

The Story (20) – Jesus' Ministry

By Ashby Camp

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I. Review

A. As I said last week, Israel's return to the land after 70 years of exile in Babylonia was great, but it was still a pale shadow of the kind of glory predicted by the prophets. Israel was small, struggling, and under the oppression of foreign powers, and Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi document the low spiritual state of the nation. In the first century, Israel was weak, poor, and being ruled politically by the Romans.

B. The people longed and prayed for the coming of God, for his final intervention when he would set all things right and rule in the fullest sense to the blessing of his people. In Mk. 15:43 Joseph of Arimathea is described as one who was "waiting for the kingdom of God" (TNIV). It is at that time that God the Son came into this world as the God-man Jesus.

C. He was miraculously placed by the Holy Spirit into the womb of the Virgin Mary, was born in Bethlehem, and after a brief time in Egypt, grew up in Nazareth in Galilee. He had younger brothers – James, Joses/Joseph, Judas/Jude, Simon – and sisters (Mk. 6:3; Mat. 13:55-56).

D. We are given a glimpse of Jesus at age 12 when he was in the temple in Jerusalem, having gone to the city with his family for the Feast of Passover. He became a carpenter like his father Joseph, but we know nothing of his life from age 12 until he began his public ministry around the age of 30. Joseph is not mentioned during the years of Jesus' ministry so it seems he died when Jesus was between the ages of 12 and 30. With his death, Jesus would have become the breadwinner and the head of the family.

II. John the Baptist

A. Jesus' relative, John the Baptist, appeared on the public scene before Jesus. He served as a herald announcing the arrival of the Lord's anointed, the long-awaited Messiah. He called the people of Israel to repent and to be baptized into the community of "anticipators," the group that trusted his divinely-given message about the appearing of the Christ and repented in that expectation. John prepared the way for the Lord's public ministry.

B. In coming to John for baptism, Jesus not only identified himself with John's message, albeit as the object of that message rather than simply a believer of that message, but also embarked on his messianic task in a new way. He also was revealed publicly as the one about whom John spoke.

III. Jesus' Ministry

A. Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism and then was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tested by Satan and proved true to God. He chose 12 disciples called apostles who accompanied him as he traveled through Judea and Galilee and on occasion into the surrounding regions.

B. As he went about, he announced to people the gospel, the good news, of the kingdom of God.

1. The kingdom of God was central to Christ's ministry and message. George Ladd states in *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 54: "Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus."

2. **Mat. 4:23** states (NIV) that Jesus "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, *preaching the good news of the kingdom*, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." **Mat. 9:35** states, "And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and *proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction." Jesus says in **Lk. 4:43** (NIV), "I must preach the *good news of the kingdom of God* to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." **Luke 8:1** says that Jesus went through cities and villages "proclaiming and bringing the *good news of the kingdom of God*." In **Lk. 9:2** Jesus sent the twelve out "to *proclaim the kingdom of God* and to heal." In **Lk. 9:60** he told a man he had called to follow him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and *proclaim the kingdom of God*."

3. The "good news of the kingdom" was that the kingdom was at long last arriving in the person and ministry of Jesus. He was the "kingdom bringer!" In **Mk. 1:15** Jesus announced to the people, "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand." He said in **Mat. 12:28**, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God *has come* upon you," and he declared in **Lk. 17:21b** "for behold, the kingdom of God *is* among you [in your midst]."

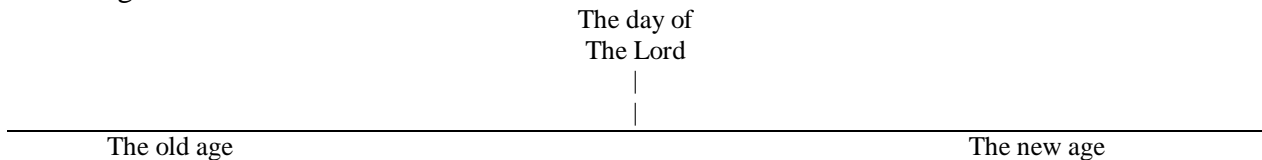
4. He made the same point in some of his parables. For example, the point of the parable of the bridegroom in their midst (Mat. 9:14-15; Mk. 2:18-20; Lk. 5:33-35) is that Jesus' disciples do not fast because the current period is like the celebration of a wedding feast when the groom is present. The joyful and significant thing that is taking place in Jesus' ministry is the ushering in of the long-awaited kingdom of God. That is why he tells the disciples in **Mat. 13:17**, "For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

