is equipped to endure until the Lord returns.

A. Community Emphasis. Every baptized believer is added to the Church, Acts 2:47b. Christians do not exist in isolation. When people accept Christ, they are included in a local congregation of the saints, Romans 12:4,5.

1. A beloved community. Members of the family of God are to love each other. They are to demonstrate practical concern for the physical well being of fellow members, Acts 4:32. They are to live in harmony with other Christians, I Corinthians 12:12,18-20,24b-26. These attributes are implied in the “language of belonging” in the New Testament. Clearly believers are “*members of each other*,” “*yokefellows*,” “*brothers and sisters*,” “*fellow citizens*,” “*friends*,” and “*fellow workers*,” Ephesians 2:19; Philippians 4:3; James 2:5; I Peter 2:17; I John 4:20,21.

2. A united community. The unity that prevails among believers has its basis in their association with Jesus through baptism, Romans 6:3,4; Galatians 3:26-28. The momentous event of baptism into Christ—as individuals into a corporate body—transcends all class, clan, and caste barriers, I Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 3:6; Colossians 3:11. Baptism results in a conscious change in social relationships and self understandings. Identity with Jesus makes

close community in the Church possible, Ephesians 2:11-13. It explains the reaction of Paul when Peter refused to eat with Gentiles, Galatians 2:11-14. Where prejudice is allowed, barriers to fellowship are rebuilt that Christ tore down in His death on the cross, Ephesians 2:14-18.

3. A committed community. In a very real sense, evangelism brings people from all ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds into the Body of Christ. People of great diversity become part of one family. The community of believers is a new creation, II Corinthians 5:17. The primary focus of the Church is to be a united people in a divided world. She is to live for the sake of others. She is to attract the lost to the Lord, Romans 1:8; 16:19; II Corinthians 3:2. The Church is missionary in her very marrow—through her infectious unity, her mutual love, her exemplary conduct, her warm fellowship, and her radiant joy. The kingdom community is not a cloistered group—barricaded against the intrusion of the outside world. Rather she is a community of hope which groans and labors for the redemption of the lost. She is a sign of the dawning of the new order in the midst of the old way, a vanguard of the new heaven and new earth to come. The Church is a special community—straining to prepare the world for its destiny—en route to the complete expression of the kingdom of God.

B. Kingdom Emphasis. After His incarnation, Christ was exalted to the throne of God, Philippians 2:9-11. From that throne, empowered by God, He reigns supreme over the entire universe.

1. Reign of Christ in heaven. References to the “*kingdom*” are relatively infrequent in the writings of Paul. The apostle mentions the kingdom only 14 times in 13 letters. Though rare, his teaching about the kingdom is quite illuminating.

a. Inheritance of the kingdom. On four occasions, the expression “*inherit the kingdom*” is found. The phrase has a meaning similar to the “*enter the kingdom*” statements of Jesus, Matthew 19:23,24. Likely, the “*inherit*” idea reflects the influence of the Septuagint (or Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) with which Paul was familiar, Isaiah 57:13; 61:7; 65:9. Paul apparently adopted the notion of inheritance into his teaching, Galatians 3:29; 4:7. In general, the apostle used “*inheriting the kingdom*” as an ethical motivation for righteous living, I Corinthians 6:9,10; 15:50; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5. It is obvious that the kingdom already existed (though still concealed in heaven), cf. Ephesians 2:6. What mattered, then, was avoiding forfeiture of that inheritance through frivolous behavior.

b. Service in the kingdom. Believers are called into the kingdom, I Thessalonians 2:11,12. This invitation was also a motivation for righteous living. Hence, those who passed the test would be ushered into the kingdom—“*counted worthy*”—as a generous reward for their faithfulness, II Thessalonians 1:3-5. The partners of Paul were described as “*workers for (or in) the kingdom of God*,” Colossians 4:11. They were toiling in the service of the sovereign Lord. They proclaimed the kingdom of God, Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31.

c. Manner of the kingdom. The reign of God is not “*a matter of talk but of power*,” I Corinthians 4:20. The context of this statement is Paul challenging certain arrogant members

of the Corinthian congregation, I Corinthians 4:19. These believers were claiming to reign with Christ already, I Corinthians 4:8. The apostle countered their assertion by saying that the reign of God manifests itself not in human claims but in divine power. Paul wished they were right. He wished he was ruling with them. But the apostles were far from reigning victoriously, I Corinthians 4:9-13. During this age, believers carry their cross. The promised presence of the kingdom is breaking into the here and now in the power of the Spirit, I Corinthians 2:1-5. As a visible kingdom, however, the full reign of God waits. In the meantime, undeniable signs are pointing to its partial presence, Romans 14:17,18.

d. Sovereignty of the kingdom. In three passages, Paul refers to the reign of Christ, I Corinthians 15:24; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 1:13. “*The kingdom of Christ and of God*” alludes to the co-regency of the Father and the Son during this present time. All opposition to the sovereignty of God will eventually be subdued. Then, Christ will hand over the kingdom to the Father, I Corinthians 15:25-28. The beginning of the reign of Christ was no doubt after His resurrection. The apostle Peter argued that Christ exercised His sovereignty immediately after His ascension back to heaven, Acts 2:29-36. The apostle Paul reached the same conclusion, Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1. Consequently, there was a uniform teaching in the early Church. She associated Psalm 110:1 with Psalm 8:6, as seen in I Corinthians 15:25-27a, which reappears in Ephesians 1:22. The enthronement of Christ was a core tenet in the faith of the first century saints, Philippians 2:9-11.

