

# NEW TESTAMENT: JESUS

## THE KINGDOM PRESENCE (5)



T. M. MOORE

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**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

Kingdom Presence in the New Testament: Jesus  
The Kingdom Presence (5)  
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Welcome to *Kingdom Presence in the New Testament: Jesus*

With the incarnation of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is front and center. Jesus' life and ministry demonstrated the reality and power of the Kingdom. His teaching held it up for all to consider and seek.

But because the Kingdom is not of this world, it was difficult for people to grasp. The gospels present the Kingdom as the central theme of Jesus' earthly sojourn. He proclaimed it and He would achieve it for His people. In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God takes center stage in the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Thank you.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 Jesus: Kingdom Come

*From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Matthew 4.17*

*Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” Luke 17.20, 21*

*“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” Matthew 6.33*

### *Shiloh at last*

As we have seen, Jacob prophesied of his son, Judah, that God would establish a Kingdom under his oversight that would include Israel and all nations (Gen. 49.8-10). From the beginning of creation, as we have seen, God was preparing that Kingdom for the day when “Shiloh” would come, when the Kingdom prepared for Him would belong to Him from that time forever.

Again, to review, “Shiloh” is an interesting word. In the Hebrew it appears to be a contraction of three words—“who”, “to”, and “him.” I think an accurate way of translating Shiloh would be something like, “Him-Whose-It-Is.” Jacob foresaw One coming for Whom the Kingdom from God was being prepared, with Whose arrival the Judaic dynasty would cease but the Kingdom would continue.

David also foresaw this day, when God, through the prophet Nathan, promised him that He would establish on David’s throne a Son Who would reign forever. David subsequently came to see this King seated at the right hand of the Father and ruling from heaven over all the earth (2 Sam. 7.13; Pss. 110, 72).

We have seen that the prophets also foresaw this coming One. They understood, if only incompletely, that the Kingdom of God would be given to One like the Son of Man, Who, in turn, would give that Kingdom to the saints of the Most High God, who would possess it forever (cf. Dan. 7.18-25), and that the Kingdom of God would increase in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit forever.

Into that rich background of Kingdom anticipation, Jesus came, proclaiming the Kingdom of God, asserting Himself to be the Son of David and King of Israel, and calling His people to renew their vision of the Kingdom and devote themselves to pursuing it.

During the days of Jesus’ earthly sojourn, the Kingdom of God was His highest priority. He intended that it should be ours as well.

We can see the primacy of the Kingdom in the mind of our Lord Jesus Christ in three ways. We’ll look at the first of these in this and our next installment.

### *Proclaimed and taught*

The first words of Jesus’ ministry announced that the long-awaited Kingdom of God had come near to men (Matt. 4.17). It had come near to them in the Person of the One Who embodied it and would formally receive it when at last His work was done, and Who had come to bestow that Kingdom on His followers through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

Most of Jesus’ teaching revolved around some aspect of the Kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount introduced this teaching, the parables “colorized” it and made it vivid, His life and work embodied its purity and power, and His forty days of teaching after the resurrection provided a Kingdom exclamation point to the end of all His earthly instruction.

Nothing occupied the teaching of Jesus as much as the Kingdom of God. People were to understand that the promised Kingdom had come near; it was “at hand” and even “within” or “among” them. The promised interaction of heaven and earth had begun with new power and consequences, and those who hear the Good News of the Kingdom must prepare themselves accordingly.

They must see the Kingdom as more valuable than pearls or treasures, more enduring than the world, and more certain than any political regime with which they might be familiar. The Kingdom had come like a mustard seed, but it would grow to include all peoples and nations, to cover all the earth, and to bring all the promised blessings of God to those who believed and were born again through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom of God began its coming on earth as it is in heaven with Jesus Christ. After Him, the history of the world would never be the same.

*The first rule of following Jesus*

With the coming of Jesus history took a new turn. God’s eternal covenant purposes began to unfold in dramatic and powerful new ways, which the coming of the Holy Spirit would confirm, vivify, and enlarge.

If the first rule of buying real estate is “location, location, location,” the first rule of following Jesus Christ is “Kingdom, Kingdom, Kingdom.” There is not an aspect of the instructional curriculum of our Lord that was not devoted to describing, promising, and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is the focal point and foundation of all the teaching and preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot know Jesus apart from entering His Kingdom; but to enter it, and to realize all the promises of our citizenship there, we must seek that Kingdom as our defining priority in life.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Jesus came to “bring near” the Kingdom of God. He has sent His followers on a similar mission (Jn. 20.21). What are the implications of this mission for you?
2. Do you think Christians today are as serious about the Kingdom as Jesus was? Explain.
3. How do you understand what it means to “seek” the Kingdom of God?

