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The Gospel of the Kingdom



T. Austin-Sparks



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The Gospel of the Kingdom

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Contents

[Chapter 1 - The Kingdom of God](#)

[Chapter 2 - The Operation of the Kingdom of God](#)

[Chapter 3 - The Kingdom and the Church](#)

[Chapter 4 - The Priority of the Kingdom](#)

[Chapter 5 - The Proclamation of the Kingdom](#)

Chapter 1 - The Kingdom of God

"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

Overshadowing and encompassing all else in the Bible, and especially in the New Testament, is the phrase: "the kingdom of God". "John the Baptist [cometh], preaching... saying... the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1,2). Jesus preached it and taught it and said that it had come nigh (Matt. 4:17). Before His transfiguration He had said that there were some there who would not see death until they saw the Kingdom coming in power (Mark 9:1). After His resurrection He spoke with His disciples about the Kingdom (Acts 1:3).

This was the theme, too, of the apostles. Paul himself spoke of it to those in Rome as late as his imprisonment: right up to the end, it would seem, it was concerning 'the Kingdom of God, and the things of Jesus Christ', that he spoke (Acts 28:31). The letter to the Hebrews is summed up in one phrase: "Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken..." (Heb. 12:28) literally, 'being in the course of receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken'. That explains all that is in that letter. And the book of the Revelation itself can be gathered into one sentence: "Now is come... the kingdom of our God..." (Rev. 12:10).

All this amounts to a very full, strong and comprehensive statement, and it is therefore surely necessary for us to acquaint ourselves with the meaning of the Kingdom of God. At the outset, therefore, let us spend a little time in defining the Kingdom of God, for we must be clear on this matter of definition.

A DEFINITION

What is the Kingdom of God? It is generally agreed that the word 'kingdom' is not a very good translation of the Greek word which lies behind it. The root meaning of the original word translated 'kingdom' in our English Bibles is 'sovereign rule', or 'reign', so that it should be more correctly translated 'the sovereign rule of God', and we must keep that in mind all the way along. We shall go on using the word 'kingdom', for we shall find it difficult to get away from it, but let us be very clear that, when we are using the word 'kingdom' in this connection, we are thinking and talking about the sovereign rule or reign of God.

Now, in the light of the teaching of the New Testament, this has three aspects.

Firstly, it does mean the kingly rule of God. Then it leads on to an order or nature of things characteristic of the One who rules. Note how it is to be: the one *LEADS ON* to the other. The latter condition is not always present. God rules: that is a fact in itself; but that is sovereign rule where over a very large area there is nothing characteristic of God, nothing which sets forth the nature of God. But the fact and truth of God ruling *LEADS ON* to the next thing, and that is an order which takes its character from Him who rules. That is what it is intended to lead to, and in the New Testament you will find that that has a large place, as we shall see later.

And then, going one stage further, the sovereign reign or rule of God leads to an actual realm in which that order and nature operates and is expressed. This is something into which you can enter, but you cannot enter it apart from the other two things: the fact of His absolute Lordship, and the fact

that you, by some mighty work of God, have become a 'partaker of the Divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4) - the very nature of God has been introduced and a new order of things has been set up.

That is the definition of the Kingdom of God. It is very important, because I hope you are going to be led to a new reading of all that is in the Word about the Kingdom, and you will be in confusion unless you have clearly grasped that definition in its threefold aspect.

It hardly needs to be said that the 'Kingdom of God' and the 'Kingdom of Heaven' are not in any sense two different things. Matthew prefers the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. There is a very good reason why Matthew preferred the title 'the Kingdom of Heaven', the sovereign rule of Heaven - or rather of the heavens, for the word is not in the singular, it is in the plural. Mark, Luke and John always call it the 'Kingdom of God' - again, for very good reasons, into which I leave you to dig. But the two titles denote the same thing.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD PRESENT

Now, we are expressly told by John the Baptist and by the Lord Himself that the Kingdom of God or of Heaven was "at hand", was "nigh", had "drawn nigh". On one occasion the Lord put it "...is come nigh unto you" (Luke 10:9) on another, "...is in the midst of you", or "within you" (Luke 17:21). And, as we have already quoted, before His transfiguration the Lord said, 'There are some here who in their lifetime will see it come in power'. So we are told that it is present. But we may not perhaps realise what a tremendous amount hangs upon that statement. A whole system of teaching has arisen which says that the Kingdom has been suspended and will come in with the Jewish age later on. But John said, 'It is at hand'. Jesus said, 'It has come nigh'. Jesus said, 'You shall see it come in power in your lifetime', and, 'The Kingdom is in the midst of you' - *IS* in the midst of you'. It is present.

But here a question arises. If the sovereign rule of God and of the heavens is universal and eternal, as the Bible declares it to be - in the book of Daniel the phrase which governs everything is "the heavens *DO* rule" - in what way is it more particularly so in this dispensation? God is the Ruler of the universe, and always has been and always will be. How is He more so in this dispensation than at any other time? In other words, in what way is the kingdom at hand, or has it come nigh, in *THIS* dispensation? And the answer is a very full, a very comprehensive and a very wonderful one.

