

Heaven Now! *The Two-phased Kingdom*

Last week, we looked at a disturbing dream given a pagan Old Testament king concerning God's Kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar was given a pre-screening on the development of history and his place in the context of God's Eternal Kingdom. This dream revealed that Jesus came not only to deliver from sin, but also to completely overturn Satan's rule on earth.

One of the very surprising lessons we learn right away about the setting up of God's Kingdom is that it did not come in one climactic event, as some had expected. Jesus introduces us to this two-phased pattern in a couple of his most famous stories – the parables of the *Mustard Seed* and the *Leaven* that works its way through the dough.

To illustrate, we have special celebrations or holidays, like Christmas, for instance. We have the beginning of the Christmas season, Christmas day, and the winding down of Christmas with the New Year's celebration. In a way, it is all Christmas.

Journey Together:

1. What is your favorite holiday of the year and why?
2. Describe something you have had to wait for a long time.

Road Map:

Note: In Matthew 13: 31-33, Jesus also explained the Kingdom as a multifaceted event. He relates the Kingdom to a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds that also becomes the largest of shrubs in which the birds of the air nest. He then makes another expanding comparison of the Kingdom with leaven working its way completely through the dough of a loaf of bread.

1. How do these parables help explain the two phases of the Kingdom?
2. Jesus made the official announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom in Mark 1:15. *"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"* What are some of the evidences Jesus gave that the Kingdom of God had begun with the authority of God already at work in verses 16 - 45?

3. What additional evidence did Jesus give in Mark 4:35-41, of who he is and the presence of God's rule on earth? What other evidence can you think of in Jesus' life and ministry that demonstrates the presence of the Kingdom in Jesus' life?

4. Revelation 21 – 22:7, describes the second phase of God's Kingdom on earth in the coming of the New Jerusalem down from God out of heaven. What are some notable differences between the Kingdom described here and phase 1 in Jesus' First Coming? What do you look forward to most about the New Jerusalem and the final establishment of God's Kingdom rule?

5. How does a two-phase Kingdom provide a better explanation of Jesus' overall ministry and mission? Some have referred to the Kingdom of God as here and not yet – meaning that the Kingdom has already begun, but also is not yet fully realized. In what way do you already see yourself living in the Kingdom? What are you most looking forward to about God's Kingdom that is still yet to come?

6. How can this group pray for you this evening?

My Journey: Read Ephesians 6:10-18.

1. Paul often referred to himself as Christ's ambassador – meaning that he belonged to God's Kingdom while representing God's affairs in a foreign land. In the verses above, he also reminded us that we are waged in a spiritual battle of conflicting kingdoms. The Kingdom of God has come and we are victorious in God's strength. However, the Prince of Darkness still fights on against God's rule. How are we most vulnerable in this battle and what weapons do you most need to win your current struggles?

2. How does this fuller reality of God's Kingdom both present and future give real perspective for your spiritual life right now?

3. How is God using *Journey* your life and witness this week?

4. How can this group pray for you right now?

Backstory: In this week's journey with Jesus, we learn that the Kingdom of God is both already here and still to come. During the time of Jesus, people were looking for and expecting the Kingdom of God. The glorious restoration of the Temple in Ezekiel 43 and the future hope of God's people predicted in all the prophets following the Babylonian Captivity, was based on the hope of a David-like deliverer/Messiah. Messiah means "Anointed One." Israel's deliverer would lead them in triumph over their enemies and firmly establish them as the powerful and successful nation they once were in the days of David and Solomon – only greater!

The Messiah was their only hope for the glorious return God's Kingdom as promised in the prophets. In fact, all the major groups of Jesus' day – the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, and the Essenes - all had their own ideas of what influence was most needed for the Messiah's coming. The Zealots believed that if they took a revolutionary stand, God would respond by sending the Messiah. The Essenes believed that if they lived pure enough God would be influenced to send the Messiah. The Pharisees believed that the Messiah's coming depended on the keeping of the Law. Each group, in turn, was looking for and hastening the Messiah.

What they completely missed was a dual event or two phased Kingdom. Even John the Baptist seemed to be a bit confused about the nature of God's Kingdom. John preached a baptism of repentance in preparation for the Messiah, but when we look closely at John's message, in Luke 3:7, it is clear that John expected the Messiah to come as a single final judgment event. John was preparing people for judgment as described in Malachi 3:1-3, where the Messiah would come as a "refiners fire."

John was a bit confused when Jesus was not doing what he had been expecting. Matthew 11 records John's confusion when he sent messengers to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt. 11:3).

John had been correct. Jesus was the Messiah, but the Kingdom of God was coming a bit differently than even John had anticipated. The Kingdom of God was coming in two stages. It would appear first as insignificant and as tiny as a mustard seed. In the future, at the end of the age, the Kingdom would be manifested again as the largest of shrubs. Everyone – including John -- was expecting the large shrub kingdom instead of the tiny mustard seed version.

We tend to focus on the great shrub kingdom, as well. We are often guilty of emphasizing the "good news" of Jesus Second Coming, when good news is already here in the forgiving grace of God and Jesus' deliverance from sin and setting the world right. In our longing and expectation for Christ's return, we must remember that he has already come and the Kingdom of God is at hand! Our responsibility is to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom that has already begun.

It is important for us to grasp this about Jesus' mission and message. It means that God is already present in the world and his Kingdom has already begun! It means that salvation is already being offered. When Jesus tells the story about the Great Banquet in Luke 14 – it is a banquet that the religious leaders are being invited to right then, but are making excuses. So Jesus began to invite the poor, the lame, and the Gentiles. The good news of God's Kingdom was being extended, but people were not taking Jesus up on the offer.

The force of this week's lesson is that the Kingdom of God is already here and that people need to listen to Jesus' invitation and accept his gracious offer. If we are waiting for the Kingdom in the return of Jesus, we are waiting for something that is already underway. Only those who enter into God's Kingdom now, while looking forward to Jesus' return and the consummation of the Kingdom, will be ready since they have surrendered their lives to Jesus the Messianic king, have joined him in the work of his Kingdom, and are eagerly waiting for him!