

"Repent! For The Kingdom Of The Heavens Is At Hand!"
by Richard A. Nelson

The Bible shows us numerous extreme events that earmarked major progressive expressions in the thinking and purpose of God. For example, as radical as the Red Sea suddenly opening down the middle and making dry ground for Moses and the Israelites' escape from Egypt; as radical as the flowing Jordan River stopping to open a way for the prepared people of God into the Good Land; and as radical as the prayer of Joshua stopping the sun in the midst of the sky for an entire day, so also was the radical cry both of John and of Jesus exclaiming "Repent! For The Kingdom Of Heaven Is At Hand!"

As the Red Sea was crashing, as the Jordan River was flowing, as the earth was in rotation around the sun, so the events of culture and the daily grind of human living were in motion when John the Baptist came declaring this world-changing announcement. Do you find it easy to pass over this phrase in the Bible? Like most of us, probably so.

The prophet says to "break up the fallow (ploughed, but obviously unused) ground" "for it is time to seek the Lord..." (Hosea 10:12). As believers we may be like a ground broken up for the purpose of receiving seeds of life to grow a field for harvest, but like a negligent farmer we may leave the work undone until the ground appears useless only because it is unused, unprepared, unreceiving and therefore unfruitful- never more so than in regard to this topic at hand does this apply.

I hope the Lord will find in our hearts a ground broken up, refreshed in its ploughing so His words might have entrance like ready seeds in a prepared field (Psalm 119:130a; Matthew 13:19, 23). The phrase "Repent! For the kingdom is at hand!" represents much and we can gain and produce much if we hear the same thing that was spoken. The following thoughts are written with this hope in mind:

1. This proclamation was first uttered not by Jesus, but by John, the baptizing one, the half-second cousin of Jesus (Luke 1:36, of Mary and Elizabeth the mother of John). Luke 3 describes the coming of John preaching the baptism of repentance and preparing the people for the coming of Jesus who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit (positive) and with fire (negative). In Matthew 3:2, the baptizing John declares "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!". In Matthew 4:17, the forthcoming King repeats the exclamation of John by announcing to the Jews with the same words: "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Both the forerunner of Jesus, and Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Christ, made this declaration foremost in their ministries.

2. This declaration implies a major sea change in history, for it was the prophesy of Isaiah and Malachi (Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 11:11-14; Luke 1:17; 3:4; Matthew 3:2-12) of a voice in the wilderness would one day come to declare this day. John was clearly the fulfillment of this prophetic marker. It is notable that the Son of Man quoted John in declaring this forthcoming event, and not vice versa.

3. John spoke of the forthcoming kingdom and baptized all who were willing. Even Jesus insisted it was necessary to be baptized in the river Jordan, (i.e. to be symbolically buried), by John. In His divinity, there was no need of baptism, but as the offspring of Mary He was made "in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). As a flawless man, He was even "made sin" for us (II Cor. 5:21); and therefore joined in the personal and public experience of pronouncing the first Adam in need of a collective burial.

4. The fact of this burial was immediate in baptism, but the reality of it was secured later on the cross by His blood (Hebrews 9:14-16). It is in this we find the reason and must marvel at the stature of John in the eyes of God. Jesus said "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist..." Not only through baptism did he terminate the old creation but he introduced the forthcoming extension of the kingdom of God on earth; hence the identification of His coming motion in the kingdom of the heavens (Matthew 6:10, 13; 11:11a; Luke 16:16).

5. John appeared like a wild man in the wilderness, yet he was the unique person for whom world history had waited for the centuries since Isaiah and Malachi. He was the means God used to "bury" the old kingdom, the Satanic kingdom, the kingdom of flesh, culture, religion and the essence and nature of Adam himself with his worldwide offspring. John was the means not only to "bury" the past and give the willing an opportunity to repent of sin, but of proclaiming the imminent conception of the coming kingdom age in world history.

6. The kingdom of the heavens had not yet come, it was just being prepared to come. John introduced it and Jesus confirmed the introduction. The fact that both John and Jesus said "the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2; 4:17) makes it clear the kingdom of heaven did not begin, strictly speaking, with the coming of Jesus in the flesh (John 1:14).

Jesus would be revealed as the King later, but His kingdom did not commence until after His resurrection, as evidenced by the interchangeable use of "church" and "the kingdom of the heavens" in Matthew 16:16-18. The spectacle of this forthcoming kingdom was significant, in that the focus was not on God's people going to heaven, but on the kingdom of heaven coming to the earth. To miss this thought is to partake of one of the

primary strategic errors of traditional Christianity today, and thereby misconstrue or leave unexplainable and un-experienced a great portion of the Bible, especially the latter part of the Gospels, the Epistles, and The Revelation of Jesus Christ.