The Kingdom of God was always, by Divine appointment, the heritage of God's Son. God purposed that Kingdom for His Son as His inheritance. Through Him, by Him, He made all things, and unto Him were all things created (Rom. 13:36; Col. 1:16). But, further, it was intended to be man's in union with God's Son. There is much about that. "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the Son of man, that thou puttest him in charge? ...Thou madest him to have dominion..." (Ps. 8:4,6). "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). This is not something extra. It was eternally in the thought of God for man, to be realised through union with His Son. Man was in the picture from the beginning - man was created for that very purpose.

And that very truth opens the door for the tragedy. By man's act and by man's consent, by man's rebellion against the expressed will of God, the Kingdom passed into the hands of a usurper. Yes: the dominion over this world passed into the hands of one who is, even by the Lord Jesus Himself, designated 'the prince of this world' (John 14:30), and by Paul 'the god of this age' (2 Cor. 4:4). It went into alienation from its rightful Heir - and from man in union with Christ as a joint-heir - it went into alienation, which demanded restoration. It went into enmity against God, which demanded reconciliation. It went into captivity, demanding release. It went into moral ruin, demanding

reconstitution. There is the answer to the question as to why in this dispensation the Kingdom has a particular meaning.

THE KINGDOM AT HAND WITH THE COMING OF THE HEIR

Thus, you see, the Kingdom, or the rule, in all its meaning as we have defined it, came to hand with the appearance of its rightful Heir. This dispensation is covered and dominated by the fact of the Son of God having become incarnate. As the Heir of all things, He has come to seek and to save that which was lost - and it was an immense 'that'. So the Kingdom or the sovereign rule has come into this dispensation, in this particular and peculiar way, with the Person of Jesus Christ, God's Son, the rightful Heir. It has also come in with Him as the alone Redeemer of the inheritance, the only One who could redeem, the redeeming Kinsman who alone had the position and the right and the resource to redeem - the "Son of man". And so the Kingdom has come near in the person and the work of the Lord Jesus, and this phrase, "the Kingdom of God", defines, explains and sums up the whole meaning and purpose of the incarnation and the mission of the Lord Jesus.

Do you say, Why was God's Son made man? Why did He come in the flesh? Why did He come into this world, and then why did He suffer and die and rise again? The answer is: In order that the sovereign rule of God might be recovered, restored, reconstituted, the enmity dealt with and reconciliation made, the captivity broken, release brought in. You will no doubt be recalling much Scripture in support of this. "To proclaim release unto the captives..." (Is. 61:1): that was His mission - to reconstitute things from their moral ruin. We may consider this more fully later. What is called 'the Sermon on the Mount' is, as Dr. Campbell Morgan calls it, 'the whole manifesto' of the Kingdom of God: it shows what the Kingdom of God is like - the constitution of it in moral principle.

So, He came, and He finished His work to recover and secure His own God-given inheritance of the Kingdom; and, rising from the dead, He says: "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18) - literally it is, 'has just been given to me' - and from that moment all authority is vested in the Name of Jesus. The remainder of the New Testament is the demonstration of that fact. The book of the Acts, from the beginning onward, sets forth in a very, very concrete and forceful way the authority of the Name. "By what power, or in what name...?" was the interrogation. 'If you ask concerning the Name, be it known unto you that by the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...' (Acts 4:7-10). The authority is not only claimed by the Lord Jesus, but demonstrated by Him in the power of the Holy Spirit.

CHRIST'S WAS A 'COSMIC' MISSION

This inheritance was something very comprehensive. The mission of the Lord Jesus was, if I may use the word, cosmic: that is to say, it did not just relate to the earth as the beginning and the end. It had to do with the whole spiritual sphere in which this earth moves. Paul defines that as: 'principalities, powers, world-rulers of this darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies' (Eph. 6:12). There is much more of that kind, and that is what we mean by 'cosmic'. It is supra-earthly, if you like - the whole spiritual setting of everything here. In that whole realm of the heavens which were polluted and defiled, the mission of the Lord Jesus was efficacious and effectual; it was not only for man on the earth and for the earthly creation. The very heavens had to be purged, we are told (Job 15:15; Heb. 9:23). Yes, the inheritance is a large inheritance. His rule, His sovereign rule, is a very, very great thing. It moves out into the vast expanses where these hosts of evil spirits have their sphere of operations. His rule is there, it is extended there.

But, of course, it operates also amongst men. That hardly needs to be said, and certainly not

emphasized. I refer again to the book of the Acts. But was the book of the Acts ever finished? It is the one book in the Bible which has no finish. It just breaks off. How we would like to know the rest! But no, it just breaks off; it leaves Paul there on his chain in Rome, tells us no more. Ah, but, you see, the book of the Acts was never intended to be finished until the end of this dispensation. It has gone on and on, and it is still having chapters added to it, and it is still on the same lines with the same meaning - the sovereign rule of the Lord Jesus and His securing of His inheritance by His own authority. But for His authority nothing would come to Him. You and I know quite well that we cannot just bring people into the Kingdom willy-nilly. It requires the exercise of the very throne of the Lord Jesus to bring a soul through by new birth. And those who are receiving the Kingdom, that is, those who are still 'in course of receiving' the Kingdom, know quite well that every inch of this territory is contested, and that we never come into one extra fragment of our inheritance in Christ without some exercise of His sovereign power.

