

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART VI

by Andy Woods

Because today's evangelical world believes that the church is experiencing the messianic kingdom, we began a study chronicling what the Bible teaches about the kingdom. This earthly kingdom is anticipated in the office of Theocratic Administrator that was lost in Eden, in the biblical covenants, in the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, and in the earthly theocracy governing Israel from the time of Moses to Zedekiah. This theocratic arrangement covered most of Old Testament history as God governed Israel indirectly through various intermediaries until the Babylonian Captivity ended the Theocracy. Such termination initiated the "Times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24; Rev. 11:2) when the nation had no king reigning on David's Throne as Judah was trampled by various Gentile powers.

Against that backdrop entered Jesus Christ, the rightful Heir to David's Throne. It was incumbent upon first-century Israel to enthrone Christ in order to enter into all of her covenantal blessings (Deut. 17:15). The opportunity for first-century Israel to enthrone Christ thereby bringing in the kingdom is known as "the offer of the kingdom." This idea is captured in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" as proclaimed to the nation by John (Matt. 3:1-2), Christ (Matt. 4:17), the Twelve (Matt. 10:5-7), and the Seventy (Luke 10:1, 9). That this offer was a unique opportunity only for first-century Israel is apparent in Christ's instructions regarding how the offer should be presented. In Matthew 10:5-7, He instructed the twelve: "Do not go in *the* way of *the* Gentiles, and do not enter *any* city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Such a national limitation on the offer of the kingdom conveys that it was only for first-century Israel. Had first-century Israel enthroned Christ, the earthly kingdom would

have become a reality for the nation and the entire world. Israel's covenants would have been fulfilled, and the Times of the Gentiles would have terminated. Despite the unprecedented opportunity for the establishment of the messianic kingdom due to the presence of the rightful king among the first-century Jews, Israel rejected the kingdom offer (Matt. 12:24) leading to the kingdom's postponement.

KINGDOM POSTPONEMENT

The unique opportunity for Israel to accept the kingdom offer will not re-emerge until the offer is re-extended to future Israel in the events of the Tribulation period (Matt. 24:14; Jer. 30:7). In the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24–25), Christ explains the future circumstances by which Israel will accept the offer of the kingdom. Matthew's emphasis upon Israel's restoration in the Olivet Discourse grows out of the final verses of the previous chapter (23:37-39). There, Christ expressed His desire to gather (*episyntagō*) Israel. Unfortunately, Israel rejected the kingdom offer at His First Advent. Christ then promises that the time would come when the nation would acknowledge Him as the Messiah by chanting a messianic Psalm (Ps. 118:26; Matt. 21:9) thus allowing Christ to return, re-gather (*episyntagō*) Israel (24:31), and reign from David's Throne (Matt 25:31). Thus, Matt. 23:39 furnishes the condition through which Israel's final regathering will be achieved. Until this condition of Israel's acceptance of her Messiah has been satisfied, the kingdom cannot come to the earth. The entire Gentile world could become Christian. Yet, if tiny Israel remains in unbelief, the kingdom cannot materialize. Conversely, the entire Gentile world could reject Christ. Yet, if Israel fulfills the condition stated in Matthew 23:37-39 by accepting Jesus as the Messiah, the kingdom will materialize upon the earth. Because the Olivet Discourse and related passages teach that the condition of Jewish national acceptance of the Messiah will

not be satisfied until the events surrounding the future Tribulation period have occurred, the kingdom will remain in a state of postponement until that time.

This notion of the postponement of the kingdom due to national Israel's rejection of Christ distinguishes the premillennial, dispensational viewpoint from that of Judaism and Reformed Theology. Judaism rejects Jesus as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah since He failed to bring in the kingdom promises. A Jewish unbeliever will typically argue that Jesus was not the Messiah since *Shalom* or world peace and kingdom conditions (Isa. 2:4) are not a present earthly reality. Reformed Theology claims Christ succeeded in bringing in the kingdom since the kingdom promises are now being fulfilled in a spiritual sense. However, this approach ends up radically allegorizing Israel's terrestrial promises so that they find their spiritual realization in the present Church Age. The dispensational premillennialist understands that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. However, the kingdom is not a present reality since first-century Israel never satisfied the condition of faith in Christ. Until this future national conversion transpires during the Tribulation, the kingdom remains in a state of postponement rather than in a state of present fulfillment.