*Next steps—Preparation: Do you agree that the first rule of following Jesus is “Kingdom, Kingdom, Kingdom”? Why or why not?*

## 2 Jesus: Seek the Kingdom

*“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”* Matthew 6.33

*In this manner, therefore, pray:*

*Our Father in heaven,*

*Hallowed be Your name.*

*Your kingdom come.*

*Your will be done*

*On earth as it is in heaven.* Matthew 6.9, 10

*Pray for the Kingdom*

We’re continuing to look at the *primacy* of the Kingdom of God as Jesus taught and lived it.

Jesus commanded His disciples to pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6.9, 10). We may note three specifics about this instruction.

First, Jesus taught us to pray that the Kingdom would come *on earth* in the same way that it exists in heaven. This is completely in line with what we saw in David and the prophets. In heaven the Kingdom of God is a spiritual realm that reflects the righteousness and peace and joy in God’s Spirit which all creatures enjoy within the throne room of Christ and God (cf. Rev. 4, 5). This is the nature of the Kingdom in heaven. Jesus intends His Kingdom to come among us in a similar fashion.

Indeed, Paul teaches that we can do no better, in serving God and blessing men, than to embrace the character, enjoy the condition, and spread the consequences of the Kingdom in the course of our daily lives and activities (Rom. 14.17-19).

Second, Jesus made praying for the Kingdom the *highest priority in our prayers* after praising and honoring God. The Kingdom is more important than our daily needs. The Kingdom is more to be desired than that our sins should be forgiven or that we should be rescued through temptation.

The Kingdom, moreover, *provides the incentive* for our prayers and the hope of their being heard and realized: “For thine is the Kingdom...” God has the power and the authority to grant our prayers, and He rules in righteousness, peace, and joy to do so.

Third, we are to pray for the Kingdom *“whenever” we pray*. Prayer for God’s Kingdom to come among us is to be part of all our prayers to God. “When you pray, pray this way...Your Kingdom come...” Thus, Jesus not only commanded us to pray for the coming of the Kingdom, but to make that coming central to and of the highest import—next to praising the Lord—in all our prayers.

Prayers that fail to seek the Kingdom, therefore, would seem to miss the point of the privilege of prayer.

*Seek the Kingdom*

Jesus taught the primacy of the Kingdom by His life and words, and He taught it by commanding us to seek its coming in prayer. Jesus also asserted the primacy of the Kingdom of God by commanding His followers to *seek* the Kingdom, together with the righteousness of God, as their highest and defining priority in all things.

The sense of this is that Kingdom-seeking must be not merely the *first* in the order of our daily activities, but *the defining motif* of all we think, say, and do.

This is just another way of saying that everything about us must be devoted to God as an avenue by which His rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit may flow from the courts of heaven into the chaos and confusion of everyday life, according to His Word, and in the power of His Spirit. Thus, our Lord Jesus Christ, through His Kingdom ambassadors, works to reconcile all things back to God, makes all things new, and calls all people to repent and believe the Good News.

Jesus is the greatest Kingdom visionary, for He came from where that Kingdom perfectly exists; He embodied its power and potential; and He knew what He must do, having received the Kingdom, to give it to His saints and further its advance on earth. All our understanding and seeking of the Kingdom of God flows from the Father, through Jesus and His Word, by His Spirit, into the time of our lives, and back to our Lord and King once again.

*There is more*

And yet there is more to learn from Jesus concerning why the Kingdom must be the highest priority in our lives as His followers. For, as we shall see, the Kingdom has come and is unfolding all around us. It is making progress on earth, like a growing stone (Dan. 2.44, 45), overcoming all obstacles and opposition to bring the beauty, goodness, and truth of God into the land of the living (1 Jn. 2.8).

And while, for now, we may not experience as much of this glorious coming as seems to be promised, this is not for want of Jesus teaching, showing, and helping us to do so. It is rather because we, like those Israelites of old, are too easily satisfied with what our eyes can see and our ears can hear. We have little real insight to the unseen realm, where Christ rules in glory and power, and little taste for the kind of disciplined life seeking the Kingdom of God requires. To be brief, we have not “left everything” to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as He works to bring His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

But as we continue looking into Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom, and then turn to the apostles for their understanding of the Kingdom, perhaps we may be motivated and stirred in our hearts to higher aspirations and greater exertions of forcing our way, through all the madness, minutiae, and mundanity of life, into the glorious and eternal Kingdom of God (Lk. 16.16).

