

WAITING AND WORRYING

Matthew 4:17, 23

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Waiting and Worrying

The doctor has taken certain tests and sent them away to be read. Because of the holiday weekend and the backlog of patients, you won't likely hear any results for two weeks. The clock creeps along, sliding slowly at a snail's pace. During the torturous waiting period, you imagine the worst, hope for the best, and figure out how to settle for something in between. You replay the doctor's visit a thousand times in the middle of the night, trying to read his face—a raised eyebrow, clucks of the tongue, and the wavering tone in his voice. Then your mind shifts to the technician and his guttural groans and nervous fingers. Do any of these hold the answer or do they mean nothing at all? And how can you tell the difference?

You're a six-year-old girl and can't wait until Christmas. Your parents have promised, or at least hinted, that Christmas is going to bring you a pony. You've already been riding a friend's pony since you were four years old, but you dream every night of having a pony of your own, a pony which has never been more gentle or graceful than he is in your dreams. You are picking out possible names: Scout, Teddy Bear, Charm, or Thunder. In your grandest dream, the pony is a gray gelding, but any color will do. "How long 'til Christmas?" you ask your mother. She responds with a sly grin which indicates she might have just been shopping for a Shetland. "Thirty days," comes her tempting reply. Every hour becomes a day. Every day becomes a week. Every week becomes a month. And the month seems a year. How can Christmas come to a crawl? You are forced to wait and can only ride your pony in the meadows of your mind. Time has never stood still like it does for the child waiting for a Christmas surprise.

You've been sleeping on a slab of cold concrete for forty-one months. Every day is the same monotonous routine: eagerly awaiting your ration of one bowl of sticky rice and waiting at the well for hours to fill your canteen with clean water. The balance of each day is spent longing for liberation. As a prisoner of war, you have been beaten badly on the Bataan Death March. Every day you languish with fellow prisoners, hoping that help is on the way.

Sometimes the waiting time is the hardest time of all. It is the time in between where we are now and where we hope to be. Whether two weeks or two decades, waiting time is torturous time.

Looking and Longing—An Old Testament Perspective

The Day of the Lord

The ancient Israelites had been waiting for the great "day of the Lord" when God would intervene on their behalf, overturning injustice, righting all wrongs, and freeing them from the oppression of

foreign rule. The day of the Lord was an event more than a date. It was usually represented as God's intervening on behalf of ancient Israel and judging the pagan nations. This was an event that put an end to man's rebellion and began the period of God's sovereignty (Joel 2; Isaiah 13-14). The day of the Lord was the hinge point which connected human history with the eternal kingdom of God. Sometimes the Old Testament spoke in the plural using "those days" (Jeremiah 5:18) or in general using "the time" that is coming (Joel 3:1-2). Though described in various terms, the event was the same—the arrival of God's reign in human history.

Of all the elements the day of the Lord might have included from an Old Testament perspective, we can be sure that the occasion held at least three hopes of God's people: (1) the involvement of God acting in the "here and now," (2) judgment upon those who opposed Yahweh, and (3) the liberation of ancient Israel from all pagan authorities. The description of the day was one of wrath, anguish, affliction, destruction, and devastation which reaches its climax in the picture portrayed in Zephaniah: "a day of trumpet and battle cry, against the fortified cities and the high corner towers" (1:16). According to the prophets, all of history was moving toward this great climactic moment when God would intervene on behalf of His people.

The day was also, however, to be a day for the purification of the people of God. The prophetic word declared, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1). The question is then asked, "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?" No answer is given, but it is said that the Lord himself will bring about the purification of His people like a refiner's fire or fullers' soap. The day of the Lord, therefore, represents God's arrival and the arrival of His kingdom as He purifies His people.