7. The kingdom of God is the ruling of God based on the authority of the life of God. The kingdom of God includes from eternity past when there was life over which to rule and to eternity future when there is no more enemy or opposing kingdom (I Cor. 15:24-25). The kingdom of heaven, on the contrary, is the kingdom of God, but it is the kingdom of God accomplished only in a certain period of time and in a certain way for a certain purpose. In the same sense, you may say someone is a male his whole life, but his role as a husband is for a specific time period and for a specific purpose in his overall life as a male.

8. Luke speaks primarily of the kingdom of God in its broad general terms. Matthew speaks primarily of the kingdom of God in its specific term of time and therefore identifies it as “the kingdom of the heavens” through most of the book, though not always (Matthew 6:33). According to Matthew 16:16-21, the kingdom of the heavens would be birthed at a later date. The later date was at the initiation of the church by means of the indwelling Christ in John 20:21-23 and Acts 1-2. In Matthew 16, “church” and “kingdom of the heavens” is used interchangeably.

9. It is after the revelation to Peter that Jesus was “the Messiah”, “the Christ” (both mean “the Anointed One”), that Jesus moved specifically towards the events of His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, indwelling and outpouring as the Spirit after His resurrection, to produce the church, which He purchased on the cross. (Acts 20:28; Matthew 16:21; Ephesians 5:25b-27; 3:10-11; Acts 1:3-5; 2:4; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31; I Corinthians 4:20; Romans 14:17; Colossians 4:11; I Thessalonians 2:12; II Thessalonians 1:5; II Peter 1:11; Revelation 11:15; 12:10).

10. Since the kingdom of God existed from the beginning, the coming of the kingdom of the heavens to the earth implied a monumental, progressive development. The focus no more would be heaven and no more just the kingdom of God as Israel had known it. It was the extension of mystical heavenly authority to practical heavenly authority expressed through a collective people inhabited by the God of the heavens on the earth as originally planned (Genesis 1:26-28). It was a declaration that Satan and his kingdom of darkness would be progressively replaced, not “in the sweet bye and bye on a golden shore” but here, beginning now in the midst of the darkness on the corrupted earth.

11. After the resurrected Christ had breathed His indwelling life as the Spirit into the apostles in John 20:22, He spent the next forty days before His physical

ascension speaking of the “things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:1-3). This kingdom was initiated in full by the Spirit poured out upon the believers, clothing them with power for preaching the full gospel (Acts 2:4, 41, 47). This was no more “repent for the kingdom of the heavens is at hand”. No, the time was now completed for this message and this was the actual birth of the heavenly kingdom on earth in and upon those who believed into Christ and received Him as their divine life supply in and through their human living (Matthew 16:16-18). It was no more “at hand”, for it was actually initiated in Jerusalem.

Jesus the Messiah (the Christ) is the source, life, center and circumference of the kingdom of the heavens; hence, the forthcoming move of God included not only the inception of the church, His body, but of He himself as the life-giving Spirit after His resurrection to indwell those who believe.

12. After the birth of the church was completed through the events of John 20:21-23 and Acts 1-2, throughout the Acts and the epistles, the church as the kingdom of the heavens within the kingdom of God are clearly the same thing. The church is the heavenly kingdom of God on earth today. Unlike many have come to teach, the kingdom was not suspended until the Lord’s physical return. (Acts 14:22; 28:23, 31; 1 Corinthians 4:20; 15:50; Rom. 14:17; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5).

The kingdom of God has been in the past and will be in the future (Luke 1:33). The kingdom of the heavens is that time section of the kingdom of God which is the age of the mystery of Christ, which is the church, the body of Christ, the corporate expression of God in this age on the earth in preparation for the full growth of its life and domain during the time of the millennium, in which the earth will be fully covered and recovered by the full gospel of Christ through His body (Daniel 2:35b, 44-45; Isaiah 9:7; 27:6).

May we be enlightened and strengthened to grasp and enter into the reality of the kingdom of the heavens today, the church life as it was originally implemented by the accomplishment of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ of God on the cross and in His resurrection, ascension, indwelling and outpouring for the producing of His image and dominion on the earth today as originally intended by God (Genesis 1:26-28; Ephesians 3:10-11).

This is a great advance in God’s eternal purpose towards completing the entirety of His heart’s desire through the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the heavens, the genuine, biblical church life in this age.