

The Government On His Shoulder

Study Four — The Now and the Not Yet

In these five studies, or snapshots, of what God's kingdom or reign is about, we have noted its clash with the kingdoms of this world, its bringing of grace to his people, and its central operation of Christ defeating our enemies on the cross. We look, now, at what it means to live today by the powers of an age still to come and a future that cannot be imagined but whose winds we feel (cf. John 3:5-8; Heb. 6:4-5).

To say that we already have all of what God has promised is folly. There is still much evil and suffering upon us, and much unfinished business within us. To suggest that *this* is the kingdom would be to demean God. Is what we see all he can do? Is this all he has promised (Heb. 11:16)? God's reign is only complete when every foe is defeated and all creation does God's will.

The Old and New Testament promises are unequivocal that there will finally not remain one element of creation that is not expressing God's kindness and power in Jesus Christ. 'The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9). 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ; and he will reign forever and ever' (Rev. 11:15). 'Then comes the end, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to the Father, when he has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death' (1 Cor. 15:24-26). 'For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of his glory, by the exertion of the power that he has even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3:20-21).

Jesus often speaks of the kingdom as a coming reign of God that we should long for (Matt. 6:10), and should aspire to enter (Matt. 6:21). We may either dine with Abraham or be cast into darkness (Matt. 8:11). His kingdom at present may now include alien elements, but not at the end (Matt. 13:37-43). The message of the kingdom will be preached among all nations and then the end will come (Matt. 24:14). The kingdom's 'bridegroom' will come, that is, Christ will return, and we will need to be ready for his coming (Matt. 25:1-13). When he comes, he will say who may enter the kingdom prepared for them (Matt. 25:34).

For the most part, when Paul refers to the kingdom, it is this future he has in mind. It is what we will inherit (Acts 14:22; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:24, 50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; 1 Thes. 2:12; 2 Thes. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:1). The same is true of Peter (2 Pet. 1:11) and James (Jam. 2:5).

And yet Jesus has shown that the kingdom is a present power that has come upon us (Luke 11:20), and Paul knows we are living now according to a power whose results will not be revealed until the last day (Eph. 1:17-23). His own ministry is evidence of God's kingdom power (1 Cor. 4:20), and the Church community is to be evidence of God's coming salvation (Rom. 14:17). How should we understand this 'now' and 'not yet' of the kingdom?

Clearly, the present power of the kingdom and its coming culmination are not in conflict. Some speak about 'inaugurated eschatology' (e.g. Greg Beale); that is, what is to be has been inaugurated now and we are to live by faith in what cannot be seen. Others speak about 'the presence of the future' (the title of a book by G. E. Ladd). Let us consider various ways in which this works out.

Justification by faith, and then by sight

I start with justification because being 'right' is fundamental to all human flourishing. We critique our politicians for doing things merely to show that they are in the right but it is a universal trait. Self-justification—that is, the maintenance of our dignity without the honour of God's approval—may be the major motivator of human action. We will go to extraordinary lengths to prove we are right in doing, thinking, feeling or saying what we do. This is inevitable because we are created to have God's approval and the lack of it is unbearable. We must replace it. Typically, we want

events to prove we are right—to vindicate us. This leads to all manner of deception, selfishness, manipulation, and finally, cruelty.

Paul says (Rom. 5:1-5) we are justified now—we have peace with God and access to grace. But then, we also rejoice in hope of sharing the glory of God. Upsets along the way—that is, things turning out in a way that suggests we are in the wrong—do not upset us because the Holy Spirit is given to stop hope turning sour. Rather, we exult in anticipation of sharing the glory of God.

Interestingly, these ideas of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit recur later in the book (Rom. 14:17) when Paul says that this saving and gracious reign of God is to be evident in our relationships with one another. Having arguments over trifles (lack of peace) is evidence of self-justification (by eating the ‘right’ things), and focus on ourselves destroys joy that can only arise if we are focused on what God is about. We are to represent to others what God has given us. Much of our argumentation, in marriages, families and churches, has to do with being ‘right’ and so we seek to be vindicated in having our will implemented. On the other hand, if we understand that God has justified us now, and will vindicate us on the last day, much of the heat will go out of our relationships.

