

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XXIII

by Andy Woods

Today's evangelical world believes that the church is experiencing the Messianic kingdom. To address this type of confusion, we began a study chronicling what the Bible teaches about the kingdom. In this series, the biblical teaching on the kingdom has been surveyed from Genesis to Revelation. We have noted thus far that what the Old Testament predicts concerning an earthly kingdom was offered to Israel during Christ's First Advent. Yet, the nation rejected this kingdom offer leading to the kingdom's postponement. In the interim, the kingdom is future as God now pursues an interim program that includes the church.

In addition, we began scrutinizing a series of texts that "kingdom now" theologians routinely employ in order to argue that the kingdom is a present reality in order to show that none of these passages, when rightly understood, teach a present, spiritual form of the kingdom. We began with the use of alleged "kingdom now" texts in the life of Christ, such as "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:5-7), "seek first His kingdom" (Matt. 6:33), "until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence" (Matt. 11:12), "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28), and "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21).

BORN AGAIN TO ENTER THE KINGDOM

Sometimes John 3:3-5 is used to support the notion of a present, spiritual messianic kingdom. These verses say, "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?' Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'"

Although the word "kingdom" is used twice in these verses, it is important to note that the term does not speak to the issue of the time of the kingdom's establishment. Rather, it is only used of a revelation of how one must enter the kingdom once it is ultimately established. In other words, when the kingdom comes, entrance into it will only be granted to those who have been born spiritually. Beyond this very little is said. Thus, of this verse and others like it, Sullivan notes, "Because in these verses the Kingdom is not dealt with extensively, it is impossible to use such references to reach a meaningful understanding of the *basileia*."¹ As has been mentioned earlier in this series, when the word "kingdom" is left undefined as it is here, its meaning must be developed from the Old Testament. This is especially true of John 3:3-5. In this context (John 3:9-10), Jesus expresses incredulity that Nicodemus, Israel's teacher, did not comprehend the new birth as an essential prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom. "Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?'" Such incredulity relates to the fact that Nicodemus as Israel's teacher should have been well aware of Ezekiel 36:24-27, which clearly explains the necessity of the new birth before entrance into the kingdom is permitted. These verses say, "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."

These verses not only reveal the necessity of the spiritual birth prior to entrance into the kingdom, they also explain the specific time in history when the kingdom will be established.

They occur in the section of the Book of Ezekiel directly depicting Israel's end time program (Ezek. 33–48). The overall context of this section is eschatological since these chapters relate to Ezekiel's recommissioning to preach the nation's restoration (Ezek. 33), the millennial David (Ezek. 34), Edom's future destruction (Ezek. 35), Israel's future political and spiritual restoration and reunification (Ezek. 36–37), the Gog and Magog battle leading to the nation's restoration (Ezek. 38–39), the millennial temple (Ezek. 40–46), the millennial river (Ezek. 47:1-12), the millennial land inheritance of Israel's tribes (Ezek. 47:13–48:29), and the ultimate restoration of Jerusalem (Ezek. 48:30-35). In other words, Ezekiel 36:24-27 is found in a context predicting the return of Israel to her own land (Ezek. 36:24), the future Tribulation period, and beyond. Thus, the very kingdom, entrance into which spiritual birth is a mandatory prerequisite, is a completely future reality since its very establishment is intimately connected with end time events. By leaving the word "kingdom" undefined in John 3:3-5, Jesus presupposes this rich Old Testament background drawn from the prophet Ezekiel as related to the kingdom's future arrival. In sum, in John 3:3-5, Jesus merely rehearses a well-known fact from Ezekiel, the necessity of spiritual birth prior to entrance into the kingdom. By making such a scant statement and by not defining the kingdom, we must go to the source, the prophet Ezekiel, in order to gain insight as to when the kingdom will arrive. As explained earlier, the context of the new birth is found within a larger context that points exclusively to the future for the kingdom's arrival.

NOT TASTE DEATH UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew 16:27-28, represent more verses utilized by "kingdom now" theologians. They say, "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS. Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His

kingdom.” In verse 27, Jesus notes both the angelic manifestation as well as the final judgment associated with the coming of His kingdom. Because in verse 28 He indicates that there are some listening to Him who would not die until the coming of this kingdom, many assume that Christ established His kingdom in spiritual form at His First Advent.

However, this interpretation ignores the context of Christ's statement, which is found in the very next verses of the following chapter. Matthew 17:1-13 describes Christ's Transfiguration, where Christ appeared in His glorified state. Since this glorified manifestation of Himself was a temporary appearance during His First Advent, His Transfiguration was a foretaste or a token of what the Son of Man coming in His glory and the splendor of His kingdom, as depicted in Matthew 16:28, would be like. Thus, contextually, in Matthew 16:28, Christ predicted that the Transfiguration would take place before some of His immediate audience had died. Christ's prediction in this regard was literally fulfilled six days later since the Transfiguration took place as recorded in the very next chapter. Unfortunately, the chapter division causes many to bifurcate Christ's prediction at the end of Matthew 16 from the events at the beginning of Matthew 17. However, it must be remembered that chapter divisions are artificial. They are not part of the inspired text, but rather were added much later in a well-intentioned but sometimes ineffective way of organizing and outlining the biblical text. Craven explains the full context of Matthew 16:28:

The declaration of Jesus, “There be some standing here,” etc., Matt. 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27. This, according to the opinion of Chrysostom and others (see Lange Comm. on Matt. 16:28), may find its fulfillment in the immediately following Transfiguration. In this event the Basileia was not merely symbolized, but in all its glory was for a moment set up on earth (comp. 2 Pet. 1:16–18).²

That Matthew 16:28 was fulfilled in the Transfiguration of Matthew 17:1-13 receives further support from the grammar of the passage. McClain explains, "the conjunction with which

chapter 17 begins clearly establishes the unbroken continuity of thought between 16:28 and 17:1, as also in the accounts of Mark and Luke where no chapter division occurs."³ Ice also demonstrates the continuity of thought between the two chapters:

All three accounts of the prophesied event speak of seeing and the kingdom. Matthew says they will see "the Son of Man coming in His kingdom," emphasizing the person of the Son of Man coming. Mark says, "they see the kingdom of God" and he adds that it will come "with power." Luke simply says that "they see the kingdom of God." The transfiguration fits all aspects of the various emphases found in each of the three precise predictions. Matthew's stress upon the actual, physical presence of the Son of Man is clearly met in the transfiguration because Jesus was personally and visibly present...Mark's emphasis upon a display of the kingdom with "power" was certainly fulfilled by the transfiguration. No one could doubt that the transfiguration certainly fit the definition of a "power encounter" for the disciples. That Jesus appears dressed in the Shekinah glory of God upon the Mount (Mk. 9:3) is further evidence to the disciples that He was God and acted with His power. Luke's simple statement about some who will "see the kingdom of God" is vindicated also by his account (17:28-36). Twice Luke records our Lord describing the transfiguration with the term "glory" (17:31, 32).⁴

(To Be Continued...)

¹ Clayton Sullivan, *Rethinking Realized Eschatology* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1988), 127.

² E.R. Craven, "Excursus on the Basileia," in *Revelation of John*, ed. J. P. Lange (New York: Scribner, 1874), 96.

³ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 336.

⁴ Thomas Ice, "Preterist "Time Texts", in *The End Times Controversy: The Second Coming under Attack*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 2003), 88.