

# Waiting for Kingdom Come

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In some ways it is easier to talk about the Dominion of God in the present, but harder to visualize it.<sup>1</sup> It is easier to talk about because we live in an experiential age, an age quite prepared to talk about life transforming events or encounters. Yet, on the other hand, it is easier to envision the future of God's Dominion, easier to come up with potent images of what it will look like ('the lion will

lie down with the lamb', 'swords will be beaten into plowshares'), yet harder for many to relate to or believe in. Even some Christians would be prepared to say that after 2,000 long years Jesus is probably not coming back to bring human history to a climax.

In part the loss of a viable hope for the future of the world, and the replacing of it with a dying and going to

heaven sort of hope, an *other-worldly* hope, is understandable. Yet this failure of nerve and of faith is not justifiable, and often it is grounded in a misunderstanding of what the New Testament actually says about the future of God's Dominion.<sup>2</sup>

Three things need to be stressed at this point: 1) the New Testament says nothing explicit about the timing of the second coming of Christ, it simply affirms the fact of that coming. Indeed Mark 13:32 informs us that Jesus himself said during his ministry that he did not know the timing of the second coming of the Son of Man; 2) often when the issue of timing comes up we fail to bear in mind that God is not a creature bound within the space-time universe. God transcends time and is not limited by time as we know it within the material universe. This is in part what is meant in 2 Peter 3:8: 'But . . . with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise . . . but is patient with you, not wishing any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night . . .'; 3) the earliest Christians, since they did not know the timing of Christ's return, were prepared to reckon with and hope for the possibility that Christ would return in their own day, but they used images like that of the thief in the night to convey the fact that Christ would come at a surprising or unexpected time, and therefore one must always be ready. So it is a mistake to suggest that the earliest Christians believed that Christ would definitely return in their age, and then when that proved untrue had to conjure with the delay of the Royal Return. The viable future of God's Dominion on earth should not be dismissed on the basis of a misreading of what the New Testament claims about the timing of Christ's return.

The Lord's Prayer, which the church today should and must pray in good faith, includes the words 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven'. This prayer makes clear that God's Dominion in heaven is not the same as God's future Dominion on earth, otherwise there would be no point to this petition. The petition suggests that the Dominion is not yet fully present on earth as it already is in heaven. Bearing these things in mind a series of questions need to be considered

### ***I. The Meaning of 'Heaven'***

Let us consider first the meaning of the term heaven. By definition, heaven is the dwelling place of God. Some have deduced from this that because God is thought to be *omni-present* therefore heaven is likewise everywhere. This represents a misunderstanding of the concept of God's *omni-presence*. The Bible does not affirm that a little bit of God is everywhere or in all things in the material universe. This notion has rightly been dubbed *pan-theism*. The God of the Bible, however, is not a

substance or a force that permeates all things. God is a personal being, indeed God is a *tri-personal* being, One who is Father, Son, and Spirit. When the Bible speaks of God being present everywhere what is actually meant is that all things are present to God at once, for God is much greater than the material universe. God is not an item within that universe, but the Maker of it. 'He's got the whole world in his hands . . .'

We must remember that when we speak of heaven, we are not speaking of a place within the material universe, say just outside the earth's atmosphere. We are speaking of the eternal dwelling place of God from which God created the whole universe. Furthermore, God can be distinguished from heaven. For instance, God can be near, or in our midst, and heaven still be remote. This means that while God in the person of the Holy Spirit is dwelling within God's people, nonetheless heaven does not now exist on earth, but when we discuss the future of God's Dominion the idea is that there will be, as it were, a merger of heaven and earth. God will make his final and eternal dwelling place with those who dwell below. At that point, heaven will come down and earth will be transformed.

Another clear sign that heaven is not envisioned as being here on earth in the present is that the New Testament speaks of believers dying and going to heaven. The famous parable of the rich man and Lazarus seems to be making this point (Lk. 16:19-31). What is not usually noticed by many modern readers of the New Testament is that heaven is not envisioned as the final dwelling place of God's people.

Resurrection of the dead is the language the New Testament uses over and over again to speak of the final future of God's people, and this has to do not with life in heaven but rather life in a new embodied condition on earth. The ultimate future of humankind is not in a disembodied existence somewhere outside the material universe but rather in a resurrection body here in space and time. We need to put some flesh on some of these bare bones ideas by examining a variety of texts.