INTERIM AGE

Due to Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer resulting in the messianic kingdom's postponement, Christ began to explain the spiritual conditions that would prevail during the kingdom's absence. This interim program includes His revelation of the kingdom mysteries (Matt. 13) and the church (Matt. 16:18). Before describing these spiritual realities, some preliminary remarks must be made about this new interim age. First, as noted in the previous installment, the fact that God knew that Israel would reject the kingdom offer thereby ushering in

His eternal purpose for the interim age in no way implies that the offer to national Israel was not a genuine or bonafide offer.

Second, this interim age is intimately linked to the word "mystery" (Matt. 13:11; Eph. 3:9). "Mystery" simply means a previously unknown truth now disclosed. Vine explains, "In the N.T, it [*mystērion*] denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those who are illumined by His Spirit."¹ In other words, both the kingdom mysteries and church are unrevealed in the Old Testament.

Third, rather than being the product of Christ's Davidic kingly rule, the work of God in the present age is the result of Christ's present session as High Priest at the Father's right hand. Because Israel rejected the offer of the kingdom, Christ never inherited the prophesied Messianic kingdom nor took His seat on David's Throne at His First Advent. These realities await His Second Advent. Following Christ's rejection by Israel, He ascended to heaven to His Father's Throne (Rev. 3:21; 12:5b) where He pursues His ministry known as His "Present Session." During this time, He functions as high priest (Heb. 7:3b). Even in His present ministry, Christ retains His identity as the unique Davidic Heir (Rev. 3:7; 5:5; 22:16) who will one day occupy the earthly Davidic Throne in fulfillment of God's promise to David in 2 Sam. 7:13-16. It is from His glorious heavenly position (John 17:5), rather than from David's Throne, that He orchestrates His present work in the world. Thus, the present age remains an era unrelated to the prophesied Messianic kingdom (Luke 19:11-27). In other words, the kingdom mysteries and church age represent neither a fulfillment or even a partial fulfillment of what prior Scripture predicts

¹ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Nelson, 1996), 424.

concerning the Davidic kingdom. This distinction has long been noted by Bible scholars. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, summarizes:

Similarly, the earthly kingdom that according to the Scriptures had its origin in the covenant made to David, which is mundane and literal in its original form and equally as mundane and literal in uncounted references to it in all subsequent Scriptures which trace it on to its consummation, is by theological legerdemain metamorphosed into a spiritual monstrosity in which an absent King seated on His Father's throne in heaven is accepted in lieu of the theocratic monarch of David's line seated on David's throne in Jerusalem.²

Fourth, the notion that the present, interim age came about as a consequence of Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer in no way implies that it is an afterthought or less important in God's mind in comparison to His program with national Israel. On the contrary, according to Ephesians 3:11, the church was "in accordance" with God's "eternal purpose." In other words, God always knew and purposed that He would create and work through the church. Although Israel's program is revealed in the Old Testament, the church's program is unrevealed. However, this distinction does not mean that God's unrevealed program for the church is of less importance than His revealed program for Israel. Furthermore, although the church represents an interruption or parenthesis between God's past and future dealings with Israel, this in no way implies that the church is of lesser importance than God's past or future dealings with national Israel. The dictionary definition of a parenthesis simply conveys the idea of an interval rather than something of less importance. Thus, understanding the church as a parenthetical break in this manner in no way suggests that the church represents "plan B" in relation to God's purposes for Israel. Theologian Thomas Ice well summarizes:

In almost 35 years since I have become a dispensationalist, I have never heard nor read of a dispensationalist teaching a plan B scenario. Yet opponents often present this straw man in their statement of what we supposedly believe. We believe that God's single plan has always included

² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 5:315.

the Church, but He did not reveal the church age part of the plan in the Old Testament...Paul states specifically that the church age “was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verse 11). This is why dispensationalists have never taught the so-called plan A and plan B theory that critics suppose we hold. Dispensationalists have always taught that there is a single plan carried out in stages.³

(To Be Continued...)

³ Thomas Ice, “The Uniqueness of the Church,” *Pre-Trib Perspectives* 8, no. 6 (September 2003): 4.