

The Promise of Salvation Fulfilled

Christ, the Kingdom, and the New Covenant

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Throughout the history of the Old Testament the faithful people of God looked forward to the day when God would send his promised savior or redeemer to restore his people to their original and destined purpose with God (Acts 3:19-21). These faithful people lived by faith in the promises of God. Though living in this world they were, through the eyes of faith, looking forward to "a better country - a heavenly one"² (Heb. 11:16) and to a "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). And yet, despite having persevered in faith, all of these Old Testament believers died not having yet received these promises (Heb. 11:13). For the day in the timetable of God's plan had not yet arrived for the promises to be fulfilled (Heb. 11:39-40).

Old Testament Prophecies:

The Christ and the Kingdom of God

As the history of the faithful people of God continued through the later stages of the Old Testament the vision of this coming kingdom or paradise became even clearer and was foretold by "all the prophets" (Acts 3:21-24). Examples of these prophecies can be found in the Old Testament Books of Isaiah and Daniel. Isaiah spoke of a coming ruler whose righteous kingdom would reign *forever*:

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his

kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever (Isaiah 9:6-7).³

The prophet Daniel also spoke of a coming everlasting kingdom. A kingdom to be brought to pass by "one like a son of man" and which would replace all other kingdoms and rule so as to establish God's righteous rule forever:

In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed ... it will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever (Daniel 2:44).

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven ... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-17).

This everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace eventually came to be summed up by the one term - "the kingdom of God." The many titles of its future ruler were also summed up in one term - the "Messiah" or "Christ" - God's anointed Savior and King. It was on this biblical promise of the coming Christ and the glorious everlasting kingdom of God which he was to establish that all the hopes of the Old Testament faithful rested. For then, and only then, would their God whom they loved "wipe away the tears from all faces," "remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth," and "swallow up death forever" (Isaiah 25:8).

The Birth of Christ

When, in the plan of God, "the time had fully come" (Gal. 4:4), Jesus Christ, the promised Savior and King, was miraculously

conceived by the power of God's Spirit and then born into the world (Luke 1:26-2:38). Though the faithful people of God within the Jewish nation were looking expectantly for his coming, much confusion existed as to who this "Messiah" or "Christ" would be and as to what kind of kingdom he would establish. Some four hundred years had passed since the last Old Testament Book of Malachi and during this inter-testamental period the Jewish people had been in captivity to the Persian, Greek and, finally, Roman Empires. As a result, many of the Jewish people of that time were looking for a Messiah or King who would immediately deliver them from their political captivity to Rome and establish a kingdom that would restore Israel to its heights of glory which it had once held under the kingdom of David in the Old Testament.

Jesus was to show, however, that there was much more to his mission than this. For Christ came first and foremost to bring spiritual deliverance to mankind by destroying the work of the Devil (I John 3:8), thus making possible man's reconciliation back to his proper and intended relationship with God (II Cor. 5:18-19). Only after this was accomplished would he be able to come again in power and glory to establish the paradise of God's kingdom in a new heaven and new earth where righteousness would dwell.

The Good News of the Kingdom of God

Jesus began his public ministry at the age of thirty after being anointed with the power of the holy Spirit (Luke 3:21-23; 4:16-21). At that time he made it his chief mission to proclaim, expound, and demonstrate the true nature of the coming kingdom of God which he was to establish. All four of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - show this. Look, for example, at the Gospels of Mark and Luke:

'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent [turn to God] and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15).

At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.' And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea (Luke 4:42-44).

Jesus stated that he was sent by God to preach the "good news" of the kingdom of God. Why was it good news? Because Jesus, as the anointed Messiah, promised deliverance, salvation and eternal life in the paradise of God's coming kingdom to all who believed his message and accepted him. In addition, he also demonstrated the love, power and deliverance of God's kingdom by many miraculous healings. In this way the power of the kingdom of God was already present in Jesus, the Messiah, before the kingdom itself was established in a restored earth as had been foretold by all the prophets.