e. Power of the kingdom. The Lord defeated the principalities and powers in the cross, Colossians 2:15. If the rulers of this age (who are “*coming to nothing*,” I Corinthians 2:6) had known the hidden wisdom of God, they would not have killed Jesus, I Corinthians 2:8. The resurrection made Him “*the Lord of glory*,” Acts 2:36; Romans 1:4. Thus, Jesus was elevated to the right hand of God—where He reigns over the powers hostile to Jehovah—till all His enemies are made His footstool, I Corinthians 15:25. The last enemy is death, I Corinthians 15:26. It will be defeated when (at Jesus’ return) the final resurrection takes place, I Corinthians 15:54,57. Death will lose its power. Deceased believers will be raised to life, I Thessalonians 4:16,17. Their post-resurrection state is called a “*reign in life*” with Christ, Romans 5:17. That life will be given to their mortal bodies by the Holy Spirit, Romans 8:11; cf. II Corinthians 5:4. At that time, the evil introduced into the world by Adam will be overcome, Romans 5:18. Salvation will be complete. All human dominion, authority, and power will be destroyed. And, then, the Son will surrender His rule to the Father, I Corinthians 15:22-24. This will make God “*all in all*” (or supreme), I Corinthians 15:28. He will be the sole ruler of the universe.

f. Participation in the kingdom. Christians are qualified by God to share in the kingdom of light, Colossians 1:9-14. The kingdom is a present reality in which believers participate. The saints are qualified for this participation because they are “*raised*” with Christ through baptism, Colossians 2:12; 3:1-3. The goal of redemption, then, is acceptance into “*the kingdom of the Son*.” The kingdom embraces both the heavenly community (of angels around His throne), Revelation 5:11,12, and the earthly community (of saints in the Church), Ephesians 2:4-7. Christians have a citizenship in heaven because they are members of His Body on earth, Philippians 3:20,21. Therefore there is a close relationship between the “*kingdom of*

Christ” and the “*Church of Christ*” (though the kingdom is a more comprehensive entity), Ephesians 1:9,10. The reign of Christ extends far beyond the Church. And, when the Church has completed her earthly task, she will be absorbed into the heavenly kingdom. In other words, the reign of Christ is not only one of grace over the Church but also one of force over the spiritual powers, Colossians 1:19,20. The sovereignty of the exalted Lord is universal, Ephesians 4:10. And, praise God, at this present time, the Christian participates in the universal reign of Christ, II Timothy 2:12.

2. Rule of Christ in the world. Jesus is “*Lord*” over the community of faith, Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11. His supremacy—which is most appropriately called His “*rule*”—emerges clearly in His headship over the Church.

a. Head of the Body. While enthroned in heaven, Christ controls His Body (the Church) on earth, Ephesians 1:22,23; 5:23; Colossians 1:18. This indicates a close connection between Christ and the Church. Though she is subordinate to Christ, she functions as the “hands” and “feet” of her Lord.

(1) Giver of gifts. Like a child, the Church is always in a growth mode—maturing in her walk with the Lord, Ephesians 4:11,12. Her development is directed by Christ who gives “*gifts*” to each member as He deems appropriate, Ephesians 4:7. These gifts equip the saints for service. Every believer is prepared for ministry at home or for mission abroad. The individual activity of each member brings spiritual stability and numerical increase to the whole body, Ephesians 4:14-16. Every part of the body is empowered and guided by the head for the purpose He wants it to fulfill. And, when each part does its work, the congregation grows as the Lord intended it.

(2) Nurturer of the saints. The rule of Christ over the Church includes maturing the saints, Colossians 1:28,29. This maturation process expresses itself in love—for the Lord, for one another, and for the lost, Ephesians 5:1,2. Christ “*feeds and cares*” for the Church, Ephesians 5:29,30. The more believers respond to His love, the more they grow. The more they submit to their head, the stronger they become, Ephesians 6:10.

b. Power over the world. God stripped the principalities and powers of their dominion in (or through) Christ, Colossians 2:15. The Messiah led the deposed powers to heaven in a triumphal procession as spoils of war. He did this in order to “*fill the whole universe,*” that is, to rule with absolute power, Ephesians 4:8; cf. Psalms 68:18. The procession ended in His enthronement “*above all rule, authority, power, and dominion*” both now and later, Ephesians 1:19b-21. The rule of the Lord over the world cannot be shaken (though it does not yet appear to be complete). The Church continues to struggle against these authorities and powers in the strength and armor of God, Ephesians 6:11-17. The victory has been won. The reign of God is established. Even though there are lingering pockets of resistance, the final outcome is assured, Romans 8:37-39.