*For reflection or discussion*

1. What resources has the Lord provided to help us in seeking His Kingdom?
2. What would the Kingdom coming on earth as in heaven look like in your Personal Mission Field?
3. What does it mean for you to “force” your way into the Kingdom of God?

*Next steps—Transformation: On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest rating, how would you assess your daily life in terms of seeking first the Kingdom of God? Why did you choose that number? Can you think of one or two “next steps” that might help you to improve that number over the coming weeks and months?*



### 3 Jesus: Then and There, Here and Now

*From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* Matthew 4.17

#### *Kingdom come*

Undoubtedly Jesus had the clearest vision of the Kingdom of God of all the Kingdom visionaries we’ve seen or will see. With Him—both in His teaching and His life—the rule of God for righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit is more present than at any previous period of Scripture. We have already observed that Jesus regarded the Kingdom as of the highest priority for His followers. We are to seek first the Kingdom, not as the first in a series, but the first in everything we do.

It is clear, this is what Jesus did. It is also clear, this is what Jesus taught. What Jesus accomplished during His earthly sojourn—in His life and by His words—was but a foretaste of what He would do following His resurrection and, ultimately, His return in glory.

The full and final unfolding of the Kingdom of God awaits the day of Christ’s return. That stage of the Kingdom begins with the gathering of all God’s elect—those who are asleep and those who yet remain (Matt. 24.29-31; 13.36-43). Then, together with Him, His chosen people will return to overthrow the last remaining enemies of God and, passing through the judgment of the Lord, enter everlasting glory and bliss with Him. Then, in a new heavens and new earth, they will dwell with Him in the fullness of His Kingdom forever (Rev. 19.6-21; 1 Thess. 4.13-17).

#### *Kingdom coming*

In the Kingdom which is coming, Jesus’ followers will reside with Him in His Father’s house, in dwellings specially prepared for them by Jesus (Jn. 14.1-3). There they will share in the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, for they will see Jesus as He is and will be like Him (Jn. 17.20-24; 1 Jn. 3.2).

The Kingdom which is “there and then” will be without sorrow, pain, mourning, or sin (Rev. 21.3, 4). He Who is making all things new will abundantly provide for His citizens then—living water without payment (Rev. 21.6) and the indescribable joy and pleasure of being in the Presence of God without obstruction or interruption (Rev. 21.7; cf. Ps. 16.11). The saints of God will feast eternally with their King and rule with Him in perfect righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Lk. 22.28, 29).

In the new heavens and new earth, the citizens of Christ’s coming Kingdom will realize their full potential and God’s original design in a world of perfect but ever-increasing beauty, goodness, and truth.

This is the Kingdom and City to come, to which all are journeying who have been redeemed by the Lord (Ps. 84). It is a place of infinite and indescribable beauty, bounty, and brilliance (Rev. 21, 22), and it is the hope of all who follow Jesus in this life.

Jesus saw this hope spread out before Him throughout the course of His earthly ministry. By focusing on it and never losing sight of the Kingdom to come, Jesus was able to run His race, despising the cross and the shame, to sit down at the right hand of the Majesty on High (Heb. 12.1, 2; Ps. 22).

This is the same hope toward which we press as His followers.

#### *Kingdom now*

But the Kingdom of God, as Jesus envisioned it, was not simply for then and there. Jesus announced a Kingdom that had come. His preaching and teaching lead us to understand that the Kingdom is very much a “here and now” presence, that which is to be sought above, within, and through everything else in our lives.

We see this in the way Jesus declared the Kingdom of God to be “at hand” or “near” or even “within you” or “in your midst.” Jesus made it clear that the long-awaited reign of God had come to earth in the Person of its Heir—apparent—“Him Whose It Is” (Shiloh, Gen. 49.8-10). In His preaching and miracles, Jesus heralded the new day which the prophets had foreseen. And He did so from the very outset of His ministry: “So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

*‘The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to the poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;  
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.’*

Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4.16-21). He declared that the promised blessings had begun to fall. Jesus called on all who heard Him to make themselves ready through repentance and new birth to enter this new reality which had come to earth with Him.

