

The Kingdom Offered

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The kingdom of heaven, as presented in the early ministry of Jesus, refers to the Messianic, Davidic, earthly kingdom seen in the Old Testament, which was offered to Israel alone and was based on law, not grace.

Scripture: Isaiah 65:20, Malachi 4:5, Matthew 1:1, Matthew 4:17, Matthew 5:20, Luke 1:31, Luke 3:1, John 6:28, Ephesians 4:32, Revelation 19:16

Topics: "Kingdom Of Heaven", "Repentance And Righteousness"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer emphasizes that the division between the Old Testament and the New Testament occurs at the cross of Christ, not between Malachi and Matthew. Each Gospel portrays Christ in a distinct role: Matthew as the King, Mark as Jehovah's servant, Luke as the perfect human, and John as the Son of God. The message of the 'kingdom of heaven' in Matthew's Gospel is directed towards Israel, focusing on repentance and righteous living in preparation for the earthly Davidic kingdom. The legal requirements presented in the Sermon on the Mount are meant to condition life in the future earthly kingdom, distinct from the message of grace in the New Testament.

Transcript

In subject matter the division between the Old Testament and the New occurs at the cross of Christ, rather than between Malachi and Matthew. The Gospels, in the main, carry forward the same dispensational conditions that were in effect at the hour when Christ was born. Especially is this true of the Gospel of Matthew, Christ being set forth in that Gospel, first of all, as a King with His kingdom in full view. The Spirit has faithfully selected those deeds and teachings of Christ from the complete manifestation in the flesh which portray Him in the dominant character reflected in each Gospel.

In Matthew He is presented as the King; in Mark as Jehovah's servant; in Luke as the perfect human; and in John as the very Son of God. In all these narratives, this one Person is seen acting and teaching under the same conditions which existed for centuries before the cross. There is some anticipation of what would follow the cross as there is reference after the cross to what had gone before. Whatever preceded the cross, in the main, fell under those conditions and colorings of "the law which came by Moses," and Jesus not only held up Moses as the authority for the time, but also expanded his teachings. A great division between the Old Testament and the New, herefore, lies in the fact that "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ," and became effective with the cross of Christ rather than with His birth.

Matthew opens with an emphasis upon Christ as the Son of David: "The book of the generation (genea, nationality or line of descent, cf. Mt. xxiv. 34) of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham." Although, in this Gospel, Jesus is presented as the "Son of Abraham" in sacrificial death, the primary purpose of the writer is to set forth the nation's King. This being the only office that is ever assigned to a "Son of David." The tracing of the divinely appointed kingdom thus proceeds from the Old Testament into the New without a change other than the appearance of the long expected King, accompanied by His forerunner, whose predicted ministry had occupied the closing words of the Old Testament revelation. There is no break in the narrative.

The fact that Jesus was David's Greater Son, the fulfiller of all the nation's kingdom blessings is not based on human opinion. It was announced by the angel Gabriel before the birth of Christ as recorded in Luke i. 31-33: "And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

This treats distinctly of the "Throne of David" over the "House of Jacob," and proclaims of this kingdom that "there shall be no end." No Gentile blessings are in view here; nor need the Gentiles seek to intrude. Gentile blessings will eventually flow out of this very throne; but these are not in view, nor are any Gentile blessings endangered by a faithful recognition of this distinctly Jewish purpose. The same is clearly stated in Rom. xv. 8: "Now this I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision (Israel) for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers." He did not come to annul those promises; but He did come to confirm them. The promises made unto the fathers are well defined: no promises were made to Gentiles. The term "the fathers" can mean none other than God's chosen men of Israel.

By these promises Israel was to be redeemed and placed in her own land and that by Immanuel who should be the final Prophet, Priest and King. He should be her King over her covenanted kingdom. These promises made unto the fathers were the nation's only hope, as is clearly indicated: "We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel." "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom unto Israel?"

In Christ, then, the kingdom covenant made to David had its confirmation as well, it being one of the promises made unto the fathers. How certainly that covenant must stand to-day!

It is recorded of Jesus that He was "born King of the Jews" (Mt. ii. 2). To this throne He made final claim at His trial (Mt. xxvii. 11). And under this accusation He suffered (Mt. xxvii. 29) and died (Mt. xxvii. 37). One needs only to search the Scriptures to discover the fact that He is never mentioned as King of the church, nor King of the nations until He comes again as "King of kings, and Lord of lords" (Rev. xix. 16). He fulfilled every prediction that described Israel's Messiah King and the manner of His coming, at a time when all the records and genealogies were intact. He came of the tribe of Judah, a Son of David, born of a virgin in Bethlehem of Judea. Such claims could not then be made by an impostor without arousing the violent opposition of the rulers of the nation. His claim to be King was never challenged, so far as title was concerned. He met every prediction concerning Israel's Immanuel King. He was that King.

