

Heaven on Earth *Hints of Heaven, II*

Matthew 4: 12 - 25

There is a very important phrase that we come across frequently in the Bible – particularly in the Gospels. In fact, it’s used about 80 times just in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This phrase comes in two variations, but they mean exactly the same thing. And it is this: *The Kingdom of Heaven*, or *the Kingdom of God*.

“The Kingdom of *God*” itself shows up over 50 times – mostly in Mark, Luke, and John (but four times in Matthew’s Gospel). We find ‘The Kingdom of *Heaven*’ about 30 times – *all* of them in Matthew’s Gospel. We know that they mean the same thing, because there are some overlapping verses, some sayings of Jesus that we find in both Matthew and one or another of the Gospels. And frequently these sayings will appear word for word the same, except that Matthew will write “Kingdom of Heaven” and the others will write “Kingdom of God”.

Here’s one example...

Mark 1: 15

“The time has come,” he [Jesus] said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Matthew 4:17

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

They’re both saying the same thing, in a very similar context. Why the different words then?

Since Matthew was writing mainly to the Jews, and being Jewish himself (as were all the Gospel writers) he was being careful not to offend his readers if possible. Orthodox Jews in Matthew’s day (as today) never spoke the name of God aloud. When they were reading a Scripture and came to the word *God*, it would be written as four letters (YHWH – which is where we get the word Yahweh, or Jehovah), but they wouldn’t even attempt to pronounce it, even in their mind. Instead they would say “Adonai” or, “Lord”. God’s name was too Holy to speak.

So Matthew is writing about Jesus to Jews, and he had to deal with the fact that Jesus spoke frequently about the Kingdom of *God*. His very first public message we just read: it was “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near!” Some first century Jews would have heard that and been so offended at the speaking of the word “God” they would have missed the importance of the message itself – that the Kingdom has come in this very One, in Jesus.

Heaven on Earth *Hints of Heaven, II*

Matthew substitutes the word “Heaven” for God. So only in Matthew’s Gospel do we read, “*Repent, for the Kingdom of **Heaven** has come near.*” But in doing this, Matthew has really done us a great favor! He has opened the door to some great things that we’re going to be talking about for the next few weeks. In this simple word change, he has given us a new perspective on heaven.

Now last week, we were imagining a little bit about what Heaven will be like – heaven at the end of time. And I hope you got this – the most significant thing about heaven is that there we will be with God, in heaven there will be no more barriers, no separation between God and God’s creation...

More than pearly gates, and gold streets, harps and robes and all the rest, I suggest that the best description in the Bible that we can find of heaven is found in Revelation 21: 3

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God...”

“God with us” – among us – is the foundation, the hope, of heaven; so Matthew had no problem talking about the Kingdom of *God*, or the Kingdom of *Heaven* interchangeably. (In fact he uses both terms, but mostly he uses ‘Heaven’). Because one of the most frequent subjects of Jesus’ teachings was the Kingdom of Heaven/ God. He taught about the Kingdom in almost all of his parables. He demonstrated Kingdom values in his actions – and pointed that out. He constantly invited people to enter into the Kingdom with him.

And you know what? Virtually in every one of these teaching moments... Jesus was talking about life here on earth! Jesus’ message was not – ‘Repent and believe, so that *some day* you might go to heaven!’ His message was “Repent! Believe – the Kingdom of heaven has **come near!**”

Luke 17:20 -21 makes clear that the word ‘near’ or ‘at hand’ means ‘among us’ - now.

*One day the Pharisees asked Jesus, “When will the Kingdom of God come?” Jesus replied, “The Kingdom of God can’t be detected by visible signs. You won’t be able to say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘It’s over there!’ For the Kingdom of God is **already** among you.”*

Heaven on Earth *Hints of Heaven, II*

It is here. It is among us! It is here in its beginning form, it is obviously not fully what it will one day be. But it is here. Now! Among us!

I remember lots of mornings on hiking trips when we'd out in the deep woods. And for some reason most of the backpacking trips that I've ever been on have been taken in early spring or late Autumn. Beautiful times of year, and no bugs (which is great) but frequently very cold at night. Especially up in the higher altitudes. So there would be lot of mornings when I'd be huddled with some friends, or Brian or Kim, clutching a cup of hot coffee, sitting on a rock by a stream, and watching the line of sunlight gradually move down the face of a steep rise on the other side of a stream. Sunrise comes late when you're in a hollow between two mountains. And as the sun comes 'up' the line of light comes down!

