

NEW TESTAMENT: THE APOSTLES
THE KINGDOM PRESENCE (6)



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Kingdom Presence in the New Testament: The Apostles
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Welcome to *Kingdom Presence in the New Testament: The Apostles*

The apostles of Jesus Christ picked up where He left off, both in proclaiming the Kingdom of God and in building Kingdom communities—churches—in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost.

In their writings and ministries we see how the Holy Spirit began unfolding the Kingdom of God in the world, and we learn about the character of the Kingdom, the requirements for entering it, and that the fullness of the Kingdom is yet to come.

And we realize that the Kingdom has come, is coming, and is yet to come, and that we as believers have significant work to do in realizing the presence, promise, and power of this great gift.

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Thank you.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Apostles: Proclaiming the Kingdom

“I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ... I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” Acts 20.20, 21, 25-27

Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him. Acts 28.30, 31

Near Christianity

In our day, many are confused about the Good News concerning Jesus Christ. For some people the Gospel is as plain and simple as “believe in Jesus and receive Him into your heart.” Doing so gains forgiveness of sins—and the release from looming guilt—and the promise of eternal life in heaven. We can know we are forgiven and that we’re going to heaven when we die because we have prayed to receive Jesus.

And certainly, receiving Jesus is an important aspect of the Good News.

For others, the Gospel is rather more “earthly”, promising health, prosperity, fun, and lots of worldly comforts along with the promise of eternal life—your best life *now*. The “prosperity gospel” is front and center in many churches, and it has affected the way many others proclaim the basic teachings of Christ.

These and other forms of “near Christianity” fall short of the Good News of the Kingdom because they take a primarily people-centered approach to the work of Jesus Christ. *You* can be saved. *You* can be forgiven. *You* can know that you’ll be in heaven. *You* can be happy and enjoy all the blessings this world has to offer.

And, again, it is certainly true that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about you and me. But not in the way these inadequate views of the Good News tend to imply.

Whenever the work of Jesus Christ is presented as something done for *you*, something to help *you*, something to make *your life* better, the message is out of focus. Jesus did not live, die, rise again, and ascend to His throne so that you and I could have our best life now. The Gospel is only secondarily about us. That is, the Gospel is true, and its impact is cosmic, whether it ever accomplishes anything for you and me. The Good News is not that *we* can be happy. The Good News is about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. And that Good News is both an announcement of forgiveness, freedom, and flourishing in the Lord and a warning against ignoring the Lord or misconstruing how we relate to Him.

Jesus, as we have seen, preached and taught the Kingdom of God—an objective, inevitable, all-encompassing, all-overturning reality by which He is vindicated, God is glorified, and the world is blessed. And the apostles of the Lord understood the message of the Kingdom to be that which they must proclaim and bear witness to as well.

Forty days of preparation

Following His resurrection, Jesus met with His disciples for forty days (Acts 1.1-3). Throughout those forty days, Jesus spoke to His disciples concerning “the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (Acts 1.3). What did that include?

Surely He must have reviewed all His earthly teaching about the Kingdom: “Remember when I said this? And that?” And He must have recalled all His mighty works to explain the vast reach and power of the Kingdom—healings, resurrections, miracles, creation abounding, spiritual powers bound. And it is likely, if Luke 24 is any kind of template for these teaching times, that Jesus did what we have been doing—He surveyed the growing presence of the Kingdom of God in the minds and teaching of the prophets of the Old

Testament. Remember those forty days were devoted to *the Kingdom of God!* Not your best life now. Or not even going to heaven when you die.

We know also that the coming of the Kingdom was to be associated with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, promised in Joel 2.28-32, Ezekiel 36.26, 27, and elsewhere in the Old Testament (Acts 1.5, 8). We also know that Jesus emphasized the worldwide scope and world-transforming power of the Kingdom, that it would reach even to the end of the earth with the Good News of His Kingdom (Acts 1.6-8). Finally, we know that Jesus forbade any speculations about matters God had chosen not to reveal—such as the specific details of His return and the full coming of the Kingdom of God (Acts 1.7). Proclaiming and seeking and advancing the rule of King Jesus is hard work and demands all our time. We must not waste our time in vain and fallacious speculations which have no root in, or are speciously derived from, the whole counsel of God in Scripture.

It is not hard to imagine Jesus opening those forty days of instruction with something like, “OK, so here’s the Good News: The Kingdom of God!”