By casting out demons Jesus particularly showed that the centuries-long reign of the father of lies had come to an end. He had come to bind the strong man, and now, with the bringing near of His own reign, Jesus began to plunder the devil’s holdings to fill up His own Kingdom according to the wisdom and power of God (Matt. 12.22-29). Jesus insisted that some of those who listened to His preaching would not taste death before they had seen the Kingdom of God coming among them (Lk. 9.27). The idea that the Kingdom of God is *merely* a “there and then” phenomenon, something postponed for after His return, is not consistent with what Jesus taught or the expectations He held out for His followers concerning their own lifetimes.

So, while we look forward to a full and glorious manifestation of the Kingdom, and of our place in it, in the new heavens and new earth, now, in the present, we must seek to lay hold on that Kingdom as our highest priority in life. For as Jesus made clear, the Kingdom is both “here and now” and “there and then.”

*For reflection or discussion*

1. What should be your approach to the “there and then” aspect of the Kingdom of God?
2. How about the “here and now”?
3. Jesus said the Kingdom of God was Good News. Why? What makes it so good?

*Next steps—Preparation: How much does the “there and then” aspect of the Kingdom inform the way you live in the “here and now”? What does your “here and now” seeking of the Kingdom say about its “there and then” promise?*

## 4 Jesus: Know the Lord

*“And this is eternal life, that they may know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”* John 17.3

*...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings...* Philippians 3.10

### *A threefold vision*

All who understand the “here and now” aspect of the Kingdom of God will exert themselves to realize as fully as possible the benefits of the reign of King Jesus in their daily lives. Jesus has translated and conveyed us into that eternal spiritual realm over which He rules as King and Lord. And He calls us to His Kingdom and glory, that we may realize more of its presence, promise, and power every day.

Which means that those who serve King Jesus must strive and struggle and seek every day to gain more and more of what is ours in the Kingdom of God. This idea is implicit in every parable of Jesus concerning the Kingdom. We may possess it, like a pearl of great price or a treasure buried in a field. The Kingdom grows and bears fruit, attracting others and gaining power. We must lay hold on it with violence, forcing our way ever more deeply and permanently into the reign of Jesus Christ and His glory (Matt. 11.12; Lk. 16.16).

Jesus’ vision of the proximity of the Kingdom, therefore, was a threefold vision: The Kingdom is yet to come in all its fullness (there and then); nevertheless, at the same time, the Kingdom is unfolding in our midst (here and now); and thus every follower of Jesus Christ must make it their primary concern to seek and attain to more and more of the Kingdom of God every day of their lives.

Then and there, here and now, more and more: This is how we must think about the Kingdom of God and our involvement in it.

### *All things new*

It is impossible to read the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and fail to see that He was promising and calling people to an altogether new way of life. The Kingdom of God, as He envisioned and taught it, is a new realm, entered by the new birth, and issuing in a new life of freedom in God’s truth, unto the praise of God’s glory.

To realize this life, one must be born from above, by the Spirit of God (Jn. 3.5-7). From that moment, life becomes a journey of denying oneself, taking up our own cross daily, and following Jesus in pursuing the priorities of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 16.24, 25).

But what are those priorities? What should we, the heirs, citizens, and ambassadors of the Kingdom, embrace as the guiding framework, template, and pathway of our lives?

According to our Lord Jesus Christ, two primary and overarching priorities attach to citizenship in the Kingdom of God: Know the Lord, and bear lasting fruit.

Let’s have a look at the first of these.

### *Knowing the Lord*

Eternal life—life in the Kingdom of God—consists of knowing God and Jesus Christ (Jn. 17.3). This is no mere intellectual achievement. Rather, the kind of “knowing” envisioned here is deeply intimate, personal, and transforming.

Nor is this some casual undertaking, or some side issue in our otherwise busy lives. The apostle Paul considered knowing Jesus the “one thing” he must do while yet in this life. Only knowing Jesus makes sense,

gives direction and meaning to, and taps into the power necessary for fulfilling our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God.

To know Jesus Christ is to participate, in a mystical and spiritual way, in His body and blood (Jn. 6.48-56). It is to know the experience of His resurrection power and to understand and obey His Word (Matt. 22.29). To know the Lord is to become a child of God (Jn. 1.12), to call upon Him as Father, and to pray to Him about everything (Matt. 21.22; Jn. 16.24). It is to receive His good gifts and to use them, like wise stewards, for the increase of His glory (Lk. 11.11-13; Matt. 25.14-30). It is to be indwelt by His Spirit so that the life of God is formed increasingly within us (Jn. 14.15-17).