But you had to wait patiently for it. And watch that line of light and warmth come down closer and closer...you couldn't rush it, but you knew it was going to get there. And when it finally did, we'd all bask in the warmth! Well, in a similar way, the ultimate sunrise has yet to come. Nevertheless, we can see some definite signs of its coming – the valley is getting brighter, it's getting warmer. There are 'hints' of heaven all around us, and they are to be found in the Kingdom of God/ Heaven.

The fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven is not here yet. We talked last week about resurrection, and a New Heaven and a New Earth, and how what was broken in Genesis 3 gets 'fixed' in Revelation 21, and we're still waiting for all that to happen. But the beginning signs of that inevitable coming are all around us. The 'hints' of heaven are everywhere. Signs of what is to come, the first buds before the great awakening of all things.

And the premise of this series is that when we recognize those signs for what they are, we'll appreciate them all the more, and our longing for the real thing (for the *fullness* of Glory) will be stoked. We'll have a real heavenly anticipation, a godly hope in our hearts. And as Paul wrote, "... *hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*"

Take a look once again at the Scripture reading we just read from Matthew 4.

Heaven on Earth *Hints of Heaven, II*

Jesus hears about the death of John the Baptist, the one who came to prepare the way, to be the herald for the coming of Jesus. And having heard that, Jesus takes up John's message, and begins his public ministry by announcing, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

He starts calling disciples, inviting them to be part of this new thing that God is beginning. And then in verse 23 we read:

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. ²⁵

Remember last week's reading from Revelation 21? It was describing the New Heaven and the New Earth... I already referred to part of this:

"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

You see a similarity here, between these two passages? The first thing God does in the New Heaven and New Earth is to walk among his people and minister to their needs! He wipes every tear from their eyes. He takes away the hurt, the pain, the scars of this old earth – so that there will be no more mourning, or crying, or pain. Everything about the old order of things will be changed – including what remains of our old nature: our endless rebellion, our frustrations with ourselves, our selfishness, our turf battles, our lack of forgiveness, on and on.

Taken away. Healed. The ancient Psalmist looked ahead to this day and wrote,

*You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. □ You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, □ that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. □
O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever!¹*

That day is not yet here... but there is a hint of its coming all around us. The healing ministry of Jesus announced to the world that something different – something new – was beginning. Heaven

¹ Psalm 30: 21 -22

Heaven on Earth *Hints of Heaven, II*

was coming down to earth. And this healing work *continues* through the Church. Through the people of the Kingdom of Heaven. It's a powerful hint of heaven.

Sometimes, then, we see glorious healings in answer to our prayers. We've seen it here: Physical healing, Spiritual healing, Emotional healing. But we have to realize – and we've talked about this before – not everyone is healed in this life, and for those that are (especially physical healing) it is incomplete and temporary. Present day healings are a *sign* of what is to come, not the fullness. As with Lazarus who was raised from the dead, only to die again, every physical healing on earth – for now – is temporary. We are still mortal.

But when we see the hand of God move in a person's life, when the Holy Spirit touches a heart, bringing hope from despair, bringing health out of brokenness... we can know that the Kingdom of Heaven is not only *coming*, it is in fact *here*. One day these healings will be complete and permanent. But for now we have the sign, assurance that a better day is coming.

Another way that heaven comes to earth through the Kingdom is when the Church is what we are meant to be – the Body of Christ on Earth. When we have the mind of Christ in us – and we become agents of hope for a deeply hurting world – the Kingdom of Heaven comes among us.

One specific way that this happened recently was through the wonderful outpouring of generosity that people shared through this church over the Christmas holiday. There is no way to adequately describe what we in the staff got to see over Christmas, but families were adopted, children received wonderful gifts, people were fed, literally thousands of dollars were sent out in supermarket gift cards; we had so many people volunteer to 'man' the Salvation Army kettles something like \$26,000 was raised for the coming year. Our discretionary fund is in good shape ready to give assistance to many people in what will likely be another difficult year for some.

When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to ask if he really was the long awaited one, Jesus' response to them was this: *"Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."*

Heaven on Earth *Hints of Heaven, II*

Jesus said, you want to know if I'm the Messiah? Then look: you can know for certain that the Kingdom of heaven has **come** because there are healings, because there is good news being shared and care given to the poor. It's not what it will be...but it's a sign! It's the beginning!

When we hear the term, "Kingdom of Heaven" in the scripture, we need to understand that this is not a reference to a physical Kingdom, with borders and boundaries, and rulers, hierarchies, and so forth. The grammatical construction is not something that we have in English, but what it means is something like 'the place where Heaven rules'. Or, 'where God rules' – *that* is the Kingdom of God.

