

THE COMING KINGDOM – PART V¹

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Because today's evangelical world largely believes that the church is presently experiencing the messianic kingdom, we began a study chronicling what the Bible teaches concerning this important issue of the kingdom. That there will be a future, messianic kingdom on earth has been revealed thus far through the divine intention to restore the office of Theocratic Administrator (Gen. 1:26-28) that was lost in Eden (Gen. 3). Likewise, the promise of a future, earthly, messianic reign was prophesied in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 15) and related sub-covenants. While these covenants guarantee that the kingdom will one day come to the earth through Israel, according to the Mosaic Covenant, the kingdom's ultimate manifestation is conditioned upon the nation's acceptance of Christ as her long-awaited king during the events of the future Tribulation period. Previous articles also explained how God restored the office of Theocratic Administrator that was lost in Eden, at least in a limited sense, at Sinai. This theocratic arrangement covered most of Old Testament history as God, even after the time of Moses, governed Israel indirectly through Joshua, various judges, and finally, Israel's kings until the Babylonian Captivity ended the Theocracy. Such termination initiated a dark time in Jewish history known as the "Times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24; Rev. 11:2) when the nation had no Davidic king reigning on David's Throne as Judah would be trampled down by various Gentile powers. Against the backdrop of such bondage entered Jesus Christ, the rightful heir to David's Throne. The Gospel accounts identify Christ as the long-awaited regal heir prophesied in the Old Testament.

KINGDOM OFFER

As noted earlier, when the Abrahamic Covenant and related sub-covenants are considered in harmony with the Mosaic Covenant, Israel's covenantal structure can best be described as an unconditional covenant with a conditional blessing. In other words, any Jewish generation must satisfy the conditional Mosaic Covenant before they can enter into the Abrahamic Covenant's unconditional blessings. Such a condition can be satisfied if Israel enthrones the king of God's own choosing (Deut. 17:15). Thus, it was incumbent upon first-century Israel to enthrone Christ in order to enter into all of her covenantal blessings.

The opportunity for first-century Israel to enthrone Christ and consequently experience all these blessings is known as "the offer of the kingdom." This idea is captured in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" as proclaimed to the nation by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1-2), Christ (Matt. 4:17), the Twelve (Matt. 10:5-7), and the Seventy (Luke 10:1, 9). What this expression means is that the unchallenged rulership that God experiences in heaven had drawn near to the earth in the person of Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Davidic king. It is also called "the kingdom of heaven" since the

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kingdom will be inaugurated by the "God of heaven." Notice how Daniel connects this "God of heaven" with His coming kingdom: "In the days of those kings the *God of heaven* will set up a *kingdom* which will never be destroyed..." (Dan. 2:44). Because the king was present, the opportunity to enthrone Him was a reality for first-century Israel. However, the expression "at hand" does not mean that the kingdom had arrived. Rather, the kingdom was near or in a state of imminence or immediate expectation since the presence of the king allowed first-century Israel to make a bona fide choice to enthrone Christ and thus enter into her covenantal blessings.

Notice that the word "kingdom" in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" is left undefined by John the Baptist, Christ, the Twelve, and the Seventy. This lack of a New Testament definition shows that the notion of the kingdom was understood by how the concept had already been developed in the Old Testament. As we have learned, the Old Testament portrays a coming earthly, messianic kingdom. This kingdom is anticipated in the office of Theocratic Administrator that was lost in Eden, in the biblical covenants, in the earthly theocracy governing Israel from the time of Moses to Zedekiah, and in the predictions of the Old Testament prophets. Had first-century Israel enthroned Christ, this earthly kingdom would have become a reality not only for the nation but also for the entire world. Israel's covenants would have been fulfilled, and the Times of the Gentiles would have terminated.

FIRST-CENTURY ISRAEL REJECTS THE KINGDOM OFFER

Despite the unprecedented opportunity for the establishment of the messianic kingdom due to the presence of the king among the first-century Jews, tragically, Israel rejected the kingdom offer. Why did the Israel of Christ's day reject the opportunity to establish the kingdom? At least two reasons can be given. First, Christ emphasized in the Sermon on the Mount that the kingdom was not only physical and political but also moral and spiritual (Matt. 5–7). Here, Christ reiterated what the Old Testament had already revealed that while the kingdom would certainly be earthly and terrestrial it would also be moral and ethical (Ezek. 37:23-24). Thus, citizens of Christ's kingdom had to exhibit certain moral qualities (Matt. 5:3-12). Because Israel was far more interested in a physical and political kingdom that would overthrow an oppressive Rome than they were in a spiritual and moral kingdom (John 6:15, 26), Christ's emphasis upon the moral characteristics of His kingdom set the stage for Israel's ultimate rejection of the kingdom offer.

