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PREACHING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Tom Wells

Not long ago I had a visit from the Jehovah's Witnesses. After we had talked a bit one of them asked me, "How would you define the kingdom of God?" As you may know, the kingdom is one of their favorite themes. I gave my answer and after some further discussion they left.

Does the subject of God's kingdom have the same interest for Christians as it does for the Jehovah's Witnesses? It should. Why? Because understanding God's kingdom—in the broad terms with which I will treat it here—offers a framework for preaching and grasping the ongoing program of God. Two things, particularly, make such understanding important to us. First, our Lord taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Unless we are content with vain repetition, we will want to know what we are praying for. That is doubly true because the Lord Jesus did not leave us large numbers of subjects for prayer. This prayer, then, must be important. We cannot help being interested in its meaning. Second, we see that the message preached in the gospels is the message of "the kingdom of God" or, in Matthew's gospel, "the kingdom of heaven," where "heaven" is used as a synonym for God. (Compare "heaven knows" and "God knows" in profane English.) Since this is the message of the gospels, we dare not ignore it.

THE MEANING OF THE WORD "KINGDOM"

Let us start by reviewing the meaning of the word "kingdom." In modern English kingdom most often means a realm or territory ruled over by a king. In the Bible it often has the same meaning. In a vision Satan showed the Lord Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world, and their splendor," and offered them to Jesus in return for worshipping him (Matthew 4:8-9). If we ask, "What was it that Jesus saw?" most likely the answer is, a vast array of territories that Satan claimed to rule. "Look at all these countries! They're mine," Satan said in effect, "but they'll be yours—every inch of them!"

In Scripture, however, kingdom often means something else, something like royal rule, reign, power, authority or sovereignty. When Paul writes that God "rescued us from the power [Gr. "authority"] of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13), he does not mean that God moved us from one place to another. Not at all! He means he took us out from under the reign of Satan and brought us under the kingship of Jesus Christ. So when we read of the "kingdom of God," we may translate this "God's kingship" or "the sovereignty of God." When we pray, "Your kingdom come," we are praying, "God, bring your sovereignty to this world!" Again, kingdom means rule, reign or sovereignty.

PROBLEM: HASN'T GOD ALWAYS BEEN SOVEREIGN?

If you have read the previous paragraph closely, however, a red flag may have gone up in your mind. I can imagine you saying to me, "Hasn't God always been sovereign over this world? How can we be praying for something that already exists?" These are good questions. Let's see if we can understand how God can be sovereign and yet urge us to pray for his sovereignty in the future.

When God created man and woman and placed them

in Eden, two things were true. First, Adam and Eve obeyed God at the outset, and so did everything else. Second, Adam and Eve and everything that he made served God's purposes—everything without exception. That is what made Eden such a wonderful place. It was Paradise. Let's put this down in one/two form: (1) Every creature obeyed God. (2) Every creature served God's purposes.

But then something happened. Man disobeyed God, and God cast them out of Eden. This brought the state John Milton described as "Paradise Lost." Paul tells us that the whole creation was upset by man's disobedience (Romans 8:19-23). Number 1 above was no longer true. Adam and Eve no longer obeyed the Lord. Human sin made it impossible to say, "Every creature obeyed God."

But that raises the question: What about Number 2 above? Can we still say, "Every creature serves the purposes of God"? Oddly enough, the answer is "Yes." Men are now disobedient. They do not do what God commands. But that is not the whole story. They still serve the purposes of God, as surely as Adam and Eve did before they sinned. How can this be? Let's see if we can give a scriptural answer to this question.

There are at least two things in the Bible called "the will of God." One of these is the commands God gives. When God says, "Do this!" we call his demand "his will." Here is a sentence that uses "God's will" in this way: "It is God's will that we love him with all our hearts." No Christian will argue with this use of the phrase "God's will." Every Christian will agree that the sentence we just read is true. God's command to love him is God's will for us. Theologians have called this God's *preceptive* will, the will we find in his precepts or commands.

Something else is also called "God's will" in Scripture: the things God has made up his mind will happen in this world. James gives us an example of this use:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a town, and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that" (4:13-15).

Here James tells us to often use the phrase, "If the Lord wills!" We are not independent beings who can do whatever we choose. God is sovereign over us. We can do nothing that he does not either cause or permit. Now if you ask the question, "Why does God allow some things and not others?", the answer is, "He allows what serves his purposes." Anything else he prevents. There are no exceptions.

