

The End of the End: The Glory of God

1 Corinthians 15:24-28

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Today is the final message of our series on the kingdom of God from the gospel of Matthew. I began last September saying the kingdom of God is way more important than we realize. To hear Jesus speak was to hear a message about the kingdom of God. He told us to seek it first (Matthew 6:33 ESV) over anything else. The apostles spoke to unbelievers about the kingdom of God. Satan shudders knowing this kingdom has and will conquer his own dark kingdom. Yet, how often do we consider or talk about the one thing we are supposed to seek?

I hope this series has implanted kingdom DNA into our church. I received this encouraging note this week from one fairly new family in our church:

*"Pastor Steve,
This is the first time I write to you, so here is the bottom line up front: the kingdom of God series and Bethel Church have helped our family refocus on God and recover from a less pleasurable experience. We have incorporated 'kingdom talk' into our regular 'here and now' living and communication with each other. We have learned that modeling our 'heavenly citizenship' is an 'oblitunity' - a sincere and deep commitment to love at all cost. And, finally, tying the 'go, baptize, and teach' message in Mathew 28:19 to the 'all nations, and then the end will come' in Mathew 24 directs the believer to the true meaning and purpose of these passages. Far too many well-intended preachers tend to focus on the surrounding signs described in these passages as if we were meant to sit around and watch them unfold. THANK YOU! Since that sermon, I have engaged our family in 'kingdom talk' on a consistent basis - and God has used this small gesture to refocus our attention on what truly matters. Spiritually speaking, we continue to sharpen our focus, being intentional about our faith, and seek to be engaged in God's kingdom in the 'here and now.'"*

If this is indicative of how God is transforming us as a church, we are taking wonderful steps toward being a more biblically-aligned congregation.

So how about one more review? The kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God through Christ. What is he redeeming? Everything broken and cursed starting in the angelic realm and, because of Adam's sin, the realm of the physical universe as well. The rebellion began in Satan's prideful heart. When Adam sinned, the world fell into spiritual darkness and physical decay. Everything without God seems ultimately futile (Ecclesiastes). Death became an inescapable reality. The universe is in rebellion against God falling short of the glory of God.

But wait! Frodo has the ring. Aslan is on the move. Dorothy is on the yellow brick road. There is a last Jedi somewhere on an island. These fictional stories all capture a redemptive theme that echo the real and true story of God and us.

The reign of God returned to this world in a person. In a Messiah. A King. A son of David. The Son of God. Prophecies were fulfilled in the birth of Jesus the king. Angels announced his royalty. Magi arrived from afar to honor him. But largely the world was unaware that a king and a kingdom had arrived.

With him came power. Amazing, future kind of kingdom power, but right here in this despairing world. These deathly hallows. This dying world. He healed. He created. He loved. He resurrected. And he told everyone that the kingdom of God was at hand.

He died on a cross. The King died for his people—specifically for our sins. Jesus' resurrection conquered the reign of death in this world. Death would no longer be the only and absolute final judgment on us.

How? In his own words, Jesus is the "*resurrection and the life.*" (John 11:25) His kingdom is the opposite of death. It is a kingdom of life. A kingdom of the heart. A kingdom whose reign is expressed inwardly and spiritually as Jesus is enthroned in the human heart. This happens through repentance and trust in Jesus as Savior and King. The word the Bible uses most is "Lord." The most basic creed of early Christianity was *Jesus is Lord*. To embrace that is to surrender to his reign and become his disciple.

King Jesus' great commandment is to love and his great commission is to make disciples. The mission is more and better disciples. Jesus' return and the end of all things won't happen until the gospel of the kingdom is preached to all nations (Matthew 24:14). For 2,000+ years the church has proclaimed Jesus as Lord. We are his people. His kingdom is forever.

What if I told you here at the end of the series that while the kingdom is incredibly important, it is not most important? Have I undermined the whole series? There is something more important which even the kingdom of God is a means to, and actually, gives it its significance.

