A Gospel Journey [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Tuesday, 6 December 2022 - 06:42



Read time: 16 minutes
Our perception of the world and reality is largely shaped by what we learn about it from others. Changing that perception can be jarring, but also liberating and beautiful. I felt that God—through His Word—thrust me unto a particular journey to do a course change.

A Perplexing Journey

This journey started roughly a year ago. I was reading the Gospel according to Luke, specifically the story of Jesus sending out the seventy two—a story I had read many times before.

As I read the familiar words, something struck me. Suddenly my attention was aroused, like when hearing a that-was-definitely-not-right noise in your home at night.

"*What* did Jesus do?"

He sent out the seventy two.

To do what?

To... preach the Gospel? Surely, because for what else does God send people out. But ...

I glanced back to the previous chapter where He sent out the twelve in like manner.

"To proclaim the Kingdom of God." (Luke 9:2)

Okay ... But the disciples don't understand the Gospel yet! Peter only acknowledges that Jesus is God after the twelve had been sent out (in Luke 9:18–20). Only *after* this does Jesus begin to teach them about His death and resurrection (Luke 9:22). Even after the resurrection of Jesus, they still did not understand what it meant. For example, in Luke 24:25–26:

> "He said to them, 'Foolish people, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Didn't the Christ have to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?' Beginning from Moses, and from all the prophets, He explained to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."

That means that, surely, when the seventy two went out, they also couldn't have preached "the

gospel" of Jesus dying for our sins, and resurrecting to glory. So how does one get to the Kingdom of God without the gospel? What was it that they preached?

Thinking through this, I realised we have the following:

1. The twelve only acknowledged Jesus as God after Jesus sent them out to preach
2. The disciples fundamentally did not understand the purpose of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection

If the Gospel is that God created a good world, which people messed up with their sin, and God had a restorative plan of sending Jesus to atone for our sins through His death and resurrection, which then allows us to spend eternity with Him in paradise, then this means that the disciples fundamentally did not understand the gospel! So what message did Jesus send them out to preach?

I looked again. It didn't say that Jesus sent out the twelve "to preach the gospel". It said that Jesus sent them "to preach the Kingdom of God". This rung a bell: this is how Jesus started His public ministry.

> From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say "Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."
>
> Matthew 4:17

He did not say, "Repent, or you will go to hell!" Rather, He heralded the *Kingdom of Heaven* (and the *Kingdom of God*, as per Mark 1:14–15).

Indeed, the message was the same as what John the Baptist preached:

> In those days, John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"
>
> Matthew 3:1–2

In Luke 3:1–18, we get a fuller treatment of the ministry of John the Baptist. John was baptising people in the river Jordan to repent (that is, to turn away from) their old lives which they knew were not in step with God's desire and purpose for them. By being baptised in the river Jordan, they could, in a sense and symbolically, cross the Jordan anew into the land of God's promises, as the Israelites did after the exodus. But to live in this "land", the people had to keep to God's purposes for their lives (and the lives of all). So John gives them stern warnings and guidance on how to conduct their lives (lest they be "expelled from the land" again, as they knew from the example of Israel an Judah's historical exiles).

Getting back to Jesus, He sent out the twelve (and later the seventy two) to preach *something*. And that something *was* the Gospel (Luke 9:6). It was not His death and resurrection, because they did not understand it at that point. It seems like the disciples were faithful in teaching what Jesus expected them to teach the people, because we're not told that He was dissatisfied with their efforts, and after the twelve He sent out the seventy two (which presumably included the twelve). Indeed, if Jesus sent out these groups toward the end of His earthly ministry (cf. Matthew 16:21), then the disciples had spent the bulk of three years living with, and learning from, Jesus before being sent out. By that time there was something they understood well enough that Jesus trusted them to

be able to teach it to others. But they did not yet understand about His death and resurrection.

So what was it?

Towards the Kingdom

The text is as clear as day: the Kingdom of God/heaven.

This led to another question: *what exactly is the Kingdom of God*?

For a long time this phrase for me was simply a synonym for “heaven”, but now I started looking more closely. I began to collect all the passages which mention the Kingdom and comparing them. The picture that emerged, is that of a *restored creation*, God’s *upside down* Kingdom manifesting on earth. It is not (only) a future destination (“heaven”) that bears no resemblance or relevance to the physical world today. I am not going to go into detail what I found here; it is a worthwhile exercise to collect the Kingdom sayings and putting them side-by-side.