c. Sovereign in the universe. The rule of Christ over the Church and over the world

are related to one another. For example, in the same context, Christ is “*seated*” as a crowned ruler over the cosmos, Ephesians 1:19b-21, and “*appointed*” head over the Church, Ephesians 1:22,23. The connection between the Church and the world is quite close. Each receives the “*fullness*” of Christ, Ephesians 3:17b-19; 4:10-13; Colossians 1:19,20; 2:9,10. The Lord rules over both the Church and the world. He chooses the Church as His special sphere of operation—the place where He puts His grace and power to redeem the world. Through the Church, He draws all things under His control. Through the Church, He continues to gain dominion over the universe. The Church and the world, then, are not the same—though they are both subordinate to the exalted Christ. The community of believers brings to the cosmic powers the wisdom of God, Ephesians 3:10,11. Is this not mission? Absolutely! It is the Gospel “*bearing fruit*” all over the world, Colossians 1:6b. It is believers “*bearing fruit*” wherever God plants them, Colossians 1:10-12. And, when that occurs, converts are presented to Him as gifts of appreciation, Colossians 1:27-29. The mission of the Church is not optional. It is necessary to bring the world under the rule of heaven.

d. King of the kingdom. The kingdom in the later books of the New Testament has the same focus articulated throughout this entire discourse. For instance, Paul expressed hope in being brought safely to the “*heavenly kingdom*,” II Timothy 4:18. He associated the kingdom of Christ with the “*appearing*” (or second coming) of Jesus, II Timothy 4:1. The blending of the above and below—the heavenly and the earthly—is common in the Book of Hebrews, Hebrews 8:5; 9:23. Nevertheless, the heavenly is always considered “*better*,” Hebrews 7:18,19; 11:16, because it “*remains*” or “*endures*,” Hebrews 12:26,27; 13:14. The good things, present in heaven, are the “*future things*” for which Christians wait, Hebrews 9:11. Believers get a “*taste*” of the future now through the Holy Spirit and the word of God, Hebrews 6:4-6. Our future is called a “*kingdom that cannot be shaken*,” Hebrews 12:28. It is a “*rest*,” Hebrews 4:1. It is the “*world to come*,” Hebrews 2:5. It is the “*city*” of God, Hebrews 11:10. These are the promises of the Lord, the hope of the faithful, Hebrews 6:11; 9:15; 10:36. The apostle Peter called them the “*glories that would follow*,” I Peter 1:10,11. They are “*a new heaven and a new earth*,” the future home of the righteous, II Peter 3:13. So we look forward to a “*crown of glory that will never fade away*,” I Peter 5:4. It is our “*eternal glory in Christ*,” I Peter 5:10. Though the imagery varies the message is consistent throughout the New Testament. Christ is in charge, Revelation 1:4b-5a. He is the “*firstborn from the dead*”—a reference to His resurrection. He is the “*ruler of the kings of the earth*”—a reference to His enthronement. He makes His followers a “*kingdom and priests*” to serve God, Revelation 1:5b,6. This is who we are. It is what we do. All of that because of what He did for us. He is the “*King of kings and Lord of lords*,” Revelation 19:16. Though Satan (and his evil horde) rebel, the victory is never in doubt, Revelation 17:14. And those who trust in Him, who are faithful through thick and thin, will “*reign with Him forever and ever*,” Revelation 22:3-5. Amen!

Conclusion

As we come to the end of our study of the *King of kings and Lord of lords*, we face a pressing question. What is the fate of those who never hear of Him? Will they be saved without the Gospel, without believing in Jesus Christ? Like so many questions about the Christian faith, people hold different opinions. Some folks say “no!” All sinners will “*perish*,” Romans 2:12. Others say “yes!” God does not want anyone to “*perish*,” II Peter 3:9. Which response is true? The issue demands further discussion.

I. How are People Saved?

It is fairly common for folks to believe that (even without the Messiah) sinners will be saved. They will not perish if they sincerely obey the “light” they have received.

A. Salvation by works. Such a position is equivalent to “salvation by works.” This is in direct conflict with numerous other passages found in the letter to the Romans, Romans 3:28; 4:1,2,5,13; 9:30-32; 11:6. How, then, do those who believe in “salvation by works” respond? They say the apostle contradicted himself! In other words, they assert that, though Paul usually taught “salvation by faith,” for some reason, in the second chapter of Romans, he taught “salvation by works.” But, to claim Paul contradicted himself, destroys all value in appealing to the apostle as a support for “salvation apart from the Gospel.” What kind of an authority is Paul if he blatantly undermines his own position? Instead of contradiction, Paul made a clear and consistent argument. In Romans 1:16,17, the apostle affirmed that the Gospel revealed “*a righteousness from God*,” a righteousness that comes through “*faith*.” In Romans 3:21-24, Paul resumed the same discussion. The intervening verses, Romans 1:18-3:20, show why humans need the Gospel. The problem is sin, Romans 3:9. No one can be justified by obeying the law (or doing good works), Romans 3:20. According to the apostle, faith in Jesus is the only hope, Romans 5:1,2.

B. Salvation by faith. There are two interpretations of Romans 1:18-3:20. Each one of them—in its own unique way—upholds “salvation by faith.”

1. Salvation of Gentile believers. Some people think Paul was addressing Gentile Christians. Therefore, they, not pagan unbelievers, were justified by observing the law, Romans 2:14,26. They did not have the law “*by nature*” (or by birth) like the Jews did. Nonetheless, their faith incorporated them into Christ. It gave them the Holy Spirit, Romans 2:28,29. This fulfilled the prediction of Jeremiah, Jeremiah 31:31-34. Such an argument rescues Paul from the “salvation apart from the Gospel” position. It does so because it sees him limiting his comments to those who have already responded to the Gospel. Though a clever interpretation, it is flawed. It also has the apostle contradicting himself. Paul wrote, in the Galatians letter, that the Gospel frees the believer from observing the law, Galatians 3:1-5. Law keeping is a curse. Salvation is based on faith in Jesus Christ, Galatians 3:10-14.