The Kingdom of God

The ultimate purpose of the Day of the Lord is that the kingdom of God might be established. While the expression "kingdom of God" is never actually used in the Old Testament, God is called "King" forty-one times in the Old Testament. For example, "the Lord sits as King forever" in the Psalms (29:10), and Isaiah was fearful for His life because His "eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). God is so clearly and consistently pictured as king that one of the foundational elements of faith in the Old Testament is that God is the ruling Lord. God's kingship is related to His sovereign acts on behalf of His people through all the ages. Zechariah, the prophet, looked forward to the day when "the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one" (Zechariah 14:9).

From the Old Testament, we glean several truths about the kingdom of God. First of all, it provides the universal rule of Yahweh. This realm of His rule includes both Israel (Isaiah 26:1-15; 28:5ff.; Ezekiel 11:17ff.; Hosea 2:6-17; Zechariah 8:1-8) and the Gentiles who turn to God so that His kingdom knows no boundary in regard to the nations. All people will submit to Him (Isaiah 49:22-26; 60:4-16; Amos 9:11ff.; Micah 4:13; 7:8-17). And the nations are included in the salvation of that kingdom (Isaiah 25:6-7; 45:21-22; 51:4-5; 52:10-11; 56:3-4; Jeremiah 3:17; Zephaniah 3:8-9; Zechariah 8:20-21; 14:9). While God is already King in one sense, He must one day fully manifest His kingship in the world of men and nations.

The second element of the kingdom is righteousness. The kingdom of God is a time of cleansing, renewal, and justice (Isaiah 1:25-26; 4:3-4; 32:15-16; 52:13-53:12; Jeremiah 31:31-32; Ezekiel 36:25-26; 37:23-24). Sometimes, the righteousness of the Messiah himself overflows to the people (Isaiah 11:3-5; Jeremiah 23:5-6) and sometimes the righteousness is found among God's people in general (Isaiah 26:2; 28:5-6). The arrival of the kingdom ushers in a new kind of righteousness as the Lord seeks the cleansing and renewal of His people.

A third element of the kingdom is peace. War ceases among the nations (Isaiah 2:2-3; 9:5-6; Micah 5:4-5; Zechariah 9:9-10), and there is even peace among the animals (Isaiah 11:6-7; 35:9). Paradise-like life returns with expectations of overflowing fruitfulness in nature (Isaiah 35; 41:17-18; Ezekiel 47; Hosea 2:21-22; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13). God is at peace with man, and man is at peace with others, as this peace represents salvation (Isaiah 12; 33:17ff.; Jeremiah 31:1-14; Hosea 2:14-15; 14:4-5; Zephaniah 3:14-20). Therefore, all of human history is striving toward the goal of the coming of the kingdom of God, which includes God's complete sovereignty, righteousness, and the peaceful salvation of the world.

Looking and Longing—A New Testament Perspective

The Kingdom of God

While the phrase is never actually used in the Old Testament, by the first century both the arrival of God's reign and His continuing rule on earth had been encapsulated with the words, "the kingdom of God." All that God's people hoped for, in fact, had been wrapped up in the terms "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven." The kingdom represented a time when all that God wanted to accomplish would happen on earth as it already did in heaven, even as our Lord's prayer longed for such a day (Matthew 6:10).

But the real questions for first-century Jews were how, when, and through whom was God's kingdom going to arrive? Israel had waited for God's restoring hand since the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and carried them as captives into exile. Though long since released from captivity, the ancient Israelites had never since fully enjoyed freedom. God would eventually reign, for ancient Israel had depicted Him as a king of both Israel (Exodus 15:18; Deuteronomy 33:5; Isaiah 43:15; Mark 1:14ff.) and all men (Jeremiah 46:18; Isaiah 40:2). His sovereign rule would, at last, bring forth their long awaited liberation from foreign powers.