"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Corinthians 15:24-26)

There is so much here. Resurrection. Kingdom. Rule and reign. Consummation. The key to all of it is to focus on what's going on between God the Father and God the Son. The Triune God has always existed. Three in one. Father, Son, and Spirit. The prequel here is that God the Father purposed and willed everything that would happen (Ephesians 1:11). This was communicated to the Son including his becoming a man, suffering, and dying.

So God creates the universe, creates mankind, and Adam and Eve sinned against God. This set in motion both God's justice to condemn and God's mercy to save. 2,000+ years ago God the Son was sent as a man. He died for our sins. He was buried. He rose on the third day. He died to save us, but there's way more going on here than just that.

On the cosmic level, God the Son is engaged in a war of destroying the enemies of God and restoring what had been lost. And this came at a terrible price – His sacrifice and his death.

"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet.' But when it says, 'all things are put in subjection,' it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all." (1 Corinthians 15:24-28)

Let's take this in order. *"Then comes the end."* Not the end of all things but the consummation of redemption on the cosmic scale. What must happen first? He *must* reign until all his enemies are under his feet.

The Provisional Reign of King Jesus

Yes, the gospel is that Jesus died for our sins. But that death and resurrection had cosmic and eternal implications. It was nothing short of God's decisive victory in a long war. Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12, *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."* Largely hidden from our view, there is a cosmic spiritual battle taking place between God and the forces of evil – between God and Satan; God and demons; God and the kingdom of darkness. God is at war with sinners who refuse to worship him and are in open moral and spiritual rebellion against him. This is summarized in 1 Corinthians 15:24 as *"every rule and every authority and power."* There is no realm and no reign and no kingdom and no nation and not one inch of this universe that God will ultimately give up to Satan and evil. He is destroying and restoring all of it. It all must reflect his glory. All must worship Him. Every human heart must bow to Him. Every angel. Every demon. Every king and Caesar and Pharaoh. Every nation. Every authority of any kind must and will bow their knee before his majesty.

When we consider the enemies of Christianity, we may think of ISIS or secularism. Yet our ultimate enemy is death. For everything to be redeemed, somehow death has to be defeated, but how?

The death of death

Back to the Trinity. God the Father commissioned the Son to destroy the enemy's weapon of mass destruction. Like any war, to defeat the enemy you have to overcome his best weapon. Death is the weapon of Satan and as long as death was an ultimate reality in creation, and specifically for us, there could be neither ultimate victory nor ultimate restoration. Simply put, death had to be put to death. But how do you kill death?

Here is where we have multiple narratives weaving together. For death to be killed, the cause of death had to be defeated. Perhaps like cancer where for cancer to be defeated, the cause of the cancer has to be destroyed. The cause of death is sin and guilt. Romans 6:23 says, *"The wages of sin is death."* That guilt we all have as sinners who sin somehow had to be removed and the righteousness required by God had to be restored.

Christ died for our sins. His death was spiritual chemotherapy, which not only destroyed the cancerous blood cells but then transfused his righteous blood cells into all who believe. This allows God to declare us righteous before him through justification. Christ's death and the application of his substitutionary atonement to us allow us to stand guilt-free before God. But it's more than that. The removal of guilt also eliminates death's legal right to claim us in an ultimate sense.

Here's the amazing power and love of God. God refuses to allow Satan and death to have the final word over one atom of his creation and that includes our bodies. He doesn't just want to save us spiritually but to save us physically as well. How did he do it?

Death had to be put to death. But how do you kill death? Imagine death like a giant prison with high walls and huge bars. There's no way to escape. But in this prison of death is a

huge door with a massive padlock. If someone could break that lock, not only could he escape, but with the lock broken, so can everyone else in the prison.

That is how God killed death. When the power of God reached into that Jerusalem tomb and raised Jesus back to life, it broke death's absolute claim over us. Jesus was the first one out, but since the lock is broken, now all who follow him by faith can be set free too.