Paul got the message

The apostles got the message. We can see this in Paul’s own words to the elders of the churches in Ephesus. The message of the Kingdom of God is *urgent*. It must be proclaimed and taught publicly and from house to house (Acts 20.20). The message of the Kingdom of God is *helpful* because it helps us increase in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (v. 20). We enter the Kingdom by repenting of our sins and believing in Jesus as Lord and Savior (v. 21), and we believe with such confidence and conviction that we readily testify of the hope we have in Him (v. 21).

The Gospel of the Kingdom is about the *grace of God in Jesus Christ* (v. 24), of the disposition of God to look favorably upon us, to declare His love to us, and to empower us by His Spirit to live by grace so that praise and thanks redound to God in every place (2 Cor. 4.15). The Kingdom of God, which Paul proclaimed, draws on “the whole counsel of God” in Scripture (v. 27) as a primary theme of God’s Word and covenant and the entire focus of the Good News concerning Jesus. And Paul told these elders, these shepherds of God’s flock, that their full duty in overseeing the people of God would not be faithfully discharged apart from living, preaching, teaching, and shepherding the Kingdom of God (vv. 26-28).

For Paul, to preach the Kingdom was to teach the things that concern our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20.30, 31).

As we shall see, the presence of the Kingdom in the New Testament—as a spiritual reality taught and lived—fulfilled all the promise of the Old Testament concerning the coming Kingdom and launched the trajectory Jesus spent three years and forty days impressing on His disciples. The Kingdom of God is the Good News of Jesus, and the apostles of our Lord and Savior will show us what that entails.

For reflection

1. What is suggested by the term, “near Christianity”? What’s the difference between this and the Gospel of the Kingdom?
2. How did Paul show that he understood the message of the Kingdom?
3. How will you seek the Good News of the Kingdom of God today?

Next steps—Preparation: Review the teaching of Jesus on the presence of the Kingdom. Based on His teaching, what would you expect to see happen where that Good News is faithfully preached and taught?

2 The Apostles: The Nature of the Kingdom

You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. 1 Thessalonians 2.10-12

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love... Colossians 1.13

A new way of life

How did the apostles understand the Kingdom they preached and taught? Surely every Christian today knows the term “the Kingdom of God” and has some thoughts about what that idea expresses. We’ve examined some of those views previously.

But since Paul and the other apostles made preaching and teaching the Kingdom of God central to their ministries—just as Jesus had done—we do well to look more closely at what *they* understood by that term. Then we’ll be able to consider the extent to which such a Kingdom presence is part of our own discipleship.

We begin by acknowledging that Paul—and we can assume the other apostles as well—understood the Kingdom as a new realm of existence, a new way of life in which everything we do is aimed at bringing glory to God (1 Cor. 10.31). Indeed, as Paul noted, God has *called* us to His Kingdom and glory. He has established us in the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we have escaped the corruption of the world and are able to partake of the very essence of God (2 Pet. 1.4).

We live in a new realm, a heavenly realm (Heb. 3.1), in which, the more we consider our Lord Jesus Christ the more we understand of what it means for the Kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven. And the more clearly we can see what is involved in seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. We are in the Kingdom *now*. The Kingdom operates on a new economy, an economy of grace and truth empowered not by dollars and cents but by the Holy Spirit of God (Eph. 1.3-14). The power of the Kingdom consists not in words, but in the Holy Spirit of God (1 Cor. 4.20; Acts 18), Who is making all things new in the Kingdom of God (2 Cor. 5.7). All old things are passing away as we learn Jesus and increase in Him (2 Cor. 5.7; Eph. 4.17-24). We who have come to reside in the Kingdom of God are, by the power of God’s Spirit, becoming more like Jesus (2 Cor. 3.12-18), and so are our churches (Eph. 4.11-16).

As we might expect, such a Kingdom presence will necessarily exclude certain people who refuse to adapt to this new situation.

Kingdom eligibility

The Kingdom of God is the new and heavenly environment of all who believe in Jesus and are following the path He walked in life (1 Jn. 2.1-6). Here the apostles warn against thinking we can take up residence in this realm while clinging to the old baggage of our sinful way of life.

So Paul: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6.9, 10). And again: “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5.19-21). And in Ephesians 5.5-7: “For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words,

for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them.”

In the Kingdom of God, the riches of faith—the promises of God, the fruit of the Spirit, the tokens of love, and the work of advancing the Kingdom—are more to be desired than the riches of this world (Jms. 5.5). Those who mock those who seek the riches of faith rather than the world, showing partiality to those which material means, are “judges with evil thoughts” (Jms. 5.1-4).