While You Are Waiting

By the first century, various approaches had developed to try to deal with the delayed coming of God's kingdom. One approach was taken by the Qumran community. This community, which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, simply withdrew from the wicked world and waited for God to do whatever God was going to do. They chose isolation. Others, like Herod, built palaces for themselves and tried to get along with the powers that be—Rome—in hopes that God would someday validate their feeble compromises with worldly powers. They chose to enjoy the earthly rule of Rome while they waited for the kingdom to come. The most aggressive approach, however, was taken by the Zealots who were ready to take political action, sharpening their swords to fight a holy war to put God on the throne even as they said their prayers. They chose to try to force the kingdom's arrival by initiating a kingdom clash between worldly powers.

Jesus and the Presence of the Kingdom

The question, of course, is which of these three approaches was adopted by Jesus? How did He look and long for the kingdom of God? Surprising His contemporaries, Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God had already arrived with His very presence. The summary of Jesus' preaching, as presented by the gospel writers, is certain and succinct: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven *is at hand* (Matthew 4:17, 23, emphasis added). New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd even asserted, "Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus." Jesus was declaring that God was, indeed, sticking to His age-old plan, pressing His sovereignty upon Israel and the world, and promoting justice and mercy. He was, however, accomplishing all this through Jesus himself. As Lord, Jesus was teaching and acting as if the very plan of God's salvation and God's vindication of Israel was actually occurring because of His own presence and work. Many of Jesus' parables concerned the arrival and the value of God's kingdom (Matthew 13; Mark 3:27; and Luke 15). Jesus was declaring that those who heard His message should give up their approaches to bringing in the kingdom or dealing with its delay and fall behind His new vision of God's reign and rule.

Jesus' most famous sermon, The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), is a seedbed for His teaching about the kingdom. When He told His disciples "Do not resist him who is evil" or "Turn to him the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39), He was declaring that His followers should not join the Zealots in their approach to inaugurating the kingdom. Rather, Jesus' hearers were to fulfill the role of God's people, the role of Israel—to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth, and a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden (Jerusalem).

The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed found its roots in ancient Israel, but grew in a new direction. He was declaring that He and His followers were now the true people of God, the reconstituted Israel. They too would experience suffering, but God would ultimately vindicate them.

Whether Jesus was commanding directly, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," or teaching from the prophets in the synagogue, His message was the same: "That which the prophets have spoken of has begun in Me." For example, in Luke 4 we have the central passage of Luke's entire gospel. Jesus took the scroll of Isaiah, stood in the synagogue, and read from the prophet (Isaiah 61:1). "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." Next Jesus, as was customary, re-rolled the scroll and sat down to expound upon the prophetic passage. With all eyes fixed upon Him, He made the great declaration that the kingdom of God had arrived, saying, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

In the kingdom of God, the downtrodden, infirm, and marginalized poor were to be uplifted by God's righteous hand. Jesus was accomplishing the very tasks that were to be identified with the agenda of God's kingdom. When John the Baptist was held captive by Herod, he sent His disciples to ask Jesus if He was the "coming one" or should they look for another? Jesus gave evidence of His position by declaring that His answer was found in His actions, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Luke 7:22).

The crowd was so shocked that the son of Joseph, a carpenter's boy, claimed to have inaugurated the new age, to have brought in the year of the Lord, that they were filled with rage (4:28) and were ready to stone Him. Only by God's miraculous hand was He able to escape from His hostile countrymen (4:30).

With the declaration that Isaiah's prophesy had been fulfilled by His presence and His actions, Jesus himself was confessing that He was the long-awaited Messiah. In Him all the messianic hopes had been completed. God's kingdom had come (see Luke 11:20; 16:16; 17:20-21) and "today" (Luke 4:21) was the promised time. Jesus made clear that the kingdom was not only something to be looked for in the future, but it *was* already; it *was* now.

