
Article IX. The Kingdom

The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King. Particularly the Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ. Christians ought to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come and God's will be done on earth. The full consummation of the Kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the end of this age.

Genesis 1:1; Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Matthew 3:2; 4:8-10,23; 12:25-28; 13:1-52; 25:31-46; 26:29; Mark 1:14-15; 9:1; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:2; 12:31-32; 17:20-21; 23:42; John 3:3; 18:36; Acts 1:6-7; 17:22-31; Romans 5:17; 8:19; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 11:10,16; 12:28; 1 Peter 2:4-10; 4:13; Revelation 1:6,9; 5:10; 11:15; 21-22.

Article X. Last Things

God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.

Isaiah 2:4; 11:9; Matthew 16:27; 18:8-9; 19:28; 24:27,30,36,44; 25:31-46; 26:64; Mark 8:38; 9:43-48; Luke 12:40,48; 16:19-26; 17:22-37; 21:27-28; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:11; 17:31; Romans 14:10; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 15:24-28,35-58; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Philippians 3:20-21; Colossians 1:5; 3:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18; 5:1ff.; 2 Thessalonians 1:7ff.; 2; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:1,8; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:27-28; James 5:8; 2 Peter 3:7ff.; 1 John 2:28; 3:2; Jude 14; Revelation 1:18; 3:11; 20:1-22:13.

Introduction

In these statements of belief, the article on the Kingdom contains mainly the idea of God's sovereignty and His rule over the hearts of people; and the article on Last Things focuses on Judgment Day, or final judgment, which includes both condemnation for God's enemies and vindication for His people. Of these two, "Last Things" seems to be what reaches out and grabs most people and holds our attention the most. Maybe that's because we understand that when the Lord returns, final judgment is soon to follow.

Last Things

The end will be the time when every knee shall bow and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. It will be a time when we *truly* understand that we are all sinners, and *none* of us deserve Heaven. It will be a time when we begin to comprehend how truly great God's gift of salvation is. It will be a time when believers will be vindicated and unbelievers will be punished.

And well it should be that Last Things consumes many of our thoughts. Joel 2 indicates that the Day of the Lord will be a great and terrible time. It is a time greatly longed for, but also a time to be greatly dreaded. For it will be a time of judgment – both condemnation for unbelievers and vindication for believers. For unbelievers it will be a consuming judgment. For the believer it will be a purifying judgment. And for believers it will be a time not only of reward, but also of loss, as Paul indicated in 1 Corinthians 3:15.

The New Testament teaches us that a healthy dose of fear of appearing before God's judgment seat is beneficial for the life of the believer. In the epistles alone, at least sixteen times it is recorded that we are to fear God, and fear appearing before His throne. Also in the epistles we are taught, at least sixteen times, that believers will stand before God for judgment. For example:

1. Heb. 12:29 – God is a consuming fire
2. Romans 14:10 – We will all stand before the judgment seat of God
3. 1 Cor. 3 – Believers will be saved, but only as people who pass through fire
4. 1 Peter 1:17 – fear since you call "Father" the one who judges everyone's work impartially. What this means is that, even though I am a believer and follow Jesus, when I stand before His throne He will use the same exact standard for me that He uses for nonbelievers when it comes to judging my works. When it comes to right and wrong, He does not have lower standard for His children than for unbelievers, and this is who we call "Father." And we will stand before Him some day.
5. 1 Peter 4:17 – Judgment time, and begin with the household of God
6. 2 Peter 3 – Everything is reserved for fire, and the knowledge of Judgment Day should lead God's children to holy living
7. Rev. 20 – John wrote about the Great White Throne of Judgment. At the beginning of the chapter he said that the dead in Christ will rise first. Later in the chapter he stated that the rest of the dead will be resurrected. Then he said that all of the dead will appear before the Throne. There will be a judgment of works, and then the judgment of hell.
8. Matt. 25:31-46 – When Son of Man comes in his glory and sits on his throne, at that time all the nations/peoples will appear before his throne, and at that time he will separate the sheep from the goats.