Equally important, to know the Lord is to be known by Him, to have Him so personally and intimately involved in every part of our lives, so that His Presence is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 7.21-23; 28.20). We can accomplish many ostensibly religious and good things without knowing the Lord. But unless we know Him, and are known by Him in return, we shall have no part in His Kingdom.

To know the Lord is thus to “walk in step” with Him, embracing His mission, seeking His vision, relying on His Word and Spirit, and living according to His holy and righteous and good Law (Matt. 5.17-19). In the Kingdom as Jesus brings it, all the children of God gather to Him, like chicks to their mother, taking refuge in the shelter of His grace and truth, feeding on the gifts which He brings them, and growing to maturity in order to extend His offspring and Kingdom throughout the earth (Matt. 19.13-15; 23.37).

We may only know God through Jesus Christ, by receiving Him as the promised Word, Savior, and King, sent from the Father for our redemption and restoration (Jn. 14.6). Believing in Jesus is incomplete if it does not lead to a life of knowing Him. Knowing the Lord by taking on the yoke with Jesus Christ, and learning from Him (Matt. 11.28-30), is thus the highest priority for every citizen of the Kingdom of God.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Why is knowing the Lord indispensable to being truly saved?
2. How should knowing the Lord affect the way we live each day?
3. How can believers encourage one another in knowing the Lord?

*Next steps—Transformation: What would you recommend to a new believer as a proper course for growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3.18)?*

## 5 Jesus: Kingdom Fruit

*“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.”* John 15.16

*“Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”* John 15.2

### *Chosen for a reason*

Citizenship in the Kingdom of God is achieved when the Lord Jesus calls a lost sinner to repentance and faith, bestowing the gift of the Spirit, according to His Word, and granting new life in the Kingdom of God. From that point, the believer begins a journey of increasing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, that is, of knowing with increasing righteousness, peace, and joy the reality of eternal life. All who are thus born from above are equipped with all they need to begin knowing the Lord ever more intimately, personally, and with transforming power.

But why has Jesus called us to the Kingdom? What should result from our coming to know the Lord?

He Himself explains, as we see in our texts. The intimacy we enjoy with God in His Kingdom, when it is true knowledge of Him, will result in fruit in our lives. God is glorified when His children bear lasting fruit (Jn. 15.8). Thus, His children prove themselves to be such—sons and daughters of the eternal King—and therefore justified in laying hold on His promises and seeking more of His Kingdom (Matt. 7.12, Jn. 15.8).

But of what does this fruit consist? We may divide our fruit-bearing into two sub-categories: fruit realized within, and fruit borne without.

### *Fruit within*

The fruit Jesus brings forth within us is of two primary sorts, righteousness and love.

*Righteousness.* Jesus expects His followers to increase in righteousness, the true, inward righteousness of God’s Law, and not merely—like the Pharisees and scribes—as an external show of conformity to regulations and rules. True righteousness is the outward expression of a heart fully devoted in love to God (Matt. 22.34-30; 5.17-20; 23.25, 26).

This is not something we can achieve in our own strength. Nor is the righteousness that we express, to whatever extent we bear such fruit, our own righteousness. Rather, it is the evidence and fruit of the indwelling Christ, Who, by His Word and Spirit, brings life and renewal in and through us to refresh all those around us (Jn. 6.63; 7.37-39). True Kingdom citizens become increasingly like their King, as He works within them to will and do of His good pleasure, bringing increased Kingdom righteousness throughout their soul (Phil. 2.13; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Righteousness defines the *character* of the Kingdom of God (Rom. 14.17, 18). We must seek and strive for this righteousness (Matt. 6.33), that it might be the defining attribute of our soul—heart, mind, and conscience. This life of righteousness is the way to fullness of peace and joy in the Kingdom of God (Jn. 15.6-11), but we cannot attain it to any degree without abiding in Jesus and His Word and Spirit. Without Him, we can do nothing (Jn. 15.1-5).

*Love.* Chief among the virtues of righteousness, and defining all the others, is love. Jesus calls us to love God with all our soul and strength and our fellow citizens in the Kingdom as He has loved us. We are also called to love our neighbors—whoever they may be—as we love ourselves (Jn. 13.1-15; Matt. 22.34-30). Jesus

insisted that the Law and the prophets are sufficient to instruct us in the ways of love, and He promised that whoever learned, kept, and taught these would be great in the Kingdom of heaven (Matt. 22.34-30; 5.17-19).