A REDEMPTIVE MISSION

Christ's mission was also a redemptive mission. How great does that word 'redemption' become, when we view it in the light of this whole purpose of God as to the place of His Son universally. Not only men and women, but the whole earth and the whole cosmos, redeemed by the Blood of Jesus. The day will come when the glory of that redemption will be manifested universally.

A RECONSTRUCTIVE MISSION

Then the mission of Jesus was reconstructive. That, of course, is spread right over the New Testament. What is He doing with you, with me, with His own who have come under His sovereign rule? What is happening to those of us who have come under the Lordship of God in Christ? We are just being reconstructed, that is all, and we are learning as we go along how much we need reconstructing. Things have all broken down, all gone wrong. We cannot put them right. Something has to be done to reconstruct this whole fabric. Hence, all the dealings with us by the Spirit of God, in trials and testings, in afflictions and adversities and sufferings, are reconstructive works unto the Kingdom of God. They often seem to be destructive works - and it is true that you have got to get rid of the rubbish, of the debris, before you can build; the two things are two parts of the one thing - but, you see, the receiving of the Kingdom comes through afflictions.

Is it not stated quite clearly and definitely: "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22)? Now go beyond the primary idea of a sphere as interpreting the Kingdom, and see that the tribulations are bringing you into that sovereign rule of the Lord, which is going to prove itself so beneficent, so glorious, so wonderful. You agree with me that it would be a grand and glorious thing if everything were just as God would have it. That is what He is working toward with you and me. 'Through much tribulation we enter the Kingdom': we are coming into the inheritance, we are coming into the sovereign rule.

THE GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM

So much for the explanation of the term 'the Kingdom of God'. What is the inclusive issue? "This gospel of the kingdom" - 'This *GOOD NEWS* of the sovereign rule of God'. The sovereign rule of God is good news! That comprehended the whole message of the apostles and of the Church for this dispensation. It is the good news of the Kingdom - the good news that the Throne exists and is occupied and is dominant. The good news, to begin with, in the most elementary aspect of the proclaiming, is that there is a Throne, and on that Throne is Jesus Christ; that the authority is vested in Him, and that that authority is a very real thing: and that the Holy Spirit is working all things in us

and in this world in relation to the authority or Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Take an illustration from the Old Testament - Israel in Babylon, that great, immense world power; a people broken, shattered, crushed, ground to powder, in despair. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps. 137:4). They hung their harps upon the willows in the hopelessness of the situation. But listen! A prophet is speaking. "For your sake I have sent to Babylon, and I will bring down all their nobles" (Is. 43:14, R.V. Mg.). "For your sake" - "*for your sake*" - a broken, crushed, hopeless people. This overthrow and destruction of one of the mightiest empires that this world has seen has an explanation in a poor, despised, broken, captive people.

Now bring that up to date, and realise that this Throne is operating now in history. Mighty world powers are going to be shattered and broken and disintegrated because of the Church. Antichrist will be given his tether. He will be allowed to 'exalt himself above all that is called God, sitting in the temple of God, giving out that he is God' (2 Thess. 2:4). How much further can anyone go than that? Antichrist will be given liberty to go even as far as that. But then he will be smitten and destroyed by the very countenance of Christ Himself. For the authority of Christ to be displayed in all its intrinsic power, it is necessary that all this other be allowed. The Devil is allowed to go a long way, but behind there is always the Throne. The Throne is saying, 'Go as far as you can, and then I will destroy you out of hand.' That is the good news of the sovereignty.

What we have said so far is but an introduction, but I trust that it may help towards a new understanding of this wonderful phrase - "the kingdom of God" - and I believe that we shall be thrilled as we look more deeply into it. But let us be quite clear about this. That Kingdom has come, that Kingdom is present; that Kingdom, in spite of all that seems to be working to the contrary, is functioning. That One at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens is Lord, and this is something to be apprehended by faith, and stood upon in the day of ordeal.

For surely it was that assurance and confidence, that certainty, that accounted for the wonderful stability of the Apostles and the Church at the beginning, when it seemed so otherwise. Is it not this that has astonished us, and perhaps perplexed us? Here is all this persecution, all this martyrdom, all this seeming triumph of evil and of evil men and of the Devil, and yet these people do not bow inwardly to it, they do not accept it. Whether they be individuals, or whether it be the Church, they just do not accept that this is the last word and that this is the supreme power. They repudiate it, even to death. Why? There is no other answer than this, that they had come to a fixed and final position about the exaltation of the Lord Jesus to the Throne in the heavens. It was a settled thing, and it was so real in their hearts that nothing that this other could do could ultimately destroy them. They go to their deaths singing in triumph.

It is easy to speak glibly of these things: and yet - and yet - is it not true that the Lord has special reserves of grace for special ordeals? If ever you feel that you could not go through a certain trial, that if you had to face that, you just could not go through with it, you are taking on something that you have no right to take on. If the Lord calls you to go through fire or water, He has a special reserve of grace for you in that. And that grace will be from the *THRONE* of grace. "Let us... draw near with boldness to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may *FIND* grace to help us in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). It is a throne above, mediating grace for need and suffering as it is required.

Chapter 2 - The Operation of the Kingdom of God

In the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel by Matthew, which we may have open before us by way of reminder, we find the operation of the Kingdom illustrated in a sevenfold way.

THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

I do not propose to attempt an exposition of that sevenfold way, but will simply lift out from the chapter the salient features of the operation of the sovereign rule of God. We have here that operation illustrated, in what have come to be called 'the parables of the Kingdom'. That is the title which men have given to them, but it is well to remember that the title which the Lord Jesus gave to them was 'the mysteries of the Kingdom'.

THE KEY TO THE PARABLES

These parables, or mysteries, of the Kingdom of Heaven are really impossible of understanding, except in the light of the definition of the Kingdom which we have just given - that is, as the sovereign rule of God. If you interpret them as indicating primarily a realm or nature, then you have gone beyond their warrant, and you will most certainly get into confusion. Few parts of the New Testament have been more subject to controversy than these parables. The various interpretations that have been given to them have divided students and teachers into irreconcilable schools. We shall see something of that as we go along. It is therefore necessary to discover the key to the parables, in order to be saved from this confusion and contradiction; and that key undoubtedly lies in the definition of the Kingdom as *THE SOVEREIGN RULE OF GOD*. Let me repeat: I am not embarking upon an exposition of these parables, but seeking to get at something of very great importance and value to ourselves at this time.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

The first is what is called the parable of the sower (vv. 18-23). The Lord Jesus said that the seed is the word of the Kingdom. "When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom", He said. Now re-translate that as 'the word of the sovereign rule'. The word of the sovereign rule has gone forth. What is the result? Very largely failure. The success in the positive sense is very limited, comparatively - some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold. You see how impossible it is to impart to the Kingdom the idea of a realm or a nature. That would imply that within the realm where God rules you have very largely failure. But that is not the teaching of the parable. The teaching of the parable is this. The word of the sovereign rule is sent forth, like seed; and, no matter if there is a large failure in response and reaction to that word, God is successful in the end with a body that is productive of that which is implicit in the Word.

Yes, man may fail. He may receive apparently with gladness, and then it may all come to nothing. He may respond in a way, and seem to be going to turn out all right - and then, because of difficulties and adversities, just fade out. But let there be failure, disappointment, breakdown: no matter - God gets something in His sovereignty. There is something that this sovereign government of God secures. You see, this is a tremendous word of the sovereignty for labourers. You labour, you scatter, you give, you work, you travail; but, if it is the word of the sovereign rule in very truth, it cannot

ultimately fail. There may be much disappointment, but there will be an issue which answers to the intention of the One who gave it. Very simple: but you see how important it is to recognise the all-governing law of the sovereign rule which cannot, fully and finally, ultimately be defeated. A great deal may seem to argue that the labour is in vain; but the Lord is saying here in this parable: 'No! When it is a word of the rule of God, it cannot ultimately return wholly void; there will be something resulting from it.' The sovereignty is governing.

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

The next is that commonly called the parable of the wheat and the tares - the darnel (vv. 23-30). Here from the word the thought passes to persons. It is not the word that is now sown - it is persons that are sown. Children of the Kingdom are sown in the earth, and then by night the enemy comes and sows his own children, children of his kingdom. They are the children of the Devil. His method is suitable to his object. His object being completely to nullify what is of God, his method is to imitate it. That is a wile of that evil wisdom of Satan - imitation children of God mixed in with the true children of God in order to nullify. The workers are represented as coming to the owner of the field and telling him what they have found there, and he says, 'Ah, an enemy has done this.' And they say, 'What would you have us do? Shall we pluck up this other thing?'

He replies: 'No - let the sovereignty have its way! Let them both grow together, and the sovereignty, the rule of Heaven, will progressively make very clear which is which, and the end will be an easy and a safe course. If you start doing that now, you have not got the wisdom of Heaven to discriminate. It is not your business, and you have not the faculty or capacity, to disentangle this deep work of the Devil, by trying to mark out what is true and what is an imitation. That is not your job, and you are not qualified to do it. Only Heaven can do that. So let it go on, and the sovereign rule will make manifest what is of itself, and what is otherwise.'

It is the sovereign rule that is going to solve and settle this whole problem. You cannot say that the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God is like that which is pictured in this parable - an awful mixture. It is not. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, is one thing, and only the sovereign rule of God can bring out into clearness what is of God.

But that will happen as we go on. We can trust the sovereign rule. That is very practical: it works like this. There are those who are truly of God, of Heaven; and then there are those who come in - who perhaps sing the hymns, use the phraseology, carry on the same way, associate with those of the Kingdom; but there is a difference. Deep down, they are really "not of us". They are just imitations; they are not real, not the genuine thing. We may discern, as these men discerned, that there is something here that is not the same thing, something that is foreign, that is alien and strange. What are we going to do? Had we better turn them out, tell them to go?

No, no! Go on long enough, and they will go of themselves. The two things will be self-manifested, and it will be quite easy in the long run. "They went out from us", said John, "...that they might be made manifest that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). This is a heavenly principle, you see - there is a manifestation. It is difficult to endure patiently those people who you sense have not, as we say, the root of the matter in them - who are just camp-followers. But, as with the mixed multitude that left Egypt with Israel, time and testing will find them out. This is the way if the Kingdom, the sovereignty, operates, and it calls for much faith, and much patience.

