

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM?

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SCRIPTURE: Psalm 145:1-13, with omissions.

I will extol thee, my God, O King; and I will bless thy name for ever and ever. Every day will I bless thee; and I will praise thy name for ever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts ... The Lord is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy. The Lord is good to all; and his tender mercies are over all his works. All thy works shall praise thee, O Lord; and thy saints shall bless thee. They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power; To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and glorious majesty of his kingdom. Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations.

The kingdom of God is ... righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. (Romans 14:17)

There are so many seemingly conflicting definitions of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, and so many varying concepts of what the kingdom is, that most of us would be hard pressed to give a satisfactory definition, or to answer the question, "What is the kingdom?" Almost any answer, almost any definition would leave something unsaid, some aspect unmentioned, some portion of our total concept unsatisfied and incomplete.

There is one school of thought which completely spiritualizes the kingdom, which says that the kingdom does not and cannot exist in this world, that it is entirely a kingdom of the spirit, that it has nothing to do with everyday practical affairs like economics and politics. Those who follow this school of thought quote Jesus' statement, "My kingdom is not of this world," without even analyzing the word and construction of that sentence. Jesus did not say that his kingdom would never be in this world but that it was not of this world. He taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come; and in the next phrase taught them to expect it in this world by telling how the kingdom would come -- when God's will is done on earth as it is done in heaven. It is the kingdom of God -- the kingdom of heaven -- but we may have it on earth at any time when we are willing to do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven.

The Pharisees were the "watchful waiters" of Jesus' day, who thought that some day God would miraculously send down the kingdom from heaven, complete with a Messiah to overthrow Rome and restore Israel to its ancient glory and pre-eminence. The Zealots went one step further, and advocated the overthrow of Rome and the establishment of the kingdom of God and of Israel by violence, by force, by assassination, and open warfare. Jesus was constantly subject to the pressure of these two ideas from his own disciples, as well as from the throngs about him. The people tried to take him by force and make him a king. The disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven and destroy all opposition.

Jesus was neither a dreamer, watchfully waiting for a futuristic, apocalyptic kingdom, nor a political schemer whose method was to raise a revolution and take the kingdom by force. Jesus did nothing to encourage, and everything to discourage the notion that he would set up his kingdom suddenly, miraculously, or by the use of force. He had decided against those methods at the time of his temptation in the wilderness. His kingdom was to be in the world, but it was not to be of the world. It was to be composed of those who would willingly do on earth the will of the Father in heaven.

The kingdom was then, and is now available to all. Perhaps we have to wait for some aspects of it, but the kingdom is available now, just as it was available to the Pharisees of Jesus' day who came asking him when the kingdom should appear. If we remember that they were the watchful waiters who expected a sudden, miraculous appearance of the kingdom without any change or effort on their part, the word "when" assumes a tremendous significance. To their query Jesus replied that the kingdom was already among them, or in their midst, or within them; the kingdom was even then available to them if they would only give allegiance to the King. The Pharisees were expecting all Israel to enter the kingdom as a race and as a nation; but the door to the kingdom was the narrow door of repentance. Men must enter the kingdom one at a time by renouncing the rebellion of the past, taking the oath of allegiance to the King, and living according to the King's laws -- doing his will on earth as it is done in heaven.

What is the kingdom? It is God's kingdom -- the kingdom of heaven. But the kingdom does not exist only in heaven; the kingdom is universal. There is not a square inch in the vastness of the universe where God does not rule, and where God's laws do not have to be obeyed. We are living in the midst of the kingdom now, either in obedience and loyalty, or in rebellion.

The kingdom of God is spiritual. It exists in the hearts of men. It is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. It exists wherever men do the will of God, and to the extent that they recognize him as King and give obedience to the laws of his kingdom. But the kingdom must also be in some of its aspects temporal, or it is no kingdom. It simply is not possible for us to keep a spiritual law without expressing that obedience in physical terms, in physical actions. It simply is not possible for us to believe whole-heartedly and unreservedly in spiritual principles, such as love, good will, and brotherly kindness, and then refuse to put into physical, temporal action the spiritual principles which we profess. Most of the multitudes of the so-called Christian world have missed the kingdom completely, because they thought that they could be subjects and members of God's kingdom by worshipping him in spirit, but ignoring his laws in practical, physical, temporal, hard-headed, worldly affairs. A spiritual kingdom without any temporal manifestation of the spiritual principles professed is like a disembodied spirit. It is only a ghost -- a phantom.

What is the kingdom? The very nature and meaning of the world pre-suppose that certain elements are essential to a kingdom. Any kingdom has first of all a king. Second, the king must have subjects, who give loyalty and allegiance and obedience to him. Third, there must be territory or space in which these subjects live, and over which the king has dominion. Fourth, there must be certain laws by which the subjects are governed, and by which the king dispenses justice. Fifth and last, there will be certain officers who derive their authority from the king, and who help him in dispensing justice, administering his laws, and seeking to build up the kingdom by persuading more people to become subjects of the king.

The kingdom of God, we believe, comprises all these things. The King is God; his vice-regent is Jesus Christ. Those who have formally pledged allegiance to God as King before those authorized to represent him, and who are honestly and loyally trying to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven, are his subjects. The King's territory is universal -- but being universal, it includes our earth. All natural laws, as well as all spiritual laws, are the laws of the kingdom, laws which are written into our bodies, our spirits, and into every atom of matter in the universe. The officers of the kingdom are the officers of Christ's church -- his priesthood -- divinely called by prophecy, commissioned and authorized to act in his name. They have no ambitions to worldly power or authority. They use no force to bring people into the kingdom or to keep them there, for God's kingdom is not of this world and it does not employ worldly methods to extend its dominion. Every man must be free to enter the kingdom if he likes, or to reject it in rebellion if he prefers. The officers of God's kingdom rule by love and sacrificial service.

God's kingdom is not of this world, but it is in this world. It has a King, subjects, territory, laws, and officers. It is spiritual, but it is also real and tangible. Its spiritual laws and principles must find reflection in the practical and the tangible. The kingdom is at hand, available now. We invite all men to repent of their rebellion, to surrender to God, the great King, and to live in obedience to the laws of his kingdom.