Kingdom people radiate the Kingdom presence. They increase in righteousness, are brokers of peace, and bring the joy of the Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit to everything they do (Rom. 14.17, 18). Those who prefer the ways and delights of the world to seeking the Kingdom presence demonstrate that they have no true place in this realm and economy of grace.

The end of our work

For Paul, those who associate with him—as learners and co-workers—must consider themselves laborers for the Kingdom of God (Col. 4.11). The end of our labors is the eternal destination of an unshakeable realm of glory (1 Cor. 15.24, 50-54; Heb. 12.28) where we will see Jesus as He is, be like Him (1 Jn. 3.1-3), and serve Him forever with joy and praise in a new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells at last (2 Pet. 3.13).

Knowing this, as citizens and ambassadors of this new and glorious realm, we must devote ourselves to the work of the Kingdom, seeking grace to help us in all aspects of our lives (Heb. 12.28) and being diligent in all things always to be found in Christ, without spot and blameless (2 Pet. 3.14).

This is the calling God issues to those who would come to Him through Jesus Christ. Make sure this is the calling to which you have responded.

For reflection

1. God calls us to His Kingdom. What are the implications of this for our daily lives?
2. We are appointed as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God and witnesses to Jesus. Where does God send you to do this work?
3. If we see no evidence or fruit of the Kingdom, and instead we see only someone clinging to old and worldly interests and ways, what should we conclude?

Next steps—Preparation: Spend time in prayer reviewing the passages cited in this installment. Where do you need to make progress in responding to God’s calling to His Kingdom and glory?

3 The Apostles: Entering the Kingdom

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love... Colossians 1.13

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Acts 14.21

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ... Revelation 1.9

The mystery of the Kingdom

Mark 4.11 holds out a strange truth for all followers of Christ: "And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God..." Mysteries are, well, mysterious. Difficult to understand. Perhaps even, for most people, impenetrable.

And yet we love them. We love watching them unravel (think: Agatha Christie). We experience anticipation and delight the deeper we go into a mystery, and great relief and satisfaction once all is revealed.

The mystery of the Kingdom is a little like this. As we have seen, the Kingdom of God is present here and now; but it will only come to its fullness there and then, in the new heavens and new earth. We are *in* the Kingdom because God has called us to it and has conveyed us there (1 Thess. 2.12; Col. 1.13). The Kingdom of God is within us, but we must seek the Kingdom as the defining priority of every aspect of our lives. How can we both have something and not have it? Be in it yet have to seek it?

It's a mystery.

But Jesus says it is given to us to "know the mystery" of the Kingdom. Literally, He says the mystery of the Kingdom has been *given* to us. It's in our hands. We are working toward the "reveal" at the end of time. And this means that there is always more of the Kingdom to realize, more to experience, more to extend and expand, and therefore always more to *enter* of this glorious Kingdom of light and life than we've ever known before.

This is what the apostles teach about the presence of the Kingdom. We must continue entering it, going further, becoming more immersed and ensconced in the rule of King Jesus, entering ever more deeply into the righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit which are unique to this domain.

What does that involve?

Tribulations

Pursuing the mystery of the Kingdom follows a path which retraces the steps of Jesus: Obedience to God and His Word (1 Jn. 2.1-6). That seems simple enough, but there are caveats. First, that path leads us through "many tribulations". Tribulation is the experience of every Kingdom-seeker in every period of Church history, from the days of Paul and John to the present time. Jesus promised that, in this world we would have tribulation (Jn. 16.33)—disappointments, setbacks, failures of will, opposition, persecution, betrayals, health issues, and even innocent suffering (like Paul's thorn in the flesh). We cannot avoid such tribulations. We must learn how to take them on as a means of entering more completely into the Kingdom of God.

The way to deal with tribulation is not to despair, get angry, become vengeful, work for better elected officials, or just give up. The way to deal with tribulation is through the spiritual gift of patience. Those who experience tribulation in their Kingdom-seeking efforts patiently endure, rejoicing in their trials and giving thanks in every situation (Jms.1.2-4; Phil. 4.6, 7). By so doing, they wait on the Lord to sustain and grow them through their times of tribulation so that they grow in Kingdom character and will be even better prepared

for the next round of trials (cf. Ps. 27.13, 14).

You can know you are in the Kingdom of God and that you are seeking more its presence when you encounter various kinds of trials and tribulations. We glory—not complain—in our tribulations, “knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5.3, 4). That is, more of the mystery of the Kingdom which has been given to us.

