

## THE KINGDOM AT HAND

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SCRIPTURE: Luke 21:25-31

And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming upon the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. And he spake to them a parable: Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand.

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The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel. (Mark 1:15)

In the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry he preached, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." A little later, when Jesus entered upon his ministry, he made the same appeal and the same announcement: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Still a little later, when he had called and commissioned the Twelve, he sent them forth with the instruction, "As ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is a t hand."

There is a strange urgency -- a strange sense of haste about that phrase, "at hand." In the Old Testament it is used several times by prophets to foretell impending judgment and calamity which came as predicted within a short space of time. When Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane said, "The hour is at hand and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners .... behold, he is at hand that doth betray me," Matthew continues in the next verse to say that "while he yet spake," Judas came into the garden to betray and arrest him.

If the kingdom was "at hand" even before Jesus entered upon his active ministry, why do we still wait for it today? Were John the Baptist and Jesus wrong when they declared it to be "at hand?" The question is still further complicated by the fact that near the close of his ministry Jesus listed in some detail the signs of his future coming in glory and judgment, and said, "When ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand." The kingdom was "nigh at hand" in the days of John the Baptist, in the days of Jesus and the disciples; and it will be nigh at hand in the day of Christ's second coming in glory.

The New Testament church lived in a constant tension between two concepts -- the concept of a present kingdom into which each one who had fully accepted Christ had fully entered, and the concept of an unrealized, future, triumphant kingdom which should some day overthrow all worldly kingdoms, subdue all evil under which the saints suffered untold persecutions, and establish Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We still live in that state of tension and expectancy, a little doubtful at times of the future kingdom, even though we have experienced -- at least in part -- the redemptive power of the present kingdom.

We have said several times in previous sermons that there are many aspects, modes, or phases of the kingdom. The kingdom is present, and yet it is also future; it is realized, and yet it is also unrealized. It is always a kingdom available to those who will obey its laws -- the kingdom "at hand" and not a kingdom afar off. But for the triumphant kingdom foretold by Christ, we still wait in faith.

Perhaps we shall not have to wait much longer. To those who believe in the signs which Jesus gave to warn of his second coming, it seems increasingly obvious that the day for the realization of his triumphant kingdom is "near at hand." For centuries the church has awaited the fulfillment of this promise. Many have grown weary of waiting, and have attempted to rationalize or spiritualize the hope of a triumphant kingdom -- to put it in heaven rather than on earth -- to claim that the second coming of Christ was to be a spiritual coming, and not a literal, physical coming in clouds of glory. Some have scoffed, and by their very scoffing have fulfilled prophetic scripture, which says that in the last days there shall be scoffers, walking in their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming?" Yet Peter reassures us, as does Paul and every writer of the New Testament, that the second coming shall some day be a reality, and warns us to be aware of the signs, lest that day overtake us as a thief in the night. Twenty of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament teach the second coming, and the authors of the other seven books mention it elsewhere. The second coming is mentioned 318 times in 260 chapters.

Let us now look briefly at some of the signs which indicate that the kingdom of heaven is "at hand," that the second coming of our Lord cannot be delayed much longer. One of the signs was to be a multiplication of false Christs and false prophets. If you have been smugly content in your own religion, you probably have no idea at all of the number of religious leaders who have appeared in the past hundred years in various parts of the world claiming to be re-incarnations of God or Christ, or claiming to be a great prophet who would unite all mankind in brotherhood and peace. By their fruits ye shall know them.

Another sign of the coming kingdom was "wars and rumors of wars," with nation rising against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. The rumors of war which once flew by slow sailing vessel and horse-drawn mail coach now fly with the speed of light on every radio wave, by television, by wirephoto, by automatic printer. They are printed on high speed printing presses, and sent forth by millions in every mail which now travels in planes at speeds approaching the speed of sound. Truly, this is a day of "rumors of wars."

It is also a day of "wars and commotions," or wars and instabilities. There are few nations on earth today besides our own which have not changed their form of government in the past hundred years. Kings without number have lost their thrones; empires have been deprived of many of their possessions and much of their former prestige and power. Instability of government is reflected in instability of currency in most of the nations of the world, in economic upheaval, in depression and unemployment.

A hundred years ago, war -- terrible as it was -- affected comparatively few of the citizens of the warring nations. The last war, though we escaped its full fury here in America, was brought right to the door of most of the residents of Europe. No one will ever know the total loss of private property, in homes, businesses, factories, roads, utilities, public buildings -- or the total loss of civilian life -- in the mass bombings of the cities of Europe. Truly in our day war has been poured out upon all nations, and the end is not yet.

As a result of war, famine and pestilence have stalked through the world, fulfilling another sign of the nearness of Christ's second coming. Men's hearts are failing them for fear for looking forward to the things coming upon the earth, as we contemplate what may happen if the H bomb or the new cobalt bomb are unleashed. Once we thought that the prophet was exaggerating when he spoke of the elements melting with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein being burned up; but we now have within our hands the power to accomplish literally that result.

The day of judgment for many men, many nations, many systems, many philosophies, is near. The signs all point to the imminent coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ, to judge the earth and to establish his kingdom. "When these things begin to come to pass," Jesus said, "look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh." If Jesus was right, and if these signs be true, the triumphant kingdom is "at hand."