

The Return of Jesus Christ—Part 1: The Coming Kingdom

Then the LORD will go forth

And fight against those nations,

As He fights in the day of battle.

**And in that day His feet will stand on the
Mount of Olives,**

Which faces Jerusalem on the east.

**And the Mount of Olives shall be split in
two,**

From east to west,

Making a very large valley;

**Half of the mountain shall move toward
the north**

And half of it toward the south. ...

Thus the LORD my God will come,

**And all the saints with You. (Zechariah
14:3–4, 5b)**

The Return of Elijah

The prophet Elijah never died. One day, as he was walking with the prophet Elisha and preparing for his (known) departure, “suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11).

Centuries later, the prophet Malachi closed out the books of the Prophets, and thus the Old Testament, with the following prophecy:

"Remember the Law of Moses, my servant,

Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel.

With the statutes and judgments.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet

**Before the coming of the great and
dreadful day of the LORD.**

And he will turn

The hearts of the fathers to the children,

And the hearts of the children to their fathers,

Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.” (Malachi 4:4–6)

Moreover, a significant amount of Old Testament Scripture, mainly in the books of the Prophets, predicated that God's anointed Messiah (Daniel 9:26), the **God-man**, would come and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The following passage from Micah is one of the more notable prophecies:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days
That the mountain of the LORD's house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,
And shall be exalted above the hills;
And peoples shall flow to it.
Many nations shall come and say,
"Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
He will teach us His ways,
And we shall walk in His paths."
For out of Zion the law shall go forth,
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
And rebuke strong nations afar off;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war anymore. (Micah 4:1-3)

Yet, it is clear from other passages that "the day of the LORD," a time when God will pour out severe judgement upon the world, shall proceed the establishment of the kingdom of God. Notably, Zechariah warned Israel:

Behold, the day of the LORD is coming,
And your spoil will be divided in your midst.
For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem;
The city shall be taken,

The houses rifled,
And the women ravished.
Half of the city shall go into captivity,
But the remnant of the people shall not be cut off of from the city.

Then the LORD will go forth
And fight against those nations,
As He fights in the day of battle.
And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives,
Which faces Jerusalem on the east.
And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two,
From east to west,
Making a very large valley;
Half of the mountain shall move toward the north
And half of it toward the south.
Then you shall flee through
My mountain valley,
For the mountain valley shall reach to Azal.
Yes, you shall flee
As you fled from the earthquake
In the days of Uzziah king of Judah.

Thus the LORD my God will come,
And all the saints with You.

It shall come to pass in that day
That there will be no light;
The lights will diminish.
It shall be one day
Which is known to the LORD—
Neither day nor night.

But at evening time it shall happen

That it will be light.

And in that day it shall be

That living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, Half of them toward the eastern sea

And half of them toward the western sea;

In both summer and winter it shall occur.

And the LORD shall be King over all the earth.

In that day it shall be—

“The LORD is one,”

And His name one. (Zechariah 14:1–9)

At a high level, the Law and the Prophets (i.e., the Old Testament Scriptures) prepared Israel for (1) the return of Elijah, (2) the day of the LORD, (3) the coming of God as a man (Messiah), and (4) the establishment of the kingdom of God on Earth when Messiah will rule the world from Jerusalem.

(Knowing this framework will help you understand the meaning of Old Testament prophecies that are obviously not attributable to the historical situation of Israel at the time.) The Old Testament prophets were not shown anything beyond the thousand year reign of Christ (or Millennial Kingdom). So at the time of the God-man's first coming, these were the general expectations of the believing, Scripturally knowledgeable Jews.

Having laid this groundwork, consider what the angel said to Zacharias, concerning his forthcoming son, John the Baptist:

But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ... And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. **He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, '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.” (1:13, 16–17)

The angel said that John would “go before Him (Messiah) in the spirit and power of Elijah” and then he quoted the prophet Malachi: “to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” (4:6). Before

commenting on this, let us examine the apostle John's record of what happened to John the Baptist once he began his ministry:

Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

And they asked him, "What then? **Are you Elijah?**"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No."

Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the LORD,'" as the prophet Isaiah said." (John 1:19–23)

John the Baptist was in the wilderness of Judea preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! (Matthew 3:2)" Many people were coming to listen to him and be baptized (Matthew 3:5–6) which placed a demand on the Jewish religious leaders to review the situation. This account reveals that these religious leaders were expecting Elijah and *the* Prophet. The coming of *the* Prophet was foretold by Moses shortly before his death:

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.'

"And the LORD said to me: 'What they have spoken is good. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.'" (Deuteronomy 18:15–19)

What is interesting about this is that God raised up many prophets that spoke His words during the course of ancient Israel, but the Jews did not associate them with this Prophet. They associated this Prophet with the Messiah and they were still waiting for Him at the time of John the Baptist's ministry.

When John told the religious leaders who he was, he quoted the prophet Isaiah:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make straight in the desert

A highway for our God.

Every valley shall be exalted

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough places smooth;

The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

And all flesh shall see it together;

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 40:3–5)

Similar to Elijah in the Old Testament, John was empowered by the Holy Spirit to prepare the people's hearts for the Messiah. However, the nation of Israel rejected Jesus at His first coming, leaving much of Isaiah's prophecy still unfulfilled, notably: "The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and *all flesh* shall see it together." This promise aligns with the apostle John's declaration: "Behold, He is coming with

clouds; and *every eye* will see Him, even they who pierced Him. John's declaration may have been inspired by the prophet Daniel's vision:

"I was watching in the night visions,
And behold, One like the Son of Man,
Coming with the clouds of heaven!
He came to the Ancient of Days,
And they brought Him near before Him.
Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,
That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion,
Which shall not pass away,
And His kingdom the one
Which shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13–14)

It is interesting that there is something about the return of Jesus Christ that will cause all people to see Him.

