

The Kingdom, and Entrance Into It

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, emphasizing its present reality, the necessity of earnest pursuit, and the transformative new life it offers to believers.

Scripture: Ezekiel 12:2, Matthew 3:2, Matthew 11:11, Luke 16:16, John 1:29, John 3:2, Acts 13:27, Galatians 4:6, Ephesians 4:13, Hebrews 12:28

Topics: "Kingdom Of God", "Spiritual Pursuit"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the profound connection between the prophecies of the prophets and the Kingdom of Heaven, emphasizing the pivotal role of John the Baptist as the turning point between the Old Testament prophecies and the New Testament reality of the Kingdom. He highlights that the Kingdom of Heaven is not merely a literal, earthly kingdom but a new life, relationship, constitution, vocation, and gravitation towards heaven, calling believers to a continuous and violent pursuit of God's full purpose. T. Austin-Sparks challenges listeners to be men and women of violence, meaning business with God and allowing nothing to hinder them from entering into and growing in the vast Kingdom of Heaven.

Transcript

"For they that dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew him not, nor the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him" (Acts 13:27).

"Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist: yet he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye are willing to receive it, this is Elijah, that is to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11:11-15).

"The law and the prophets were until John: from that time the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and every man entereth violently into it" (Luke 16:16).

I think we can recognise that the common link between Acts 13:27 and Matthew 11:13 is "all the prophets". In the one case they heard not the voices of the prophets; in the other it is said (vs. 15), "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

THE PROPHETS PROPHESED OF THE KINGDOM

First of all, we must understand the meaning of this whole statement in Matthew 11 - "all the prophets... prophesied until John." What did they prophesy? Of course, they prophesied many things. One paramount concern in their prophecies was that relating to the coming King and the Kingdom. So much was that so that in the New Testament the matter of the Kingdom is taken for granted. When you open the New Testament and begin to read in the Gospels, you find that no explanation is given. The Kingdom is not introduced as something of which people were unaware. You find from amongst the people those who came to the Lord Jesus and used the very phrase, and you find the Lord Himself, although the matter not mentioned by others who came to Him, using the phrase 'the Kingdom' without any introduction or explanation.

Nicodemus was a case in point. We have nothing in the narrative to indicate that Nicodemus said anything at all about the Kingdom. He started by saying: "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God." There was nothing about the Kingdom in that. The Lord Jesus interrupted there and said: "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:2,3.) Evidently that was the thing that was in the mind of Nicodemus, the Lord knew it. You see, it is a thing taken for granted in the New Testament; and although later (as we find in the book of the Acts and subsequently) the true heavenly explanation is given, or there is some teaching concerning its true meaning, the Kingdom is something that is already very much in the minds of the Jewish people, and of course it has come from the prophets. The prophets had much to say concerning the Kingdom, and some of them had something very definite to say about the King. We will not try to prove that. It is a statement which you can easily verify.

What did the prophets prophesy? Inclusively, they prophesied concerning the King and the Kingdom. What was the culmination of the prophets in that comprehensive connection? It was John the Baptist. He gathered them all up; he was, so to speak, the inclusive prophet. What was John the Baptist? He was the terminal or turning point between all that had been and that which was now going to be, between the Old Testament and the New. That is the statement here "all... prophesied until John." Until John; now - from John. What was the message of John? "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). But alongside that, the great outstanding note of John is, "Behold, the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Those are not two different things; they are one. "The kingdom... is at hand": "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

THE KINGDOM PRESENT IN CHRIST

What was the issue, then, from John's time - the issue which sprang into new meaning, new force, because it had become an immediate one; no longer that of prophecy but now the issue of actuality? It was the Kingdom of Heaven. "The law and the prophets were until John: from that time the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached." The prophets had prophesied it; now it is preached as having come, and having come with "the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world."

What, then, is the Kingdom of Heaven? We have led up to this step by step, and when we answer this final question we shall see clearly what it was that these Jewish rulers and dwellers in Jerusalem never saw, though they heard the prophets week by week.

I am going to press the challenge of this again. I feel that it is a very solemn thing that ever the Kingdom of Heaven should have come near to anyone. You see, the Lord is eventually going to judge everyone on their opportunity. The opportunity has been given - and contact is opportunity. The very availability of the Kingdom is opportunity. What is done with opportunity? The Lord Jesus walked in the midst of the Jewish

nation three and a half years. His very presence among them was their opportunity - and what a terrible, terrible consequence followed their failure to make good their opportunity!

