

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 13: THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN HEAVEN

Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God was a unique and a graphic way of explaining that a new era had dawned. For all the NT writers, everything that God had revealed in the past had reached its final phase of world history. In other words, the last days. We can see this development to this final phase as the prophetic 'Days of the Lord' in the history of God's people and the world in general. Or, we can view it through the forward-looking eyes of faith of the OT saints who believed God would send a Messiah; and through the eyes of the NT saints whose eyes of faith look backward to the Incarnation of the promised Messiah. Or, we can look at it through the three great OT covenants with Abraham, Moses and David and the words of the prophets. But no matter what way we view past revelation, all perspectives converge in Christ event. And as we follow the next signpost into the Book of Hebrews, you will see that from the very first verse, this writer takes us back to the planning and preparation for the way the kingdoms of heaven and earth would henceforth operate until Christ's return.

Matthew 6:10 (NIV) Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Matthew 6:33 (NIV) But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

The inauguration of the kingdom of God marked the epoch when all the sovereign plans and purposes of God would reach the penultimate stage of fulfilment in and through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. What is striking in the book of Hebrews is that the message of the outworking and consequences of Jesus' first coming, which he reviews in plain language, is the same message that is given in Revelation in pictorial/symbolic language, which looks forward to His second coming. In summary, both books speak of divine sovereignty, salvation and judgement. That being the case, the signposts on these stages of Route 66 reveal to us how the coming of Jesus affected how God's sovereignty was to operate in heaven and on earth. This, as we saw last time, was a primary concern of Jesus' teaching. The first petition of the Lord's prayer is for God's kingdom to be established on earth, on exactly the same basis as it is established in heaven. God's sovereignty in heaven is unassailable, beyond question and beyond doubt. Everything in heaven conforms to His will. What characterises that will is His essential attribute of righteousness. So, before we can talk about the kingdom of God on earth conforming to the kingdom of God in heaven, we first need to learn about the structure and nature of divine, heavenly sovereignty. It is the first three verses in Hebrews which gives us the most comprehensive insight into how the dynamic of God's sovereignty underwent a fundamental change. I may be wrong, but I would defend the view that these three verses are the heart and soul of NT theology, for it is there that we will find that the operating system of the kingdom of heaven had been radically pre-programmed to accommodate the significance of the Christ event.

Hebrews 1:1-3 (NIV) In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Familiarity perhaps blinds us to what would have been a startling and disturbing assertion to a Jewish audience. Here we are presented with the joint sovereignty of the first and second

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Persons of the trinity. We can only appreciate how radical this was by referring to Deuteronomy 6:4. **Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.** It is the first part of the Shema, a prayer, to this day, still repeated daily by orthodox Jews every morning and every night. The concept of God sharing His sovereignty with a crucified Man, albeit believed to have been resurrected by God and exalted to the highest place of honour by the right hand of the divine throne in heaven, was simply incredible to Jewish sensibilities then. And it still is for a people whose monotheistic beliefs cannot comprehend dual sovereignty. Yet this is what the writer to a Jewish audience is asserting. There is a build-up of expressions that ensure there is no misunderstanding about the Person with whom God shares sovereignty. He is no less a Person than God's Son. He is God's heir in terms of status and authority. His pre-existence is inferred by His involvement in the creation of the universe. He manifests the glorious appearance of God and His word is the powerful word of God which sustains all things. As mentioned, sitting at the right hand of God is not just the place of highest honour, together with everything else written, it confirms the kingship of Jesus.

Hebrews 1:8-9 (NKJV) But to the Son He says: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness (justice in NIV) is the scepter of Your kingdom. 9 You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness more than Your companions."

Hebrews 7:1-2 (NKJV) For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, 2 to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated "king of righteousness," and then also king of Salem, meaning "king of peace,"

Psalms 113:5-6 (NIV) Who is like the Lord, our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth.

Joel 2:32 (NIV) And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance.....