In the book of Hebrews, our forbears in faith show that they lived for a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). They ‘gained approval through their faith’ in anticipation of receiving ‘what was promised’ (Heb. 11:39). Justification is effectively advance notice of a visible vindication in the future—a vindication of God first, and then, of us. God is with us, now, by the Holy Spirit, but that very Spirit is crying out with us for the vindication to come (Rom. 8:20-27). Hebrews spends much time demonstrating how we come to stand without condemnation before God (Heb. 9:14) and then shows that it is this faith that has sustained God’s people from the beginning (Heb. 11:4, 5, 7). He goes on to talk about us receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28).

The Apostle Peter knows from the start that he will not be a success in this world. Jesus tells him he will die as a martyr (John 21:18-19). But he says we have been born again to a living hope through Christ’s resurrection, to receive an inheritance that cannot fade, and that we are kept, now, by God’s power, to receive salvation at the last times. He says we will have great joy, though interspersed with distressing trials (1 Pet. 1:3-6). He also says we have been given magnificent promises that will lead to us sharing in God’s divine nature, and because of this, we should apply ourselves diligently to living out the forgiveness he has granted (2 Pet. 1:3-9).

Lights in the world through hope

Jesus made it clear we are to be light and salt in this world (Matt. 5:13-16). The nature of this influence includes meekness, and suffering, but with anticipation of the kingdom (Matt. 5:3, 10). Hope is essential for all living but the world cannot produce this hope. It cannot guarantee anything. It cannot rise above the dead weight of our corruption. Without the good news of Christ, people are without God and without hope in the world (Eph. 2:12).

The gospel of the kingdom may seem ‘otherworldly’ and rather ineffective in dealing with world events. Some have criticized Christians because their anticipation of a better future made them unwilling to engage the present. However, the perspectives, habits, hope, goodness, discernment and joy that Christians have from Christ’s reign are the very things the world *does* need (Phil. 2:14-15). They must be present to the world as a witness to them of a reign they cannot reproduce. State powers may legislate, educate and remonstrate, but they cannot produce the virtues that make for a civilized society.

Berman, Harold (former Harvard Law School Professor) writes, ‘It is supposed by some, especially intellectuals that fundamental legal principles ... can survive without any religious or quasi-religious foundations on the basis of the proper political and economic controls and philosophy of humanism. History, however, including current history, testifies otherwise. People will not give their allegiance to a political and economic system, and even less to a philosophy, unless it represents for them a higher sacred truth’ (*Christianity Today*, 4/9/81, p. 28).

Tom Holland, acclaimed American historian of ancient Rome, was brought up to believe our Western values arose from the renewed study of the Greeks and Romans in the 16th century—the Renaissance, and later, the Enlightenment. He now says that his historical study has disproved this position, and, though still an unbeliever, he says...

Today, even as belief in God fades across the West, the countries that were once collectively known as Christendom continue to bear the stamp of the two-millennia-old revolution that Christianity represents. It is the principal reason why, by and large, most of us who live in post-Christian societies still take for granted that it is nobler to suffer than to inflict suffering. It is why we generally assume that every human life is of equal value. In my morals and ethics, I have learned to accept that I am not Greek or Roman at all, but thoroughly and proudly Christian.
(<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/religion/2016/09/tom-holland-why-i-was-wrong-about-christianity>)

God's reign does not fit the world's cherished matrix of science or human potential without God and will never be welcomed for what it is without the gift of the Spirit. It will be constantly challenged, and, until the end of history. However, we know that it is not only what the world needs; it is its future. Our ethic is an ethic of hope. Our idea of society does not arise from what is possible or expedient, or merely from what is right, but what is *ahead*—the things that God has promised.

For example, if there will be no hatred in the new heaven and earth, then there is no need for hatred now. We may compare the world's fostering of anger as a means to promote change.