This mighty display of God's love and power was a foretaste of all that God's coming kingdom was to be. It also showed the stark contrast between the goodness of God's kingdom and the oppression of Satan's spiritual kingdom that had engulfed the world since the time of Adam. Look at the following verses:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Matt. 4:23).

Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'it is only

by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.' Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Matt. 12:22-28).

Jesus' healings were an invasion of the power of the kingdom of God, which was then in heaven (Matt. 6:9-10), into the realm of Satan and his kingdom of darkness in the world. Since the time of Adam's sin this spiritual darkness and evil had engulfed the entire world (I John 5:19). Only where God's will was done and God's Spirit displayed in power did the light of God's kingdom penetrate and dispel this spiritual darkness of Satan's kingdom. The Book of Acts summarizes Jesus' entire ministry in the light of this spiritual battle as he delivered people from the oppression of the devil:

...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him (Acts 10:38).

Here we see the key point that had been missing in the understanding of the people of Jesus' day. Their problems and oppression were not due to the Romans, Greeks or Persians who had held them in captivity. Instead, the root cause of their oppression was spiritual. Satan and his spiritual kingdom of evil had, since Adam's day, deceived the world and brought sin, sickness and death into it. The whole world was lying in the web of its spiritual deception and oppression. Until the spiritual causes of

man's dilemma were defeated and overcome, God's kingdom could not come in all of its power and glory.

The True Nature of the Kingdom of God

Jesus, therefore, opened up the spiritual understanding of his followers. Though God's kingdom will one day fill a new heavens and earth, it will not be a political kingdom based on the worldly standards of this age. Instead, it will be a spiritual kingdom – that is, a kingdom that will come *from* heaven to a renewed and glorious earth, and whose character and standards are "not of this world" (Matt. 6:9-10; John 18:36; Rev. 21:1ff). To enter, or inherit, that future kingdom a person must now be born of God's Spirit so as to become a child in God's family and an heir of that kingdom to come (John 3:1-16; Rom. 8:16-25). Then, at the time of Christ's future second coming all of God's faithful people from all generations will be raised and transformed so as to have a share, or inheritance, in this new world to come. For, as the Apostle Paul was later to state, "... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50).

In short, the kingdom of God which is to come will necessitate a whole new order of things where the mortal will become immortal, the perishable become imperishable and the entire creation "delivered from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:18-21; I Cor. 15:35-54; Rev. 21:1f). Jesus called this the "making new" or "regeneration" of all things and promised that his followers would be rewarded in that "age to come" for their faithful service in this life (Matt. 19:28-29; Luke 18:29-30).

Christ had also taught, however, that in order to enter the kingdom of God a person's righteousness must "surpass that of the Pharisees" (Matt. 5:20), for God's holiness required perfection (Matt. 5:48). However, since man was unable to attain such perfection on his own (Matt. 19:16-26; Rom. 3:23), it was necessary that Jesus give his own life as the

ransom sacrifice for man's sins - the righteous for the unrighteous (I Pet. 3:18) - so that man could receive righteousness, not by his own merit, but as a gift from God through faith in Christ (Rom. 3:20-24; 5:15-19). As Jesus himself stated, " ...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

The Two-fold Purpose of Christ

It was therefore for the purpose of doing for sinful man what he was incapable of doing for himself that Christ had come into the world. As the savior of the world, the perfect man, it was necessary for him to first defeat the spiritual causes of man's oppression and separation from God: sin, death and Satan. Only after this could he come again in power and glory to bring about salvation in all its fullness by destroying God's enemies and establishing forever the kingdom of God in a new heaven and new earth where righteousness would dwell.

Though this two-fold purpose of Christ - his sufferings on behalf of mankind and his future glory - had both been foretold in the Old Testament, the first part was not understood by the people of Jesus' day - not even by his closest followers (Luke 18:31-34). It was only after his sacrificial death, and then resurrection, that Jesus was finally able to open the understanding of his disciples so that they could realize the significance of his crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 24:44-47). As the "lamb of God" who was to "take away the sins of the world" (John 1:29) Jesus freely gave up his own life as the ransom payment for the sins of all mankind (II Cor. 5:21; I Pet. 1:18-21; Isaiah 53). On the third day God raised him from the dead gaining victory over sin, death and Satan for all of God's people.