Second, Israel pursued righteousness by way of self-effort rather than by accepting the imputed or transferred righteousness offered by Christ (Matt. 5:20). Israel's works-oriented Pharisaical system (Mark 7:13) caused the nation to stumble over Christ's simple message that righteousness can only be gained by faith alone (John 6:28-29). Romans 9:30-32 explains, "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law. Why? Because *they did* not *pursue it* by faith, but as though *it were* by works. They stumbled over THE STUMBLING STONE." While

a small Jewish remnant did accept Christ's message, the crux of the nation as well as the nation's leadership stumbled over it.

The Gospels carefully reveal Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer. The turning point is found in Matt. 12:24. When the Pharisees were unable to explain away one of Christ's many miracles, they instead attributed the miracle's performance to Satanic powers. At this point, the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" virtually disappears from Matthew's Gospel. The phrase does not resurface until the offer is re-extended to a distant generation of Jews during the future Tribulation period (Matt. 24:14). Such an absence signifies that God took the kingdom offer off the table when the Pharisees demonstrated unbelief when confronted by Christ's miracles. This rejection of the offer was ratified at Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem as well as by the nation's decision to hand Christ over to the Romans for crucifixion (Matt. 21–23; 26–27). Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer is also represented in the following statement by the nation's religious leaders to Pilate: "Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar'" (John 19:15). Thus, John well summarizes: "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11).

Because Israel rejected the offer of the kingdom, the messianic kingdom was *not* established at Christ's First Advent. Instead of inheriting His rightful kingdom, Christ never became king over the nation and consequently was "cut off" and inherited "nothing" (Dan. 9:26a). While the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant prevents Israel from forfeiting *ownership* of the covenanted promises, first-century Israel's lack of response to the offer of the kingdom prevented the nation from *possessing* these blessings. From the time of Christ up to the present hour Israel remains only the *owner* rather than the *possessor* of the covenanted promises. Although not *cancelled*, the messianic kingdom remains in a state of *postponement*. Just as past generations of Jews were disciplined for Mosaic Covenant violations (2 Kgs. 17; 25), Christ-rejecting first-century Israel also experienced divine discipline (Deut. 28:49-50) by means of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple resulting in over a million Jewish deaths when Titus of Rome invaded Israel thirty-eight years after the time of Christ in the horrific events of A.D. 70 (Dan. 9:26b; Matt. 24:1-2; Luke 19:41-44).

THE INTERIM AGE AND THE KINGDOM'S POSTPONEMENT

Due to Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer resulting in the messianic kingdom's postponement, Christ began to explain the spiritual conditions that would prevail during the kingdom's absence. This interim program includes His revelation of the kingdom mysteries (Matt. 13) and the church (Matt. 16:18). Before describing these spiritual realities, a few preliminary remarks must be made about this new interim age.

First, the fact that God knew that Israel would reject the kingdom offer (Dan. 9:26a) thereby ushering in His eternal purpose for the interim age in no way implies that the offer of the kingdom to national

Israel was not a legitimate or bona fide offer. An all-powerful God can use the free will of His creatures in order to accomplish His eternal purposes. Chafer explains:

...God not only knows beforehand the choice His creatures will make, but is Himself able to work in them both to will and to do of His own good pleasure. The Scriptures present many incidents which disclose the fact that the will of God is executed by men even when they have no conscious intention to do the will of God...Was the death of Christ in danger of being abortive and all the types and prophecies respecting His death of being proved untrue until Pilate made his decision regarding that death?²

In other words, when Israel of its own free will rejected the kingdom offer, that decision was used by an all-powerful God to usher in the next major phase of His pre-ordained plan. This plan entailed Christ paying the sin debt of the world by dying on the cross and God's present work in the interim age.

(To Be Continued...)



² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 5:347-48.