Below I quote selectively, but at length, from Vine’s Expository Dictionary, which corroborates what I found. The quote is from the entry for “kingdom”[1] (Scripture references are omitted for brevity):

> Kingdom is primarily an abstract noun, denoting sovereignty, royal power, dominion, … It is used especially of the "kingdom" of God and of Christ.
>
> The Kingdom of God is (a) the sphere of God’s rule. Since, however, this earth is the scene of universal rebellion against God, the "kingdom" of God is (b) the sphere in which, at any given time, His rule is acknowledged. God has not relinquished His sovereignty in the face of rebellion, demoniac and human, but has declared His purpose to establish it. … Henceforth God calls upon men everywhere, without distinction of race or nationality, to submit voluntarily to His rule. Thus the "kingdom" is said to be "in mystery" now, that is, it does not come within the range of the natural powers of observation, but is spiritually discerned. When, hereafter, God asserts His rule universally, then the "kingdom" will be in glory, that is, it will be manifest to all.
>
> Thus, speaking generally, references to the Kingdom fall into two classes, the first, in which it is viewed as present and involving suffering for those who enter it; the second, in which it is viewed as future and is associated with reward.
>
> The fundamental principle of the Kingdom is declared in the words of the Lord spoken in the midst of a company of Pharisees, "the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you," …
>
> Now, the King and His rule being refused, those who enter the Kingdom of God are brought into conflict with all who disown its allegiance, as well as with the desire for ease, and the dislike of suffering and unpopularity, natural to all. On the other hand, subjects of the Kingdom are the objects of the care of God, and of the rejected King. …
>
> Concerning the present, that a man is of the Kingdom of God is not shown in the punctilious observance of ordinances, which are external and material, but in the deeper matters of the heart, which are spiritual and essential, viz., ‘righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit,’ …
>
> The Apostle Paul often speaks of the Kingdom of God, not dispensationally but morally, but never so of the Kingdom of Heaven. ‘God’ is not the equivalent of ‘the heavens.’ He is everywhere and above all dispensations, whereas ‘the heavens’ are distinguished from the earth, until the Kingdom comes in judgment and power and glory when rule in heaven and on earth will be one.

This journey pointed me to a new conclusion: *the Gospel is primarily the Kingdom of God come to earth*. God has "returned" and is reigning in the mess of our making, inaugurated by the incarnation and birth of Jesus. We are called, primarily, to *live* the Kingdom *now*.

But where does that leave Jesus's death and resurrection? It's still very important. Without it, we are unable to have a restored relationship with God. Without it, we cannot be a redeemed people. Without it, we are unable to *enter into* and *partake of* the Kingdom of God. This point gets expounded at length in the New Testament after the gospels. So, yes, Jesus's death and resurrection "so that we can be saved" is good news, but it is only *part* of the good news. From one perspective, it is the *mode* which allows us to accomplish the main thrust of the good news. This "main thrust" (that is, all that talk about the Kingdom of God) is the very emphasis of Jesus's earthly ministry: the thing which He maybe spent 90–95% talking about and teaching to others. Put another way, *once* we are saved, we spend the rest of our lives "building" *for* the Kingdom of God by living out the purpose of our salvation. Jesus's death and resurrection has multiple dimensions: it also was *victory* over death (*Christus Victor*), it was an *example* to us of a life lived faithfully to God's purposes for our lives, it showed us to love others as we *ought* to, Christ paid the penalty for our sin and suffered the consequences so that we don't have to, it was the exclamation mark to Jesus's of life in God's upside down Kingdom, and more. It shouldn't be merely our "ticket to heaven".

On the Shoulders of Giants

Although this new understanding of the Gospel was novel to me, I am happy to say that it isn't anything new. Nothing is more dangerous as "discovering" something in the Bible which no-one else has yet. But if I find something, and discover that others before me have found the same, then I have peace over what I found. Indeed, it illuminated for me the understanding, perspective and intentions of many people, traditions and churches that I had previously found puzzling.

This perspective (more-or-less) is found (among many others) in the works of N. T. Wright (e.g. *Surprised by Hope*), Tim Mackie (of *The Bible Project*; see, e.g. here [2]), the Letters to the Exiles *[3]* series2 by the Acton Institute [4], and others. This perspective de-emphasises eschatology (that is, how we get saved, e.g. the Calvinism-Arminianism debate) and emphasises love, sacrifice, and work for the Kingdom (while we already have the assurance of being part of God's chosen people).

