

# Offer of the Kingdom

## **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"**

- John the Baptist (Matt 3:2; Mark 1:15)
- Christ (Matt 4:17)
- The Twelve (Matt 10:5-7)
- The Seventy (Luke 10:1,9,11)

The Greek verb *engizo* is translated "near" or "at hand." However, "kingdom now" theologians understand the phrase "at hand" to mean "here" in the sense that the kingdom has already arrived. However, such an interpretation is controversial and is hardly a foregone conclusion.

James 5:8-9 uses the identical verb *engizo* to communicate the nearness or any moment expectation of the Lord's coming. These verses say, "You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door." Here, not only is the verb *engizo* translated "near" used that is also used in the early-Gospel expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," but so is the identical parsing of this same verb. In all of these instances, the verb *engizo* appears as a third person singular perfect active indicative. Virtually no one interprets James 5:8-9 as conveying the Lord's presence or arrival. Rather, all understand the passage as describing His imminent nearness or any-moment appearance. Thus, why should the same verb and parsing in the expression "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" not be given the same rendering of the kingdom's imminent nearness rather than its presence or arrival? If the grammatical structure of James 5:8-9 conveys the imminency and nearness of the Lord's coming, then consistency dictates that the same grammatical structure in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" also depicts the kingdom's imminent nearness rather than its arrival. The perfect tense employed in all of these verses communicates "that the kingdom had drawn near and was then in a condition of nearness. It is better to translate 'has come near.'

The fact that the word "kingdom" in the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" is given no detailed explanation in these verses must mean that John, Christ, the Twelve, and the Seventy are drawing upon information already revealed about the kingdom in the OT. Thus, they are offering to Israel what the OT reveals concerning the kingdom. The OT consistently depicts the kingdom in earthly, terrestrial terms. The Jews of Christ's

day, who were well familiar with this OT understanding, were similarly anticipating an earthly, literal kingdom.

The ministry of the incarnate Christ never altered this earthly expectation. Not only did the disciples believe that Christ was going to restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), but the mother of James and John also requested that her sons be given places of prominence with the earthly kingdom's establishment (Matt 20:20-21). Because the request in Matt 20 and the inquiry of Acts 1 both transpired late in Christ's ministry, it is unlikely that the disciples had a mistaken understanding of the kingdom at this point. They had already heard Jesus teach extensively about the kingdom and had already been blessed by Christ for their insight into the kingdom (Matt 13:11-17).

In the events surrounding both Matt 20:20-21 and Acts 1:6, Christ never issued a rebuke due to a faulty understanding or expectation of a future, earthly kingdom. Rather, in Matt 20, His only correction to the mother of James and John related to her failure to consider that the cross precedes the crown (Matt 20:22-23). Similarly, in Acts 1, His only correction of the disciples involved their misunderstanding concerning the timing of the establishment of the Davidic kingdom, not the fact of its ultimate fulfillment (Acts 1:7). In neither case did Christ challenge their common expectation that a future, earthly kingdom would ultimately become a reality. All of this background shows that the phrase "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" could hardly represent an inauguration of a spiritual kingdom in Christ's early ministry.

In sum, far from teaching that the kingdom had now arrived in a spiritual sense, the expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" merely communicates that the OT expectation of an earthly kingdom had drawn near in the person of Christ. Had the nation enthroned Christ (Deut 17:15), what the OT predicted concerning an earthly kingdom would have become a reality not only for Israel but also for the entire world. As long as Christ was present amongst first-century Israel offering them the kingdom, it was in an imminent state of nearness. This reality is an entirely different matter from saying that the kingdom was present or had arrived. Unfortunately, "kingdom now" theologians miss the true import of the early-Gospel expression "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" by instead arguing that the kingdom is here rather than near. In actuality, in Christ's early ministry, the opposite was true. This conclusion comes from carefully noting the grammar of the passages as well as the common understanding of "kingdom."

Eight reasons why the "offer of the kingdom" should not be so easily dismissed since it rests upon firm exegetical footing. It is found not only in Matthew's gospel but also Luke's gospel.