This love must be nurtured inwardly, in how we think, what we desire, and what we value above all else. The more righteousness bears the fruit of love in our soul, the more these Kingdom attributes will flow from us by the Holy Spirit, like rivers of living water (Jn. 7.37-39).

*Fruit without*

The fruit we bear without through the righteousness and love of Christ is also of two sorts—making disciples of the Lord and the reconciling of the world to God.

*Disciple-making.* Jesus has instructed all His Kingdom citizens to devote themselves to the work of making disciples as they are going about the everyday activities of their lives (Matt. 28.18-20). Though He spoke this commission to His disciples, He instructed them to teach it to us as well. Thus, we are called to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom and to teach, encourage, and assist our fellow Kingdom citizens in growing to maturity in that glorious realm. This calling is for every believer (Heb. 5.12). Whatever else we do as expressions of love for God and neighbor must be expressed within this disciple-making mold.

Part of our disciple-making priority requires that we, like Jesus, seek the lost (Lk. 19.10). We cannot simply wait around for lost people to ask us what we believe. We must go to them, get to know them, look for ways to serve them, and, as we are able, engage them in conversations concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. We also have abundant opportunities to encourage our fellow believers as disciples, by sharing with them in God's Word, prayer, worship, fellowship, and ministry.

*Reconciling.* Jesus was sent to earth to bring the Kingdom of God near to men, because of His Father's undying love for all the vast cosmos (Jn. 3.16). He also knew that God was at work in Him, to accomplish through His work of redemption the reconciliation of all His creation to God (2 Cor. 5.17-19). Whatever our involvement in creation may entail—work, cultural activities, caring for the environment, politics—we must take a Kingdom perspective on it, so that we may pursue the vision of all these aspects of the creation reconciled to God. Thus we continue the work which Jesus accomplished in bringing glory to God in all our everyday activities.

As we have seen, in Jesus' mind the Kingdom of God is primary. By bringing it near, and by drawing us into it, He calls us to embrace its priorities and to bring every aspect of our lives into joyous and fulfilling line with the purposes and course of the divine economy, as that is unfolding within the Kingdom of God. As the Kingdom advances within us, it will overflow from us in the fruit of righteousness, love, disciple-making, and restoring the reconciled world.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. How do you see the fruit of the Kingdom being nurtured and borne out in your life?
2. How can believers encourage and help one another in bearing such Kingdom fruit?
3. The presence of the Kingdom becomes known in the world as the citizens of the Kingdom bear Kingdom fruit in their lives. What can keep us from bearing such fruit?

*Next steps—Transformation: How would you describe the state of Kingdom fruitfulness in your life at this time? Where would you like to see improvement? What can you do to begin realizing more of the fruit of the Kingdom?*

## 6 Jesus: The Progress of the Kingdom

*Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches." Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened."* Matthew 13.31-33

### *Inevitable growth*

The parables of our Lord Jesus Christ concerning the Kingdom of God reveal just how important this new reality was to His mission. They show us not only how He thought about this spiritual realm which He was bringing near, but how we should think about it as well.

As we have seen, the Kingdom of God held *primacy of place* in Jesus' message. The Gospel Jesus proclaimed and accomplished is the Gospel *of the Kingdom*, not merely of going to heaven. The Kingdom of God was the defining motif and the overarching objective in all His work and teaching, and He taught that it must have the same place in the lives of all who follow Him.

Jesus, moreover, insisted on the *proximity* of the Kingdom, that it had come and was being "brought near" by Him and His mission. The Kingdom would come in an even fuller and more significant way within the lifetimes of those who heard Him, and beyond that, in its full and complete form at the final harvest and the end of history.

Given the primacy of the Kingdom, it is to be expected that Jesus would enlarge on the *priorities* of that heavenly domain which He had now brought into the sphere of human history. Those priorities—knowing the Lord and bearing lasting fruit—would be identifying marks for all who follow Jesus in seeking the Kingdom of God. If we are followers of Christ, then seeking the Kingdom is the defining theme of our lives; and increasing in the knowledge of the Lord so that we bear fruit are primary *objectives* for our journey.

### *As the patriarchs and prophets also saw*

A final element of our Lord's vision of the Kingdom involves His unmistakable sense that the Kingdom of God would *grow and make progress upon the earth*. As Jesus understood it—and more importantly, according to the agenda He is now pursuing—the Kingdom should grow like a vast tree and spread like leaven in a loaf of bread.