THE MUSTARD SEED

The parable of the mustard seed (vv. 31, 32) is one of the most difficult of all, and one that has perhaps been the occasion of some of the worst interpretations and teachings. "*The kingdom of heaven is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is less than all seeds; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches.*" Do you really believe, in the light of all these other parables and of His whole teaching, that the Lord Jesus said, "This is the Kingdom of Heaven - the Kingdom of Heaven is like that"? If the common and popular interpretation is to be accepted, then we are involved in some real difficulties. Admittedly, the parable does seem to mean that Christianity, or "the kingdom of heaven", has very small beginnings and then grows to very great dimensions. There may be an element of truth in that. The beginnings in Jerusalem *WERE* small, and in the course of the centuries Christianity has become worldwide. But is that just what the Lord meant by the parable?

There are at least three things that would pull us up and make us think again, and think more energetically.

One is that at other times the Lord definitely used terms of strict and severe limitation in relation to salvation, the way and the issue. So much was this so, that His disciples were startled into ejaculating: "Lord, are there few that be saved?" (Luke 12:23). He spoke of the way to life being straitened, and few finding or accepting it: of the gate being narrow, and few entering thereby (Matt. 7:13,14). He called His disciples (representatives of His Church) the "little flock" to whom it would be the Father's good pleasure to give *THE KINGDOM* (Luke 12:32). There are contrasting ideas between "wide" and "narrow", "broad" and "straitened", big and little, popular and unpopular. All this does not agree with the usual superficial interpretation of this parable.

Then what about the "fowls of the air"? Did He use this metaphor in a contradictory way? In the parable of the sower He had spoken of these in a bad sense: is He employing the same terms in a right and proper sense here? This violates the principle of consistency in inspiration.

Thirdly, is it *COMMONLY* true that the "mustard seed", the smallest of all, grows into a tree so great as is here depicted? No, it is positively not true. If our Lord saw such a thing - and He may have done - and drew attention to it, He was drawing attention to something abnormal and not natural. It was sufficiently abnormal and unnatural to attract attention.

This brings us to the factor that is common to *ALL* the parables and all the teaching of Jesus, and of the Apostles subsequently. In all these parables there is a selective, discriminating, contrasting, comparative, good-and-bad element. The Kingdom of Heaven is like that: the sovereign rule is all-comprehending, but it is very particular, selective, and judicial. Consistency in every direction demands that we interpret this "tree" of Christianity as an abnormal, unnatural development, capable of housing many things that are not in keeping with the true *NATURE* of the Kingdom. These "fowls" are *NOT* the born-from-above people who alone can see or enter the kingdom (John 3). They are all the accretions, the camp-followers, the parasites, the various kinds of people and things that take advantages of Christianity, and use its cover, but are not of its nature.

The Lord was letting His disciples know that this is what would happen, and that the sovereignty took all this in its stride. It is as well that we should know that the Lord has foreseen the developments of Christianity and its abnormalities, but it is to great detriment that His spirit of discernment and discrimination does not have a way with so many Christians.

Does the New Testament, to begin with, indicate that there is any such thing as abnormality, or this

kind of abnormal development, about the true work of God? It rather indicates that, although ultimately the sum of many, many centuries will be 'a great multitude which no man can number', there will be, as we get nearer and nearer to the end, a tremendous sifting out and falling away. It is definitely stated that that day will not come before there is a great falling away (2 Thess. 2:3), and that "judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). Well, then, if this is right - a great falling away - the Bible contradicts itself. As we have said, the teaching of the Lord seemed to be so clear to the disciples on this matter that they exclaimed: "Are there few that be saved?" What is all this about the broad and the narrow way? The broad way - many go by it; the narrow way - few find it. The Bible does not contradict itself; but it says that God takes account of these things, and God in His sovereignty permits them. He does not come out and destroy this freakish thing popularly called 'Christianity'. That may be there, but God in His sovereignty is pursuing His own course to secure what He is after. Though all this may be quite true, the sovereign rule of God goes on, the sovereignty is preserved.

THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

The same principle is implicit in the next parable.

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened" (v. 33).

(a) THE LEAVEN

The popular interpretation is that the leaven is Christianity: Christianity being taken by the Church and put into the world until the whole lump is leavened - the whole world is 'leavened' with Christianity. It is suggested that we shall see the world saved by the deep, silent movement of Christianity, working strongly and deeply and hiddenly, like leaven. It is easy to say that sort of thing, but it is superficial reasoning. In the light of history, and in the light of the Word of God, it is very difficult to believe.

Look again. The world-population is vastly more in excess of the Christian population than at any time in the dispensation. After these almost twenty centuries of Christianity, an immense number over a very great part of the world have never heard the Gospel yet. Look at this - 1,200 million out of the 2,000 million people of the earth are still without the knowledge of Christ. Then what of the unspeakable revelation of iniquity in countries which have had the Gospel for centuries? We could make an immense build-up of facts which would shatter this interpretation of the leaven beyond reconstruction.