As mentioned, the nation of Israel rejected the Messiah at His first coming. God knew they would, but hypothetically, the Messiah could have subdued the Roman Empire and established His kingdom at his first coming. Consider what Jesus said concerning John the Baptist:

As they [John's disciples] departed, Jesus began to say **to the multitudes** concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? ... But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written:

'Behold, I send My messenger before your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You.'

Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. **And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.** He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matthew 11:7a, 9–15)

Jesus told the Jewish crowd, and not His disciples Whom He had just sent on missions, that if they would receive Him as the Messiah, John could have fulfilled the prophecy of Elijah's return before the day of the Lord. Recall, as quoted earlier, the angel told Zacharias that his son John would go before the Messiah *in the spirit and power of Elijah*, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children' (quoting Malachi 4:6 about Elijah). But they would not, so indeed, Elijah is still to come.

What is the Kingdom of God?

The gospel of Matthew tells us that *after John the Baptist was imprisoned*, "Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the **kingdom of heaven** is at hand" (4:17) . Concerning the same, the gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus began "preaching the gospel of the **kingdom of God**, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (1:15b). Finally, in his gospel, Luke recorded Jesus later telling the Pharisees: "The law and the prophets were until John. *Since that time* the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it" (16:16).

There are two important points that I wish to make here.

First, Jesus began to preach the good news of the kingdom of God (the gospel), *after* John was imprisoned. The Old Testament era ("the law and the prophets") concluded with John's ministry.

Second, “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” are generally used interchangeably between the gospels for the kingdom of God. Matthew, writing to the Jews who were sensitive to using God’s name, mostly used the term “heaven” whereas the other gospel writers, writing to the Gentiles and Christians, chose the term “God.”^[1] The five times Matthew did use “kingdom of God” were to specify the inward rule of God.

The kingdom of God is a multi-dimensional term for both (1) the inner rule of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a believer, (2) the rule of Jesus Christ in His church which is one in Him through the Spirit, and (3) the forthcoming physical dominion of Jesus Christ over the entire world for 1,000 years (Millennial Kingdom) where the Old Testament saints, the church saints, and tribulation saints, will reign with Him. The key to reconciling these dimensions is understanding that *an internal transformation is required to receive passage into the forthcoming global kingdom of Jesus Christ.* Consider this as you examine the following verses:

"And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and our Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.

"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:29–32)

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20–21)

Jesus answered and said to him [Nicodemus], "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3:3–6)

There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you [those who do not know Him — "workers of iniquity"] see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. (Luke 13:28–29)

An outline of the timing of the kingdom of God was perhaps best revealed by Jesus in the following parable:

Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. Therefore He said: "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business till I come.' But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We will not have this man to reign over us.'

"And so it was that when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned ten minas.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned five minas.' Likewise he said to him, 'You also be over five cities.'

"Then another came, saying, 'Master, here is your mina, which I have kept put away in a handkerchief. For I feared you ...

"And he said to those who stood by, 'Take the mina from him, and give it to him who has ten minas.' (But they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas.')

'For I say to you, that to everyone who has will be given; and from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me.'" (Luke 19:11-27)

Jesus' followers thought He was going to usher in the kingdom of God right away, beginning at Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit noted that He spoke this parable "because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately." In other words, aspects of this parable were presented to correct their misconception and clarify the timing of God's kingdom plan.

In the parable, Jesus is the "certain nobleman" and "Master." He goes to a "far country to receive for himself a kingdom and return." This is Jesus ascending into heaven after His resurrection and later returning to establish His kingdom. The "citizens" are the Jews who rejected Him at His first coming.

The focus of this parable is on what each servant did with the Master's mina while He was gone for a long time. The key revelation of this parable is that we are to live by **faith** to conduct business for the Lord Jesus while He is away (although we are actually one in Him *now* through the Holy Spirit). *This is a picture of the interim church age between the Old Testament period and the 7-year Tribulation right before the return of Jesus Christ.*

Jesus appeared to His apostles off and on for a forty day period after His resurrection “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3b). His disciples were still anticipating that He would establish His kingdom then, as Luke made clear:

Therefore, when they had come together, **they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”** And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing into heaven? **This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.**" (Acts 1:6–11)

Jesus had a different plan—the church—which I will cover in another dedicated Essentials teaching.

It is important to recognize that the Jews had no concept of the forthcoming church age as this dispensation of God was concealed in the Old Testament writings. Isaiah chapters 42 and 49 does include many prophecies of Jesus reaching the Gentile nations during the church age, notably as “a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles” and that He should be God’s “salvation to the ends of the earth,” but the Jews perceived this as the outgrowth of the Messiah’s physical kingdom on earth which is reasonable.

In conclusion, I hope you found Part 1 insightful for understanding the context of the kingdom of God

in the Gospels. In Part 2, we will step into the events preceding the return of Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

^[2] In *The Footsteps of the Messiah*, Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum noted, “The reason Matthew uses the term ”Kingdom of Heaven“ is because his audience is a Jewish audience. Among the Jewish people, there was a special sensitivity to using God’s Name, let alone using the word ”God“ itself.”

1.1 ↩

2.1 ↩