Now there may be someone in this category who reads these words. Through reading them, there has become available to you, even if never before (but surely we could hardly say that), the gospel of Jesus Christ - the knowledge of the fact of the Lord Jesus and His Cross. To have ever had that within your reach is enough to settle your eternal destiny. If the Kingdom of Heaven is come near within the compass and range of your life, to your knowledge - that is the ground upon which your eternal destiny may be settled. Of course, there was very much more in the case of these people, and their condemnation was so much the more. The prophets prophesied in their hearing, and yet because of something in their own make-up, because of some reaction from themselves, the rulers and the people never heard what they were hearing; they never recognised that here was something which had very great implications, and that they must find out what those implications really were. They did not take the attitude - 'If there is something here which concerns me, I must know what it is.'

You could hardly ask for less than that, could you? but the very absence of that kind of reaction to the presence of the gospel, as I have said, may be the ground upon which judgment will take place. It did in their case, and a terrible judgment it was! What a judgment, these two thousand years of Jewish history! "Your house is left unto you desolate" (Matthew 23:38). Was there ever a story of more awful desolation than the story of the Jews since then? But, even so, that is only a parable of desolation; something here on this earth. What must desolation in the spiritual and eternal sense mean - forsaken of God, and knowing it? It is a solemn message, and of course it paves the way to this other part, the "violent" entering into the Kingdom. This is something to take seriously, something about which you cannot afford to be careless or indifferent.

What is the Kingdom? The answer to that can be given in three or four quite brief statements. What did the Kingdom of Heaven prove to be? I repudiate that system of interpretation which claims that a literal, earthly, temporal kingdom was offered to the Jews at this time. I do not believe it. It would have been a poor sort of thing for the people of whom we read in the Gospels to have had the kingdom in their hands - not much glory or satisfaction to God in them! Look at Palestine today, and see what kind of kingdom it would be in the hands of those people! What is possible for the world when that kind of thing gets the kingdom? No, I repudiate the interpretation of a temporal kingdom being offered to Israel by Jesus at that time. But what did the Kingdom of Heaven, which was preached in the days of John the Baptist, prove to be and to mean, as the Lord Jesus interpreted it, and later the Apostles?

WHAT THE KINGDOM IS

(a) A New Life

First of all, the Kingdom of Heaven was a new life, altogether other than that which men knew anything about in all their history from Adam onward. That is what the Lord meant in His own first reference to the Kingdom, when speaking to Nicodemus about his soul's need. "Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" - because it is another life that has come in, as by a birth. It is not just the energizing of an old life. It is not just the swinging over of an old life into new interests, turning from one line of interest to another, from one system of occupation to another: once you were all out for the world, and now with the same life and interest you are all out for Christianity. No, it is another, different life, a life that never was, given from God Himself. The very essence of the Kingdom of Heaven is that it is a heavenly nature in

a heavenly life, given as a distinct gift at a crisis. Another life - that is the Kingdom, to begin with.

(b) A New Relationship

It is a new relationship, a relationship with God: which is not simply that now we become interested in God - that God becomes an object of our consideration and we swing over from one relationship to another because now we have taken up Christianity. No, it is a relationship which is of the essence of this very life itself. We have an altogether new and different consciousness, so far as our relationship to God is concerned. The great truth of the Gospels, especially as emphasized in the Gospel by John, is that a new revelation of relationship with God has come by Jesus Christ. "I manifested thy name unto the men whom thou gavest me out of the world" (John 17:6). That name, of which He is always speaking, represented a new relationship - "Father"; not in the sense of a general and universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, but a specific, new relationship which comes about only by the entering of the Holy Spirit into the life in a definite, critical act. "God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:6). When did that happen with you? What was the very first lisp of your new life? "Father!" - uttered out of a new consciousness. Not now a God who is afar off, unthinkable, all-terrible, of whom you are afraid; no, "Father!" When we are "born of the Spirit," there is brought about an entirely new relationship.

(c) A New Constitution

Then the Kingdom of Heaven is a new constitution. I am not thinking now of a new set of laws and regulations, but of a new constitution so far as you and I are concerned. We are constituted anew, with an entirely new set of capacities which make possible things which were never possible before. It ought to be recognised - and I would have you lay this to heart anew - that the child of God, the member of the Kingdom of Heaven, is the embodiment of a miracle, which means that there are supernatural possibilities and capacities in every such one. What tremendous things go on in the history of a child of God! When we see fully and clearly at last, we shall recognise them to have been nothing less than Divine miracles again and again. We do not know all the forces which are bent upon the destruction of a child of God, and how much his preserving through to the end represents an exercise of the almighty power of God. Some of us know a little about that: that our very survival is because God has exercised His power over other immense hostile powers, that we are kept by the power of God - and that it takes the power of God to keep us!