Judaism always believed God was their king enthroned in the heavens. So, when the writer to the Hebrews in verse 8 claims that the Son's throne is eternal, he is explicitly stating that Jesus dwells in the heavens as a divine king equal with God. We can also see the characteristic of the Son's kingdom was righteousness. This was the primary quality Jesus associated with the kingdom of God. What adds further emphasis to the kingship is that He is said to belong to the order of Melchizedek. Although Hebrews will concentrate more on the priestly function of Melchizedek, it is important to note that he was also a king. In fact, the king of righteousness and peace. Here too, in Genesis is the first mention of the name of the city which will come to be known as Jerusalem. Melchizedek was king of Salem, and in all future belief about the dwelling of God right to the end of the book of Revelation, Jerusalem retains its position as the Holy City, and the city of David and will still denote God's presence in eternity. The indications of heavenly, royal lineage could not be more clear. When we sing the chorus 'Majesty' we are singing a summary of what the writer to the Hebrews said so long ago about Jesus.

Majesty, worship His majesty; unto Jesus be glory, honour and praise.

Majesty, kingdom authority, flows from His throne unto His own, His anthem raise.

So exalt, lift up on high the name of Jesus.

Magnify, come glorify Christ Jesus the King.

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Majesty, worship His majesty, Jesus who died, now glorified, King of all kings.

Having established who exercises sovereignty in the kingdom of heaven, we can move to the next landmark which shows how that authority will be communicated to and exercised in the earthly kingdom. Again, this is made perfectly clear. It is God's word, now spoken through His Son. In other words, the "Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9).

Hebrews 1:1-3 (NIV) In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,.....3 sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Hebrews 4:12-13 (NIV) For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Twice we see the Son linked to the Word of God. There is the clear implication that the Son of God is the last in the line of the prophets whom God had previously tasked to proclaim His word to the world of the Old Testament. In view of His exalted sovereign status, it is the Son who will speak for God, and as such this makes that word authoritative for the kingdom on earth. That means that every aspect of Jesus' earthly ministry in terms of personality, word and deed proclaim the voice of God to the world. It is extremely important to emphasise this, because this revelation is the final one God will give to humanity. In the past God, His plans and His ways had been progressively revealed through the prophets. Speaking through Jesus took revelation to its final stage. Here was the progression of revelation from promise to fulfilment.

The use of the term 'last days' is also striking. It has a definite note of finality about it. F.F. Bruce puts the meaning of this term very clearly. "The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ, but there is no progression beyond him..... 'last days' is a literal rendering of the Hebrew phrase which is used in the Old Testament to denote the epoch when the words of the prophet will be fulfilled.....the consummation of the ages." (p46) In other words, there will be no more divinely appointed and approved prophets sent by God to give us any further information about His plans. He has given us all we need to know in Christ. And all we need to know is contained in His Book, the Bible. That is why on this 160th anniversary of Greenfield, we have tried to give you an introduction to the whole revelation God has given to us, with the hope and prayer and it will guide you into a deeper knowledge and understanding of it.

God's word reigns in heaven. It is the word, given through the Word made flesh. It is the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ that feeds the kingdom of God on earth, to enable it to grow and develop. That is because only the word spoken by the Son is powerful enough to sustain its continuing growth until its last citizen has been admitted into God's kingdom. The text in 4:12-13 describes the kind of power it encompasses. It is living because it is invasive. It exposes the thoughts and attitudes of souls and spirits that can remain hidden to the human eye. It is so penetrating that it can separate the marrow from the bone and assess the state of both. Being sharper than the sharpest sword it lays bare the innermost recesses of our beings and lays bare even our subconscious motives before the eyes of God. Given that God will be the Judge to whom we will have to give an account for our earthly existence, the writer to the

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Hebrews leaves his audience in no doubt that the power and authority of the word spoken through the Son lies at the heart of how the kingdom of God operates in heaven. Jesus' role as the forth-telling and foretelling Prophet of the kingdom of God on earth will continue to be relevant until that Word no longer has to be broadcast to the world. Now, however, it is the prophetic voice, not of an itinerant preacher and teacher, but the voice of the resurrected Christ, whose divine royal status has been authenticated by His elevation to the right hand of God, and who is authorised to speak on His behalf. While God's word had always been the ultimate authority for His people in the past, the Christ event had introduced a new element to past revelation. Jesus had embodied the word of God in His Person and, in His earthly ministry, had proclaimed He was the manifestation of God's way, God's truth and God's life. With the endorsement of divine sovereignty for everything He was, said and did, people's responses to His words, from His ascension onwards, would determine whether or not they were citizens of the kingdom of God on earth.

Our next landmark takes us to the third change in the heavenly operating system.