Now, we may disagree as to the exact timing of believers standing before the judgment seat, but we cannot escape the New Testament's teaching that we also will appear before God's judgment seat. This is not necessarily what we like to dwell on a whole lot. It is much more comforting to concentrate on those unclean unbelievers who are going to stand before the Throne, be condemned, and thrown into the fiery lake. Amen? But the New Testament does not allow me to do this.

Understanding the end is coming, and that it is primarily about judgment, should impact me so that I live a holy life right now. And judgment – both condemnation and vindication – is the central focus of the “Last Things.”

Chronology

Consequently, when it comes to Last Things, many prefer to focus on timing and chronology. After all, if this is really going to happen, wouldn't it be nice to have a little bit of a heads-up to know when this is going to happen, so that, just as we do with so many things in life, we can do things right at the last minute to get everything right? Wouldn't it be nice to have a little warning to make sure you have time to get your affairs in order? It would be terrible if it just happened, and we didn't see it coming? We might not get something right that we could have, if we just had a little warning that the end was near. We might not make those last minute preparations like we would if we just had a clue the end was near. So there is a tendency to focus on time and chronology so that we make sure we do the last minute necessities to be ready to stand before God's throne.

The chronology of end times was also a fixation of the thoughts of the disciples. In Acts 1:6, when Jesus was about to ascend into Heaven, he gathered His disciples on the Mount of Olives, and the disciples asked, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (NASB). I can understand the disciples' question confusion at that time.

The disciples always had difficulty with Jesus as Messiah – what He taught and what He actually did, as opposed to what they expected out of the Messiah and the Kingdom. They continually wondered when He was going to raise that army, march into Jerusalem, throw off the shackles of Rome, take the throne of David, and restore proper worship in the Temple. They continually asked about this, and I can understand their confusion on the issue at this point.

Jesus had told the disciples parables about a master that was going on trip, and while he was gone he left his stewards with work to do. Then one day the master returned and the stewards had to give an account. Jesus had told His disciples that he was going somewhere that they could not go with Him. This baffled them. They wondered if He

planned to go out among the Gentiles. They wondered where He was going that they couldn't go with Him.

And then Jesus died. He was in the tomb, and on the third day He rose. And now He was back, and they were on the Mount of Olives, where not too long before this they began the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, and from where they expected the Messiah to make his triumphal march into Jerusalem to take the throne of David. And I can understand that at this time they might have wondered, "Maybe this is it. Maybe He went away for a little while, and now He's back to restore the kingdom to the nation of Israel." And so they asked, "Is this the time...?"

As recorded in Acts 1:7, 8, Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know the times or epochs which the Father has set by his own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses..." Most scholars agree that when those two terms – "times" and "epochs" – are used together, they refer to a chronological series of events leading up to a conclusion. So what did Jesus say? "Concerning a chronological series of events that lead up to the conclusion, you will not know."

How many times do we read those words and respond, "Well, I think I'm smart enough to read the Bible and figure out the chronological series of events that lead up to the conclusion?" Jesus responds back, "I'm telling you, you won't know!" And we say, "Well, I think I will!" And He says, "No! You won't." And we get this little agreement going. That's strange for people who claim the Bible is our standard for all thinking and acting. Jesus said we will not know.

In the Olivet discourse in Matthew 24, which many people associate with Jesus' teaching about Last Things, Jesus stated that the angels do not know when the end is going to happen. Not even the Son knows when this will take place. Only the Father knows, and apparently He isn't telling anyone until its time. Sometimes, though, we act like we are little bit sharper than the angels and Jesus, because we act like, if we study hard enough, we can figure out the chronology which leads up to the conclusion, even though Jesus said we won't.

Instead of being able to figure out the chronology, Jesus said that when the Spirit came upon the disciples they would be witnesses. He taught that, for His followers, chronology is not to be the fixation of one's mind, but being about the work of the Kingdom is the fixation.

This is right in line with what Paul taught. The church throughout the ages has been fixated on chronologies and conclusions. Looking at what Paul wrote in 1 Thess. 5:1, he had been comforting the Thessalonians concerning believers who died before the return of Jesus. They apparently wondered if this meant that they would miss out on the

consummation of the Kingdom since they did not physically live long enough for Jesus' return.