Paul tells us that God "accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will" (Ephesians 1:11). Scripture illustrates this in many ways. We recall Joseph's speech to his brothers after their father's death. Fearing the worst, the brothers pled with Joseph to forgive them for their selling him into Egypt.

But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Genesis 50:19-20).

Being sold into slavery served two sets of purposes in Joseph's life. His brothers sold him to be rid of him, and their purpose was served. But God allowed it for his own purpose, to save the people of Israel alive. Unless the grace of God later intervened, the brothers would answer for their evil purpose. But that did not keep them from serving God's purpose. They did so as surely as if that was all they wanted to do!

The highest and best illustration of this truth is the cross of Jesus Christ. No one supposes that the enemies

who killed him were moved by a desire to further the purposes of God. Not in the least! But that is what they did. If we ask, "What is the greatest sin ever committed?" certainly this sin must be high on that list. But if we ask, "Of all that has happened in this world, what is the greatest source of blessing?" we see that the answer is the same in each case, the killing of Jesus Christ. God's purpose was served in the midst of their sin. In fact, if God does not rule over sin, he may rule in Mars or Jupiter or Venus, but not in this world. Everything humanity does has the shadow of sin cast across it. The sovereignty of God is a mere name, if he is not sovereign over sin. We see this again in Paul's experience with Satan (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). There Paul calls his thorn in the flesh "a messenger of Satan" (v. 7). But if we ask Paul what its purpose was, he tells us nothing about Satan's motivation. Instead he describes God's purpose: "Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from being too elated" (v. 7).

As far as the record is concerned, we are left totally in the dark about Satan's purpose. God's purpose is all that counts!

Before we go on, let's review the effect of the fall. Before the fall two things were true: (1) Every creature obeyed God. His *preceptive will* was carried out. (2) Every creature served God's purposes. His *decretive will* was done.

Since the fall men are disobedient, but as far as God's purposes are concerned, all creatures continue to serve the purposes of God. Sin eliminated the first point but left the second intact. If we look over the whole span of history for a moment we will see that in Eden God's will, in both senses, was done. Now it is not. Men do not obey God, though they continue to serve his purposes. In eternity future, however, we will know "Paradise Regained" (to borrow another title from Milton). Then men will obey God once more,

and they will continue to serve his purposes. Why will this happen? Because God will exercise his *kingship* to make it that way. We will obey him just as the unfallen angels in heaven obey. That explains why we pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." In heaven God's commands and God's decrees are both carried out. Sin destroyed the marriage between these two, but when sin is destroyed God will unite them again.

WHAT ABOUT GOD'S KINGSHIP NOW?

Since God has been sovereign throughout history, he has been bringing about his purposes. If we ask where we can see this, we see it in everything that happens. But occasionally we can see it dramatically in the destruction of the wicked. The flood, in which vast numbers of mankind were killed, illustrates this. He has also exercised his wisdom and sovereignty in creating outposts of righteousness starting with Adam and Eve and continuing through Noah, the patriarchs and Israel, both as a whole and in its remnants. All of these obeyed God and kept his precepts, to a greater or lesser extent. These events of judgment and mercy suggested and pictured a giant step forward that God would bring about in "the last days."

When will God assert his kingship in this fuller way? When will the last days arrive?

Not too many years ago the popular answer to this question went something like this: The last days will come when the millennium arrives (or, when we are ushered into eternity). In other words, the last days will begin with the return of Christ. But recently another answer has become evident from Scripture. The last days began with the complex of events connected with the first appearance of Christ. The writer to the Hebrews makes this point in starting his book. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last

days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (1:1-2a). For this writer, the last days have already come.

This means that God's kingdom began at the same time. We shouldn't be surprised at this because both John the Baptist and Jesus preached the coming of God's kingdom in a very short time. John said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 3:2). Mark gives Jesus' words as, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15). Note the reference to fulfillment. Jesus' hearers were living on the brink of the kingdom of God which had been promised for the last days. This message caught the ears of many of those who heard it, because it was the very thing they were looking for. Later Mark cites Joseph of Arimathea as an example of such a man. He describes him as "a respected member of the Council [Sanhedrin], who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God" (15:43).

