

## The Kingdom, Now and Not Yet

by Tony Dale

There is a tension, it seems to me, that underlines the profound difference of expectation between differing understandings of the kingdom of God and the degree to which we live in and experience this kingdom now. That God quite frequently does heal is currently really beyond speculation. Unless we feel that those who are reporting extraordinary accounts of the miraculous in various Third World countries (let alone folk like myself who have seen the Lord do a considerable amount of healing in this country) are lying, then we have little reason to doubt what God can do. If one wants documentation of God's healing power from well attested sources, one can probably do little better than to read *Healing Miracles* by Dr. Rex Gardiner. However, the question is not what God can do, but what God will do. Where do we draw the line between understanding what is ordinarily available to the Christian and what is only available as an extraordinary manifestation of grace?

I believe the issue is clearly set out in "The Lord's Prayer:" 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' We know that in heaven there is neither sickness nor dying, neither sorrow nor pain (see, for example, Rev. 21:4). A part of our task, as outposts of the kingdom of God on earth, is to be actively praying that the reality of that kingdom rule, which is now perfectly manifest in heaven, enters our earthly situations. It is obviously going to be a matter of both battle and perseverance for an open manifestation of this kingdom to come, whether it be in terms of "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17), or in the casting out of demons (Luke 11:20). Both are equal manifestations of the presence of the kingdom. Both are areas where we need to be involved aggressively in taking hold of Christ, but which will only be captured in this life as we pursue the Lord.

The Christian walk is not passive. Although Jesus is our righteousness, we are still commanded to "pursue righteousness." Although He is our peace, we are still told to "pursue peace with all men." And certainly it is plain that "He is our life." This does not take away our necessity to reach out to Him for this life. The degree to which we manifest the kingdom of God is going to depend on the extent to which we allow God's Word to take root in our heart. God's Word is equally valid to all people at all times. However, it only produces fruit in our individual lives when it is mixed with faith. The writer to the Hebrews remarks, "Therefore, since the promise of entering His rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard it did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest" (Heb. 4:1-2).

Jesus taught us clearly that the kingdom of God suffers violence and that the violent take it by force (Matt. 11:12). We obviously play an integral part in this earthly manifestation of God's rule. This is typical of the whole realm of prayer warfare and what the Lord has taught us of prayer. Surely, it is not God who is changing as we pray, but we ourselves. We, as we pray, are exercised by it. It teaches us to be dependent on God, and it inspires us to pray more, even without ceasing. More to the point, prayer is God in us, "with groanings which cannot be uttered," seeking to bring about change in us, others, and His kingdom. Even as we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done," we are effectively saying, "Lord, change me so that I can help extend the reality and answer of that prayer."

Perhaps I can illustrate this with a situation out of my own family's experience. A number of years ago when my wife Felicity and I were medical students, we had the opportunity of doing an elective period in the United States. While we were there, Felicity experienced a bacterial infection that was extremely painful. It was at a period in our Christian walk when we were seeking to learn much more from the Lord about healing. So rather than just take antibiotics (which would almost certainly have helped with the situation!), we felt that we should pray. In our

seeking the Lord, he made it very plain that this infection was at a spiritual level, a direct result of something being wrong in our lives. As we asked His forgiveness and turned away from this, the infection immediately cleared. A few weeks later the infection recurred. We went back to the Lord to ask Him why. He made it plain that this time it was not due to any sin, but so that he could manifest His glory. The Lord told Felicity that at a specific time on a specific day the pain would go, and she would be healed. To the very hour, what the Lord had promised happened.

At both times, we had to seek God and then pray His will into being. Is this not an expression of His command to us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"?

### **Creation still groans**

Scripture makes it plain that there are limitations placed upon us. Although the sting of death has been taken away, the factor of death has not been removed. Our temporal bodies have not yet put on immortality. Creation itself, as is beautifully described by Paul in Romans 8, is still subject to both futility and decay. Our bodies are not excluded.

It is interesting to note what Romans 8 says: "The creation itself will be liberated from its to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21). This verse seems to imply that the children of God are already enjoying a glorious liberty. The context is that of creation (i.e. the physical realm). One way, although certainly not the only way, of understanding this statement is to see that God's children are already enjoying a liberty in the physical realm, which will only be shared subsequently by the rest of creation. It's as if we, who are the first fruits of redemption, are also experiencing the powers of the age to come in a way that is not yet available to the rest of creation.

This "being subject to decay" obviously affects Christian and non-Christian alike. Some Christians postulate that being a Christian is no more likely to protect one from disease than if one were a non-Christian. I find this view unacceptable. It is clear that we, as Christians, are often delivered from the common maladies of society. Simple obedience to the Word of God will protect us from venereal disease, because our lifestyle will not promote it. A love of God's Word will lead us to honor our bodies, which are the temple of the Holy Spirit. This means that we are unlikely to smoke or drink excessively, and so again, we find that we are protected from illnesses to which many non-Christians succumb. My own experience of much pastoral work within the church leads me to think that the prevalence of anxiety and depression within it is substantially different from that within the world at large. I do not mean to imply that it is not there. Any pastor knows that it is, and in abundance. However, the answers to these people's problems will be found as they move more into the peace and joy of Christ, and accordingly they will find their anxiety and depression dissipating.