Paul wrote to them and said, no! They will not miss out on the consummation. So he told them of some things which would occur when Jesus returned. The church throughout the ages has studied what Paul wrote, and we study what Paul wrote, and we concluded that we can develop a chronology of the end based on what Paul wrote. What is interesting, is that at this point, right after he wrote about some events associated with Jesus' return, Paul stated, in 5:1, "Now, concerning *times* and *epochs*..." There are those two words again – "Concerning a chronological series of events that lead up to a conclusion, there is no need to write..."

We look at what Paul wrote and we say, "Well, Paul, I think I can come up with a chronological series of events that leads up to a conclusion." And he says, "That's not what I'm writing about." And we say, "I think you are." And he says, "Well, I'm telling you I'm not!" And we get into this little dispute.

Jesus said, "You won't know." Paul said, "There's no need to write about it." Why did Paul say in 1 Thessalonians that there was need to even write a chronology? Because, he stated in 5:2, "...The Day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night..." There is a comparison here. You want to know how and when the Day of the Lord will come, figure out how a thief comes to your house. How many thieves put up billboard signs stating, "I am coming to your house on this day, at this time? How many thieves, about a week before they come send you a letter? – "I just wanted to remind you that I'm coming next week." How many thieves give you a call the night of their visit? – "Just wanted you to know that I'm leaving my house right now to come to your house. Be there in a few." How many thieves stop at the end of your driveway, honk the horn, and flash the lights? --- "Hey, I'm almost there." How many thieves stop and knock on the door as they enter the house? – "Just wanted to let you know, I'm coming in right now."

We all know that a thief can come into our house at any time, and we try to prepare for it. But when a thief actually shows up, doesn't it catch you just a little off guard? – "I knew you could come, but I didn't expect you right now." The Bible teaches that Jesus will come just like a thief in the night. We know He is coming, but exactly when and how He is coming we do not know. I think even believers that have it all figured out, when He finally does show up, they will say, "Wait a minute, now. I didn't expect You now. Could You go back, and let's do this the right way."

I think His coming will catch them off guard just a little bit. The Bible does teach us, however, that even though we do not know the exact moment and series of events of His coming, His arrival will not catch us off guard, because we know that He is coming at some point.

Paul went on to say in verse 1 Thessalonians 5:8 that this knowledge about Jesus' coming causes His people to live holy lives – being about the actions and business of the Kingdom we should be about – so that when He does show up, even though we are a little surprised, we will be able to say, “But I am ready.” The result of the knowledge of Jesus' coming on the life of the believer should be faithful stewardship, not a fixation on chronology.

These ideas are consistent with the parables Jesus told about a master that went on a trip and left his stewards with work to do, and then returns. In these parables, who ate the good stewards? They were the ones who, regardless of whether or not they know when or how the master would return, simply went about the work they were left to do. When the master returned he saw that they had been doing their work, and what did he say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the pleasure of your master, and let me reward you with even more”

Then there were the unrighteous stewards as well. They were the ones who either watched for the master's return, and it is interesting that they always missed it, or who did not see the master coming or felt he was delayed and decided to relax, abuse the other servants, and sometimes even got drunk. Then the master returned and found that they had never really been about their work. In relation to these servants Jesus mentioned weeping, and gnashing of teeth, and taking what they had from them.

Studying these two types of servants, one was not concerned about the timing of the master's return; they were simply about their work. They received the master's pleasure and reward. The other group was obsessed about the master's return, but never did their work. They received the master's ire and punishment. Which group do you want to be a part of? I'm carnal enough that I want to be a part of the group that hears, “Well done good and faithful servant. Let give you some more.” To be in that group what do I have to do? I have to quit fixating on chronologies, signs, and conclusions, and simply be about the work the Master has given me to do.

So, even though the New Testament teaches about events associated with Jesus' return, chronologies are not the focus of the believer's attention when it comes to Last Things. Instead, the work of the Kingdom is to be the focus of the believer's life.

The Kingdom

This leads us back to the Kingdom. What exactly is the Kingdom? When is the Kingdom? And what impact does it have on my life?