Earlier I wrote, "The last days began with the complex of events connected with the first appearance of Christ." If that failed to locate an exact moment for the coming of God's rule, it was no accident. The moment is difficult to pinpoint. Many have seen the kingdom, that is, the authority and rule of God, revealed in the activity of Christ in the gospels. And with good reason! No one before him ever displayed the authority of God over men, nature and death in the way the Lord Jesus did. It seems unwise, then, to exclude this activity from the coming of the kingdom. Nevertheless, the giant step forward in the kingship of God seems to have come at the exaltation of Jesus. At that point he can say, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). The Messianic King, promised in ages past, has come and is now exercising his reign on earth! Man once ruled as God's prime minister in

Eden. Man now rules again on earth (and in heaven), in the person of Jesus Christ!

Now in subjecting all things to them [human beings], God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor . . . (Hebrews 2:8-9).

God's King has come. He has been crowned. All things are not yet subject to mankind generally, but they are subject to him. Redeemed humanity will join him in ruling, when he has completed the task of "bringing many children to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). In the meantime, we rule in our representative Head.

The Old Testament, however, promises new heavens and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17; cf. 2 Peter 3:13), a new creation. Is that promise strictly future? More than that, if it is strictly future how is that consistent with the arrival of the kingship of God in the past? And, if it is not strictly future, how is it seen in any of the events connected to the appearance of Jesus Christ two thousand years ago?

As we have seen, God has always been sovereign. To speak of the coming of his sovereignty or kingship is to speak relatively of "a giant step forward" in the progress he is making in returning men to his own moral likeness. Obviously that work is not yet done. It is not even started in those who are yet to be saved, and it is not done in me or in you. To speak of God's kingship coming is like speaking of grace coming (John 1:17) or faith coming (Galatians 3:25). All three have existed throughout history. That does not mean, however, that the new creation is strictly future. It too has begun. How? By the creation of the new nation made up of God's elect, the church. Do you remember Paul's language in 2 Corinthians 5:17? He speaks of a "new

creation." The NASB translates this, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature." It is equally possible to translate this verse as follows, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, there is the new creation," that is, the new creation has begun in that its citizens are being joined to Jesus Christ to form the new people of God. The thought is captured in the New English Bible: "When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order is gone, and a new order has already begun." The Lord Jesus now rules over the nation that will populate eternity. Notice how Peter develops this idea at Pentecost.

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:33-36).

Jesus, who is both Lord and Christ, shares the rule with his Father. Peter's listeners recognized the impact of this. Though they were Israelites, they were not yet citizens of the new creation. Sensing their lack—though probably not precisely in these terms—they cried out with fear, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). In essence Peter said, "Bow the knee to God's King; give your allegiance to Jesus Christ." Peter might have adopted the words of Paul (had they been written when he spoke):

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ

is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

In saying these things both Peter and Paul were preaching the kingdom of God. The kingdom was inaugurated with the coming of Christ as God's King. It runs through the age in which we live. In preaching the gospel the apostles used the keys that let men into God's kingdom. As the book of Acts closes we see Paul still tirelessly "testifying to the kingdom of God" (28:23) and "proclaiming the kingdom of God" (28:31).

CHRIST COMES IN TWO STAGES

Before the fall of man two things were true: (1) Every creature obeyed God. His *preceptive will* was carried out. (2) Every creature served God's purposes. His *decretive will* was done.

The fall pried these two things apart. Disobedience entered and has remained to characterize human life. Nevertheless all things still carry out the purposes of God. When we pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we are praying that God will create a new world in which these two things will come together once more. They remained together in heaven; they must be reunited on earth.

How will this finally be accomplished? The second coming of Christ will finish the work. We glimpse the completion in the book of Revelation: "Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever'" (11:15).

What are the "loud voices in heaven" referring to? Their words might have been spoken at the ascension of our Lord when "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18) became his. It was then that his reign was inaugurated. That was his coronation day. But the following verses in

Revelation are an inspired commentary on verse 15.

Then the twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth" (11:16-18).

So then, the coming of God's kingship will not be complete until judgment comes, with destruction and reward. Sin will be banished from the new earth forever. Happily, obedience will be restored completely. Once more God's preceptive will (his commands) and his decretive will (his ongoing purposes) will be reunited. His will once more will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Every preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ is thus a preacher of the kingdom of God. The gospel is the gospel of the kingdom. It is the exercise of God's kingship through Jesus Christ. Even as you read this article the gospel is capturing men and women and making them citizens of God's kingdom. In a sense, that has been God's program in every age, as we have seen. The kingship of God unites his purposes in history. What has been true throughout history is pre-eminently true today. The last days have come in that the giant step forward appeared in the coming of Jesus Christ. We do not await its appearance, but its completion. Hence we continue to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!"

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