What, then, is the meaning of the leaven? I do not believe that leaven here stands in a different category from leaven anywhere else in the Bible. Consistency of Scripture demands that we interpret leaven always as the same thing, in the same light: and everywhere else in Scripture leaven is evil - something that has to be purged out. In the old economy they had to light their lamp on the eve of the Passover, and search the house high and low, nook and cranny, for any leaven and purge it out. The Passover could not be eaten till it was certain that there was no vestige or trace of leaven anywhere. They had to eat unleavened bread in the Passover. The Lord Jesus spoke of "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:6) and "the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). And Paul spoke of 'purging out the old leaven' (1 Cor. 5:7). Everywhere it is something evil. The function or effect of leaven is to disintegrate, to break up, to tear apart - every housewife knows that. And it is not different here: still it is leaven and still it is evil. If you say that the Kingdom of Heaven, as a realm, is like that, you are in trouble. But the sovereign rule of God knows all about this deep, secret

movement of disintegration, of evil, that has come into the realm of Divine things. It is not the Kingdom of Heaven that is like an alcoholic fermentation, disintegration, putrefaction.

(b) THE WOMAN

It is only necessary to look at such passages of Scripture as Revelation 2:20-23 ("the woman Jezebel"), and Revelation 17 ("the great harlot") to realise that a "woman" so often in the Bible is the symbol of a system. Again and again it has been a woman, either personally or symbolically, who has corrupted Divine things, or brought corruption into relationship with them. See Samson; see Solomon; see later kings for examples. In the message to Thyatira, this insinuation of evil and corruption into the House of God is the occasion of the severest judgment - for it is called "the deep things of Satan" (Rev. 2:24). What foreknowledge and foresight our Lord had in these parables! But let us go on.

(c) THREE MEASURES

Three measures. Remember that three is the number of Divine Persons and Divine things. Evil has spread even through the Church, so that within Christianity itself the very Divine Persons have been subjected to questions and doubts. God Himself - the Son, the Spirit - has been misrepresented. With many other things of God, evil has come in to break them up - to destroy their effectiveness and power by destroying their solidity. What are you going to do about it?

The sovereign rule of God takes account of it - the working of evil, the working of falsehood, the working of misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the things of God. History is just full of it, as we know. We hate using terms and labels, but is it not just that which has happened in the last hundred years in the realm called 'Modernism' or 'Liberalism'? Is it not the leaven disintegrating Divine things? The very Person of Jesus Christ is stripped of His Deity; the very Word of God is denied its authority and its finality; the very Holy Spirit is degraded from His dignity as a Divine Person; and so on. The Lord Jesus discerned the future, saw the way things would go, and spoke like this. He was saying. 'This very generation will not be out before all sorts of heresies and errors will come into the realm of Divine things' - which they did.

But the sovereign rule of God goes on. This does not spell God's confusion and God's defeat. His sovereignty is greater than all this. It is the only way really to be consistent both with the teaching of Scripture and with history itself. Surely it must be sheer blindness that reads history in any other way. As I said, I am not expounding these parables, but lifting out the point that is common to them all. From various angles, for various and differing causes, in differing situations, right down the age: whatever may be permitted by that sovereignty, that sovereignty is equal to it all, and will be fully vindicated in the end.

THE PARABLE OF THE DRAG-NET

We reach the last parable, that of the great dragnet let down into the sea - the sea always speaking of humanity - and gathering a great multitude of fishes. Yes, the sovereignty of God does that: in comes the net, with its multitude of fishes of all sorts, and then sovereignty gets to work and separates the good from the bad, and in the end God has what He was after from the beginning. He has got it at last. That is how the sovereignty works. There is much instruction here for Christians and for Christian workers. If we had our way, we would go to work to see to it that we always and only have the thing that is absolutely and certainly and positively according to God's mind: we would select that, and put a hedge round it, and set up walls about it, and we would protect it and keep it, as an

exclusive company. But these parables say, No! The sovereignty of Heaven does not do that sort of thing. The sovereignty of Heaven permits and tolerates very much that will ultimately be found to be not according to Heaven. Yes, it takes account of much; but it is driving its own course, and, in the end, through all, God will have what He set His heart upon.

THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE RULE OF GOD

To sum up - see how comprehensive is this rule of God. The sovereignty of God is one of the most problematic and perplexing things to Christians, in relation to what God will allow even in association with His own work. We would not do that at all. We would be very, very particular. But see how comprehensive God is. He allows a very great deal. He not only allows it - He even uses very much that perhaps we would never use, or about which we would have a question. He comes through things in His sovereignty to get His ends. It is *HIS END* that is the great testimony to His sovereignty. We say: How could God get anything out of this, or out of that? Well, He does, that is all. How could God get anything in that way? He just does! Look at this, look at that, look at all these things: is anything possible for God? The verdict at the end is that God sovereignly did get something.

You see, this is the great heart and core of this whole teaching and revelation of the Kingdom of God. It does not mean that you and I need not be sensitive to the Lord - that is another thing altogether. We may come to that later, when we say something about the Kingdom and the Church. It does not mean that, because we see that God's sovereignty reaches His ends in spite of everything, we are just to be careless and insensitive to the mind of the Spirit; to do all sorts of things that God, if He could have His way, would not sanction. But it does mean that this sovereignty of God is going to cover a lot of ground: it is going to get its end through many, many ways and means which in themselves, intrinsically, are not of Him. It is this rule of the heavens that is, so to speak, 'getting on with its job'.