This is in line with what was promised about the Kingdom from the very beginning (cf. Gen. 1.26-28; Dan. 2.44, 45; Is. 9.6, 7). We cannot read the gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom and not see that, in His mind, the Kingdom He was bringing near would, wherever it took root, make progress and grow to bring forth the fruit evidenced in His own life and insisted on in His teaching.

We should expect, therefore, that the rule of King Jesus unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit will increase *in us* as well as *through us* as we continue seeking the Kingdom of God.

We may observe this insistence on the progress of the Kingdom in four ways, after which we will summarize two implications that arise from Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God. We'll look at the first two of these ways in this installment.

### *Parables and miracles of growth*

Many of the parables Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God have to do with the idea of growth, for example, the parable of the mustard seed and that of the leaven. The Kingdom is "sown" into the earth or "hidden" in it. This refers to the preaching of the Word, which, wherever it finds welcoming soil, takes root

and begins to grow and spread. As it grows, it becomes visible, prominent, fruit-bearing, and beneficial to all who participate in its fruit. Like leaven, it transforms its environment from something bland and unpalatable into that which can be made wholesome and good.

The parables in Matthew 13 are typical of this emphasis (we'll hold off on the parable of the wheat and tares for the moment). In the parable of the sower, good seed grows in good soil and bears fruit for those for whom it is intended (vv. 1-8, 18-23). The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven equally emphasize the growing and expanding character of the Kingdom (vv. 31-33). The parable of the fish net (vv. 47-50) is interesting in that it demonstrates that not all those who are gathered into the "net" of the Kingdom are those for whom the Kingdom is intended. Many, it seems, will enjoy the benefits introduced by the Kingdom of God, and perhaps even consider themselves full-fledged citizens therein, only to be disqualified in the end because they neither know the Lord nor bear the fruit which such knowledge produces (cf. Matt. 7.21-23).

Such parables, accompanied by miracles emphasizing astonishing multiplications (feeding the thousands, water into wine, sudden large catches of fish) impress us not only with Jesus' sense of the inevitability of the progress of His Kingdom, but of His determination and ability to bring that progress to pass. This is a vision of the Kingdom which, as we have seen, comports well with what previous Kingdom visionaries also anticipated.

The presence of the Kingdom here and now is a *growing* and *transforming* presence. This is what we are seeking as we seek the Kingdom and righteousness of God.

*Called to bear fruit*

It is inconceivable that Jesus would have commanded His disciples to bear fruit in the ways we previously noted unless He intended them to do so and expected them to labor diligently for such fruit. Fruit expresses increase, and fruit that remains holds the promise of more fruit yet to come.

Jesus envisioned His rule growing in and through His followers unto love for God and men, righteousness, the multiplication of disciples, and the reconciliation of all things to God through Him. This expectation of and command for fruitfulness marks out parameters of Kingdom progress for the followers of Christ, both as individuals and as communities, and is a second evidence that Jesus' vision of the Kingdom is one of progress and development.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Meditate on Daniel 2.44, 45 and Isaiah 9.6, 7. How can you see that these passages must have been in Jesus' mind as He taught about the Kingdom of God?
2. What should Kingdom increase look like *in* your life? How should the growth of Christ's rule *in* you affect your life over time?
3. How does the Kingdom come into the world *through* you? With what effects?

*Next steps—Transformation: How consistent are you in thinking about the Kingdom as growing and increasing in and through your life? What can you do to make this more consistently part of your daily walk with and work for the Lord?*



## 7 Jesus: The Kingdom Struggle

*He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels." Matthew 13.37-39*

### *Resistance and persecution*

We're looking at the evidence from Jesus' teaching that He expected the Kingdom of God to expand and increase on earth as it is in heaven. Temporal expansion and increasing fruitfulness are both in the mind of Christ as He unfolds His Kingdom. He came into the world to bring a Kingdom that would spread throughout the world, bringing righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit to *all* the world.

The book of Acts—and the rest of the New Testament—shows us that Jesus' vision was compelling and accurate with respect to the presence of the Kingdom of God. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom increased on earth according to the template Jesus laid out in Acts 1.8: Holy Spirit power, working in believers, to spread the Kingdom throughout the world.