2. Judgment of non-Christians. The second interpretation addresses a different audience. God will judge unbelievers—whether Jews or Gentiles. Paul was not teaching how a person could be saved, but why the judgment would be fair, Romans 2:5. Here, apart from Christ, is the standard of judgment: “*God will give to each person according to what he has done,*” Romans 2:6; cf. Psalm 62:12b. In other words, judgment for the non-Christian is based on works. Whether Jew or Gentile, those outside of Christ, who persistently do good, will be given eternal life, Romans 2:7. However, if God judges Gentiles by works, does not the Jew have an advantage over the Gentile? No! Not at all! Though the Jew has the law, the law must be obeyed completely in order to save, Romans 2:13,17-24. No one outside of Christ can meet that standard, Romans 3:19,20. The Gentile has guidance from God. He is not at a disadvantage, Romans 2:14,15. Hence, both Jews and Gentiles are “*without excuse,*” Romans 1:18-20. The entire context is pointing out the futility of “salvation by works.” The apostle never says (nor suggests) that pagans can be saved apart from the Gospel. On the contrary, Paul categorically claims that salvation (“*righteousness*”) comes through faith in Jesus Christ, Romans 3:21-24.

II. Can God condemn the Heathen?

Over the centuries, the question of divine fairness has surfaced in discussions about the final destiny of those who “have never heard.” Is God fair in punishing the unreached heathen? This query leads to further questions.

A. Who are the heathen? The term “heathen” refers to those who have never heard the Good News—the Gospel of reconciliation through Jesus Christ, cf. Jeremiah 10:25a. They are not illiterate barbarians. They have simply not received the message of salvation (because they lived in pre-Christian times or somehow escaped the net of missionary outreach). Whatever the reason, these people will not be condemned for rejecting Christ. That would clearly be unfair. Only those who have heard the truth and turned away from it are guilty of spurning the grace of God.

B. Is anyone totally unreached? Those who have never heard the Gospel are far from guiltless. Human beings will be judged by God for their response to whatever light they have. No one lives in total darkness, Acts 14:16,17. The Lord confronts all people with general revelation—nature, history, and conscience. Jesus, the true light, gives light to everyone, John 1:4,9. Even before sending Jesus, God placed in mutinous humans a sense of His “*righteous decree,*” (which likely means His condemnation), Romans 1:28-32. Although pagans “*do not know God*” through the inspired scriptures, I Thessalonians 4:3-5, their sinful condition does not make them totally ignorant of God, Romans 1:21.

C. Is general revelation sufficient? The question of divine fairness also leads to a discussion of general revelation. Is such a revelation sufficient to guide a seeker to a genuine knowledge about God?

1. Can God hold heathens responsible? General revelation is available to everyone.

From it, humanity can deduce a rudimentary understanding of God. Consequently, the Lord condemns those who “do not know” Him, Galatians 4:8. He holds both the ignorant and the rebellious accountable. “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,” II Thessalonians 1:8.

2. What does general revelation reveal? The Bible portrays general revelation as intelligent data, Psalm 19:1-4a. It has sufficient informational content to condemn those who rebel against it. They are held guilty of suppressing the truth, Romans 1:18-20. Human responsibility is firmly established.

3. Must God redeem everyone? General revelation makes known the power and deity of God (though it says nothing about His redemptive grace). God will not save those who have never heard the Gospel. The Lord was just when He did not rescue fallen people in former times, II Peter 2:4-9. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude, He will not be unjust when He condemns disobedient souls in later times. God is not obligated to save a morally rebellious creature. His intervention is a voluntary expression of His mercy, Romans 9:14-21. Nowhere does the Bible say that God plans to save all humanity. Instead, some will be saved. Some will be lost, Matthew 7:13,14; 13:24-30; 25:46.

4. Is God unfair? The justice of God is not measured by human understandings of fairness. The Lord is intrinsically just, Psalm 85:11. Our norm of justice is not the measure of His justice. Rather He is the standard for determining it, Psalm 89:14. Why, then, should the question of His fairness even be raised? Job 8:3. It is unthinkable to consider for one moment that Yahweh is unfair, Nehemiah 9:33; Zephaniah 3:5. God is judge of all the earth. His judgment is infallible, Genesis 18:25; Deuteronomy 32:4; Job 34:10. To accuse God of misconduct, to fault Him with error, to disparage His elective grace is to forget who He is. The fairness of God is demonstrated in His condemnation of sinners. He punishes them not because they lack the light but because they reject the light they have.

III. Are the Ignorant Lost? The Athenian people, to whom Paul the missionary spoke, are the biblical equivalent of those who have “never heard” the Gospel.