1. The idea of the contingency of a benefit depending upon whether the offeree is willing to accept the terms of the offer is well established in the OT (1 Kings 11:38; Jer 18:7-10).
2. Israel's covenantal structure required repentance before the kingdom could be established (Lev 26; Deut 28).
3. The message of the kingdom's nearness was confined to national Israel. Matt 10:5-7 says, "These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them, saying, '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!'"
4. The contingency of the offer is seen in statements of Christ, such as, "And if you care to accept *it*, he himself is Elijah, who was to come" (Matt 11:14). Of this statement, Toussaint remarks, "There is scarce a passage in Scripture which shows more clearly that the kingdom was being offered to Israel at this time. Its coming was contingent upon one thing: Israel receiving it by genuine repentance."
5. There is a cessation of the announcement of the kingdom after Israel rejects her Messiah (Matt 12; Luke 11).
6. The Lord pronounces judgment upon that generation (Matt 23:36-39) for failing to recognize the hour of their visitation (Luke 19:42,44; Dan 9:26). In other words, they were judged because they failed to accept the offer.
7. The parables of rejection depict the postponement of the kingdom. While earlier in Luke's gospel the kingdom is portrayed as being near (Luke 10:9,11), the Parable of the Minas was told in order to dissuade the disciples' expectation of the kingdom's nearness (Luke 19:11). The parable teaches that the kingdom program would be postponed for a long duration and the disciples had obligations to fulfill in the interim (Luke 19:11-27).
8. The message of the kingdom's imminence does not reappear until the context pertains to the Seventieth Week of Daniel or the future Tribulation period (Matt 24:14; Luke 21:31). In sum, when understood in the light of this kingdom offer, Christ's statement in Matt 12:28 was not indicative of the fact the kingdom had arrived. Rather, His statement simply meant that the tokens of the kingdom (His miracles, exorcisms, etc...) could have become a reality for the nation of Israel had she responded to the contingency of the offer that Christ was extending to her.

So if Jesus' Offer of the Kingdom was legitimate, how could it have been in good faith if He knew they would reject Him (Ps 22; Is 53)? And how could Israel be held responsible for rejecting their predicted King (Zech 9:9; Luke 19:30-44) if to accept Him would potentially bypass the cross?

Underlying these questions is an implicit belief on our part that *moral possibility* and *historical necessity* are mutually exclusive.

This is a subject which I like to refer to as "walking the knife edge" between man's responsibility and God's sovereignty. In our human understanding we are constantly drawn to one side of the knife or the other: on one side of the blade is man's responsibility, on the other side is God's sovereignty. Our human reasoning assumes them to be mutually exclusive: if God is truly sovereign, then man could not be responsible for what comes to be—or so we think. On the other hand, if man is truly responsible, then his will (choices) must be determinative in the course of history, able to even overcome God's sovereignty. But the Scriptures teach both human responsibility and divine sovereignty—even in cases where choices by man seemingly could have resulted in a path which change God's sovereign plan (Rom 9:16-19).

Consider the following Biblical situations:

- God knew that Adam and Eve would fall, yet He still made a good faith offer as if they may not have. Yet they were completely responsible for disobeying.
- Jesus knew that the Jews would reject Him as King, yet He still made a good faith offer of the kingdom to Israel and the nation remained fully responsible for rejecting Him (Hosea 5:15; Zech 12:10; Matt 27:24-25; Rev 1:7).
- Jesus knew that Judas would betray Him (John 6:70), yet chose him as one of the twelve. His betrayal was a key step leading to His crucifixion, yet Judas remains fully responsible for turning Jesus over to the authorities (Matt 26:24)...the words of Christ regarding Judas raise the theological problem of divine sovereignty versus human responsibility in relation to the Kingdom...(Luke 22:22). The rejection of the regal Son of man and His Kingdom was no chance incident in the history of the world, for this matter was part of the counsels of the Eternal One. On the other hand, what Judas did in conspiracy with the leaders of Israel was something which morally the conspirators ought not to have done, and for which therefore they will be held personally responsible before the bar of God. Our Lord's terrible words (Mark 14:21) underline this responsibility. ***But if the moral responsibility for rejecting the Messiah and His Kingdom was genuine, then so also the divine offer must have been genuine.***

One of the most powerful passages concerning this "knife edge" between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility is found in Peter's sermon to the Jews in Acts 2:22-

23, where he makes two important points:

1. Jesus' crucifixion was according to the *determined purpose and foreknowledge* of God (God didn't just *know* it would occur, but *determined* that it would)
2. Israel's lawless behavior, which Peter's listeners were fully responsible for, brought this about. The Scripture is walking along the "knife edge" which, in our minds, would separate man's responsibility from God's sovereignty. So we have to embrace both because this is the higher Scriptural truth—even though in our limited understanding we are unable to fully reconcile the two (Rom 9).