Hebrews 1:3 (NIV)After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Hebrews 6:19-20 (NIV) We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, 20 where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

Genesis 14:18 (NIV) Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High.....

To the royal and prophetic credentials of Jesus, we now read of what the writer to the Hebrews sees as the most important function of the exalted Christ. Steeped as he is in the scriptures of the OT, this writer sees the eternal, perfect priesthood of Jesus as the most radical of the changes in the heavenly realm. From these last two verses in chapter 6, four more chapters, just under 1/3 of the whole book, is devoted to the Christ's role of High Priest in the order of Melchizedek. The Genesis account also gives us another significant detail of his encounter with Abraham. The meal they shared was bread and wine. He also had the authority to bless Abraham, giving glory to God for Abraham's victory over his enemies. The fact that Abraham is said to have given him a tenth of everything indicates a recognition that this person was more than a mere human being. By the command of God, the Aaronic priesthood of the tribe of Levi would later be established under the law of Moses. But, by linking Jesus' priesthood, by divine appointment, to that of Melchizedek, the writer to the Hebrews shows that this office precedes and supercedes any form of priesthood from the time of Moses onward. That Jesus came from the tribe of Judah (7:14) was another indicator of the radical shift that had taken place, for access to God was no longer dependent on the sacrifices and rituals ordained under the Mosaic law. From the time of Jesus' ascension, His royal, eternal priesthood was established, with far-reaching consequences for the relationship between God and humanity.

The writer to the Hebrews spells this out in chapters 7 to 10 which extol the superiority of Jesus' priesthood over all that has existed before.

Hebrews 7:19-26 (NIV) (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. 20 And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, 21 but he became a priest with an oath when God said

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to him: **“The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’”** 24 **but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. 25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. 26 Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.**

There are just too many characteristics to talk about but positive reassurance jumps out from these words. Why do we have a better hope of being right with God. The answer is because God has sworn an oath – a binding, irrevocable declaration - that Jesus’ priesthood is final and permanent. And because He is immortal, no human being will ever be left without a priest to represent their case to God. Above all else, the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus rests on the superiority of His character. Just these few words capture the unshakeable and indestructible foundation upon which priesthood has been established in the heavenly kingdom. For that reason the ‘better hope’ mentioned in verse 19 is one that will never fade, be in vain, or be disappointed or dashed.

But, that hope is also better because of what is involved in the priesthood of Jesus.

Hebrews 7:21-22 (NIV) But he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’” 22 Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

Hebrews 8:6 (NIV) But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

A better covenant established on better promises. According to the OT reference from Jeremiah 31:31-34 given in support of this statement in chapter 8, Jesus is the fulfilment of God’s OT declarations that in the last days a new covenant would govern His dealings with human beings. The covenant was new because God’s law would be implanted in the mind and written on the hearts of those who accepted the royal authority of those spoken through His Son. It would be new, because knowing and understanding those words and accepting the mediation of Christ brought people into a personal relationship with God, and gave them a personal experience of God at work in their lives. Lastly, that relationship was made possible because their sins would have been forgiven. Those were the better promises attached to the intercessory mediation of Jesus’ priestly role in the heavenly kingdom.

All of this builds up to a climax in chapters 9 and 10 where it is made totally explicit that Christ’s ability to function as a High Priest was founded on the fact of His perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

Hebrews 9:15 & 22 (NIV) For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance..... In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Hebrews 10:14-16 (NIV) For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. 15 The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: 16 “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”

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Without the shedding of blood, as shown by the OT sacrificial rituals, there could be no forgiveness for sin. Without the forgiveness of sin, there was no access to God. Without access to God there would be no eternal inheritance; there would be no hope of even attaining the holiness God expected of His earthly subjects. There was no hope of eventually attaining the perfection of an eternal existence when kingdom of heaven and the kingdom on earth would eventually become one for all eternity. That is the ultimate purpose for this last structuring of the kingdom of God in heaven and only those who have been made holy, having the righteousness of Christ will enter that united kingdom. From the profound significance of the first verses of his book, the writer to the Hebrews makes known the foundations upon which the kingdom of God rests in heaven and the means by which it operates. God's sovereignty and the institution of His exalted Christ as the divine, sovereign prophet, priest and king of the kingdom God had willed would be formed on earth, would henceforth be the only means of salvation for humanity.