This perspective goes against the grain of much of evangelicanism. I think evangelicanism developed in a certain way (perhaps *sola fide* alienated people from thoughts of "working" for the Kingdom) where salvation was emphasised, not the Kingdom. The work of getting (and keeping) others saved became a manic, all-encompassing pursuit. Generations of people grew up with the so-called *Romans Road* [5] perspective of salvation, which has dominated much of Western Christianity for centuries. There is truth in it, and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) stands. I can also understand the efficacy of it: for some people, the fear of hellfire [6] is a great motivator. But it tends to de-emphasise the wholistic purpose of our lives of salvation and emphasises being only missions-focussed.

To quote the (modern) Archbishop Cranmer (a pen name):

> The theology of salvation is intrinsically linked to our partial understanding. If the motive for mission is conversion, the Kingdom is limited to the sum of saved souls. If the motive is church planting, the Kingdom becomes the Church. If the motive is eschatological, the Kingdom is a future hope and the exigencies of life are ignored. And if the motive is philanthropic, the priority becomes the pursuit of social justice and the Kingdom becomes an improved society. Focusing on any singular dimension is to limit both the Kingdom of God and the theology of salvation, but when these dimensions are held together in tension, salvation becomes a daily experience, a constant possibility, and a final hope.

In his book *Know and Tell the Gospel*, John Chapman has a whole chapter on "The gospel and the kingdom of God", where he touches on exactly this topic, and shows how Jesus and Paul both

preached the Kingdom of God. Packer ends the chapter with the following:

> However, it is possible to err in the other direction. It is possible to emphasise the sin-bearing act of Jesus as if his kingly rule was quite independent of it. People will respond to this by believing that their sins can be forgiven and that they will be acceptable to God because of the death of Jesus, whether the truly repent and acknowledge Jesus as Lord or not. To respond like this is to ignore what God say (Romans 10:9). To trust Jesus as Saviour and not acknowledge him as Lord is to misunderstand the gospel.
>
> Whenever the gospel is preached, whether in terms of the 'kingdom of God' or of the 'death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins' both ideas must be conveyed. One is not to be understood without the other. They are not alternative or opposing 'gospels'. They are aspects of the same gospel. One without the other leaves the gospel inadequate.

Conclusion

I have often said that, when I was attending a Dutch Reformed denomination as a child, it was like having the gospel as a broken up jigsaw puzzle: all the pieces were there, but disjointed and not connected as a whole. After I returned from the "desert wandering" period, God made the puzzle pieces fit together, and for the first time I saw a whole. Now I feel like having seen the whole picture on the puzzle pieces, but it was a low resolution reproduction of some masterful work of art, such as *The Night Watch*. After this gospel journey, I have seen the original, massive masterpiece! By saying this I don't claim to have full or complete revelation, nor that I won't learn anything new or develop further. I am not enough of a fool to claim something like that. But this was significant: a definite watershed moment in my spiritual journey.

I understand that some people may not "get" what I am saying; I didn't "get" this message clearly from others for a long time, until the Holy Spirit cleared it up for me. Others may think I am making too big of a deal of it, because this has been their understanding of Christianity for a long (those perplexed and frustrated by evangelicanism). Others may be concerned or angry by what I have written, because it goes against or threatens their long and dearly held perspectives (those within evangelicanism). To all I want to say: I sincerely believe that this change of perspective, for me, will be for the good.

May God continue to lead me on my journey. May others, whether being sent or by invitation, join me on it!

- 1. Despite Vine speaking here of those in the Kingdom being in "conflict" with those outside of it, this is not an "us-versus-them" conflict. To think that is to miss the point of God's upside down Kingdom. Those in the Kingdom are to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44), and to love the created world, because God created it, fundamentally, good (Genesis 1:31). Any adversarial conflict should only come from those who reject God's Kingdom.
- 2. In this series, the term "For the Life of the World" is used instead of "Kingdom of God", probably to try and avoid confusion with people commonly associating the phrase "Kingdom of God" with "heaven" (i.e. a place we go to after we die, which is spiritual not physical, and is disconnected from the present world).

Categories:

- Theology [7]
- Missions [8]

Tags:

- gospel [9]

- kingdom of heaven [10]
- salvation [11]
- purpose [12]
- romans road [13]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1239

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1239
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmFPS0f-kzs
[3] https://www.letterstotheexiles.com/
[4] https://www.acton.org/
[5] https://www.postost.net/2012/05/what-s-wrong-romans-road-salvation
[6] https://siyach.org/node/1035
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/655
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/23
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/723
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/1074
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/93
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/674
[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/1075