

Living in God's Kingdom

Lesson 9: Return of the King

Notes for the leader: This is the ninth and final lesson in a series about "Living in the Kingdom." This lesson focuses on some warnings Jesus gave his disciples about being ready for his return, and the Last Judgment that will occur.

Introduction

Throughout these lessons on the Kingdom of God, we have emphasized that the Kingdom is not "something that is going to happen someday" – it starts **here** and **now** for anyone who is willing to confess his sin and **submit his life to Jesus Christ** as his Savior and Lord.

But there is another sense in which the Kingdom of God has not yet been fulfilled. In this final lesson in this series, we are going to look at some things that Jesus said would happen when he returns to take charge of his Kingdom, to judge the world, and to take those who belong to him to be with him in heaven forever.

"In my father's house are many rooms;" Jesus said, "if it were not so, I would have told you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you may also be where I am." (*John 14:2-3*)

There are several Biblical prophecies about what will happen just before Jesus returns. Some Christians have gotten into major arguments about how to interpret these prophecies. We do not intend to fall into that trap -- we will follow Paul's advice and "avoid foolish speculations and controversies." But we must look at some things that Jesus thought it was important for his disciples (and us) to know.

Mark 13:1-8

As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

"Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately,

"Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you.

Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many.

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

Jesus is talking here about the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, and warning his disciples about the terrible things that would happen just a few years after he spoke these words.

Everything Jesus said came true in 70 AD, when the Roman Emperor Vespasian sent an army under a general named Titus to destroy Jerusalem and put an end to the political troubles in Israel. Hundreds of thousands of people fled into the walled city of Jerusalem and barred the gates. The Roman army surrounded and besieged the city, starving the people into submission and then killing most of them. The Roman army then proceeded to take the city apart until there was no city left. What Jesus had said came true – not one stone of the temple was left on top of another.

The nation of Israel was destroyed, and the surviving Jews fled into other countries around the empire. From that day, in 70 AD, until 1948, there was no nation of Israel. Many Christian teachers believe that the reestablishment of Israel, after nearly 2000 years, is one of the final events that will precede the return of Jesus. If they are right, Jesus may return very soon.

In this passage, Jesus goes on to warn his disciples about the trouble and persecution they will face because they are following him. Then he tells them some of what will happen when he returns to take charge of Kingdom. And he warns them that

Mark 13:32-37

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.

It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.

If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.

What I say to you, I say to everyone: "Watch!"

Most of the scriptures that tell about what will happen during these "last days" are found in the book of Revelation. This book of the Bible contains a vision – like a dream – that God sent to Jesus's disciple John when he was a very old man. At the time of this vision, the church was undergoing great persecution under the emperor Domitian, and John was being held prisoner on the island of Patmos.

Like most dreams or visions, it is difficult to understand what some of the parts of John's vision mean, and there are several different interpretations. But there are some main ideas that are very clear.

First, let's read John's vision of what will happen when Jesus assembles everyone who has ever lived to stand before him to be judged:

Revelation 20:11-15

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Notice that at least two different "books" are mentioned. One set of books apparently contains a history of what each of us has done in our lives. **But anyone whose name is written in another book, the "Book of Life," is not judged according to what he has done, but is judged according to what Jesus has done.** This is what Jesus was talking about when he said,

"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." (John 5:24)

Now John's vision turns to what is waiting for everyone who is part of God's Kingdom.

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live 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."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

We have dealt with more than the usual number of passages in this lesson. Here are a few questions that focus on the major points we have covered.

Notes for the leader: Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.

Follow-up Discussion

Notes for the leader: The main purpose of the follow-up discussion is to make sure that each small group has grasped the main ideas of the study. You can skim quickly through the answers if it seems clear that everybody understands them. If not, pick a group that "got it" and have them explain the answers.

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you know who "got it" and who didn't.

1. What does Jesus warn his disciples about? (*Mark 13:1-8*)
Jesus said that there will be false prophets who will try to deceive Christians, some of them even claiming to be Christ himself! The clear message of the scripture is that when Christ returns, he will not do so secretly. There will be no doubt about it!
2. Who knows the time at which Jesus will return? (*Mark 13:32-37*)
Jesus said that even he himself did not know -- only God the Father! Despite this warning, many people over hundreds of years have worked out elaborate systems to determine when Jesus will return. Don't let anyone sell you their "system." Remind them of this verse, in Jesus's own words.
3. What should we be doing while we wait for his return?
God has given every believer a spiritual gift to use within the church and a job to do within His Kingdom. He has given all of us clear teachings on how to live and serve Him. When Jesus returns, he should find every one of us walking faithfully, praying faithfully, and working faithfully according to his teachings.
4. Who are the people who will be part of God's Kingdom forever? (*Revelation 20:11-15*)
All those who have trusted Jesus and followed him. -- those who have been "born again" by faith and trust in him -- just as Jesus said to Nicodemus (*John 3:1-21*).
5. From this passage, what do we learn about what heaven will be like? (*Revelation 21:1-4*)
When he comes in judgment to finally wipe away the power of sin and evil, Jesus will restore everything to be like what God intended it to be in the beginning: no sorrow, no pain, no tears ... Things will be as if mankind had never sinned, and everyone who has trusted in Jesus will see him face to face and live in the presence of God forever.

Notes for the leader: Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the "Take-Home Thoughts" handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cell-mate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!

Small-Group Discussion Questions

The Return of the King

1. What does Jesus warn his disciples about? (*Mark 13:1-8*)
2. Who knows the time at which Jesus will return? (*Mark 13:32-37*)
3. What should we be doing while we wait for his return
4. Who are the people who will be part of God's Kingdom forever? (*Revelation 20:11-15*)
5. From this passage, what do we learn about what heaven will be like? (*Revelation 21:1-4*)

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Take-home Thoughts About ...

When Jesus Returns

In our study of the Kingdom of God, we have emphasized that the Kingdom starts **here** and **now** for those who accept Jesus as their Savior and commit their lives to him. But there's another sense in which God's Kingdom won't be fulfilled until Jesus returns. When he does, he will destroy Satan and take every member of the Kingdom to be with him in heaven. "If I go and prepare a place for you," Jesus said, "**I will come back and take you to be with me**, so that you may also be where I am." (*John 14:2-3*)

Jesus warned his disciples about what to expect. He warned them about the coming destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in 70 A.D. under the Roman general Titus, less than 40 years after Jesus spoke these words (*Mark 13:1-8*). He then warned them about the persecution they would face because of their faith in him (*Mark 13:9-23*).

Finally, he told them about the "last days" before he returns to fulfill the Kingdom. He said that **no one knows when this will occur** – not even Jesus himself (at least at that time) – but **only the Father**. But, he warned, **many would try to deceive the believers, some of them even claiming to be Christ himself!** So, Jesus said, "Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come." (*Mark 13:33*). And he told a parable about a homeowner going on a trip, leaving his house in the care of his servants (*Mark 13:34-37*). When the homeowner (Jesus) returns, **he expects to find each one of us alert and ready, and faithfully carrying out the instructions he has given us.**

We can read about these final events, including the Last Judgement, in chapters 20 and 21 of Revelation. We may not know when these things will happen, but we can pray as the Church has prayed for nearly 2000 years: "**Come soon, Lord Jesus!**"

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