### ***II. Raising — the Question***

First there is the issue of the end times in general. The Apostle's Creed, which the church has affirmed for centuries includes these words: 'I believe in Jesus Christ who . . . on the third day rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead . . . I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting' Now lest we think this credal statement is redundant, the second reference to resurrection refers not to Jesus' resurrection, but to that of the believers. This is not a novel doctrine, but something the church has always affirmed as part of its faith. It is important to

stress also that the resurrection of the dead is contingent on the return of Christ. The former will not transpire unless or until the latter happens.

Indeed one can say that the whole schedule of eschatological events hinges on the return of Christ. Until and unless Christ returns, there will be no resurrection of the dead, no final judgement, no life everlasting, no Dominion of God on earth as in heaven. In many ways the return of Christ is a trigger event much as the resurrection of Christ was. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15 — if Christ is not raised, then the dead are not raised. If Christ is not raised, then our faith is in vain, we are still in our sins. As with so many things in Christian theology, an understanding of the whole career of Christ, both the past and future of Christ leads to an understanding of our future and the future of God's Dominion. Indeed, as we shall see, Christ's history is our destiny.

Human beings are bound by time and space. The creation story itself in Genesis 1–2 makes evident that we could not fully exist without an embodied condition, without a supportive material environment in which to live complete with air, water, food and much more. The propagation and preservation of the human species likewise depended on not just one type of embodied existence but rather two types — male and female.

When the New Testament talks about the new creation it means exactly that — a renewal or transformation or recreation of the creation that already existed. The endtimes are envisioned as being like and yet superior to the beginning times for the human race. It is thus a mistake to assume that the New Testament writers envisioned dying and going to heaven as the final condition of human beings. Rather, that was seen as a blessed interim condition on the way to the new heaven and the new earth. Notice that even the martyred saints under the altar in heaven are not satisfied — they ask 'How long?' (Rev. 6:9–10). The new creation began during Jesus' ministry, reached its first climactic point with the resurrection of Jesus, and will not be completed until Christ comes again.

Let us consider one of the most crucial texts in all the New Testament for this sort of discussion, a text which is the basis of much of the church's credal statements about the future — 1 Corinthians 15. This text, especially certain key verses, provides crucial material for the church's proclamation at Easter. We are all probably familiar with 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and . . . he was buried, and . . . he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters . . .' (15:3–5). But it is also in this same chapter that Paul provides a brief sketch of the future. After referring to Christ as the first-fruits of the resurrection from the dead, he says 'then at his coming

those who belong to Christ, then comes the end when he hands the dominion to God the Father after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he puts all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death . . . When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the One who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all' (15:23–28).

Lest we think that Paul means something different when he refers to the resurrection of believers than he meant when referring to Christ's resurrection consider verses 50–54: 'flesh and blood [i.e. physical life as it now exists] cannot inherit the Dominion of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable . . . We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability and this mortal body must put on immortality.' This text has sometimes mistakenly been taken to mean that Paul was suggesting a non-material view of resurrection or life in the kingdom of God. What in fact Paul means is that flesh and blood, *in its present* condition, subject to disease, decay, and death cannot participate in the eternal realm. Even Jesus' body had to be transformed before he could enter the eternal realm.

Paul links the resurrection of Christ to the resurrection of those in Christ with the metaphor about the first and the latter fruits, and he makes clear that the believer's future will be like Christ's past — in each case they ended up in an embodied state, except that, the resurrection body was immune to disease, decay, and death for it was imperishable. Resurrection is something that happens to dead persons, but Paul also affirms that there will be believers alive on earth when Christ returns and they will be changed or transformed into a resurrection state.

But doesn't Paul say that we shall have a spiritual body, not a material one in the life to come (1 Cor. 15:44)? In fact a close examination of the Greek at this point shows that a word with an *ikon* ending such as 'spiritual', (*pneumatikon*) has here, provides not a description of the substance out of which the body is made, but rather its animating principle. Paul is talking about a body animated entirely by God's Spirit which gives eternal life, as opposed to a physical body which is animated merely by *psuche*, life breath, such as was the case with Adam. In fact Paul believes there is both continuity and discontinuity between the present body and the resurrection body. In both states the believer will have life, in a body, and will remain the same person as before. But Paul places more emphasis on the discontinuity. The present body is perishable, inglorious, weak. The resurrection body will be imperishable, glorious,

powerful. Paul of course knows that God can create something out of nothing, as Genesis says, so he is not concerned about the problem that some have been dead so long that they no longer have any material remains. In some cases the resurrection body will involve the transformation of the remains of a dead person, in some cases it will involve creating a whole new body for the deceased person. In either case the result is the same. One has an eternal condition suitable to the eternal realm one has now entered.