Again, if love will remain when other things have passed away (1 Cor. 13:13), then love, now, 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Cor. 13:7). Nothing is meant to work without love—even multinationals, and especially families.

And again, if self justification will be absent when we see Christ in his moral grandeur and we are transformed into his image, then there need be no self justification now, and no ambition other than to know Christ and to serve our neighbor (Phil. 3:8-11).

Again, if there will be no defilement in the new heaven and earth, then we long and pray for God's kingdom and righteousness now, and believe that righteousness will exult a nation and that sin is a reproach to any people (Prov. 14:34). The church is to model these things, and, where appropriate, argue for these things.

And especially, if on the way to glory, Christ never remembers our sins but buries them in the sufficiency of Christ's offering, then we need not badger others with our incriminations and disappointments as though we had rights to the perfection of others.

Political action?

How then, may we represent the truth of Christ in the public sphere? Many books are written about this matter, and particularly now as the tide of opinion against any authoritative revelation is high. I offer two observations.

The church must bear witness to a kingdom whose powers are in the gospel, not just in law. We cannot expect ideas or codes to win the day. Our faith cannot be reduced to systems or ethics. It remains a power—Christ himself. Where the church has mistaken its culture for its message, it has reproduced an appearance of godliness but not its power (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5). The church's authority is not political but prophetic. Its only 'sword' is the one coming out of Christ's mouth (Rev. 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21), the word of the kingdom (Matt. 13:19). On the other hand, God will give us opportunity to contribute to the political and social landscape of our days and we should seek the good of the community where God has placed us (Jer. 29:7).

For example, Vaclav Havel, a political dissident under communism, and later the Czech Republic's first president, spoke of living authentically as a way of protest, refusing to be defined by the state, and portraying, even through suffering, what it means to be true. This seems to express much of what a Christian may do in the wider community.

What Christian reformers do in the governance of nations is best done as citizens of that country rather than as representatives of the church.

For example, Abraham Kuyper, theologian, educator and politician in Holland (PM, 1901—1905), started a university, and Christian unions, and a political party. But he insisted that the church not run these or be responsible for them.

Preparation for a future

A friend who suffered various confusing changes in his life described his administrative job to me as 'not a means to an end but a preparation for a future'. In fact, he was a capable theologian and academic but learned that the rationale of his life did not lie in how effective he appeared to be but how well he would fit in the age to come (cf. 2 Thes. 1:4-5). It is in that age, not the present one, that our identity and accomplishment will be seen truly (Rom. 8:19). It is then that we will be truly 'appreciated'—by Christ himself (Matt. 10:42). We need to sit loose to this present world. Some things that seem important now, for cultural or political or other reasons, turn out to be not eternal and can be let go. It is the eternal things that we, our families and our community, need now.

The parables of the kingdom that we looked at earlier (Matthew 13) say that those who learn how the kingdom functions now and hear the word of the kingdom will shine like lights in the kingdom of their Father (v. 43). These parables explain a mystery—of why the coming of the King does not immediately bring in the consummation of all that has been promised. Attempts to use these parables to get things to happen are futile. Their focus is not so much the gradualness, and certainly not the do-ability of the work, but a comparison of the present seeming insignificance of what is happening and the certainty and finality of the kingdom God is creating.

We are poised between two kingdoms, this world on the one hand, and the reign of God on the other. We live in the overlap of both, and with the consequent tensions. We cannot ignore the world and live in a kingdom ghetto. Nor can we immerse ourselves in this age as though it will fulfill the promises of God. However, Christ will be with us to the end of the age, not just as a presence, but as our leader in battle. Who can tell what God may do? Looking at others may give us some ideas but we must follow the King. Perhaps, like John the Baptist in jail, we may ask if Christ is truly King or if we should look for another (Matt. 11:5). Jesus sends word back to John that the deaf are hearing and the blind are seeing and the dead are being raised, and, that those who take no offense at him are blessed. In the end, we must trust the King.