We, left to ourselves, are so fussy, so particular, that we would not leave room for the sovereignty of God. The great appeal here is: Leave plenty of room for God. That is what it amounts to. Never despair over any situation as being finally and utterly hopeless. In the presence of the spread of this evil thing, this leaven - the expansion of this abnormal, 'freak' Christianity, with its contradictions and disappointments - we are forbidden by this sovereignty to give up and say it is a hopeless thing. We have to come to the place where we say and believe and take our stand: 'That looks a pretty hopeless situation, but God can get something out of it, and He will.'

That is the good news of the Kingdom, the Gospel of the Kingdom. I know that many of you who read these words can bear this out. You have known the most awful and impossible situations of mixture and hopelessness. You have despaired - and then you have seen God do something. What a strength and force that gives to the remainder of the statement! "This gospel of the kingdom shall be proclaimed... for a testimony unto all the nations". In His sovereignty, God can turn the most unpropitious and unpromising situation, the most hopeless state of things, into a glorious testimony. Yes, He allows so much, but He governs all. And He makes use of all manner of agencies - even the Devil himself. That must be sovereignty! "An enemy hath done this." Very well: we will use the enemy to show what is right and what is wrong, to make all the more manifest what is of God and what is not. The work of the Devil shall be employed to that end. That is the rule of Heaven.

All this is borne out in the later New Testament. "The things which befell me", writes Paul (Phil. 1:12) - what were they? They were the Devil's work. Again - "We would fain have come unto you, I Paul once and again; and Satan hindered us" (1 Thess. 2:18). Strange, mysterious statement! Yes, the

Devil is busy; "a messenger of Satan" (2 Cor. 12:7) - he is very active. And what is the verdict at the end? "The things which befell me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel"! Under the sovereignty of God the very works of the Devil are being used to reach God's end.

Perhaps that is common knowledge, so often said. But we must come more definitely to this settled position, that *GOD AND CHRIST ARE ON THE THRONE*. This Kingdom is a present reality. There are many things which contradict it and work against it. God does not consume and annihilate them: He permits them, and then takes hold of them; and the end is that His throne is established and it is made manifest that "his kingdom ruleth over all" (Ps. 103:19).

What these parables say to us is this - that God faces facts and has no illusions. He faces the fact that a large proportion of the sowing of the word of the Kingdom will fail. He faces the fact that Christianity will become an abnormal conglomeration, without any distinctiveness of testimony. He recognises that there will be a secret hidden working of error, of evil, of falsehood, all to disintegrate. He faces it all - all the work of the Devil, all the work of evil, all the failure of man - and then He declares His sovereignty over it all. That is what arises here. Let us ask for strength to believe it.

GOD'S JUDICIAL WORK

I have not said much about another aspect of these parables: namely, that there is a judicial, discriminatory work going on all the time. Do not fail to see that. All through these parables, He is cutting a line, He is discriminating, He is acting judicially. God is not just saying, 'Everything is all right - do not worry. Sit in your armchairs, ye Christian men; sit down, the Kingdom is coming.' No; rather - 'Rise up, ye men of God!' God is not passive, indifferent, careless, saying, 'Oh, it will be all right, this is all right; do not worry about it.' He is not like that. He is acting, and will act, judicially. He is really putting things in their place, and dividing between, as He does with the churches in the Revelation. He is discriminating. He is putting this here and that there, and saying that they belong to two different realms. That is a part of His sovereignty.

But our chief point is this: The operation of the Kingdom, or the rule, of God is to bring in at last the triumph of that rule. Whatever else may come in, it means the triumph of that rule. The rule of Heaven, the rule of God, comes out in the end triumphant.

Chapter 3 - The Kingdom and the Church

"In those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, saying, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1,2).

"I... say unto thee, that I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

"And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church" (Matthew 18:17).

It is a very significant fact that it is in the Gospel by Matthew, which is essentially the Gospel of the Kingdom, that the Church is first brought into view in the New Testament.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH

The first question which arises is as to what the difference is between the Kingdom and the Church. What is the difference? Are they two things, or one? The attempt has been made, by one considerable body of teaching, to prove that they are two different things entirely: that the Kingdom is one thing, belonging to one age, that it is now in this dispensation in suspense, but that it will come in with the restoration of the Jews in the next dispensation, the present dispensation being that of the Church. If you want to believe that, you will have to do a lot of juggling with the Scriptures - as has been done. As far as I can see, that system of truth is absolutely unsupported by the Scripture itself. However, I do not want to introduce a controversial element or source of confusion. I am simply saying that this is a question that we must face.

What is the difference? Are they two things? The answer is really Yes and No. They are not the same thing, and yet they are. That does not help you very much, I know, but we must go on to explain.

The sovereign rule of God and of the heavens, which has come to be called the Kingdom, is, in the first place, as we explained earlier, an announcement, a proclamation, a declaration, of a Divine fact: namely, that the sovereignty of God has been established in and through His Son Jesus Christ *IN THIS DISPENSATION*, in a new and immediate way. That fact was proclaimed for the first time, in the power of the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost. God had made Him Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). From that time onward, the note was made to ring out through the nations in ever-widening circles - Jesus Christ is Lord! That is the first phase of the sovereign rule or the Kingdom - a proclamation or an announcement.

