

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

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It is evident when we read the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and also the opening chapters of the book of Acts, that the dominant subject is "*the kingdom of heaven*". The gospel that John the Baptist preached, and that the Lord Himself preached, and that the twelve apostles were commissioned to preach, was that "*the kingdom of heaven is at hand*".

"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent ye: for THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is at hand." (Matt. 3:1 2)

"Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of THE KINGDOM OF GOD, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and THE KINGDOM OF GOD is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:14 15)

"These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into *any* city of the Samaritans enter ye not. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is at hand." (Matt. 10:5 7)

In the sermon on the mount, the blessed prospect of *the kingdom of heaven*" was repeatedly addressed by the Lord. For example,...

"And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed *are* the poor in spirit: for theirs is THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN." (Matt. 5:2 3)

"For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN." (Matt. 5:20) "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. THY KINGDOM COME. Thy will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven." (Matt 6:9 10)

Even following the Lord's death and resurrection from the dead, the theme of His instructions and charges to the apostles still pertained to the kingdom of God. Luke tells us in Acts 1:1 3 how that the Lord gave...

"...commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: to whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to THE KINGDOM OF GOD."

As the foregoing examples testify, the doctrine of "*the kingdom of heaven*" pervades the record of the Lord's earthly ministry, and is that in which the 12 apostles were both instructed and commissioned.

WHAT IS "THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN"?

Sometimes the "*kingdom of heaven*" is thought of as simply being a reference to heaven itself, and that what the Lord and the 12 apostles were preaching about was simply the issue of heaven and how to get there. With others it is thought to be a reference to a spiritual reigning of God in the hearts of men which results in transformed lives and eventually in a transformation of society. What the Lord and the 12 apostles were therefore preaching about, it is said, was the issue of men needing to repent and let God and His will reign in their hearts. In so doing, God's will will be done on this earth.

Though these are commonly accepted ideas as to what the "*kingdom of heaven*" is, they are at variance with what the Scriptures themselves declare it to be. The testimony of God's word is that the "*kingdom of heaven*" is not a reference to heaven itself, or to a spiritual reigning of God in men's hearts, but rather to the literal reigning of God Himself on and over this earth in fulfillment of the covenants God made with the nation of Israel.

ISRAEL'S COVENANTED KINGDOM

According to the covenant God made with Abraham and his seed, the nation of Israel is to be a "*great nation*" on this earth, and as such the means through which "*all the families of the earth shall be blessed*". (Gen. 12:1 3) They have land covenanted to them by God in which they are to dwell as this "*great nation*" and provide for the blessing of the world by God. (Gen. 13:14 18; 15:7 21; 17:1 8) As was later confirmed to them in the Law, they are designed by God to be "*a peculiar treasure unto (Him) above all people*"; a "*kingdom of priests, and an holy nation*". (Ex. 19:1 6)

God's plan and purpose with the nation of Israel is for them to be that "*great nation*" and "*kingdom*" in which they functioning as God's priests to the rest of the world will provide for the blessing of the world and the administering of God's dominion over it. Isaiah, therefore, prophesying about the fulfillment of God's plan and purpose with Israel, proclaimed...

"And it shall come to pass in the last days, *that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people:*" (Isaiah 2:2 4a)

Israel in her kingdom and in fulfillment of God's covenant with her will provide for the subjection of the world to God's ways and for the establishment of His paths for it to walk in. The will of heaven will reign and rule on this earth in Israel's covenanted kingdom.

ISRAEL'S FAILURES

But Israel rebelled against God and His plan and purpose for her, as her history testifies. And so with David, and in view of Israel's failures, God covenanted to en flesh Himself in the seed of David and to come to be their redeemer, deliverer, king and blessing. In so doing, He would provide for them to be what His plan and purpose is for them. Therefore, Isaiah also proclaimed to Israel...

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of *his* government and peace *there shall be* no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgement and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this". (Isaiah 9:6 7)

And as Daniel also proclaimed when he saw the end of Gentile dominion over Israel and the fulfillment of God's promises to the nation,...

"And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, *but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.*" (Daniel 2:44; cf. also 7:13 14)

Israel's covenanted kingdom of heaven's rule and dominion on this earth was to be established through her Messiah, the Son of David. The "*God of heaven*", enfleshing Himself in the seed of David in accordance with the Davidic covenant, would come and redeem His people and set up the kingdom of His dominion on this earth in Zion. This is what God's covenants with Israel called for. This is what the expression "*the kingdom of heaven*" refers to and is all about.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AT HAND

When the Lord was born into this world, He came to fulfill that which was covenanted with David. Just as was announced to Mary...