Such increase does not come easily, however. Jesus taught His followers that they should expect to be opposed, even to the point of persecution, by advocates of the prevailing worldviews (cf. Jn. 15.18-25). These words do not appear to have been intended only for His immediate circle of disciples, any more than was His prayer in John 17 (cf. v. 20). The first Christians were persecuted in conjunction with the growth and spread of the Christian faith, as it challenged the religious, political, social, and cultural beliefs and practices of the day. If the Gospel had not spread, and if it had not promoted a way of life which challenged the existing worldviews, the Christians would have been left to their religion, just like all the other cults and sects of the day.

But it was the expansive nature of the Gospel, coupled with the radical and all-encompassing claims of the Kingdom, and the dramatic power of the Spirit, that provoked advocates of the settled worldviews to persecute the Church, as they have done in every age. Men will not sit quietly by while their familiar way of life is being turned upside-down (Acts 17.1-9), unless, of course, they have been subdued by a love which they cannot ignore and transformed by a power they cannot resist.

Jesus knew His followers would be persecuted in every age because He foresaw the continuing enlargement and advance of His Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven, as a powerful presence challenging and overthrowing every pretense of men (cf. Dan. 2.44, 45).

### *The parable of the wheat and the tares*

The parable of the wheat and the tares is perhaps the most paradigmatic of Jesus' parables concerning the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13.24-30, 36-43).

In this parable Jesus envisioned the impact of the Kingdom through all of time, from the first sowing of the Gospel to the final harvest of the saints. He spoke in terms of the whole world and envisioned it as a field throughout which the Gospel is sown and the Kingdom brings forth fruit over all the earth. He understood there would be opposition—symbolized by the tares—but, in the end, when the angels return to harvest the field, the world will be, as Jesus saw it, a wheat field, ready to be harvested, and not a weed field, waiting to be burned.

Jesus brought a new era, a new realm and power, into the affairs of men and nations. And He was persuaded that nothing, not even the gates of hell, would be able to prevent the progress and growth of this new Kingdom which His coming heralded and brought near (Matt. 16.18). He gave everything He had to ensure

that His vision would come to pass, and His vision was realized by those first believers against continuous opposition and brutal persecution.

*Implications*

Two implications attend to this aspect of Jesus' vision. We may state these succinctly.

First, Jesus did not envision His Kingdom coming in its full and complete form prior to His own return in glory. While the Kingdom will make progress as His followers evangelize the world, increase in Him, and build the Church, the full realization of that promised realm awaits the consummation of history, the day of judgment, and the new heavens and new earth. The Kingdom comes fully in the there and then, and it expands toward that daily in the here and now.

So we must not be overly confident concerning how much real progress we may expect to achieve in this life.

At the same time, the followers of Christ must always strive to live up to His vision of progress along the various fronts we have considered in this study, realizing more of the presence of the Kingdom in our lives and life spheres, even in the face of stiff resistance. We must continue to call people to repentance and faith, urge them to press their way into the Kingdom, and promote growth in the righteousness and love of the Kingdom, regardless of how our adversaries may seek to discourage, disparage, and destroy us.

Second, the *progress* of the Kingdom reinforces the *priority* of the Kingdom and makes *seeking the Kingdom and its righteousness* all that much more important as the commanding perspective of the life of faith (Matt. 6.33). When we understand, as Jesus taught, that Kingdom increase is inevitable and irresistible, we will devote ourselves even more earnestly to seeking that increase in every area and aspect of our lives.

Jesus did not come to bring a faith with merely personal and subjective applications. He came to bring near a Kingdom, a Kingdom that is filling and transforming the nations of the world, and He calls us to seek that Kingdom as a mighty struggle, in the full expectation that progress can be achieved, even if complete victory must wait.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. How do you expect to see the Kingdom of God increasing and expanding in and through you?
2. Why must we nurture and sustain a clear and compelling vision of the full coming of the presence of the Kingdom at Jesus' return?
3. How would you explain the relationship between the vision of the Kingdom, the priority of seeking the Kingdom, and the progress of the Kingdom as Jesus taught it?

*Next steps: How do you expect your life in the week to come to realize a greater presence of the Kingdom? What are your plans? What are you praying for Christ to do in you and through you?*

*Kingdom Presence in the New Testament: Jesus*

*For reflection or discussion*

1. In what ways was the Kingdom of God a central theme in the life and ministry of Jesus?
2. What are some of Jesus primary teachings about the Kingdom of God?
3. In what sense can we say that the Kingdom has come, but it is yet to come?
4. What is the Gospel of the Kingdom?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this part of our study of the Kingdom presence in the Old Testament?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.