An earthly reign from a heavenly throne

"For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." (1 Corinthians 15:25)

Do you remember what Jesus said after his resurrection and right before his ascension? *"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'"* (Matthew 28:18) What was that about? It doesn't mean he was less than God before this or lacked any power. What it does mean is that his resurrection inaugurated a new reign, a new realm, a new kingdom. The kingdom of God established on earth. God the Father gave to the Son all authority over every realm and he mediates this authority from heaven on earth. He has all authority. It's like the old saying, "Where does a lion sleep?" "Wherever he wants." Jesus is like that. He rules with absolute authority. He goes and moves and revives anywhere he sovereignly chooses. He must reign and he will reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. This refers to the ancient practice of a conquering king putting his foot on the neck of the conquered king. It was symbolic of absolute domination and victory.

Christ has all authority but clearly he does not yet exert that authority in its fullness. This doesn't mean he isn't reigning right now. He is on his throne. Yet Satan continues his rebellion. Demons continue their mischief. Billions of humans do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord. In fact, in some ways we could look around and say, *This doesn't look like a victory at all! What is he waiting for?*

Why is Jesus' waiting? Why the delay? The gospel of the kingdom hasn't been proclaimed to all nations yet (Matthew 24:14). The end won't come until it is. Jesus is waiting. Peter writes, *"Count the patience of our Lord as salvation."* (2 Peter 3:15). He's waiting until all his people are saved. He won't lose a single one of them and that includes us. We should be glad he waits because his patience means our salvation. But someday, the waiting will be over...

The Return of the King

We pick up the cosmic story. In one moment, all these principalities and powers set against him and every human heart that refuses his kingship, all of them will be stunned by the appearance of the King.

"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords." (Revelation 19:11-16)

What has led to this? Sin was defeated in the cross. Death was destroyed by his resurrection. His enemies are destroyed by his second coming. What happens in the end is breathtaking. It's all about the Father and the Son. *"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father."* (1 Corinthians 15:24) Verse 28 gives a little more detail. *"When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him [God the Father] who put all things in subjection under him [Christ], that God may be all in all."* (clarifications mine)

In the end, this isn't ultimately about the kingdom of God. It is about God and the infinite love between God the Father and God the Son. When Jesus has defeated every enemy, saved and resurrected every believer, fulfilled every purpose the Father gave him, he gives a gift to his Father. What's the gift? A fully restored creation. A kingdom now extended into every possible realm. This is Philippians 2:10, *"Every knee [will] bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."* With every enemy under his feet via judgment and hell, and a restored creation through the new heaven and earth, and a redeemed and glorified humanity, the Son presents a created order completely redeemed and restored as a gift to the Father. Then he submits himself to the Father so that *"God may be all in all."* (1 Corinthians 15:28) The story ends where it began. Frodo is back in the shire. Dorothy is back in Kansas. And God reigns over all.

Where are we in the story? Every person here is in this story. Hopefully not the enemies. Certainly not God the Father. Not God the Son. We're not the white horse. I heard this years ago and it has stuck with me. Amazingly...

We are the gift the Son gives to the Father

The Son gives to the Father the kingdom and the kingdom is more than us, but it most certainly includes us. We are the love expression of Jesus. Can you believe it? We are a symbolic gift of how much the Son loves the Father. How willingly he obeyed. The humiliation of becoming a baby. The fruit of those tears in Gethsemane. The anguish on the cross. We are the fruit of all that, and in the end, we are his gift to the Father. For all eternity, as the Father sees us walking, and running, and dancing around in our resurrected bodies, he will think, *O how my Son loves me...*

Are you in the kingdom? Is Jesus your King?

Friend, if you've not submitted your life to this King by believing in what he did on your behalf, the King invites you into his kingdom. There is access to all, but only those who put their personal trust in him and submit to his Lordship may enter.

Christian, is your heart and life in total submission to him? He rules over every inch of this universe and that includes your heart and life, but we can resist him for now. Why would we? Recommit yourself today to being a fully surrendered servant to the King of kings and Lord of lords. *"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."* (Romans 11:36)

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