A. Case of the Athenians. In the time of the apostle Paul, Athens was a center of spiritual and philosophical reflection, Acts 17:18-21. Paul was disturbed by what he experienced in Athens, Acts 17:16. The Epicureans were indifferent to the gods (believing they were remote and unconcerned). The Stoics believed humans had kinship with the gods. Hence, the audience of Paul represented a wide spectrum of religious opinion. Obviously, with many idols in the city, one could say the Athenians were “very religious,” Acts 17:22. But their religion was wrong headed, Acts 17:29. Idols were useless. They reflected an ignorance of the real God. Such ignorance was formerly overlooked, Acts 17:30. While the apostle respected the Athenian struggle to be religious, he concluded that their effort was in vain. Paul offered no words of acceptance or approval to these “very religious” people. They were sincere but subject to the just judgment of God, Acts 17:31. Therefore, Paul invited them to repent (which cannot be construed as an endorsement of their religion). The fundamental point is clear. When a

person approaches Jesus, that person also approaches God, I Corinthians 8:5,6. To get to God, a person must go through Christ, I Timothy 2:5. In order to gain eternal life, the Athenians had to rely on the Son of God, II Timothy 2:10.

1. Is ignorance an excuse? The subject of ignorance is rare in the New Testament. One instance occurs in the crucifixion of Christ, Acts 3:17. How could that be? Did not the Jews willfully bully Pilate into executing Jesus? “*Ignorance*,” in this case, meant they were outside the truth. They acted consciously but were unaware of the import of their actions. Therefore, they were encouraged to repent, Acts 3:19. Ignorance was not excused! One was still liable before God for behavior that was ignorant of its error. Those in ignorance are held responsible, I Timothy 1:12-14. Paul was. Though unaware of the significance of his actions, he was still guilty. Likewise, pagans are ignorant and wrong, Ephesians 4:17-20. This has always been true, Leviticus 4:27,28; I Peter 1:14,15. Ignorance is not excused.

2. Were God fearers saved? In Athens, Paul also reasoned with God fearers in the synagogue, Acts 17:17. A God fearer was a religious person, Acts 13:43,50. The term described both Jews and Gentiles. They were devout people. However, though devoutly religious, God fearers still needed the message of salvation, Acts 13:26. They needed forgiveness, Acts 13:38. Thus, they were warned not to scoff at the message of heaven, Acts 13:40,41. Obviously the God fearer was interested in religion but had not responded to Jesus Christ. In Acts 13 and 17, God fearers were treated with respect but were not approved by God. In other words, interest in religion alone did not save. Instead, the Lord required faith in the Jesus, I Thessalonians 1:9b,10. Sincere pagans, who practice their religion, “*worship in ignorance*” like the ancient Athenians, Acts 17:23. God fearers must become Jesus fearers!

B. Fate of the Pagans. A growing number of believers are troubled by the traditional teaching that salvation is found in Christ alone, John 14:6. It is disturbing to realize that billions of people—good people in other religions—have no opportunity to hear the Gospel. Therefore, many theologians are calling on the Church to abandon her intolerant attitude toward adherents of other world religions. The spiritual condition of the heathen tugs at our hearts. In the end, however, we must surrender our feelings to the word of God which insists that everyone without Christ is lost, Acts 4:12; I John 5:11,12. The fate of those who have never heard is not a question of personal passion but biblical precept, John 6:53.

1. Cutting the nerve of mission. Those who expect the heathen to find God through general revelation are faced with a difficult question. If God saves people apart from missionaries, does that not destroy the reason for mission? After all, if pagans are redeemed without the Gospel, why send missionaries? We send missionaries abroad for the same reason we support evangelism at home: “*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*,” Romans 10:13-15a. To question the sending of missionaries is very dangerous. It impugns the sovereignty of God, Matthew 28:18-20. It nullifies the necessity of the cross. Those who demand a halt to seeking converts from other religions believe Christianity is no better than any other faith. They ignore the scriptures (especially those passages that claim Jesus is the only Lord and Savior). These people prefer to compromise the faith. They wish to replace an

exclusive attitude with peaceful coexistence. Such a position—while maintaining the outward trappings of the Church—will drain the Gospel of truth and undermine the urgency of mission, I Corinthians 4:2.

2. Charting a course for mission. We cannot abandon the clear teachings of God. When the arguments for the possibility of salvation apart from Christ are examined, they are found wanting. The New Testament says pagan religions cannot save. Only Jesus can. Yet, on the one hand, if we place too little value on the religions of the world, our witness will become irrelevant. And, on the other hand, if we place too much value on the religions of the world, we will be drawn down the path of compromise. Either approach will prove disastrous to mission. We must find a balance. We must not only acquire an understanding of pagan faiths but also demand the conversion of heathen worshippers. The pressure to tolerate all religions will diminish the effects of evangelism. As western nations become increasingly secular, the Church will more and more face charges of being narrow and bigoted. The survival of the Christian faith in a postmodern world depends on how we deal with the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Proposals that call into question the integrity of the faith “*once for all entrusted to the saints*” must be treated for what they are—the work of Satan. When mission is seen as the mandate of the King, the soldiers of the cross will press ahead unflinchingly in the strength of their sovereign Lord, Mark 16:15,16.