First of all, when is the Kingdom? The New Testament teaches that there are two aspects concerning the time of the Kingdom. On one hand the Kingdom is a future reality. In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus said, "When Son of Man comes in His glory... then He will sit on His glorious throne...." Here Jesus showed that the consummation of the Kingdom, and the ultimate realization of the Kingdom, was a future event. This is a future reality for which believers have waited since the ascension of Christ after His resurrection. When exactly this will happen, we don't know, but it is coming in the future.

Not only is the Kingdom a future reality, it is also a present reality. We can see this in Matthew 12:28, where Jesus stated, "If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." Jesus taught that even though there is a future aspect of the Kingdom, His earthly ministry inaugurated the Kingdom. The Kingdom is a present reality because He established it at that time, and we live waiting for the future consummation of the Kingdom.

So the Kingdom is both present and future, but what is the Kingdom? The Bible teaches there is both a physical and a spiritual aspect of the Kingdom. In Revelation 21 John described a day when, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away... and I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...." and God's dwelling will be with men forever, and the peoples of the earth will come and go in the new Jerusalem.

There is a physical reality of the Kingdom. We see this in Genesis 1. I do not know that God had a physical throne sitting on the earth, but we do see that there was a period of time when God's kingdom reigned over the earth and the people of the earth. However, people rebelled and turned away from God. We look forward to the day when His Kingdom will become that reality of rule over the earth once again.

As we study biblical history we see that there was time when God raised up a nation, the nation of Israel. He made it a city on a hill, the light of the world, the model of what it meant to have relationship with God. Consequently, people continually dwell on the geopolitical aspect of the Kingdom. Is it a particular nation? Is it a particular earthly kingdom? Where in the world is it? What people group is God's people? We focus on this geopolitical aspect of the Kingdom to this day, but the Bible teaches that, in terms of a practical working out in the lives of believers, the Kingdom at this point is primarily a spiritual reality. We do look forward to the time when all creation is subject again to the physical rule of God's kingdom; but, in the mean time, while we wait for the future consummation, the Kingdom is primarily a spiritual reality.

In John 18:36 Jesus was on trial before Pilot and Pilot asked Him, "Are you in fact a king?" and Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this

world, then My servant would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”

Also, in Luke 17:20, 21 when asked about when the Kingdom was coming Jesus stated, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.”

For practical purposes for believers today, the Kingdom is a spiritual reality. It is God’s rule in the hearts and lives of His people – working in and through His people.

Practical Application for Today

What does this mean in terms of practical living for us today, and finally we come to our text for today? In Matthew 3:1-3, John the Baptizer was preaching as a herald for the coming Messiah, and taught about the Kingdom. The Gospels summarize Jesus’ in the Galilean exactly the same as they summarize John’s teaching at the Jordan River.

In Matthew 3:1 we read: *Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'"*

John’s teaching was the same as Jesus’ – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” What does this mean for us? First, in light of Jesus’ teaching, the Kingdom comes, and is a present reality with the earthly ministry of Jesus. The Kingdom is at hand, it is here, it has approached. There will be a future consummation some day, but there is a present reality of the Kingdom. Since the Kingdom is a present reality, there is an invitation extended to enter into the Kingdom and become a citizen of the Kingdom. Jesus and John both said, “Repent.”

We typically focus on the negative aspect of repentance, turning away from bad activity – “That’s bad. You better repent.” Repentance definitely involves turning away from bad activity, but that is not the primary focus of repentance. If the only thing you are focused on is turning away from bad activity, you may very well turn from that activity, but who knows what other activity you will turn to? All you are interested in is turning away from something.

The primary focus of repentance is positive – turn to something. Theologically, it is to turn to God. The natural consequence of turning to God is turning away from sin. But the primary focus must be turning toward something, not turning away from something. If the only thing you are doing in repentance is turning away from sin, who knows what

other activity or god you will turn to? If you turn to God, and focus on turning to and following God, all your sin problems will be taken care of appropriately.

So the invitation is to turn to the Kingdom, or, enter into the Kingdom. So, for today, while it is today, there is an invitation and opportunity to enter into God's Kingdom, into His rest, to become a citizen of the Kingdom.

What will the result of this be in my life? The Kingdom is here. It is available. There is an invitation extended for me to enter into the Kingdom and become a citizen. All I have to do is accept Jesus' invitation to come into the Kingdom. What will happen in my life when I do that?