### ***III. Thy Kingdom Come***

Notice that when Paul speaks of this final future for believers he refers twice also to the Dominion of God. He says emphatically that believers in their current mortal state cannot participate in the final form of the Dominion of God. To participate in the imperishable new creation one must be in an imperishable condition, and more particularly one must have a resurrection body like Christ's. Then, when Christ has accomplished what God sends him to do at and after the second coming, namely set up the final form of God's rule on earth, he will return the Dominion of God to the Father who will reign over all forever. The Dominion of God in the case of both future salvation and future judgement is closely linked to what Christ will yet do when he returns. The goal of God is not merely to reign in or from heaven, but to reign upon the earth forever. In God's plan creation, like human creatures, has a future, not least because God cares about all that he has made.

The important point to be made about all this is that if one can believe that God raised Christ from out of the realm of the dead 2,000 years ago, in principle there should be no difficulty with the concept of the resurrection of believers in the future. The timing of the event is surely a secondary issue compared with the possibility of the event. Notice too that the completion of the Dominion of God does not come when believers die and go to heaven, but rather when God's full reign, even over death, becomes a reality, becomes evident on earth. When we pray 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done', we are praying for the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgement, and the life to come in which the Dominion is finally fully manifested on earth.

It is of course true that God's Dominion, his perfect reign, is already happening in heaven, but this should not lead us to equate heaven and God's Dominion. Heaven is currently a place, God's Dominion is the condition of that place, and is in part the condition of the life of believers on earth. We are in various respects the manifestation of the reality of the Dominion on earth here and now. The Dominion then, or God's saving reign, involves both heaven and earth and one day will encompass both heaven and earth.

What we have said thus far in this chapter should make clear that there has been, is, and will be a historical dimension or expression of God's Dominion. God is not content simply to reign in heaven. Indeed the whole of the New Testament is about God so loving the world that he sent his Son to establish that Dominion on earth, as in heaven. This necessarily means that Christians can never afford to devalue either creation or its future, whether we are talking about that bit of creation known as our bodies, or the rest of creation, both animate and inanimate. It is never an adequate theology to say 'this world is not my home, I'm just passing through' as if heaven were all that really mattered. On the contrary, the New Testament suggests just the opposite. Heaven is not the believer's home, it is simply a place through which we pass between the time we die and when we are raised from the dead.

### ***IV. 'To Be Absent from the Body.'***

Of course it is true, as Paul says, that 'to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord' (2 Cor. 5:8). It is also often true that life in heaven is preferable to suffering and sorrow, pain and dying upon the earth (Phil. 1:20-25). But there are three states that need to be compared — life here on earth in the flesh, life in heaven, life in the resurrection body in the world to come. Paul states that he would prefer to live on this earth until the resurrection and simply be further clothed with a resurrection body rather than to die (2 Cor. 5:4-5). The state of ultimate bliss is life on earth in the resurrection body. It is no accident that the historic ritual of the church for funerals contains primarily the proclamation of the hope of resurrection rather than the hope of life without a body in heaven. It is resurrection that is a death defying event. It is resurrection that makes clear that God is Lord not only of life but also of death. It is resurrection that makes evident that God's yes is louder than death's no. It is resurrection that makes clear God will rule on earth as it is in heaven. It is resurrection that makes God's Dominion on earth not just a hope, but rather a reality.

### ***V. 'I believe in the Resurrection of the Dead, the Life Everlasting'***

It is at this point that something must be said about Christianity as a historical religion. Our faith is in part based on and grounded in God's track record, what God has already accomplished in space and time. It is not simply faith in faith, or wishful thinking about the future. We believe that as God has already raised Jesus from the dead, he can perform such a miracle again for those who love him. Christ's

history, his own real life story, is the basis for our hope that one day God's Dominion will come fully on the earth. Ours is not a religion based on a philosophy of life. It is based on certain irreducible facts of history, and in particular on the death and resurrection of Christ. If Christ was not raised, there is no point in talking about the future of God's Dominion on earth. If there has been and will be no resurrection then there will be no 'kingdom come' here below in any full sense. If this is true, then Christianity indeed at best can only resign itself to an other worldly hope for the future, for we cannot expect God to be seen as sovereign here below over the forces of darkness, disease, decay and death.

I have been stressing that the balance of the New Testament witness emphasizes the historical character and locale of God's Dominion. God's intent is to rule in this world, not just in heaven. That is what God's interventions in human history, God's acts of salvation are all about. To speak only of God's Dominion in heaven is to give up God's claim upon the creation. Believers are God's beachhead on earth in a lost world, but God is not content to reign only in the lives of believers. God is the God of heaven and all the earth. We can say then that the New Testament stresses that God's Dominion will come on earth fully only through further incursions in human history, particularly at the end through the second coming of Christ.