Reach up and touch the sky

But we also need to know that entering the Kingdom is a bit like trying to touch the sky. On the one hand, to touch the sky, all you have to do is reach up. But wait, there’s so much more sky! So you start walking around in a circle, increasing the circumference with each cycle, your hand held up into the sky. Still, what about all that “up there” sky? We want to touch not only the sky within our immediate reach, but the sky way up above us, from horizon to horizon, and even more.

We need to keep expanding our circumferences and look for some way to be lifted progressively higher as we do.

In 2 Peter 1.5-11, the apostle indicates that something like this is the way we enter ever more deeply into the Kingdom of God: “But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

To enter more fully into the presence of the Kingdom, do these things, and keep doing them over and over, more and more, higher and higher, day by day. Thus, you will be supplied with ever more abundant entrance into the Kingdom of God, to which God has called you, and into which you have been conveyed.

Realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom is indeed a mystery. But how we must do so is not.

For reflection

1. How would you counsel a new believer to make the most of the tribulations they experience?
2. In what way is entering the Kingdom a bit like touching the sky?
3. Why must we desire and devote ourselves to entering more abundantly into the Kingdom of God (2 Pet. 1.9)?

Next steps—Transformation: What can you do to improve your approach to entering more abundantly into the Kingdom of God?

4 The Apostles: The Kingdom Above

...to [the apostles] He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. Acts 1.3

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus... Hebrews 3.1

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. Hebrews 12.22-24

The Kingdom “on the ground”

With the apostles and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God became something more than merely a vision; it became a lived reality which the apostles sought and for the expansion of which they labored through all their days. The Kingdom of God is an eternal, heavenly realm that is very much “on the ground” and on the move by the Spirit and Word of God, working in and through His redeemed people.

This was the experience of the apostles, as we have seen; it is what they have bequeathed to us.

As we might suppose, the apostles sustained a clear vision of the Kingdom, one that brought forward all the previous teaching of Scripture into the framework of the Gospel and the Person and work of Jesus Christ. For the apostles, the Kingdom of God was intimately bound up with Jesus and the work He presently is doing, both at the Father’s right hand and by His Spirit in and through the Church. It is a real domain of righteousness, peace, and joy, entered by those who believe and embodied in the Church, the Body of Christ. Like a great, growing stone, that Kingdom advances toward the day of Christ’s imminent return in glory.

Jesus Himself instilled this vision into His apostles, as we see in Acts 1.3. Having spent over three years teaching, proclaiming, and embodying the coming reality of the Kingdom, and promising His disciples they would see it and rule in it during their lifetimes, He now added a “graduate seminar” in Kingdom review and enlargement, lest they should lose sight of what He had taught them concerning what must be their highest priority in life (Matt. 6.33). And, as the writer of Hebrews—writing in one of the latest books of the New Testament—demonstrates, receiving and advancing “on the ground” in that heavenly calling and Kingdom is what should characterize our lives in Christ here and now.

The reality of the Kingdom

The reality of the Kingdom broke into history, and into the lives and ministries of the apostles and all believers, on the first Pentecost.

With Jesus’ ascension and rule and the coming of the Spirit, the certainty of everything He had taught and promised became for the apostles the new framework for human experience. Everything the apostles taught and did from that moment forward was with a view to seeking and realizing the rule of Jesus Christ increasingly on earth, as it is in heaven, and in preparing for the full and final attainment of His Kingdom upon His return.

The apostles’ vision of the Kingdom of God revolved around three foci: above, beyond, and within. Let’s look briefly at each of these, beginning, in this installment, with the first.

The Kingdom above

In the first sermon of the Christian era Peter declared the rule of Jesus as King and Lord to be the orienting

fact of the new epoch (Acts 2.33-36):

Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.

“For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself:

The LORD said to my Lord,

“Sit at My right hand,

Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”’

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

A new order had been established on earth; a new power was unleashed among men and nations; a new agenda was beginning to unfold; a new King was on the throne; and God was now calling all men everywhere to repent and believe the Gospel. If we would enter this new realm, we must consider Jesus and desire to take our place in that heavenly assembly of saints and angels, so that we bring that heavenly domain through our heavenly calling to earthly reality in every aspect of life.

Paul also understood the central significance of the Kingdom above, where Christ rules at the right hand of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15.25-27). Only in the light of that reality, and against the backdrop of where that reality is leading, can we do works which will last and conduct ministries that will not be in vain, but will have power to actualize in human history the unseen reality of the rule of King Jesus (1 Cor. 15.58). We must set our minds on the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3.1-3), so that we allow this heavenly vision to shape our earthly work and experience.