Subject Index

- Abimelech, 6,12
- abomination of desolation, 39
- Abraham, 4,6,12,41,46,57,66, 75,79
- Adam, 93
- adoption, 76,77
- adulation, 36
- adultery, 16
- agape, 90
- agenda, 57,85
- Ahab, 11
- Alexander the Great, 39
- alien(s), 12, 82
- allegiance, *vii*, 66
- altar, 26
- Amorite, 6,20
- Amos, 15
- anchor, 32
- angel(s), 42,47
- Antiochus, 39
- anointed, 28,34,65
- apocalyptic, 37-39, 41-43,46,47,57
- apocalypse, 37,38
- apocrypha, 36,38,40,41,46
- apple of His eye, 13
- archaeology, 6
- Ark of the Covenant, 9, 19,28,30
- armor, 94
- arrogance, *vii*, 92
- ascension, 65,67,93
- Asherah, 16
- Assyria, 15-17
- atheism, 23
- Athenian, 98,99
- attitude, 50,51,53,83,99, 100
- awe, 13
- Baal, 6,7,11,19,20
- Babylon, 6,7,18,19,22, 23,37
- battle(field), 28,30,31
- Balaam, 12
- baptism, 50,51,55,65,91, 93
- Barnabas, 66
- beatitudes, 63
- Bedouin, 3
- bias, 69
- bigot(s), 88,100
- blaspheme, 49
- Body of Christ, 59,65,89,92-94
- Book of the Law, 17
- bride, 30,79
- Calvary, 82,90,91
- Canaan, 3,6,7
- canon, 83
- captivity, 22-25,36,38, 42
- cemetery, 49
- chance, 27
- chaos, 84
- charade, 35
- chose(ness), 2,4,12
- chronometer, 72
- chronos, 72,73
- Church(es), *vi*, *vii*, 15,28-30, 47,52,54,56,59,61-66,69, 71,72,75,79-83,86-95,100

- Church of Christ, 94
- circumcision, 14,39,41,49, 50,66
- city (of God), 95
- commonwealth, 45
- comparative statements, 5
- complaining, 24
- confession, 6,8,55,62
- convert(s), 49,50,95,99
- co-regent, *viii*, 26,27,93
- Cornelius, 66
- coronation, 28,29,34
- cosmic, 25,78,80,95
- cosmos, 84,95
- counselor, 67,68
- court(s), 26,29,30,35,50
- covenant, *vi*, 5,6,13-15,18, 20,22,24,34,35,45-47,50, 75,79,80,88,89
- co-witness, 67
- co-worker, 33
- crown, 28-30,37,41,46,90,95
- cult, 19,20
- cultural revolution, 74
- cup, 55
- Cyrus, 23
- data, 98
- David, 9,10,17,21,25-28, 30,34,37,46,48
- deaf, 32
- Deborah, 20
- deliverance, 31,33,74,-76
- deliverer, 9
- demon, 61
- deposit, 68
- despondence, 26
- dispora, 41
- distress, 42
- diviner, 3
- divorce, 24
- DNA, 63
- dominion, *vi*, 26,94,95
- doom, 15,16
- downtrodden, 75
- dynasty, 28,30,34
- earth(ly), 25,42,45,64,82,90, 94,95,98
- earthquake, 42
- Egypt, 3,4,6-11,13,14,18,19, 26,75
- El, 6,7
- elect, 14,41,62
- election, 4,12
- Elijah, 11
- end-of-time, 23,37,42,45,57,64, 68,70-73,78,80,81,87
- Enoch, 46
- enthronement, 25,28,52,90, 93-95
- Epicureans, 98
- epoch(s), 42
- Ethiopia, 66
- evangelism, 52,56-58,60,67, 68,75,82,83,86,89,92,99,100
- evangelistic, 37,52,67,88,89
- everlasting, 21
- exaltation, 8
- exile, 13,14,18,22-26,31,36, 38,41,49,50,52
- exodus, 13,25,47,75

- famine, 42
- fate, 55
- fellowship, 91,92
- fertility cult, 11
- firmament, 41
- firstborn, 95
- first fruit, 62,68
- first payment, 68
- footstool, 19,41,93
- foreigner, 49
- foretaste, 65,69,71
- fornication, 49
- freedom, 16,75
- gangsters, 34
- generation, 70-72,87,89
- Gentile(s), 12,13,25,29,41, 48-51,54,57,58,61,64, 66,96,97,99
- ger, 48
- Gibeon, 20
- gift(s), 53,56,68,74,76,83, 89,94,95
- gnosis, 82
- Gnosticism, 82
- go, 67
- God fearers, 99
- godhead, 68
- Golden Age, 10,11,15
- Good News, 56-59,61, 66,67,73,75,90,96
- Gospel, 49,56,59,61,62, 64,67,68,73-75,82,87, 90,95-100
- grace, *vi*, 13,21,27,29,31, 35,38,56,58,62,63,75, 79,81,89,94,95,97,98
- Greece, 39
- greed, *vii*
- Greek(s), 39,72,92
- groom, 30
- guarantee, 65
- gymnasium, 39
- hades, 62,68
- Hannah, 20
- healer, 74
- heathen, 8,31,33,34,37, 42,50,57,66,97,99
- heaven(ly), *viii*, 25,29, 45,47,64,78,86,93-95,
- Hebrews(s), 3,8,9,12,29, 72,92,95
- Hellenism, 39
- heretical, 36
- hersey, 47
- holy, 74,81,89
- holy city, 71,72
- holy seed, 17
- hope, 16,-18,23,24,27,31,34, 37,45-48,63,68,72,76,80, 81,89,92,95,96
- Horace, 49,52
- humility, 30
- husband, 30
- hymn(s), 26,29,30,34
- hymnbook, 12,32
- hypocrite(s), 17,51
- iconoclastic, 4
- idol(s), 4,6,7,11,13,19,20,23, 31,39,60,87
- ideological, 90
- idolatry, *vi*, 4,5,7,16,17,19, 20,24,26,49
- illegitimacy, 47
- illiteracy, 74,97