Four centuries before the birth of Jesus Malachi had prophesied the coming of a forerunner to the King: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I

come and smite the earth with a curse" (Mal. iv. 5, 6). This had a certain fulfillment in John the Baptist according, again, to angelic testimony: "But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lk. i. 13-17). Thus also another Messianic claim was met in the faithful ministry of John.

The first message of this divinely foreseen witness is recorded thus: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. iii. 1, 2). This, too, was the first message recorded of Christ: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. iv. 17). So, again, it was the only message committed to His disciples when He first sent them forth to preach: "These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. x. 5-7).

This message, it will be seen, had no application to Gentiles: The messengers were to go "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It can scarcely be unnoticed that while every detail of the manner of their journey was subject to the most careful instruction by the King, there is no record of instruction having been given them as to the meaning of this first, or kingdom, message committed to them. Evidently they did not need such instruction concerning the kingdom. Had not the kingdom hope been passed from father to son for generations? Had it not been sung to them at their mother's knee? Had it not been the one great theme of the synagogue instruction? Was it not their national hope? How much in contrast to this was the prolonged inability on the part of these same disciples to grasp, later on, the new message and world-wide commission of the cross!

This focusing of the testimony of Jesus, of John and of the disciples upon one solitary message, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand," places that message under unusual emphasis and its actual meaning should be carefully considered.

The phrase "The kingdom of heaven" is found only in Matthew, the Gospel of the King, and there it appears with different shades of meaning. One only of these shades of meaning is used in Chapters i. to xii. of this Gospel. Here it seems to refer to the same earthly Davidic kingdom with which the Old Testament had closed. As has been stated, whatever was meant by this announcement of the "kingdom of heaven," it was clearly understood by the preachers who proclaimed it and by the hearers.

No other kingdom message could have thus been received by those people in that day. So, also, it was addressed to one nation, Israel, and to them as a whole, rather than to individuals. Thus the "kingdom of heaven" as a message must ever be distinguished from the message of the gospel of grace which came by the cross. The gospel of grace Israel, as a nation, has never understood, and it is addressed to all peoples and to them as individuals only. The message of the "kingdom of heaven" as first set forth by Matthew had, therefore, a limited and national meaning, -- limited as to time of its application, because a new message has come in; and national, because, for the time being, it was addressed to Israel alone.

The message of the "kingdom of heaven" did not concern itself so much with the Person of the King as it did with His kingdom. But Israel had never dreamed of a kingdom apart from the presence and power of the expected King. Thus Jesus could say of Himself, in the light of the accepted close relation between the Person of the King and His kingdom: "The kingdom of God is within you" ("in the midst," in the Person of the King, Lk. xvii. 21). To assert the imminency of the kingdom was, to them, to assert the imminency of the King.

This kingdom message conforms in another respect, also, to the conditions of the Old Testament kingdom. There must be a great national heart-turning, or repentance to God as an immediate preparation for the kingdom as seen in the Old Testament (Deut. xxx. 1-3; Isa. xxiv. 7; Hos. iii. 4, 5; xiv. 7; Zech. xii. 10 - xiii. 1; Mal. iii. 7). Repentance, therefore, became an imperative part of the message concerning the imminency of the kingdom. So each of these kingdom messengers called upon that nation to repent: "A generation of vipers" must "bring forth fruits meet for repentance." They must turn about in heart as a condition of this covenanted kingdom blessing. This they, by His grace, are yet to do, "in His time." It is to be regretted that this required national repentance of Israel has been so often misapplied as a necessary preliminary step in an individual's salvation by Grace.

As certainly as the message of the "kingdom of heaven" was a claim upon the nation's hope, so, also, the rule of life presented in connection with this claim by both John the Baptist and Christ was in harmony with the Old Testament kingdom rule of life. The kingdom as foreseen in the Old Testament had ever in view the righteousness in life and conduct of its subjects (Isa. xi. 3-5; xxxii. 1; Jer. xxiii. 6; Dan. ix. 24). The "kingdom of heaven" as announced and offered in the early part of Matthew's Gospel is also accompanied with positive demands for personal righteousness in life and conduct.