In the book of Revelation the apostle John was shown a series of overlapping, integrated visions of the powerful effects of the Kingdom above on all the affairs of men and history. Whatever transpires on earth is the result of things ordained in heaven and carried out by God’s faithful angelic and human servants.

The apostles understood that the rule of Jesus Christ is *the* determinative fact of human history. We cannot understand our lives, our faith, or our reason for being apart from a proper orientation “under the heavens” to the throne of Jesus Christ and the eternal covenantal and Kingdom purposes of God.

We have been seated there with Christ, Paul insists, so that we might live from this vantage point and fulfill our callings as ambassadors of Jesus Christ to a world in which the darkness is receding and the new light of the Kingdom of God is advancing day by day (Eph. 2.6, 7; 1 Jn. 2.8). Seek the Kingdom above, that you might know and advance it here below.

For reflection or discussion

1. What do we mean by saying that the apostles understood the Kingdom of God as a heavenly realm being worked out “on the ground”?

2. Why do we need a vision of the heavenly realm, and of Jesus, exalted in glory? How can we nurture such a vision?

3. “A new order had been established on earth; a new power was unleashed among men and nations; a new agenda was beginning to unfold; a new King was on the throne; and God was now calling all men everywhere to repent and believe the Gospel.” In view of this, what is our responsibility as Kingdom citizens and ambassadors?

Next steps—Transformation: How much does the Kingdom “above” factor in your daily walk with and work for the Lord? What can you do to improve in this heavenly vision?

5 The Apostles: The Kingdom Beyond and Within

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. Ephesians 1.22, 23

*But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says:
"When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men."*

(Now this, "He ascended"—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) Ephesians 4.7-10

From beyond

For the apostles, the Kingdom was centered "above," where Christ is seated in the heavenly places in glory. At the same time, He has given His Kingdom to His saints to enter, seek, and advance. The Kingdom exists *beyond* our present and *within* us at the same time. The "beyondness" of the Kingdom of God consists of two aspects, according to the apostles.

First is the fact that the Kingdom is unfolding from within a spiritual realm which lies beyond the reach of our physical senses. If we would understand the protocols and promise of the Kingdom and draw on its resources and power for daily living, we must learn to "see" the rule of King Jesus with the eyes of the heart, by faith, and not by sight (Eph. 1.15-23). We must develop the ability to live in the then and there, here and now. This is entirely a matter of grace.

Our duty is to search the Scriptures to gather and assemble the many images and teachings about the unseen realm and how we must "view" it. We seek the Kingdom of God as we set our minds on these things and conduct all our daily work with a view to serving as ambassadors of the risen Christ (Col. 3.1-3; 2 Cor. 5.17-21). We do not see Jesus now, at least, not with the eyes of the flesh; nevertheless, we love and adore Him because we "see" Him by faith, as He reveals Himself to us in His Word, and we live from within the framework of what we thus see and know to be true (1 Pet. 1.8, 9).

We know that, beyond this present material world, we are surrounded by a cloud of faithful witnesses, whose lives we emulate and whose hope we share, and thus we desire to be like them—faithful servants in the Kingdom. They have gone before us into the "beyondness" of the Kingdom, and we now have entered that same "beyondness" as sons and daughters and heirs (Heb. 12.1, 2; Lk. 12.41-48).

Unto beyond

Second, the Kingdom is "beyond" us because it is still to come, increasing daily on earth and in its perfection and full glory when Jesus returns to consummate His work of redemption (Rev. 19-22). There is more to the Kingdom and our salvation than we will ever be able to realize in this life. Yet we strive for more of whatever Kingdom presence we may know.

We understand that this world is not our permanent place of abode and that we are on a journey culminating in a new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3.8-14). This being so, we live *toward* the coming of the unseen Kingdom, daily striving, through God's Word and Spirit, to become transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, Whom we shall one day see face to face (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Jn. 3.1-3), and to realize more of the presence, promise, and power of His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6.10).

The Kingdom of God exists beyond us—ontologically and temporally—and it is our calling to seek that Kingdom, both as it presently exists in the unseen realm and as it shall come to be increasingly on earth and

finally upon the Lord's return in glory. The "beyondness" of the Kingdom makes of our lives a perpetual seeking to enter the Kingdom in greater fullness, beginning within our own lives.

The Kingdom within

The apostles understood, as Jesus declared, that the Kingdom of God is within us, and we exist within it. It is a realm of true and transforming spiritual power (1 Cor. 4.20) where Jesus Christ is making new all those who come to Him in faith and follow in His holy and righteous and good way, according to the Law of God (Matt. 5.17-19).