There are some very interesting, but anecdotal rather than statistically valid, accounts that can be gleaned from Christian writings as to the public health effects of local, powerful healing ministries. Approximately 250 years ago, in a district of Germany, a godly pastor by the name of Bloemheart took over the responsibility of the local parish church. Over the thirty years that he was in that district, he exercised a powerful ministry of healing and casting out demons. It was said of that district that it enjoyed better health than any of the other districts in Germany.

Perhaps more verifiable, in the modern scientific sense,\* are accounts of the life and ministry of such men as John G. Lake. This remarkable Christian business entrepreneur was called of God first to South Africa, where he established the rapidly growing and influential Apostolic Faith Churches, then later returned in the late 1920s to the state of Washington. Here, based in Spokane, he exercised a powerful healing ministry over a period of five years. It is recorded that 100,000 medically verified healings took place under his ministry during that five-year period. The Washington State Senior Public Health official commented that "the health of the whole region

had been affected by John G. Lake's ministry." It is, at best, speculation to state how this happened. Had the powers of darkness somehow been rolled back from a particular geographical location for a period of time? We may not yet see everything in the Spirit clearly, but we can certainly see some of the effects. Jesus himself, describing the work of the Holy Spirit, said that we may not see (or understand) all that He does, but we would certainly see His effects, even as we see the effects of the wind in the trees (John 3:8).

### **The principle of life working through death**

2 Corinthians 4:12 tells us that "Death is at work in us, but life is at work in you." This very interesting passage seems to explain the underlying pressures that all those in Christian leadership know are part and parcel of our following the Lord Jesus Christ. Somehow the very pressures that we work under produce their own toll, whether that is at a mental, emotional, spiritual, or physical level. It is into this context that Paul says, "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16). However, this is certainly not willing surrender to increasing decay, as much as it is joyful and obedient sacrifice for the sake of others. Earlier in this very passage, after Paul emphasizes that what is eternal is clearly more important than what is temporal, he tells us, "We who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body" (2 Cor. 4:11). It is the actual life of God, which is finding expression, not just through our spiritual existence, but also our physical life. This was the great revelation that the founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Dr. A. B. Simpson, had when he himself was crippled through overwork and pulmonary disease. In his understanding that Christ was his life, he was able to take hold of healing. He worked from that day onwards with a renewed strength and vigor that had never been his, even in his earliest days in the ministry when he was exceedingly fit. The subsequent tremendous growth of the Christian & Missionary Alliance through the United States and across the world says volumes for this saintly man of God. Many other spiritual giants have emerged from this denomination that had its roots in A. B. Simpson's revelation of the glory and power of the risen Christ. The best known are F. F. Bosworth, who conducted massive healing crusades across the United States and Canada in the beginning of the 1900s and A. W. Tozer, considered by many one of the most spiritual "prophets" of recent years.

### **Unanswered questions**

So why then do we go so often without this apparent "liberty" that is available to the believer (i.e. the liberty of health and healing)? It seems to me that there are a number of reasons that help to give us pointers in this area.

1. The lies of Satan. Satan is a liar and the father of lies. If there is some way that he can work out his task of seeking to "steal and kill and destroy," then he will do that. He will lie within our minds and within our bodies. Perhaps the greatest lie that he has perpetrated on the church is that Christ's salvation is really only effective for our spiritual needs. He has left us blind to the glorious truth that salvation is "complete—spirit, soul, and body, so that we may be preserved blameless" (1 Thess. 5:23).
2. The kingdom not yet fully realized. It is not enough though, just to say that Satan has kept God's people in . . . I think we have to realize that we are now experiencing, in only an incomplete and imperfect way, the promise of the kingdom. We are still praying as our Lord taught us to pray, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." But that kingdom is neither fully realized nor perhaps even fully anticipated by us in this present age. It is this lack of faith that leads us to the third area.

3. Low level of faith and expectation in the church. Lack of clear biblical teaching over many generations has led to the appallingly low expectation of health and healing that is now experienced in the Body of Christ, the church. In addition, modern scientific medicine has effectively become a religion of its own, with most of the church willingly bowing down at the altar of what the doctor says. It is little wonder that we see such lack of health in the church. The doctor has replaced the priest as the foremost prognosticator of future events. His "divine" ability to give a prognosis has become a type of negative prophecy that usually inspires despair and fear in those who receive it. As believers, we do not need to expect that the coming of illness will necessarily have a natural course and outcome. We live as believers, not only within the natural realm, but in the whole realm that is pervaded by the Spirit of God. When confronted with the reality ("fact") of sickness, we do not give in to the medical prognosis any more than we expect to give in to our feelings when we feel anxious, low, or angry. Instead, it is right at this point of vulnerability that we reach out to God in faith and take hold of the promises of His Word. It is from there that we are empowered to challenge the powers of darkness in aggressive prayer that God will restore us to full health.

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\*It is worth noting that science is not the ultimate arbiter of truth, nor is a detailed statistical analysis, but rather what the Word of God says.

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