The inception of the life of the child of God is a miracle. 'How can a man be born again?' There is no answer to that question except that God does it. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:52). That is, how can the child of God be supported throughout, without anything here to help, to succour, to nourish? There is no answer to that either, except that God does it; and if He does not, the child of God, because of the extra forces centred upon him or her for destruction, will simply go under. The consummation of the life of the child of God will be equally a miracle. "How are the dead raised? and with what manner of body do they come?" (I Corinthians 15:35). The answer to that is the same - God alone is going to do it.

The whole matter is a miracle from start to finish. It is a new constitution, having in it possibilities and capacities which are altogether above and beyond the highest level of human abilities; that is, above and over the whole kingdom of earth and nature.

(d) A New Vocation

Further, it is a new vocation. It is something for which to live, something in which to serve, something to bring into operation. It becomes the sphere and the means of a new life-ministry and purpose. The very consciousness of a truly born-again child of God is like this - 'Now I know why I am alive! I have been wondering all along why I was born; I have grumbled about it, and felt I was hardly done by in being brought into this world without being consulted as to whether I wanted to come; but now I see there is purpose in it - I have something to live for!' A truly born-again child of God goes off and tells people that, after all, it is worth being alive! He has discovered, behind everything else, that which has Divine intent and meaning - it never existed as an active thing until he was born anew and entered into the Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven is a new vocation, a new sense of life-purpose. It gives to life a meaning. That is the Kingdom.

Is that not altogether a different idea from that which would make the Kingdom a place with certain laws and regulations - 'You must' and 'You must not' - something objective? "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21), and it is after this kind.

(e) A New Gravitation - To Heaven, Not Earth

It is moreover something from above, and that surely implies that it is transcendent in every way. It is something that lives, and it brings life up on to a higher level. That is, if the new life comes from above, from heaven, it will always gravitate back to its source, and if this new life works in us, it will be lifting us, pulling us upward to God. It will so work that we shall feel first of all that this world is not our home. It was our home; everything for us was here until that happened; we saw nothing beyond. Now we do not belong to it, we belong somewhere else; and in some strange way we are steadily moving further and further away from this earth. We find that we become less comfortable here every day. You are in the Kingdom if you have something like that experience. If you can be comfortable and happy and content to go on here you ought to have grave doubts as to where you are as regards the Kingdom. But if you are increasingly conscious that inwardly the distance is growing between you and all that is here, then the Kingdom is truly at work, the Kingdom of Heaven has come.

THE KINGDOM COME BUT ALSO COMING

Now, another thing: the Kingdom has come, but it is always coming. We have entered, but we ought to be always entering. There is a little word at the end of the letter to the Hebrews - "Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken..." (Hebrews 12:28). The literal sense there is - "being in the course or process of receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken..." It has come, but it is coming; and it is at that point that I think we all need to recognise a difference, to discriminate between two things - between conversion and salvation.

Have you ever made that distinction? There is all the difference between conversion and salvation. Conversion is a crisis, something that happens perhaps suddenly, in a moment, and it is done. Salvation? That is something that has commenced; but you find also that the New Testament speaks about "receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:9), thus indicating that salvation is still future. Some people have built a false doctrine upon this, teaching that you cannot know you are saved until you are at the end, because it is spoken of in the future tense. But we are saved, and we are being saved. We have entered the Kingdom by conversion, but salvation is a far greater thing than conversion. Oh, salvation is a vast thing, and is only another word for the Kingdom - the Kingdom coming all the time. A spiritual babe who has just received Divine life has not got everything, except potentially. It has

conversion, it has new birth. Would you say that a little babe has everything it is intended to have? Potentially, in the life, all is there. But how much more there is to be known of what that life implies, of all that it carries with it and may lead to, of all the capacities that are there!

That is the difference between conversion and salvation. The Kingdom is a vast kingdom - "His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom" (Daniel 4:3). "Of the increase of his government... there shall be no end" (Isaiah 9:7). 'No end' simply means eternally expansive. Can you make just a geographical matter of that? Surely not. It must be spiritual - the vast inexhaustible resources of God for His own people. It will take eternity to know and to explore all those resources, the dimensions of His Kingdom.

THE KINGDOM SUFFERS VIOLENCE

Now, having in a very imperfect way considered what the prophets were talking about and what you and I have come into touch with, let us see what can be missed. Let us look at these other words: "The law and the prophets were until John: from that time the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and every man entereth violently into it" (Luke 16:16). "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by force" (Matthew 11:12). It "suffereth violence." That does not simply mean that it permits of violence. It really means that it calls for violence, and it is men of violence that take it by force. Luke puts it "entereth violently".