For now, the Kingdom is often invisible – outwardly. It exists in the hearts of people, people who choose to follow Christ. Our decision to be a follower of Christ brings about the beginning of many changes which will be completed at the end of time. We have a new life – we are *new creations in Christ* – (so much different from our old lives, that it is like being 'born again', said Jesus to Nicodemus). We take on new values – Kingdom values (because what is important in the Kingdom of heaven is not always the same as what is important on earth). We'll talk about that later in this series...

Next week we'll be talking more about the presence of Christ among the church, bringing unity and closeness – like heaven. It's not what it will be, but it's a sign of what's to come!

Let me close with this... last week we talked at length about the Scriptural teaching that ultimately heaven is (at least) based on the restored Earth. The 'New Heaven' is on the physical earth. We will be there (here) in our resurrected bodies (like Jesus – who was the 'firstfruits' of the Resurrection). We imagined a bit as to what that may be like, thinking about greater intellectual capacities, greater use of our five senses, abolishing many physical limitations, and more. It was, as I'm sure you realized, pure speculation.

What was not speculation, though, was the teaching that eternity... heaven... will be in some sort of *physical* form. That is what the Scripture teaches. I pointed out that in the Apostle's Creed, near the

Heaven on Earth
Hints of Heaven, II

end when we say, “I believe in the resurrection of the body” we’re talking about *our* resurrection, not Jesus’. (Jesus’ resurrection is referred to earlier when we plainly say, “On the third day he rose from the dead”. The next one refers to *us*, and this has been the Christian belief since the beginning of the faith.

In our Wednesday night discussion groups last week we had some spirited discussion of that – which by the way, I think is very exciting! In the midst of economic downturns, financial meltdowns, wars, troubles all around, what a great thing to have a discussion with brothers and sisters in Christ about *eternity*? Especially after a great dinner of baked Mac and cheese, and stewed tomatoes? That was close to heaven right there!

Anyway, I want to say a bit more about that, and for those of you who are having a hard time wrapping your head around this, I just want to encourage you to keep trying!

One of the very unique things about the Judeo-Christian faith is the value that it places on the physical world, even as the Spiritual world is recognized as well. The world-changing message from Genesis is that God created a universe totally separate from himself. God *inhabits* this world, but he is not bound by it. It is a separate thing from God. (We’re going to talk about this in more detail on Feb.7/8)

And, we read again and again throughout the Creation account: it is all *good*. And then, in the New Testament we have the story of again, an amazing thing, something that is unique in the history of religion: God, who exists totally apart from his creation, *takes on flesh*. God becomes Incarnate – Emmanuel. God with us. One of us!

Now, a result of this is that God in Christ can then become the perfect sacrifice for sins. But another result of this is that creation, the physical world, is blessed, it is *dignified* by this action of God. Most other religions – maybe *all* – focus their teaching either on *this* world or the *next* world. Christianity says, they are both not only important, but they are linked together – both now and in eternity.

Heaven on Earth *Hints of Heaven, II*

There is a line of theology in other religions and within Christianity that teaches that this world is evil, totally evil. And if we want to be strong believers, what we really need to do is to separate ourselves, wean ourselves from it totally – we need to deny ourselves any pleasure, we need to just think about heaven and eternity. So we've had a long history of people who would wear the hair shirts, and sit on poles for 40 years, or live in caves out in the desert thinking that this would make them more spiritual and closer to God. Because physical = evil, spiritual = good.

And they have their spiritual heirs today – partially how Christians have gained the reputation of being sour faced kill –joys in society.

But look at Jesus, he wasn't like that – his enemies called him a 'glutton and winebibber'! Now, why would they do that? Because he enjoyed life, is the short answer. This creation, even though flawed, and fallen (as we talked about last week) is still *good*. We not only can find God in this world, but we are *meant* to find God within the realm of this physical world.

Now, you see, that's why we don't endorse suicide – yes, we know that something better awaits us, but we also know that that 'better thing' is in many ways *here*. This life counts. That's why true discipleship insists that we try at least to care for our bodies –in all ways – physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally – because in the Incarnation, Christ has redeemed the physical realm as well as the spiritual. They are connected for eternity.

That's why our theology of Stewardship includes care for the poor, and should absolutely call us to be responsible citizens of the planet earth. God invented 'green', and it is sin that we have treated the environment as we have. This isn't some place that will be ultimately cast off like an old shoe, it is a place of value that will one day – along us all of us – be redeemed, and restored and perfected into God's original intention.

Well, there's lots more to talk about, isn't there? But be encouraged with these words: the best may be yet to come. But there is a lot of good here, now. And everything we do has meaning in this physical world because the kingdom of Heaven is *here*.