Jesus' claim of an "already present kingdom" was not limited to His sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth. On another occasion, the Pharisees questioned Him directly, "When is the kingdom of God coming?" (Luke 17:20-21). He had already told them in the synagogue service (Luke 4), but they had not listened. "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed," Jesus said, "nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

In the kingdom of God it was widely believed that the powers of darkness must yield their will to the will of God. The arrival of God's kingdom would be evidenced by the overthrow of all evil powers. Jesus declared, therefore, that His ability to cast out demons with the power of God was a clear indication that the kingdom was already here (Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20).

The Kingdom Comes Completely

The Jews believed in the doctrine of two ages. This familiar teaching asserted that there was "this age" and "the age to come." They expected a dramatic close of this age when the new age, the age of the resurrection, began with the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus, indeed, inaugurated the new age, the age of the resurrection, and, yet, the old age continued—a curious unfolding of God's activity in history in a manner that had never been considered by the Jews. With the presence of Jesus, the kingdom of God had arrived, and yet, the kingdom was not present in its fullest sense. Paul saw those of us living between the first coming of Jesus and the second as those "upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). Therefore, we live in a time when the kingdom has already come, but we look forward to its fullness.

While Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom with His own presence and activity, we also know that Jesus realized the kingdom had not yet fully arrived. While He could declare that the kingdom had already come, at the same time, He looked toward a future time, an end time, when the kingdom would come in its greatest power (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). In this final coming of the kingdom, the Son of Man, Jesus himself, would arrive in complete glory (see also Matthew 16:27-28). Even as Jesus declared, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done," there is a hint of a future fulfillment. Moreover, in Matthew 7:21f., Jesus referred to "that" day—a day in the future—when commenting on the coming of the kingdom (see also Mark 9:1). Jesus, therefore, could both announce the arrival of God's kingdom and yet expect the final consummation of the kingdom to unfold in future events.

To Call Him Lord is to Call Him King

To say “Jesus is Lord” is to say the kingdom of God has finally arrived. This connection is evident from several New Testament passages, especially throughout the book of Acts. Paul’s preaching in Ephesus was described as “persuading them about the *kingdom of God*” (Acts 19:8, emphasis added). In this same passage, Luke also described Paul’s message as “the word of *the Lord*” (Acts 19:10, emphasis added). Thus, in Ephesus, Paul’s “persuading about the *kingdom of God*” was equal to His teaching about “the word of *the Lord*.” To say Jesus is Lord is to say, indeed, the kingdom has arrived with the new king.

Perhaps the most important passage in Acts regarding the Lordship of Jesus in connection to the kingdom of God is found in the very last depiction of Paul’s activity in the book. While Paul was in prison, in rented quarters, he welcomed those who came to him, and he was “preaching the *kingdom of God* and teaching concerning the *Lord Jesus Christ*...” (Acts 28:31, emphasis added). Therefore, to preach about the arrival of the kingdom of God is to teach about the Lordship of Jesus.

Not only did Luke connect the Lordship of Jesus with the arrival of the kingdom, but Peter described salvation as “entrance into the eternal *kingdom of our Lord* and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11, emphasis added). Finally, the apostle John connected the arrival of God’s kingdom to both God and His Christ. The blowing of the seventh trumpet in the Revelation marked the point at which “the kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). This passage is of particular interest because both God and Christ are linked together with the idea of the coming of the kingdom in its fullest and final power.

Conclusion

Like the patient anxiously awaiting the results from an important medical test—a test which could indicate life or death—or the tortured P.O.W. longing for liberation, the ancient Israelites waited for the “coming God” and the establishment of His kingdom. This kingdom was to bring God’s rule which was to be accompanied by a new kind of righteousness among His people. Upon the arrival of the kingdom, God’s will would finally be accomplished on earth as it already was in heaven.

To say “Jesus is Lord” is to proclaim good news to all who have been looking and longing for God to step into human History. God’s people would finally be liberated from the domination of dark powers; the lame would leap; and the blind would see. To call Jesus “Lord” is to say, “The kingdom of God has come into our midst,” and, yet, to know that even Jesus promised the arrival of His kingdom in the greatest sense when He returned for His church.