- immersion, 50
- immortal, 41
- incarnation, *vii*, 62,92
- indwell(ing), 67,86
- indigenous, 11
- informational content, 98
- inherit, 92
- inheritance, 68,92
- injustice, *vii*
- inner circle, 55
- installment, 65,68
- intercede, 67
- Israel, 16,17,19,23,6,78
- Israel, 3,5-7,9,10,12-17, 22-25,27-29,31,33-42, 45-47,51,61,64,75,79, 80,87-90
- Israelite, 23,34,50
- Isaac, 75
- Jacob, 75
- Jehoiakim, 23
- Jehoiachin, 37
- Jeopardy, 15
- Jeremiah 17,96
- Jerusalem, 10,11,16,17,22, 23,26,29,34,36,37,39,40, 41,46,49,57,62,66,71, 72,88
- Jeshurun, 5
- Jethro, 12
- Jew(s), 15,22,23,25,33,36, 37,41,46-51,54,57,61, 66,71,75,78,79,96,97,
- Jewish, 24,34,40,41,48, 49-52,54,61,66,71
- Jezebel, 11
- Job,12
- John, 24,82,84,86
- John the Baptist, 73
- Jonah, 78
- Jordan River, 3,7,27,50
- Joseph, 47
- Josephus, 52
- Joshua, 37
- Judah, 9,11,16-18,22,23 25
- Judaism, 26,27,36-39,45 47-52,61
- judge, 25,26,35,37,45,50, 58,97,98
- judgment, *vi*,13,14,20,25, 27,38,42,54,56,59,71,73, 75,77,85,87,97,98
- justice, 15,25,74,75,89,98
- kairos, 72,73
- kidnap, 50
- King, 18-21,23,25-31, 33-36,45,46,59,63,71,78, 80,83,89,90,100
- King of kings, *vi-ix*,5,8, 10,11,17,29-32,34,41,42 45,47,65,77,79,86,89,95
- kingdom, *vi-ix*,2,4,9-12, 14-20,22-28,30,31, 36-43,45-48,51-56, 61-66,68-71,73,74,76, 78-84,86-95
- lament, 32
- Latin, 82
- law, 23,38,39,45,46,53, 66,96
- leaders, 64
- leadership, 64
- legal, 23,38
- Levites, 35
- liberation, 74,75,77
- liberation theology, 74
- lifestyle, 77

- light, 27,48,85,89,91,93, 96,-98
- little flock, 61,62
- little ones, 55,64
- lion of Judah, 28
- logos, 47
- Lord of lords, *v,vi*,5,8,24,95
- lordship, *vi*
- lost sheep, 61,79
- Maccabean Revolt, 38
- Maccabees, 39,40
- majesty, 28,29,34,78
- marriage, 24
- martyr, 66,81
- Marxist, 74
- Mattathias, 39
- melancholy, 42
- Melchizedek, 6,12
- mercy, 27,31,56,98
- Messiah, 2,10,20,21,25,27, 30,31,34,37,45,47,48,52, 56,62,67,73,78,80,82,94
- messianic (hope), 2,16,17, 27,31,32,34,37,46-48,53,
- Midian, 6
- miners 30
- ministry, 26,53-56,58, 60,62,65,68,73,82, 83,86,89,94
- mission(s), 26,37,38,48, 52,56-60,62-67,71,73, 82-87,89,90,94,95,99, 100
- missionary, 14,30,48-52, 56-60,62-67,71,73,80, 82-86,88-90,92,97-99
- mockery, 32
- monarch(y), 9,11,25, 27-29,34
- monotheism, 3,4,8,24
- moral(s), 4,15,17,18,49, 63,79,87,8,98
- Moses, 47,78,80
- Most High, *vi*,12,29,34, 40-43
- motive(s), 56,59,70
- mouthpiece, 68
- music, 30
- mystery, 55,61,62
- myths, 31
- Naaman, 12
- nation(s), 11-14,25-27,33,40, 51,56,57,66,71,75
- natural forces, 4
- Nebuchadnezer, 13,40
- new creation, 80
- new covenant, 80
- new heaven and new earth, 68,74,76,77,80,82,92,95
- new man, 68,74,80
- new thing, 24,37,45,46,54
- news, 26,45,58
- Nicodemus, *vii*
- Noah, 12
- noun, 82
- obedience, *vii*,23,35,39,64, 75,76,79,96
- omen, 45
- omnipotence, 32
- once-for-all, 73
- oppression, 75,76,93
- organization, 63,88,91
- outsider(s), 54,55,99
- pagan(s), 12-14,16-19,24,26, 30,31,33,34,36-38,41,49, 51,62,64,66,67,88,96,100