The Kingdom is within us, and, by the Spirit and Word of God, the Lord brings forth in us the fruit of righteousness, peace, and joy, which honors God and brings abundant benefit to men (Rom. 4.17-19). We expect to see more evidence of the Kingdom in us—the fruit of the Spirit, the tokens of love, the virtues of holiness, and a soul increasingly devoted entirely to Christ—and to demonstrate more of the Kingdom's power by our witness to Christ in the world (Acts 1.8).

Thus the apostles repeatedly urge and remind us, acknowledging that such a way of living is a struggle against spiritual forces determined to destroy us (2 Pet. 3.1-7; Eph. 6.10-20) and wicked men who seek only their own interests rather the glory of God (Rom. 1.18-32; 1 Pet. 4.1-19; 2 Tim. 3.1-13). Entering ever more fully into this Kingdom involves trials and tribulation, leading to perseverance, character, and hope. We can reach more truly into the *beyondness* of the Kingdom and thus realize more of its *withinness* as we do. As we are transformed into the likeness of Christ and our churches increase in unity and maturity in Christ, the world will know more of the true Kingdom presence simply because what now is true beyond our world and time is increasing within our world and time.

In short, Jesus is filling the world with Himself.

Living within the Kingdom, we are called to grow as disciples, becoming equipped for the work of ministry so that we might help to grow our churches in unity and maturity unto the Lord (Eph. 4.11-16). The Church is the sign, outpost, and agent of the Kingdom of God, and it is important that she strive always to heed the Word of her King and be faithful in all her Kingdom duties until He returns (Rev. 2, 3).

The apostles do not speak as frequently about the Kingdom as Jesus did, or even as much of the Old Testament does. But it was always there, in their lives and ministries. What patriarchs and prophets only foresaw, and what Jesus anticipated, embodied, and proclaimed, the apostles—and we as their spiritual offspring—now realize day by day as we meditate on, seek, and live in the power of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, which is coming on earth as it is in heaven.

We work and expect, therefore, more of the majestic fullness of the Kingdom *beyond* to become increasingly the daily reality *within* us and *within* our times as Jesus continues to fill us and the world.

For reflection or discussion

1. In what senses does the Kingdom of God exist "beyond" us?
2. What do we mean by saying the Kingdom presence is "within" us?
3. What is Jesus working to do through the presence of His Kingdom?

Next steps—Transformation: How would you describe your vision of the Kingdom of God at this time? In what ways is this vision affecting your daily walk with and work for the Lord? What can you do to realize more of the "beyondness" of the Kingdom of God?

6 The Apostles: The Kingdom Calling

We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you. 2 Corinthians 10.13

But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk... Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called... Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called. 1 Corinthians 7.17, 20, 24

A heavenly calling

The writer of the book of Hebrews explained that those who believe in Jesus are partakers of a heavenly calling (Heb 3.1). God has called us from heaven to partake of a realm of being in which righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit increasingly abound to the praise and glory of the Father (1 Thess. 2.12; Rom. 14.17, 18). We are called to the Kingdom in which God's own Son is Lord, His Word is Law, and the Spirit of God is the operative power for making all things new (2 Cor. 5.17; Rev. 21.5).

All who believe in Jesus have been conveyed into this Kingdom and are called to pursue ever-deeper entrance to it, so that the way of things in the heavenly court becomes increasingly the way of things wherever the Kingdom presence has been established and is being realized.

Thus, there is an *upward* and *forward* aspect to citizenship in the Kingdom of God, an aspect shaped and reinforced by *looking back* at the teaching of Scripture and *looking around* at the work we must do to realize increasing Kingdom presence (Eph. 5.15-17). Look up—to see Jesus, exalted in glory and ordering all things according to righteousness, peace, and joy. Look ahead—to a vision of the Kingdom presence increasing on earth as it is in heaven and coming in its fullness in the new heavens and new earth. Look back—to be strengthened in knowledge and understanding about the Kingdom and to grow in confidence in God and His Word. And look around—at what your heavenly calling requires of you as a Kingdom citizen and ambassador today.

No one ever said that entering the Kingdom would be easy. We've seen that it's a struggle to realize increasing Kingdom presence and that afflictions and tribulations will cross our path. We must take up the disciplines and perspective that will allow us to overcome the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil and realize more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God.

But where? Where does this heavenly calling realize presence on the ground?