There are aspects of the gospels which don't make sense if Jesus did not make a good faith offer of the kingdom to Israel at His first coming. We notice that Jesus initially restricted His ministry to Israel alone (Matt 10:5-6; 15:24; Mark 7:27; John 1:11; Acts 10:36). This makes little sense if the content of His presentation concerned His future atoning work on the cross which was to eventually benefit people from all nations. The answer to this puzzle, of course, is found in recognizing that the kingdom promised in the OT is uniquely Israel's. This also explains why Jesus went to so much trouble to ride into Jerusalem (the Jewish capital) on a donkey presenting Himself as Israel's king in fulfillment of Zech 9:9. (Notice too that God used a Gentile to make this as clear as possible—over the objection of the Jewish leaders themselves (John 19:14-22).

Another question we might ask concerns how Jesus could send out His disciples doing the early work of the ministry preaching that the kingdom was "near" and "at hand" (Matt 10:7) when they did not yet understand He was destined for the cross? As late as Matt 16:21-22 we find Peter, who had earlier been among those who preached to Israel concerning the offer of the kingdom, completely out of touch with the destiny of Jesus on the cross. ***If the gospel presented earlier by Jesus and the apostles concerned the atoning work of Christ, why is Peter so clueless concerning the necessity and benefit of the impending crucifixion? Clearly, whatever message Jesus and the apostles were presenting during their early ministry, it did not include a clear understanding of the necessary death of Christ.***

There is also the puzzling matter of the disciple's question immediately prior to Jesus' departure preceding Pentecost. If Jesus did not offer a kingdom to Israel, then why did His disciples clearly expect this would still be the case—even after His crucifixion?

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) This question should not be dismissed lightly as evidence of an "unspiritual" and "carnal" viewpoint, as some writers assume to

do. Such treatment imputes not only inferior intelligence to the apostles but also, worse than that, incompetence to their Teacher.

There is no clear indication that the gospel of the kingdom (Matt 4:23; 9:35) was ever preached in a way which emphasized the death of Christ. This is not to deny that certain Jews who knew the OT (Ps 22; Is 53; and other passages) understood that the Messiah was to suffer and die. Simeon and Anna were such (Luke 2:34-38). The point here is not that no Jews understood the impending death of Jesus and the atoning work of the cross, but that the initial gospel presented by Jesus and His apostles emphasized the arrival of Israel's predicted kingdom as manifest by its King walking in their midst.

The idea that Jesus' offer of the kingdom to Israel couldn't be true because the possibility exists that the offer could have been received leading to the circumvention of the cross is really a distraction: it is not dispensationalism's view that Jesus offered the kingdom which leads to this theoretical conundrum. A plain reading of the gospels reveals that John the Baptist, Jesus, and His apostles, all came preaching repentance. If this message of repentance was in good faith, then it must have been morally possible for the people who heard the message to respond. And if they did, what would have become of the cross? Who would have been left to betray Christ? Whether the offer concerned a literal or spiritual kingdom doesn't change this theological possibility because the "problem" we are dealing with concerns complete divine sovereignty and full human responsibility which is independent from the content of the gospel message itself.

Suppose that Jesus did offer a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of men, and that repentance was the condition for receiving that kingdom, and that the people did repent and were born again, what then would have happened to the cross? Since the crucifixion had not yet taken place, does it mean that there was in those days a way of salvation different from salvation through the death of Christ?

Does understanding that Jesus came to the lost sheep of the house of Israel to offer the kingdom clear up every puzzle in the gospels? Most certainly not! Even so, understanding Jewish expectations (and omissions) derived from the OT is critical to a deeper understanding of what is actually transpiring in the gospels. Despite how often one hears it taught, not everything the Jews expected when Jesus came was incorrect: God had promised a literal kingdom with the advent of Messiah. However, due to the rejection of the King, Israel would not see the King coming in His kingdom until His second advent (Matt 23:37-39; 25:31).

For additional background on this question, I can recommend:

- Tony Garland, *The Presentation and Rejection of Messiah Jesus*
- Alva McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*
- George Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (especially volume 1, propositions 24,55,57-60,67,187,206)
- Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, pp. 299-311
- Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew*