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## *The Kingdom of God Is At Hand*

### THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND—REPENT

The first emphasis in the preaching of Jesus was 'the time is fulfilled' (Mark 1:15, RSV). God's great promise to rescue His people had reached its climax in Jesus' own arrival—the arrival of the Christ ('Christ' is the Greek word for 'Messiah').

But this was not the totality of Jesus' message. He continued, 'the kingdom of God is at hand.' It was God's rule on the earth, centred in Jesus' own Person, that the Messiah brought with Him.

This has enormous implications, not just for men and women but for the whole of God's creation—and even for God Himself.

The opening chapters of Genesis record the creation and formation of the world, the creation of man and woman, their temptation by Satan, and their subsequent Fall. We will not be surprised, then, to find that the impact of God's rule corresponds to this. The coming of the Messiah brings victory over Satan, liberation in the life of man and woman, and release of the world from the bondage of satanic control.

For God Himself, the implication is His glorification. He receives glory because His powerful rescue is seen to be consistent with all His past actions towards man, and is accomplished in a way which shows His righteousness.

### FOR SATAN: DECISIVE DEFEAT

The startling reality of the cosmic battle between the arch-rebel Satan and the Son of God is presented clearly throughout the Gospels and particularly in the temptation of Jesus.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'

Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."' '

Then the devil took him to the holy city and made him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."' '

Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' '

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'

Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."' '

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him (Mt 4:1-11. See also Mk 1:12-13; Lk 4:1-13).

The tempter deals with Jesus on His own, where all temptation comes to Man. He tempts the Son of God to demonstrate conclusively who He is by a series of attention-seeking acts. But there is a catch—these acts are to be done at Satan's bidding, not God's. In other words, Satan tempts Jesus to fulfil His mission in a way inconsistent with Himself.

Jesus, the faithful Son, will not accept the idea that the rebel can force the Creator's hand. He answers with Scripture—and by so doing shows that Satan is a creature who can be addressed with the commands of God. He too is subject to God's Word and can be called to submit to it. He may be subtle, but He is only a creature.

The final temptation is a crass attempt to bribe Jesus. Worship me, says Satan, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world. Inherent in this 'offer' is the claim that Satan, having temporarily tricked men and women into allowing him some sort of sway on the earth, can act as if he is its owner. Again, Jesus makes His reply from Scripture hinge on the creatureliness of Satan—even he is to worship only 'the Lord *your* God'.

Surprisingly, the power of Jesus' approach arises from His condescension. In His true humanity and great humility, He places Himself under the Word of God. The quotation of Scripture provides both a defence against Satan and a challenge to him. It says, in effect: 'It is not fitting to ask any man, and me in particular, to worship anyone except God. It is doubly inappropriate because, in asking me to worship *you*, you are attempting to move away from being a creature. You think that by your rebellion you have achieved this, Satan, but in fact it cannot be done.'

This powerful engagement of mankind's Champion-Saviour with the enemy is fought alone in the desert. It is fought without help—the angels minister to Jesus only after He has rebuffed Satan—yet there is never any doubt about the outcome. It is a combat with the one who has enslaved the world

and Mankind, and is an early indication of the final defeat of Satan at the cross and the resurrection.

In the light of this cosmic battle, we are not surprised that in the Gospel accounts it is the minions of Satan, the demons, who first recognize Jesus. They are the first to get wind of who has arrived and who they must now face. The coming of King Jesus and the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom is associated with diseases being healed and demons being cast out from people who have been captured from within (Mt 4:23–24; Mk 1:24–32; 3:11–12; 5:2–20). ‘But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you’ (Luke 11:20).

The people of the day, who had learned their demonology from occult incantations, thought demons could be cast out only by greater demons. Consequently, they thought Jesus was in league with Satan. He announces to them the other possible (and to them unwelcome) conclusion: that, stunning as it was, God’s reign has arrived, and His Son is able to bind ‘the strong man’. Jesus has plundered Satan’s house and brought release to those bound by him (Mark 3:27).

The defeat of Satan is a major theme of the Bible. It is anticipated in the Old Testament and announced in the New.

## **ACTION**

1 Read carefully the passages quoted in brackets above, as well as Colossians 1:13–14 and Ephesians 5:10–16. Review Chapter 3 on the enemy’s methods.

2 Be clear in your own mind that demonic powers exist and are powerful. Do not be deceived into thinking the spiritual battle you are involved in can be understood in any way other than the way the Bible presents it.

3 Make it a matter of special prayer to rejoice in the victory of Jesus over Satan. Claim this victory in your own life and stand on it for the future.

In both His teaching and works, Jesus demonstrates that God's rule is as irresistible as yeast working through flour (Mt 13:33). It surprises us by growing out of all proportion to its beginning, as a mustard seed fills us with wonder at the contrast between its tiny size and the massive plant it produces (Mk 4:30–32).

God's rule tears down the tin gods made by creatures and removes Satan from the position of dominion he has seized over human hearts. It is a decisive and powerful invasion of the world to accomplish the rescue of slaves from a tyrannical master.

### FOR US: THE CHANGING OF MASTERS

This transition from Satan's kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's Son means a change of master. Jesus is now our Lord.

Paul expresses this change by speaking in terms of condemnation and acquittal. The Fall brought our condemnation and the great reign of sin and death. But Jesus Christ won our acquittal, and the reign of life came with Him.

To illustrate this, Paul contrasts Adam and Christ. Mankind can be understood as being either 'in Adam' or 'in Christ'.

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.

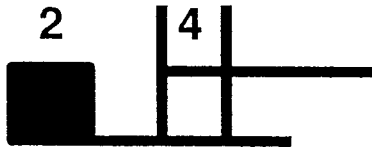
But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the

one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 5:12–21; see also 1 Cor 15:20–23, 42–45).

Paul asks us to concentrate on two men, the man at Point 2 (Adam) and the Man at Point 4 (Jesus).



The important thing about these two is that both of them, through their respective actions, draw others into the signifi-

cance of those actions. In other words, they are both *representative* people. They are 'head men'. Their actions greatly affect others.

Compare this with the prime minister of a modern state. As the federal representative of his people, he can contract agreements on their behalf with other states. From the point of view of the nations with whom he deals, we could say that the whole people have been dealt with 'in the prime minister'.

Adam and Christ are two such men—Adam because he stood at the beginning of all mankind, Christ because He invaded the human scene and dealt representatively for mankind with God. Many were drawn into the rebellion, sin and death which Adam introduced, but many can now find that the 'second Adam' draws them into His life. He is God's special and proper Man. Just as a nation can be seen 'in its Prime Minister', so God sees us 'in Christ'. Jesus has acted, and God chooses to count what He has done as being for us. He is our Federal Representative—our Head Man.

In being a representative man, Paul says Adam was a 'pattern' (or 'type', *RSV*) of Christ. Yet Jesus' actions and their results are in sharp contrast to Adam's.

- Adam's trespass led to works which brought death, but the gift of Jesus Christ produced abundant life for many.
- The effect of each man's action was different. Adam's action led to condemnation, Christ's to justification ('justification' refers to God's declaration of right-standing for men 'in Christ').
- Adam's trespass brought about the rule of death; it was through his action that men became slaves to death. By contrast, it is through Christ that those who receive the free gift of righteousness now reign in life.

Paul develops a powerful picture of Christ's work: He brings rescue from the slavery of death and conquers the forces of evil. Christ is, in God's view, our Head Man, and we

have been drawn into the vortex of His powerful life as He has caught us up into union with Himself. It is now true to say that if He died, we die; if He was buried, we are also buried; if He was raised, so are we—raised to walk in newness of life. According to Paul, being corporately understood as 'in Christ' (in the way a people is viewed as being 'in' their head man) is the foundation for our entry into the life of the new age of the Messiah, as well as the source of power for living it. We will investigate this more fully in later chapters.

It is when we have been caught up in this 'federal' death that we experience a change of dominion. We have exchanged masters and must now consider ourselves dead to the old master of sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. The whole of Romans 6 echoes this concern with mastery. 'Sin' is presented there as an active power which leads to death. 'Righteousness', on the other hand, leads to sanctification and eternal life.

In this way, Paul's imagery of being rescued from the power of sin (understood as an overlord) agrees with Jesus' teaching about the encounter of the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Satan and the rescue of those who are slaves to lords who have held them in bondage.

### THE PERIOD OF AMNESTY

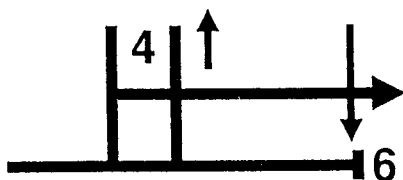
Since a decisive rescue has been accomplished in the coming of God's Son, we are not surprised to find that such an invasion of the world requires some decisions by its inhabitants. It is impossible to be in war-torn territory and disengage ourselves from the action. We must choose where we will stand in the battle.

After the triumph of the Champion, a strange time comes to pass. It is the time between the end of the war which has brought liberation and the final establishment of the new King's rule in the liberated land. Although the war has been won, combatants from both sides are still at large. There are some liberated prisoners of war fighting in Jesus' strength as



they hold on to the territory He has won for them. All things are theirs, for they are Christ's. But there are also many who remain under Satan's bondage and still serve him. They now have a vanquished, defeated tyrant as their leader.

So what is God's action now? It is to call those under Satan's rule to acknowledge their leader's defeat and to cease their rebellion. This call carries a warning: they do not have much time left to come to grips with the victorious Champion. The old vanquished age will not last for ever. In our diagram, it comes to an end at Point 6, when Jesus returns to judge the world. Yet until that day we are living in a period of amnesty, when forgiveness and reconciliation with the King is possible for all. This is due solely to His mercy. He is allowing time for the defeated rebels to hear of His victory and acknowledge Him as Lord.



The old age finishes at Point 6, but the new age which began with Christ's victorious first coming goes on for ever. God's rule has been established. The new age (the upper line in the diagram) is currently continuing parallel with the old rebellious age, but it will not always be so. One day the old age will come to final judgement—that is certain. Yet the time of that judgement, although it is sure, has not been given to us. It is always imminent, always just around the corner. Jesus taught us how to recognize it if we are alive when it comes, and in this sense His teaching is a provision for that day. But

He insists He does not want us to try to predict it. It is in God's control.

The upper line in the diagram begins at the start of Point 4, even though Jesus' victory was not finalized until the cross and resurrection. It begins here because the decisive presence of the kingdom of God is located in the *Person*, wherever He is. It is therefore appropriate for the gospel, the good news about Jesus, to be presented from the moment of His birth (Luke 1—2).

### A RATIONAL DECISION

In the light of this future final judgement, Jesus warned men to repent. They should realize their great danger and acknowledge they are rebels against God. Now that God's rule has come in the Person of His Son, their peril cannot be ignored. It is certain that everyone will bow to the authority of the Son in the end; the only question for each man is whether it will be willingly before Point 6, or unwillingly at that time. God's judgement is as sure as His Word. Jesus' major theme is that God is asking men to repent now for two reasons: because He is extending His mercy and desires them to take it, and because Point 6 will be fearful for any creature still found rebelling when it comes. The merciful God is also holy and just, and is to be feared by rebels.

The choice is a rational one. It is possible to think about it. Jesus encourages people to consider it carefully, just as a man considers whether he has enough building materials to construct a tower or a king contemplates whether he can afford to fight a more powerful ruler with his inadequate military resources (Lk 14:28—32). Every person must decide what he will do; he must know he may be crushed.

Jesus' message forces us to realize there is continuity between our present life and what will happen at Point 6. Our decision about God's rule *now* affects our standing *then*.

In fact, He makes it clear a time will come when life will be seen from the other side of judgement. At that point, the

boundaries will be fixed; there will be no way back. As the rich man in the parable about Lazarus discovered (Lk 16:19–31), it will eventually be too late for repentance. In torment he sees the reality of judgement and desperately wants to warn his five brothers who still have to face it. This is an urgent and eternal matter. Man cannot, with impunity, make light of the kingdom of God.

A firm decision is required. Not to accept the gracious invitation is to reject it (Lk 14:16–24).

So Jesus calls people to repent. Repentance involves understanding that our rebellious life turns us in on ourselves. We are quite blind to the realities of the great rule of God. Our mind can, like the traditional Pharisees, refuse to look at the obvious truth. It is as plain as reading the weather signs (Lk 12:54–56), yet we are like squabbling children preoccupied with their selfish desires (Lk 7:31).

We need to recognize our spiritual poverty. We should not be fooled into winning cheap and false security by comparing our performance with that of others (Lk 18:10–14); the gospel of the kingdom has nothing to do with comparative scales of performance and payment (Mt 20:1–15). It relies on God's free gift and generosity alone—and is always centred in the Person of God.

## DECISION FOLLOWED BY ACTION

Repentance involves both decision and action. It means to actively do what your will decides.

Jesus does not ask people merely to recognize Him; they are to live in a way which reflects their decision to follow Him. The change of mind is the basic element; the doing of it demonstrates that the change of mind has been translated seriously into life style. (See the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:21–27.) It is not the son who tells his father he will mow the lawn but does not who carries out his father's desire; it is the son who openly says he will not mow the lawn, then changes his mind and does it (Mt 21:28–31).

This action of will is deep and intense. It is the response of a person who sees God's rule as so real and valuable he is ready to exchange his whole life to get it (Mt 13:44–46).

### FOR THE WORLD: NEW CREATION

The arrival of God's kingdom makes it certain that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1). The earth, originally submitted to Man to rule and subdue, passed into Satan's hands when he conquered Man. Satan became 'the prince of this world' (Jn 12:31). But this world is passing away. It will be replaced by a new creation.

The world, because it was subjected to Man by God in the first place, now awaits Man's final redemption—what the New Testament calls 'the revealing of the sons of God'.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:19–23).

The coming of God's rule is truly a marvellous event!

*Before the next chapter:* Read Romans 1 and 3:9–11; Ephesians 2:11–22.