- paganism, 3,7-9,11,15,23, 29,51,87
- palace, 30
- Palestine, 22,36,37,39,50, 71
- parables, 54,55,64,68
- paraclete, 86
- paradise, 41
- Passover, 50
- peasantry, 22
- penalty, 50,76
- Pentateuch, 5,6
- Pentecost, 47,49,66,71
- Perish, 96
- Persia, 23,37-39
- Pharaoh, 20
- Pharisee(s), 45,47,48,51
- Phillip, 66
- Philistine(s), 3,9,10,28
- Philo, 52
- Phoenicia, 11
- physical health, 73,74
- piety, 48
- Pilot, 99
- plagiarize, 8
- pledge, 65
- political marriages, 11
- polytheism, 6,8
- power(ful), 26-29,31,53, 56,63-66,71,73,76,78, 82,85,87,92-95
- prayer(s), 30,49,53,84
- prejudice, 66,92
- privilege, 27
- progressive development, 69
- promise(s), 26,27,33,66, 78-80,95
- Promised Land, 3,7,9,22, 33
- proselyte(s), 37,48-52
- prostitution, 11,48
- providence, *vii*
- psalm(s), 26,28-30,93
- pseudepigrapha, 40,41,43
- qualification, 54
- quarrel, 64
- race, 84
- racial, 66
- racism, *vii*
- rationale, 56,58
- realm, 25
- Red Sea, 19,27
- redeem(er), 25,48,95
- redemption, 56,61,76,91,-93
- redemptive, 40,41,66,67,90, 98
- reign, *vi, viii*, 18,19,25,26, 31,32,40,42,45,53-55,61, 63-65,69-71,76,79-81,87, 92-94
- remnant, 17,18,27,36-39,79, 80,87,88,90
- repentance, 15,17,60,98,99
- responsibility, 27,55,59,65, 75,80
- resurrection, *viii*,65,70,93,95
- revelation, 37,59,62,97-99
- revival, 17,18
- rhetorical questions, 5
- righteous(ness), 23,30,47,52, 76,79,88,89,95-97
- ritual, 23,49,50
- robbery, 49
- Rome, *vii*,45,46,88

- Roman(s), 71,81,82,89,96
- ruler(s), *vii,viii*,2,18,19, 24-27,29,31,32,36,37, 39-41,45,46,48,55,63-65, 78,90,93-95
- Ruth, 50
- Sabbath, 39,50,54-56
- sacrifice(s), 23,26,35,50, 76
- saint(s), 38,40-42,56,64, 65,81,84,87,89,91,93,94
- salvation, *viii*,13,25,41,63, 73-77,81,83,85,88,96,97, 100
- Samaria, 16
- sanctuary, 12,30,56
- Satan, *viii*,67,73,78,80,82, 95,100
- Saul, 9
- Savior, 25,26,58,73,99
- second coming, 56,59,62, 63,69-73,87,95,99
- send (sent), 65-67,76,82-84, 86,89,99
- Sermon on the Mount, 63
- sexual orgy, 11
- shepherd, 23,25,26,63,64
- shalom, 21,25,74
- signet ring, 37
- Sinai, 3,20,24,31,35
- Septuagint, 92
- sin offering, 76
- slave(s), 11,75
- slavery, 12,16,68,75
- social sciences, 74
- socio-political, 74,75
- Solomon, 10,11,15,78
- soldiers, 30
- song of Moses, 19
- sovereign, 25-28,33,42, 57-59,61,63,66,67,71, 73,74,76,81-83,89,90, 92,100
- sovereignty, *viii*,2,4,18 23,26,29,31,32,36,39, 40,45,46,52,56,58,65, 67,93,99
- Spirit, *viii*,9,21,38,62, 65-68,76,86,93,95,96
- spiritual salvation, 73
- steward, 59
- Stoics, 98
- stumbling block, 47
- state religion, 22
- suffering, 32,33,37,42,46,48, 55,56,60,84,90,91
- supernatural, 47,73
- synagogue, 48,49,99
- Syria, 10,11,15
- tabernacle, 9,10,19
- Tacitus, 52
- Talmud, 50
- tax collectors, 48
- technology, 23,87
- temple, 10,19,22,23,28,30, 31,36,38,39,50,56,60
- tenet, 93
- third heaven, 41
- third person, 68
- thunderstorm, 20,31
- throne, 19,26,27,30,32-34, 40,46,88,93
- time(s), 72,73,81,87,98
- Torah, 41
- trials, 30,63
- tribal confederation, 9
- tribal league, 9,10

tribal theocracy, 9	vocabulary, 83,86	zealots, 45
truth, 30,59,62,66,67,84, 85,98-100	voluntary, 98	Zerubbabel, 23,37
turf, 67	vote, 83	Zeus, 39
understanding, 91,98	vow, 50	Zion, 24-26,28
undivided loyalty, 6	wait, 67,76,95	
undivided nature, 6	warrior, 30	
unity, 90,91	weary, 27	
unique, 5,6,8	wedding, 28-30,64	
upper room, 80	welfare, 36	
Ur of Chaldea, 6	widow, 30	
utopia, 76	wife, 24,30,79	
vanguard, 92	winnowing fork, 73	
vassal, 18,35	witness(es), 50,65-67,80, 84	
verb, 82	women, 49	
vicarious, 46,54,56,76	worldview, 4	
vice regent, 26	World War II, 73	
viceroy, 30,37	work(s), 38,45,67,73,78, 83,84,96,97	
victory, 25,28-31,33,37-39, 80,81,87,88,90,91,93-95	wrath, 25,71,76	
vineyard, 64	yoke, 48	
vision, 40,41	yokefellows, 91	
visitation, 66,72	zeal, 21,52,78	