## VI. *The New Millennium and Endtiming*

Bearing all this in mind, we need now to say something about the year 2,000, endtime prophecy and the like. To judge from the tabloids, endtime forecasting has only just begun to heat up as the year 2,000 draws closer. With all of the hype and hysteria several facts need to be kept in mind: 1) Jesus was born somewhere between 4–6 B.C. Therefore the year 2,000 has no special import for biblical prophecy, for we passed the 2,000 year mark from the time of Christ's birth several years ago!; 2) all previous predictions about the timing of the return of Christ have one thing in common. They have all been 100% wrong. Earnestness and fervour about the timing of the final events of human history does not equal knowledge about such things; 3) the New Testament speaks a lot about the endtimes, but does not specify *endtiming*. The fact or reality of what is to come should not be dismissed or discredited on the basis of unbased and unbiblical speculation about the timing of such events.

There is one passage that has been subject to all sorts of misunderstanding and deserves close attention. It is 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11. This passage has been assumed to teach: 1) that Paul affirmed that Christ would definitely return in his own lifetime, and that

therefore Paul was wrong. Hence, we can dismiss all of what Paul says about the future of God's Dominion since he got the timing wrong; 2) that Paul affirmed the rapture of the church prior to the final tribulation and the return of Christ.

In regard to the first of these claims I would want to stress that Paul uses the thief in the night metaphor in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 to make clear that no one knows the timing of Christ's return, but that the believer should not be caught by surprise in regard to the fact of the event. Secondly, since Paul did not know the timing of either the return of Christ, or of his own death, he considered it possible (not certain) that Christ might return during his lifetime. Thus when he says 'we who are alive, who are left when the Lord returns' it must be remembered that with the two unknowns he had to conjure with there was no other category other than the living he could place himself in. He could not have said, for instance, 'we who will die before the Lord returns' because he did not know the timing of either of these events. In short, this text does not by any means prove that Paul was convinced that Christ would necessarily have to come during his own lifetime.

As for the ever popular issue of the 'rapture', it needs to be recognized that this theology did not arise before the nineteenth century as part of what was called Dispensationalism and was popularized through the Scofield Reference Bible. There is no historical evidence that the early church believed in such a concept. On the contrary, the early church took texts like Mark 13:20 to mean that the church would go through the final tribulation while awaiting the second coming of Christ.

The important point I would want to make is that Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 is using familiar imagery of how the greeting committee goes out to meet a returning King and welcomes the King back into the city. It is much like the entrance liturgy we find in Psalm 24:7–10. The idea is as follows. The King and his entourage are returning to a city. The herald goes before the King and blows the trumpet and alerts those on the city walls that the King has arrived and should be properly welcomed. There follows the going forth of the greeting committee to meet the King outside the city walls after which he and all those with him are ushered back into the city. Now the crucial point that helps our discussion is this. Paul, as it were, leaves us hanging with the comment 'then we who are alive will be caught up in the clouds together with the risen to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever' (1 Thess. 4:17). Paul does not say where the believers go once they meet the Lord in the air. What he does say in the larger context provides the clues. Notice he doesn't say believers will be taken up into heaven. He says they will be caught up into the clouds to meet the returning Christ. Paul is not here affirming the presence of clouds in heaven!

Secondly, since Paul uses the imagery of a royal return, imagery his converts in Thessalonike would be probably familiar with since they knew very well the history of Philip and Alexander, the Kings of Macedon, we may assume that they would have deduced that once the believers met the Lord, they would all return with him to earth where he was going to finish bringing in God's Dominion. If this is correct, there is certainly no rapture theology here. This text, like all these other texts must be interpreted in terms of what the first audience was likely to understand them to mean, not interpreted in light of later Christian theological schemas of which the early Christians were ignorant.

Our study in this essay has focused on what may be called future eschatology, and in particular the parousia of Christ. We have dealt with both the fact and the timing of such an event. Perhaps the most important thing I can say about that future coming is that it is in God's hands. This is why we pray for it to come on earth, rather than simply bringing it about ourselves. In particular it is in the hands of the returning Christ who will

bring it about both by over-ruling the powers of darkness on earth and by raising the dead and judging both the living and the dead. This is the process by which God's will, including both justice and mercy, will finally be done on earth as in heaven. This is not a human self-help programme but rather a divine activity and programme.

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### **Footnotes**

1 Some of this material appears in another form in a small study forthcoming with Abingdon tentatively entitled *The Domain of the Dominion*.

2 On this entire subject see my *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World*, (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992).