5. God had revealed to Daniel more than 600 years earlier that his eternal kingdom would come in the days of the Roman Empire, the fourth earthly kingdom in the series

of kingdoms represented by the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (and represented differently in Daniel 7). Jesus was announcing the arrival in his person and ministry of that long-awaited kingdom, the kingdom for which Joseph of Arimathea and countless others had been waiting. He was announcing the arrival of God's final intervention in history, the ultimate expression of his kingly rule over the world. God was at long last acting to rescue creation from the sin that had invaded it, to heal this broken and sin-sick world. That is indeed good news, "gospel."

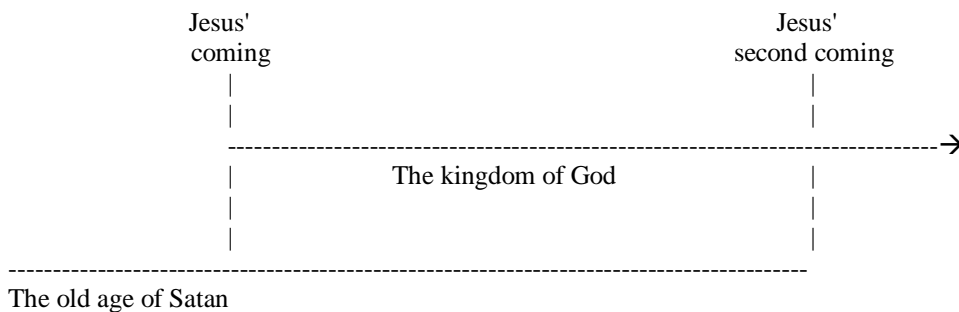
C. This naturally created excitement in some quarters and suspicion and opposition in others. It also led to misunderstanding because of incorrect ideas the Jews had about the coming and nature of the kingdom of God. The Lord addressed these misunderstandings in his teaching.

1. Many Jews thought the kingdom would arrive through or in conjunction with human military conquest, and more specifically, through or in conjunction with the expulsion of the Romans and their supporters from Palestine. They also expected the kingdom to come suddenly and decisively. They thought God's final intervention would be a one-shot deal – the Day of the Lord – where the old age would be terminated abruptly and the new, glorious age would begin. You remember in Lk. 19:11 where the people supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately upon Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. That aspect of their thinking has been diagrammed as follows:



2. This expectation caused people to wonder how Jesus could be ushering in the kingdom of God when the hallmarks of the old age – death, decay, suffering, etc. – still were present. You remember how even John the Baptist began to question as he sat in Herod's jail whether Jesus was in fact the one who would bring in the kingdom of God (Mat. 11:2-3; Lk. 7:18-19). Jesus explained in a number of parables (and elsewhere) that the kingdom comes in two stages. It is introduced or inaugurated, then there is an interval of time, and then there is a decisive intervention when the kingdom is consummated or finalized.

3. This is a clear, for example, in the parables of the growing seed, the mustard seed, and the wheat and the weeds. That concept has been diagrammed this way:



4. Texts in addition to the parables that indicate the kingdom of God is a present reality between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ include Lk. 17:21b; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13; Heb. 12:28; Rev. 1:9, 5:10. Texts in addition to the parables that indicate the kingdom of God is a future hope include Mat. 6:10, 7:21-23, 25:34; Mk. 14:25; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:50; Gal. 5:21; 2 Tim. 4:1.