This is not the principle of grace: it is rather the principle of law. It extends into finer detail the law of Moses; but it never ceases to be the very opposite of the principle of grace. Law conditions its blessings on human works: Grace conditions its works on divine blessings. Law says: "If ye forgive, ye will be forgiven," and in that measure only (Mt. vi. 14, 15): while grace says: "Forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. iv. 32).

So, again, law says: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. v. 20). This is not a present condition for entrance into heaven. Present conditions are wholly based on mercy: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by his mercy he saves us" (Titus iii. 5).

So the preaching of John the Baptist, like the Sermon on the Mount, was on a law basis as indicated by its appeal which was only for a correct and righteous life: "Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the roots of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answered and said unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages" (Lk. iii. 7-14).

This, like the Sermon on the Mount, is an appeal for a righteous life and cannot be confused with the present terms of salvation without nullifying the grounds of every hope and promise under grace. The present appeal to the unsaved is not for better conduct: it is for personal belief in, and acceptance of, the Saviour. There are directions concerning the conduct of those who are saved by trust in the Saviour; but these cannot be mixed with the law conditions of the Old Testament, or the New, without peril to souls.

Later on the same people said to Christ: "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?" and to this He replied: "This is the work of God that ye believe on him whom he hath sent" (Jno. vi. 28, 29). John the Baptist looked forward to the blessings of grace when he said: "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world;" but his immediate demands were in conformity with pure law, as were the early teachings of Jesus. Thus the legal principles of conduct of the Old Testament kingdom are carried forward into the revelations of the same kingdom as it appears in the New Testament.

The right division of Scripture does not destroy these legal passages; but it does fully classify them with the other Scriptures relating to the kingdom, both in the Old Testament and the New. There are many elements found in this body of truth that indicate the required manner of life in the kingdom which will be found likewise under the consistent walk in grace; but whatever is carried forward to be a life-governing principle under grace is there restated in its own place and with its own new emphasis. Thus the two widely differing systems are meant to be kept distinct in the mind of the faithful student of God's Word.

It should be borne in mind that the legal kingdom requirements as stated in the Sermon on the Mount are meant to prepare the way for, and condition life in, the earthly Davidic kingdom when it shall be set up upon the earth, and at that time when the kingdom prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven," has been answered. These kingdom conditions appear in the early ministry of Jesus since He was at that time faithfully offering the Messianic kingdom to Israel.

It has been objected that such stipulations as "resist not evil;" "if one shall smite you on the one cheek;" "one shall compel you to go a mile;" and "persecutions for righteousness' sake," could not be possible in the kingdom. This challenge may be based upon a supposition that the earthly Messianic kingdom is to be as morally perfect as heaven. On the contrary, the Scriptures abundantly testify that, while there will be far less occasion to sin, for the sufficient reason that Satan is then bound and in a pit and the glorious King is on His throne, there will be need of immediate execution of judgment and justice in the earth, and even the King shall rule, of necessity, with a "rod of iron." It is said that "all Israel shall be saved" and "all shall know the Lord from the least even unto the greatest;" but it is also revealed that at the end of that millennium, when Satan is loosed for a little season, he is still able to solicit the allegiance of human hearts and to draw out of the multitudes within the kingdom an army for rebellion against the government of the King (Rev. xx. 7-9). In that kingdom age "a sinner being an hundred years old shall be cursed" (Isa. lxxv. 20). The saints of that age will doubtless have heaven before their eyes and be looking there for their reward. And they will be the "salt of the earth." These kingdom commands and principles were given to Israel only and it is that same distinct nation that shall stand first in that kingdom when it is set up in the earth. Jesus was first "a minister to the circumcision," and is it an unnatural interpretation of Scripture to understand that He was performing this divinely appointed ministry at that very time when He was offering the kingdom to that nation and when He, with His forerunner, was depicting the principles of conduct that should condition life in that kingdom? Nothing is lost by such an interpretation; on the contrary, everything is gained, for the riches of grace, which, alas, so few apprehend, are thus kept pure and free from an unscriptural mixture with the kingdom law.

It may be concluded that the term "kingdom of heaven" as used in the early ministry of Jesus referred to the Messianic, Davidic, earthly kingdom seen in the Old Testament. As has been noted, the Jewish preachers needed no instruction in the details of that message. It was the hope of their nation, and it was addressed to that nation alone. So, also, an appeal was made with this message for the anticipated national, repentance which must precede the setting up of their kingdom in the earth, and the requirements set forth were legal rather than gracious. Israel's kingdom was faithfully offered to them by their King at His first appearing.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/lewis-sperry-chafer/the-kingdom-offered/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net