After his resurrection Christ then appeared to his chosen disciples and taught them about the significance of his death and the glory of God's kingdom to come (Luke 24:44-47; Acts 1:1-11). He then ascended into heaven

where as the exalted Lord over God's people he poured out the gift of holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost upon all who believed in him. On that same day, after receiving the gift of holy Spirit, the apostle Peter set forth a summary of the events that had just taken place in fulfillment of the plan of God:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:22-24, 32-36).

Jesus freely gave up his life as a sacrificial offering on behalf of mankind. In doing this he paid the price for man's sins and made possible a new covenant relationship between God and man. No longer does sin have to keep man separated from his proper relationship with God. Because of Christ's sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension into heaven and his giving of the holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, it is now possible for man to be reconciled to God and to enjoy the blessings of salvation already in this present age. The following

verses explain the significance of these events and the resulting new covenant relationship between God and man:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:6-11).

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance - now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant (Heb. 9:15).

In solving the problem of sin Jesus also made possible freedom from the bondage of death and, therefore, from the oppression of Satan himself. For it was because of sin that death had come into the world and Satan had gained power over mankind (Rom. 5:12). By his sacrificial death and then resurrection Jesus broke the power of death and destroyed Satan's hold on mankind. The NT Letters to the Hebrews and Corinthians explain:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives

were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15).

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him (I Cor. 15:20-23).

Christ is the "firstfruits" of those who have fallen asleep; therefore, his resurrection is the guarantee that all who believe in him will also one day be resurrected to share fully in the eternal life of the coming age. With the death and resurrection of Christ, along with his giving of the holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the end of human history in this present evil age has already begun. The spiritual cause of man's oppression, Satan, has already been defeated and his future doom awaits only the second coming of Christ. As the "firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18), Christ is the beginning of a new people of God (Rom. 8:28-30) - called out from every nation, family or race upon earth.

Those who believe in Christ are now born of God's Spirit becoming children in God's family and a part of his new covenant people - the church of the body of Christ. This Spirit, which the people of God now receive, is the "power of the coming age" (Heb. 6:5) and the "firstfruits" (Rom. 8:23), or "down payment" (Eph. 1:13-14), of the full harvest of eternal life which will be received at Christ's second coming. In short, the victory has already been won for God's people and history is now moving towards a known climactic end - the second coming of Christ and the final establishment of God's kingdom (I Cor. 15:20-28).

The New Covenant Perspective

It is precisely this Biblical perspective that dominates all of the New Testament writings from the day of Pentecost onwards. Christ now "reigns" at God's right hand in heaven and gives salvation, through the Spirit, to all who come to God through him (Heb. 7:22-25). However, even though his reign as Lord and Christ has already begun, it will not be fully consummated until the time of his second coming when all his enemies will be destroyed and God's kingdom will be established "on earth as it is in heaven." The time period between the first and second comings of Christ is the new age of the Spirit - that is, the age of the new covenant relationship which Christ has established between God and his people (II Cor. 3:6). For with the giving of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost the blessings of God's future salvation have already begun - even in the midst of this present evil age.

This period of time between Christ's first and second comings is sometimes called "the last days" (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; etc.), "the last times" (I Pet. 1:20) or "the ends of the ages" (I Cor. 10:11; Heb. 9:26). But it is also called the

"day of salvation" (II Cor. 6:2), because it is the period of time in which the salvation made possible through Christ's first coming is now being offered to the world. For those who choose to accept it the blessings of this salvation begin already in this present life and will be received in all their fullness at Christ's second coming. The Book of Hebrews summarizes the greatness of this two-fold purpose of Christ and the fullness of salvation which awaits those who believe in him:

... But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Heb. 9:26-28).

[Both the opening letter of this newsletter issue as well as this article have been adapted from this writer's booklet "God's Plan of Salvation". The booklet is available free of charge from the address on the back of this newsletter]

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