An earthly calling

Every believer has a calling from God, an appointed place in which to seek and advance the Kingdom of God. We have already unpacked this calling in some detail so that we know that the time and space of our lives are precisely where God intends to advance the rule of King Jesus as we redeem our time and live as Kingdom citizens and ambassadors in all the daily activities of our lives. Here I simply want to reiterate that understanding as the apostles pursued it.

We are not responsible to change the world. We are called to be transformed in our own lives, so that we become more like Jesus day by day (2 Cor. 3.12-18). And we are called to bring the light of God's truth, the salt that preserves goodness, and the leaven that transforms unwholesomeness into wholesomeness into everything we do, all the everyday small stuff of our lives (1 Cor. 10.31). God promised His people in the Old Testament that if they were faithful in submitting to His rule, He would cause all the details of their daily lives to abound in blessing (Deut. 28.1-14). The apostles, echoing Jesus, echo this promise as they exhort us to bring all our time, all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities, all our work, and all our thoughts into

captivity to King Jesus (2 Cor. 10.3-5).

In short, seeking the Kingdom of God defines the nature of a believer's calling in life, whatever our calling, in every situation, at all times. The Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven both *in* the lives of believers and *through* their lives in the world. And the fruit of the Kingdom's progress is Christlikeness in every aspect of life—righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

In our study we have been *looking back* at Scripture to gain a better sense of what the Kingdom of God is and how its presence appears. We must set the Lord always before us (Ps. 16.8), *looking up* to nurture a vision of Christ Jesus in all His beauty, majesty, power, and glory (Col. 3.1-3). At the same time, we *look ahead* to envision what a growing Kingdom presence might look like in our lives and our callings. And throughout the day we *look around* to make the most of every opportunity for serving Jesus in our lives.

Our *heavenly* calling and our *Kingdom* calling come together in all the daily details of our *daily* calling as citizens in the Kingdom of God.

A Kingdom vision

The great burden of our studies in this series has been to encourage a vision of the Kingdom of God as that was foreseen by patriarchs, kings, and prophets in the Old Testament; taught and embodied by Jesus in the gospels; and embraced, sought, and realized by the apostles in the New Testament.

But our study will only bear fruit to the extent that we work to nurture a vision of the presence of the Kingdom coming in and through our lives unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. We must seek the Lord in prayer for such a vision, calling on Him to renew us daily in His Word and to show us what to expect and how to work for the coming of the Kingdom in our part of the world.

Let that vision increase in you until it becomes your default way of thinking, planning, and conducting your life. Know what to expect; and prepare to deal with challenges, setbacks, and disappointments. Give praise to God at every step of your Kingdom-seeking journey within all the facets and aspects of your heavenly calling. Do this daily, and you will begin to realize, in every part and all the time of your life, more of the glorious presence, the incredible promise, and the invincible power of the Kingdom of God—the rule of King Jesus in and through you for the blessing of your world and the glory of His Name.

For reflection

1. What do you need to do to clarify and enlarge your vision of the Kingdom of God?
2. How do you *look up* to see Jesus? What is your approach to *looking ahead* to seek His Kingdom?
3. Do you have a prayer partner or soul friend who could help you as you work to become more consistent and fruitful in pursuing your heavenly calling? How might the two of you help one another?

Next steps—Transformation: We can all improve in pursuing and realizing more of our heavenly calling. Identify one or two things you will begin to do today to help you realize more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God.

7 The Apostles: The Kingdom to Come

And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. Revelation 22.3-5

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless... 2 Peter 3.13, 14

So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. 1 Corinthians 15.42-44

New heaven and new earth

We have discussed in prior installments the fact that the Kingdom of God is not only here and now, but also then and there. There is a glorious *beyondness* to the Kingdom, not only beyond our present time but also our temporality, our present material existence. The fullness of the Kingdom of God is yet to come, and when it comes, we will be made complete and perfect, lacking nothing, to spend forever delighting in and worshiping God in the fullness of His righteous, peaceable, and joyous rule.

The Kingdom presence yet to come will unfold in a glorious new creation, a new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells. The old heavens and earth will pass away, and new ones will be created and fused as one, where the goodness of God will abound; and the saints of God, clothed in new and eternal, glorious bodies, will dwell with Him and see Him—in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 3.1-3)—and enjoy Him forever.

There we will be like Jesus, perfect in righteousness. There we will know perfect and uninterrupted peace—no more sorrows, no more tears, no more trials or tribulations. And there we will abound in joy, worshiping our God continuously while we enjoy the full riches of the eternal Kingdom.