5. This same "now and not yet" aspect characterizes other kingdom-related concepts:

- Eternal life – **now** (Jn. 5:24, 6:47; 1 Jn. 5:11, 5:13); **still to come** (Mat. 19:29, 25:46; Mk. 10:30, Lk. 18:30, Rom. 6:22; Gal. 6:8; Tit. 3:7; Jude 21)
- End of the ages – **now** (1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 9:26); **still to come** (Mat. 13:39-40, 13:49-50, 28:20; Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; 1 Cor. 2:6; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:21, 2:7, 5:16; Heb. 6:5)
- Redemption – **now** (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14); **still to come** (Lk. 21:28; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30)
- Salvation – **now** (Rom. 8:24; Eph. 2:5, 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:21; Jude 3); **still to come** (Acts 15:11; Rom. 5:9-10, 13:11; 1 Cor. 3:15; 1 Thess. 5:9; Heb. 1:14, 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5)
- Adoption – **now** (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 3:26, 4:6; Heb. 12:7-8); **still to come** (Lk. 20:36; Rom. 8:23)
- Death's defeat – **now** (2 Tim. 1:10); **still to come** (1 Cor. 15:26)
- New creation – **now** (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15); **still to come** (Rom. 8:19-23; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 21:1-4)

6. The Lord also taught what it means to live as kingdom participants, to live as people who have said "yes" to God's gracious offer of kingdom life through faith in Jesus. We are called to live radically righteous lives, to strive in the power of the Spirit to be in the here and now the kind of holy people God wants us to be and that we will be in eternity.

a. You see this call very clearly in the Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus came not to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them (Mat. 5:17), part of which was his intensifying of the moral obligations of the Old Testament by drawing out their deepest intention. Thus, the ban on murder extends to the anger that gives rise to it; the ban on adultery extends to lusting in one's heart; the ban on false swearing extends to taking oaths; the ban on excessive retaliation extends to turning the other cheek; and the requirement to love one's neighbor is said to encompass loving one's enemies. He says in **Mat. 7:21**, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

b. This call to radical righteousness is repeated throughout the New Testament. Holy living is not some optional extra that can be rejected in the name of grace. It is the response to grace. The Apostles certainly got the message. Paul, for example, says very pointedly in **Rom. 8:12-13**: *Now, therefore, brothers, we are debtors not to the flesh, to live*

according to the flesh, ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. Peter says in **1 Pet. 1:14-16**, *As obedient children, do not conform to the former passions [when] in your ignorance, ¹⁵but like the Holy One who called you, you also be holy in all your conduct. ¹⁶For it is written, "Be holy, because I am holy."*

c. The fact we are "not yet" as Christlike as we will be when the kingdom is consummated at Christ's return means that we will fail to live up to this ideal fully, but the ideal remains the target of our lives. We are to strive to conform our lives to this teaching and thereby to glorify God. As we do so, our failures are not a source of anxiety because we understand that our life in the consummated kingdom is not something we achieve by our performance but something given to us by God's grace and received by us through faith in Christ. It is because Christ is through faith our Savior that we strive to heed his ethical calling.

D. At his first coming, Jesus not only announced the kingdom's arrival and taught about its nature and its ethics; he also demonstrated its character and gave us a foretaste of it.

1. John Piper remarks in a sermon titled "Christ and Cancer":

The answer to why Jesus did not raise all the dead is that, contrary to the Jewish expectation, the first coming of the Messiah was *not* the consummation and full redemption of this fallen age. The first coming was rather to purchase that consummation, illustrate its character, and bring a *foretaste* of it to his people. Therefore, Jesus raised some of the dead to illustrate that he has that power and one day will come again and exercise it for all his people. And he healed the sick to illustrate that in his final kingdom this is how it will be. There will be no more crying or pain any more.

2. This is likewise true of his exorcisms. In Mk. 3:27 (and parallels) Jesus gives the correct explanation of his exorcisms in the face of false claims that he cast out demons by the power of the chief demon, Beelzebul.

a. He says, "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house." Jesus' exorcisms are the opposite of working for Satan. They are an unprecedented expression of power over him. Satan is the strong man Jesus has tied up so as to be able to take away his goods, that is, to free those he had taken over.

b. In Mat. 12:28 and Lk. 11:20, Jesus expressly ties his extraordinary exercise of power over Satan to his ushering in of the kingdom of God. He says, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." As with his healings and raisings of the dead, his exorcisms were an illustration of the kingdom's character, a foretaste of the final and complete expulsion of all demons at the consummation.

E. And during his earthly ministry Jesus was involved in training the Apostles to prepare them for ministry when he was gone. He entrusted them with the mission of making disciples, bringing others to faith and thus to participation in the kingdom, and perpetuating his teaching by instilling it in the church, the community of faith. And from that small core the church exploded into the world after the Lord's death, resurrection, and ascension.