Having provided the information about the heavenly kingdom structure, nature and modus operandi, the writer to the Hebrews warns his audience that it has to be taken seriously.

Hebrews 2:3 (NIV) ...how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.

Hebrews 3:7-8 (NIV) So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness,..... (also verse 15)

Hebrews 4:9-11 (NIV) There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; 10 for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. 11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their (Israelites) example of disobedience.

And our next landmark takes us to his dire warnings about ignoring it. He established the sovereignty of God and Christ in the first chapter. This information is immediately followed by warnings in chapters 2, 3 and 4. Twice in chapter 3 and once in chapter 4:7 the audience is warned against hardening their hearts against God's word, which clearly had been preached to them. Although this writer uses different terminology, the principles in the warnings he gives reiterate the four principles of rebellion, retribution, repentance and restoration. He gives the example of the rebellion of the 1st generation Israelites where retribution resulted in none, apart from Joshua and Caleb, entering the Promised Land. This current band of Hebrews are exhorted not to follow their example of disobedience in case they, too, forfeit the eternal inheritance of rest promised to citizens of the kingdom of God.

Although his words are addressed to those who, presumably, are already part of that kingdom, they are addressing a situation where, because of persecution, there is danger of a loss of faith and even renunciation of citizenship of the kingdom. They are urged to persevere in their faith like the saints of old listed in chapter 11. Those heroes of the OT had kept the faith in spite of dangers and in spite of the fact that they never saw in their lifetimes, what this present generation was seeing fulfilled before their eyes. In view of what had been put in place in and through Christ, to offer entry into God's kingdom to the whole of humanity, for the writer to the Hebrews these strong warnings are necessary to prevent the kind of retribution from which there would never be the chance to repent and be restored to God's favour.

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John 8:17 (NIV) (Jesus said) In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true.

Hebrews 10:28-31 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Hebrews 12:29 (NIV) for our “God is a consuming fire.”

They are there to state the fact that God’s sovereignty over heaven and earth is absolute, and ignoring His words or rejecting the means of entering His kingdom can only end in disaster. The Book of Revelation, in fearsome graphic detail, gives pictures of the consequences of ignoring God’s warnings now. Quite literally, to ignore the information they have been given is a matter of spiritual life or death. The theme of the verdict of two witnesses is one that runs through the whole Bible. Jesus, even while on earth regarded the witness of the Father and Himself as constituting the verdict on that discussion. The witness now of Jesus’ divine kingship, together with God, and the Spirit of grace mentioned in verse 29, are the three witness that now determine the spiritual destiny of every human being, and their verdict is final.

Fortunately, this negative aspect of consideration of the kingdom of God in heaven is not the last landmark on the Hebrews stage of Route 66. The writer does not dwell on the aspect of repentance, but on the blessings which comes from repentance.

Hebrews 4:16 (NIV) Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 12:22-24 (NIV) But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.....You have come to God, the Judge of all..... to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Hebrews 12:28 (NIV) Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,

Repentance in this community consists of, and manifests itself in believing what has been written about God, His Christ and the Spirit of grace. It has faith and trusts in the whole earthly and present heavenly ministry of Christ on behalf of sinners. It believes that through these means, restoration to right standing with God is guaranteed. As chapters 12 and 13 explain, repentance results in perseverance in the faith, submission to God’s discipline and living a life that reflects the righteousness and justice of God. And a true knowledge, understanding and appreciation of what the kingdom of God in heaven has provided for the salvation and preservation of the kingdom of God on earth, cannot do anything else but express gratitude and worship in reverence and awe, for the opportunity to receive citizenship of the kingdom that cannot be shaken.

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As we leave this Hebrews stage of Route 66, we are left in no doubt that the kingdom of God in heaven has put in place everything required to ensure the growth and development of the kingdom of God on earth. Unassailable, eternal, sovereign power and majesty, the word that sustains the universe, the perfect priestly Mediator of the new covenant, all backed by the threefold witness of God, the Son and the Spirit of grace. All that was now needed for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven was the response of the people, this had all been established to save. And that can only happen when all our preaching and teaching follows the words of the writer to the Hebrews – fix your eyes only upon Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith – the Alpha and the Omega of faith. As we shall see next week, the success of the evangelism and missionary activity of the early church rested on obeying that exhortation of the writer to the Hebrews.