Sin and the curse will be forever banished, and we shall all serve God and Jesus Christ, in the full and perfect power of the Holy Spirit, rejoicing together eternally in His glorious light and life. Thus we shall reign with Him forever and ever.

New City

In the eternal Kingdom of God, the saints will be constituted as a glorious new city—a new Jerusalem adorned with all the beauty, brilliance, bounty, and blessings of God (Rev. 21.9-27). God will dwell in our midst to enlighten our lives and all our endeavors, and everlasting day will afford us many opportunities to bring the richness of city life to ever-increasing glory.

We should think of this new and glorious city in terms of Jerusalem in her Old Testament greatness. Glory and honor will pervade the city by the gifts and abilities people from every nation, culture, and calling bring to it. It will be a city thriving in cultural life, for being now perfected in the image of God our Creator, we will create wonders and marvels and all manner of everyday culture to serve one another, adorn the new creation, and glorify God. Even in our most quotidian of activities, we will delight to worship our Lord (1 Cor. 10.31). There we will work, play, create, rest, and serve God in complete righteousness, without competition or corruption, and as priests and kings together, gladly carrying out the rule of God's holy and righteous and good Law.

Some things will change. There will be no night in this new creation, only everlasting day. Further, Jesus said that we will not be given to one another in marriage (Matt. 22.30), for our needs will all be met by our being together the Bride of Christ. Thus, it seems likely that no new children will be born, and family life—such as it may be—will be redefined according to the eternal economy of the eternal city.

We will eat in the new eternal city, but without there being any need of death to satisfy our hunger or thirst. We will use the resources of the earth—and perhaps the cosmos?—to make good, useful, and beautiful artifacts with which to delight ourselves, serve our neighbors, fulfill the creation's purpose, and glorify God. But there will be no waste of creation's bounty, no spoiling of God's largesse, and no exhausting of His eternally renewing resources.

New Garden

The presence of the Kingdom in the new creation will be like the garden of Eden, had it never known the corruption of sin. A pure river of life will flow throughout it with the tree of life growing and bearing fruit on either side (Rev. 22.1, 2). The vast universe will be reconstituted to express a new and timeless cosmology where the rule of God over every creature proceeds in plain sight and full view of all. For His throne will be in our midst. We will see Him continuously and observe His rule in action, as angels and saints fly from His Presence—the heartbeat and control center of the eternal Kingdom—to accomplish without fail His every instruction or command.

The Kingdom presence we pursue now—the rule of Christ coming on earth as it is in heaven—should be a foreshadowing of what we expect forever in the new creation. We can only realize glimpses and brief trailers of the Kingdom presence yet to come, but they are sufficient to help us think in real and practical terms about what seeking the Kingdom and righteousness of God must entail in our daily lives.

For now, Jesus expects His Kingdom citizens and ambassadors to work: “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward *is* with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, *the* Beginning and *the* End, the First and the Last” (Rev. 22.12, 13). We must take up those Kingdom labors according to our individual callings, receiving them day by day as having their beginning in Jesus, of being granted for our use and ministry, and of returning to Him in the end, adorned with the glory and honor which are His due. And Jesus holds out the promise of blessing for all who are faithful and diligent in this life to prepare for and point the way to the next: “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22.14).

The Kingdom of God has come to earth, sent among us by the Father and the Son in the Person of Spirit and program of His Word. Here and now, we must seek the increasing presence of Christ's rule by the good works prepared for us each day (Eph. 2.10), that the workmanship of God in us may demonstrate the faithfulness and goodness of God through us unto the coming day of the Kingdom's eternal presence and glory.

For reflection

1. How often do you contemplate what the new creation will be like? Do you think there is value in doing this more often? Explain.
2. We do not take up our daily works to *earn* our salvation but to *work out* our salvation for God's Kingdom and glory. Explain.
3. How can you use the vision of the coming Kingdom to encourage your fellow believers here and now?

Next steps—Preparation: We have only touched on the vision of Kingdom in its “then and there” aspect. Can you find more in Scripture to flesh this out further? Why would it be good for you to do so?

Kingdom Presence in the New Testament: The Apostles

For reflection or discussion

1. How would you describe the place of the Kingdom of God in the writings and ministries of the apostles?
2. How do the apostles define the Kingdom? How would you describe their sense of its nature and character?
3. What do the apostles mean by “entering” the Kingdom of God? Is this a once-for-all-time matter? Explain.
4. How do the apostles help us to understand that the Kingdom is present here and now, but that its greater and fuller presence is yet to come?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this segment of our study on “The Kingdom Presence”?

For prayer:

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