

A Problem Passage

The Kingdom of God is within you! Luke 17:20-21

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Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is *within* you." (Luke 17:20-21)

The Problem

To many there is no problem with this well known verse, for they see the kingdom of God as being Christ's rule in the hearts of all believers. However, this cannot be the correct understanding of this verse. "An inner condition of the soul may qualify for admission to the kingdom, but it is not itself the kingdom" (J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*). "Jesus speaks elsewhere of men entering the kingdom, not of the kingdom entering men. The kingdom is a state of affairs, not a state of mind" (T. W. Manson, *The Mission and Message of Jesus*).

When?

Now in no way do I wish to detract from the blessed truths of Christ living in our hearts by faith (Ephesians 3:17) and of all believers being sealed with the Holy Spirit as a permanent possession (Ephesians 1:13-14). However, neither of these facts were true when our Lord spoke those words. He was on earth and the Spirit had not yet been given. Thus we must avoid one of the common errors in misunderstanding the Bible, that of reading teaching for a later time back into an earlier time, back into a time when that teaching simply could not have been true. In trying to understand this passage we must keep to the teaching of the Gospels.

Who?

The problem is exacerbated when we consider *who* this comment was addressed to. It was to the Pharisees, unbelievers, the Lord's greatest opponents. They did not believe in Him so how could the kingdom of God be within them? In fact Matthew 23:13 states, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of

heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to." Thus the Pharisees had *nothing* to do with the kingdom.

Where?

This conversation took place in Israel, and the word "you" is plural. Thus some commentators take our Lord's words to refer not to the Pharisees, but to Israel at large. Their view is that "the Kingdom of God, through its efficacy and power brought by Him [the Saviour] on earth, is already within the circle of Jewry" (Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*).

There are also examples in Greek where the preposition *entos* (within), when used with the plural "you", can be translated "among". This would render the expression "The kingdom of God is among you". In this case, the Saviour declares that the kingdom has arrived and is *among the Jews* because He, Himself, is there as the representative of the kingdom (see T. W. Manson).

However, our Lord's own words in Luke 17:21 show that such explanations are deficient.

What?

The Pharisees wanted to know when the Kingdom of God would come. Our Lord's answer was that "The kingdom of God does not come from careful observation" (Luke 17:20). Vine, in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, defines "careful observation" as "attentive watching". What does the Lord mean by this? He expands this by saying, "Nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is'" (Luke 17:21). But what do those expressions mean? Fortunately we have similar expressions in the context, and elsewhere in Scripture, relating to His second coming.

In Luke 17:22-24, we read that our Lord said to His disciples, "The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men will tell you, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other."

In Matthew 24:23 we read, "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it."

And in Matthew 24:26-27, "So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man."

In other words, if the people in Israel are *wondering* about when the Son of Man will return and say that he has returned and you can prove it by looking for Him in this place or in that place, then clearly they are wrong. If they have to watch carefully and pay careful attention to details, to see whether Christ has returned, then those who say He has returned are wrong!

When the Son of Man returns, it will be as clear as lightning in the sky. It will be seen by all in Israel and will be known by all in Israel, and similarly, with the kingdom of God. When it comes it will be seen by all in Israel and will be known by all in Israel. Discussing whether the kingdom was, at that time, within the Pharisees or within Israel,

or whether it was among them because Christ was among them each one of these is a case of "Here it is" or "There it is", and so such explanations are erroneous. That being the case, what did our Lord mean by "The kingdom of God is *within* you?"

"Many modern archaeological discoveries have validated the historical accuracy of the Bible and have helped Bible scholars understand the meaning of certain ancient words In Koine Greek, the expression *entos humon* (literally, 'inside of you') often meant 'within reach'. Thus Jesus' statement in Luke 17:21 could mean 'The kingdom is *within reach*.'" (Philip W Comfort, p 273 *The Origin of the Bible*).

This makes excellent sense. We know that both John the Baptist and our Lord Jesus started off their ministries with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:1,17). We also know that our Saviour made a number of statements such as:

Matthew 10:23: "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel **before** the Son of Man comes."

Matthew 16:28: "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death **before** they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Such statements as these make it clear that the kingdom was intimately associated with the second coming of Christ. They also show that the kingdom and the second coming were *possible* imminent events; they were "within reach"; they could come about within the lifetime of that generation (see Matthew 24:34).

Why?

I say "possible" because as the English stands it looks as if our Savior made incorrect statements, as His return and the kingdom did not happen at that time. However, the word "before" in each of these passages is the Greek *eos an*, and the particle *an* is "peculiar to Greek, incapable of translation by a single word; it denotes that the action of the verb is dependent on some circumstance or action" (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*).

Note that: it is *dependent* upon some circumstance or action. Thus what our Lord said was, "*It is possible* that some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom". It was possible. It was within reach. It depended. It depended on "some circumstance or action". That "circumstance or action" is outlined for us in Acts 3:19-21. There Peter, speaking to the people of Israel, said, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that *he may send the Christ*, who has been appointed for you - even Jesus. *He must remain in heaven until* the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." Thus if the people of Israel repented, if they turned to God, not only would their sins be wiped out, but Christ would return from heaven and the kingdom would be set up. Would this happen at that time? That was what the disciples wanted to know in Acts 1:6 when they asked, "are you, *at this time* going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

One key to the people of Israel repenting was the Pharisees, who also wanted to know "when the kingdom of God would come" (Luke 17:20). The Lord Jesus Christ told them, "The kingdom of God is *within reach*". All they needed to do was to repent, rather than to rest in their self-righteousness. They needed to turn to God, rather than remain in

their traditions. If they repented and turned to God, then many others would also. Did they?

We know from history that neither the majority of the Pharisees, nor the majority of the people of Israel, repented and turned to God. The generation to whom Jesus spoke rejected and crucified Him. The Jews of the Acts period beat, imprisoned, and stoned the apostles, and so the necessary "circumstance or action" did not come about. The kingdom may have "been near" when John the Baptist and our Lord ministered. It may have been "within reach" of those people alive at that time. It could have happened before that generation passed away, but their hardness of heart, their blindness and their deafness, rendered the people of Israel useless (Acts 28:25-27). Christ's coming and the kingdom upon this earth was postponed, so to speak, until a future day. God's salvation was sent to the Gentiles (Acts 28:28) and a new dispensation of grace commenced. What had once been "within reach" was now "beyond their grasp".

Application

No one yet has been able to ascertain just what is the balance between the sovereignty of God and the responsibilities of mankind. Clearly God had chosen to make the return of Christ and the setting up of the kingdom on earth dependent upon the actions of Israel. One view is that man's actions may delay God's plans, but never thwart them. What we have been considering here may be just such an example. Christ will most definitely come back one day and will set up a kingdom, but whether that will be in our life-time or not is a moot point. The fact is people today can still have a Pharisaic attitude, one of self-righteousness with religious traditions and rituals being more important than faith in Christ Himself. For us the kingdom may not be *within reach*, but eternal life is. Let us bow the knee at the Cross of Christ, admitting we are sinners and looking to Him for forgiveness.

Note: If you have been helped by this approach, which considers passages under the heading of *Who?*, *Where?*, *When?*, *What?*, *Why?*, and *Apply!*, then you will find Michael Penny's *40 Problem Passages* (£10.00) and *Approaching the Bible* (£7.50) of interest. Both are available from The Open Bible Trust, Fordland Mount, Upper Basildon, Reading, RG8 8LU or can be ordered from www.obt.org.uk where further details can be seen.