This is where the idea state in verse three comes in. John quoted Isaiah, "Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight." Turning to the Kingdom results in "prepared ways" and "straight paths." This is not a statement about a literal road that one builds. He is not telling us to pick one the roads in town and fix it. The terms "way" and "path" refer to one's life, one's life-style. It is not that we have to literally fill in the valleys and cut down the mountains, and pave a straight road so the Lord can come into His Kingdom. This is referring to our lives.

Since the Lord is coming and judgment with Him, and since the opportunity exists right now to enter into His Kingdom, to enter in I must bring my life under the authority of God, and my life must be a straight life according to God's authority, according to God's principles, according to God's life. I need to live holy and righteously right now. I need to be about the business of the Kingdom until the Master returns and I have to give an account.

All the other issues of the Kingdom and the Last Days will work themselves out, just as God has determined. And it will happen exactly as God has predetermined, whether I figure it out or not.

How will it happen? I don't know, and I really don't care. I'm having a hard enough time figuring out what he wants me to do right now, let alone figuring out all the chronological events which lead up to the consummation.

When will it all happen? I don't know, and I really don't care. I'm having a hard enough time redeeming the current time, because the days are evil. (Eph. 5:16)

But this one thing I do know, if I am found to be a faithful steward now, and am about the work of the Kingdom, it will be a great day when the master returns and sits on his throne.

Appendix

Fearing God in the NT:

1. Romans 3:18 – No fear led to unrighteous living
2. Romans 11:20 – Gentile believers should fear, since the branches of unbelieving Jews were broken off the tree...
3. Romans 13:7 – fear the one to whom fear is due
4. Luke 12:5 – Jesus – fear not the one can only kill the body, but the one who can cast one into hell.
5. 2 Cor. 2:5 – knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade
6. 2 Cor. 2:7 – cleanse oneself...perfecting holiness in the fear of God
7. Eph. 5:21 – Fear of the Lord produced subjection to one another in the church
8. Phil. 2:12 – Work out your salvation in fear and trembling
9. Col. 3:22 – Fear of the Lord causes servants of obey masters
10. Heb. 4:1 – Fear falling short of entering God's rest, he will declare that you cannot enter
11. Heb. 12:21 – Moses feared Mount Sinai, and death
12. 1 Peter 1:17 – live this life in fear, since you call "Father" the one who impartially judges everyone's work
13. 1 Peter 2:17 – commanded to fear God
14. Rev. 11:18 – reward for those who fear the Lord
15. Rev. 14:7 – Fear God because of the hour of judgment
16. Rev. 15:4 – Everyone should fear God because of his holiness
17. Rev. 19:5 – Those who fear God will praise him

Appearing for judgment:

1. Romans 2:5 – Unrepentant judgmental believers store up wrath for the Day of Judgment
2. Romans 14:10 – We will all stand before the judgment seat of God
3. 1 Cor. 3:13 – Each man's work revealed with fire – The Day will show it
4. 1 Cor. 3:15 – The man himself will be saved, but only as one passing through fire
5. 2 Cor. 5:10 – We will all come before the Judgment Seat of Christ
6. 2 Thess. 1:5 – The Thess. standing firm amid persecution was a sign of God's judgment that they were worthy of the Kingdom of God
7. 1 Tim. 5:24 – Some men's deeds proceed them to judgment
8. Heb. 9:27 – People die once, then stand judgment
9. Heb. 10:27 – Judgment is only expectation for those who willfully go on sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth
10. Heb. 12:29 – Our God is a consuming fire
11. James 5:3 – Rich have stored up judgment and fore for the last days
12. 1 Peter 4:17 – Time for judgment to begin, and it begins with the house of God
13. 2 Peter 3:3-18 – ought to live holy lives knowing Judgment Day is coming

- 14.1 John 4:17 – Those who fellowship with God have confidence in the Day of Judgment
15. Jude 15 – The Lord comes to execute judgment on all
16. Rev. 20 – All the dead appear before the Great White Throne of Judgment
17. Matt. 25:31-46 – When Son of Man comes in his glory and sits on his throne, all the nations will appear before him, and he will separate the sheep from the goats.