"And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." (Luke 1:31 33)

In being born into this world, the "*God of heaven*" had enfleshed Himself in the seed of David so as to be given the throne of David and to establish His kingdom on this earth. The "*kingdom of heaven*", therefore, was "*at hand*".

Not only was the King here, but the time schedule given in the prophets for the establishing of the kingdom of heaven was almost completed. (cf. Dan. 9:24 27) For this reason, as the Lord preached the gospel of the kingdom, He said,...

"THE TIME IS FULFILLED, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND: repent ye, and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:15)

This is what the program of God was all about when our Lord was here on this earth. Israel's long awaited and covenanted "*kingdom of heaven*" was "*at hand*". And with that being the case, as the Gospels describe, the Lord heralded beatitudes in view of it; taught the issue of entrance into it; declared who would be "*least*" and "*great*" in it; informed the 12 of their special positions in it; warned about the purging wrath that He would execute upon the nation and this world preliminary to establishing the kingdom, etc.

As God's kingdom program with His people Israel continued on following the Lord's resurrection and ascension back to heaven, the apostles eagerly looked for *the restoration of the kingdom to Israel*. (Acts 1:6) They, therefore, proclaimed to Israel the arrival of her "*last days*", (Acts 2:1 36), as spoken of in the prophets, and exhorted the people to respond positively to the offer of the kingdom. (Acts 3:12 26)

WHY NO KINGDOM OF HEAVEN YET?

It is patently evident that "*the kingdom of heaven*" has not yet been established on this earth. None of the aforementioned prophetic declarations concerning its establishment have been fulfilled, yet when the Lord was here "*the time*" was "*fulfilled*" for it, and so it was preached to be "*at hand*". What has happened? Why hasn't "*the God of heaven*" set up that covenanted kingdom?

Though many explanations have been set forth, God's own explanation concerning what He has done is the one that needs to be understood and appreciated.

A NEW AND DIFFERENT DISPENSATION

God's explanation as to why He has not yet established Israel's "*kingdom of heaven*" has to do with the fact that He has temporarily set Israel and her program aside, and He has ushered in a new and different dispensation or program.

As the apostle Paul teaches us in Romans 11, when Israel "*stumbled*" at the testimony of Christ that was heralded unto her, God did something unexpected. He "*blinded*" the nation and turned unto the Gentiles.

"For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part has happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in." (vs 25)

God has "*blinded*" Israel and has put her program and His special dealings with her in abeyance. In so doing, God has turned to us Gentiles and He is now administering a dispensation of His grace with us Gentiles. As the apostle Paul declares in Ephesians 3,...

"For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery;...which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same

body and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel." (vs 1 3,5 6)

The dispensation, or program, of the grace of God for us Gentiles is what God is now working out, and has been working out, since He raised up Paul as a brand new apostle and committed to him the revelation of it. During this present dispensation of Gentile grace God's program and special dealings with the nation of Israel are in abeyance. Again, as Paul teaches in Romans 11, God has "*not cast away His people*". He is not through with Israel. But rather, her "*fullness*" is yet to come. Since her "*blindness*" is "*in part*", "*until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in*", Paul goes on to say,...

"And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliver, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins." (vs 26 27)

Israel's "*fullness*" IS yet to come, and when it does, as Zechariah 14:9 says, "*...the LORD shall be King over all the earth: in that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one.*"

Also, as Isaiah declares to the redeemed and the delivered of Israel in that day,...

"...ye shall be named the Priests of the LORD: men shall call you the Ministers of our God:...For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations." (vs 6,11)

Israel's covenanted "*kingdom of heaven*" will yet be established on this earth, just as God's sure word states, and His covenants with her avow. But right now God's program with Israel is set aside and in abeyance. Right now God is working out "*the mystery of Christ*" in this *dispensation of His grace* and is forming the "*new creation*", the church the body of Christ, for a purpose He has in the heavenly places.

Christians need to understand and appreciate this and so realize that God's program with Israel recorded and described in the Old Testament, the Gospel accounts, and the opening of the book of Acts, isn't what God is working out today. But rather, in accordance with "*the revelation of the mystery*" having been given to Paul, it is in his epistles to us that we have the testimony from God concerning what He is doing today, and what He is doing with us, the members of the "*new creation*".