Here is the spirit of citizenship in that Kingdom - "by force". Why? This is not merely an appeal to be in earnest - though it certainly includes that, seeing what a tremendous thing this Kingdom is, and what an immense loss will be suffered if we do not take it seriously. But you see, the Lord Jesus is speaking as in the midst of things which are constantly opposing. There is a whole organized system, expressing tremendous prejudice. He said to them on one occasion: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye shut the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye enter not in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering in to enter" (Matthew 23:13). There is everything, from devil and men, to obstruct; to enter in requires violence. If you can be hindered, you will be hindered. If you are going to be easy-going, you will give to antagonistic forces all the ground that they want to put you out.

That is why I pointed out that it is not only a once-for-all entering into the Kingdom, but it is a continuous entering. The Kingdom is so much bigger than conversion. Of course, if you are going to be saved at all - I mean saved initially - you will have to mean business for that. You will have to make it a desperate matter, because there will be everything to stop you. But the Kingdom means a very great deal more than merely getting into it, far more than being converted. There is a great deal more in the purpose of God for our lives than we have ever imagined, and if we are to enter into that, violence has to characterize us. We must desperately mean business, and come to the place where we say: 'Lord, I am set upon all that Thou dost mean in Christ. I am set upon that, and I am not going to allow other people's prejudices or suspicions or criticisms to get in the way; I am not going to allow any man-made system to hinder me; I am going right on with Thee for all Thy purpose. I am going to do violence to everything that would get in the way.' It calls for violence, and we have to do a lot of violence to get all that God wills for us.

Oh, how easily many lives are side-tracked, simply because they are not desperate enough! They are caught in things which limit - things which may be good, that may have something of God in them, but which none the less are limiting things, and do not represent a wide open way to all God's purpose. The only way for us to come into all that the Lord means - not only into what we have seen but into all that He has purposed - is to be desperate, to be men of violence; to be men who say, 'By God's grace, nothing

and no one, however good, is going to stand in my way; I am going on with God.' Have that position with the Lord, and you will find that God meets you on that ground.

No men - not even Paul himself - knew all that they were going to know. Paul was constantly getting fuller unveilings of that unto which he was called. He received something fairly strong and rich at the beginning; then, later, he was shown unspeakable things (II Corinthians 12:4). He was growing in apprehension. But why? Because he was a man of violence. God meets us like that. "With the perverse thou wilt shew thyself froward" (Psalm 18:26). That, in principle, means that God will be to you what you are to Him. He will mean business if you mean business. There is a vast amount in the Kingdom that we have never suspected. Do believe that. There is more for all of us to know than anybody on this earth knows - far more than the very greatest saints, the most advanced Christians, know of the purpose of God.

Paul intimates that. In his Philippian letter he makes it clear that, even at the end of his life, he has yet to apprehend, he needs still to know. "That I may know..." (Philippians 3:10). There is far more to know. Do you believe that? Are you going to allow your life simply to be boxed up within the measure that you know, or within the measure of other people? No - it is the measure of Christ that is God's end. "Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). No movement, no society, no evangelical organization, no church on this earth has come to that yet, but that is the objective in view. But God requires, in order to bring us to fullness, that we be men of violence, that we really mean business, that we say to everything that gets in the way - and oh, the plausible voices, which nevertheless are subtly influenced by prejudices! - 'Stand thou aside: I am going on with God, I am going to allow nothing to stand in the way.'

"The gospel of the kingdom is preached." Can you imagine those Judaizers speaking to the people about Jesus? 'Be careful; mind you don't get caught! Our advice to you is to steer clear of that - don't get into too close touch with Him!' All that was going on. Paul was up against it all the time. He was tracked down throughout his journeys by these very people who, following on his heels, said, 'Be careful - it is dangerous!' The Lord Himself experienced the same kind of thing; and He said: "the kingdom... suffereth violence." It calls for violence; you will not get in to begin with, and you will certainly not get in in growing fullness, unless you are one of those people who do violence to everything that stands in the way of God's full purpose as revealed in Christ. You will not even know what that purpose is, God will not be able to reveal to you the next part of it, unless He finds that you are one after this kind - entering in violently.

Are you like that? Well, if we are passive, there is everything to be lost; if we mean business, there is everything to be gained. The Lord make us men and women like that, lest we be numbered among those of whom it is said that they "have ears to hear, and hear not" (Ezekiel 12:2).

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