Then, as we saw, it is an activity. Something is going on. When it is announced, when the proclamation is made, something begins to happen. Heaven is moved, and believing souls are saved. Hell is roused, and the heralds are persecuted. It is an activity - not just a doctrine, a truth, a theory. This sovereign rule or Kingdom is a mighty energy. And so, from a presenting of a fact, it becomes the demanding of an answer, and thereby a sifting and sorting of mankind into two categories, into one of two kingdoms.

We saw, further, how comprehensive is this rule, spreading itself sovereignly over everything, taking up everything into its sovereignty. Even the antagonisms and oppositions are taken hold of by this sovereignty, and made to serve the end which they were intended to defeat. It is all-comprehending, knowing all the course of things through history, as those parables make so clear. That last parable in

Matthew 13 brings us right to the end of the age, and from the first - the sowing of the seed, the word of the Kingdom - through all the phases and stages and variations, and everything that arises, to the last, the end of the age, we see that this sovereign rule has comprehended the whole, foreseen and foretold exactly what would happen and how things would develop, and has laid hold of all; so that at the last the sovereign rule is triumphant. That is the essential meaning of the 'Kingdom'.

THE CHURCH AND THE FRUIT OF THE KINGDOM

What is the Church? Well, the operation, the activity, of the sovereign rule works like this. The effect of the challenge and demand and sifting out, brought about by the proclamation, is that all along certain people are found who make the right reaction and response, and are thus brought right into the meaning of that sovereign rule: people, that is to say, who first acknowledge, and then themselves declare, that Jesus Christ is Lord. The sovereign rule has done its work so far, and then the fruit of that sovereign activity in the nations is gathered into a body called the Church. The Church becomes the vessel, the repository, of the work of the sovereign government of God. It gathers into itself as a vessel the fruit of the sovereign activity: so that the Kingdom leads to the Church, and the Church is the result, the embodiment, of the Kingdom.

It is interesting to note in Matthew's Gospel how very clear that is, if we can only see it. The last parable of the seven in chapter 13, the parable of the drag-net, brings us, as I have said, to the end of the age: the angels are sent forth, and the good are gathered into vessels, but the bad are cast away. Now turn over to chapter 24, verse 31, and here you find that the Lord is definitely answering that part of the disciples' question - "What shall be the end of the age?" (v. 3). "He shall send forth his angels... and they shall gather together his elect". Now, chapter 13 is the casting away of the bad fish; chapter 24 is the gathering of the good; and between the two, in chapters 16 and 18, we find the Church introduced.

Is that clear? The work of the Kingdom, the activity of the Kingdom, is the searching out, finding out, challenging, receiving, gathering, bringing into the Church. Strange that nothing is said about the Church coming into existence, other than - "I will build my church"! Nothing is said about Church teaching at all. It is simply introduced, almost as though it were a recognised thing, and then the final picture is of the elect being gathered. The Church is the fruit and sum of that first activity of the sovereign rule of God. And the Church is the 'elect', the 'chosen'. Peter and Paul speak of the Church in this very language. "Elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:1,2). And "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

I trust that we are clear now that the Church and the Kingdom are not two things, and yet they are. They are not the same thing, and yet they are. If you like, they are cause and effect. They are the complement of each other. There is a sense in which the sovereign rule is a 'bigger' thing than the Church - that is, if you will use the word 'bigger' in the sense of dimensions and not intrinsic value. It is so comprehensive. As we have seen, it takes up anything - almost everything - even the work of the Devil, the enemy who sowed his children amongst the children of God. This sovereign rule is such an expansive and wonderful thing. But then it focuses down upon certain results, and gathers them into a concrete entity called the Body of Christ. So that we have part and counterpart: they are one, and yet they are not one.

The Church, then, is the embodiment of the triumph of His rule. That is not only a statement of fact or of truth - it is a glorious testimony. It says what the Church is in the thought of God, but it also says what the Church ought to be in itself - the very embodiment of the triumph of the sovereign rule of God. Of course, it is so, if it is the Church in reality at all. Every one of us, if we really are in the

Church and of the Church, according to New Testament conception, is an embodiment and an expression of the triumph of His sovereign rule. You can use another phrase, if you like, which only defines that - sovereign grace, for His rule in this dispensation is the rule of grace. We are here by the triumph of sovereign grace, and we shall remain here on that ground alone, and at last we shall be found in that elect company simply because of the triumph of His sovereign rule through grace. That is the Church as the fruit of the Kingdom.

SOVEREIGN ACTIVITY IN RELATION TO THE WORD

Next, the Church is the embodiment of the sovereign activity in relation to the word of the Kingdom, as given by the Sower. While there is a large proportion of failure and disappointment, there is the thirtyfold, the sixtyfold and the hundredfold, and the Church takes that in. The Church is found to be composed of the triumph of the word of the Kingdom. Some of us are only 'thirtyfold' results, some a bit more, some perhaps may be even a hundredfold. At any rate, something has happened, and the Lord has got something in us. We want Him to have all that He can have. But that is just what the Church is - it is the thirtyfold, sixtyfold, hundredfold result of the word of the Kingdom. It is the wheat as over against the tares, the children of the Kingdom as over against the children of the Devil. We thank God that we can truly claim to be His children.

Again, the Church is the embodiment of the truth of unleavened bread. It 'keeps the feast' with 'unleavened bread' (1 Cor. 5:8). Spiritually that means that the leaven has been purged out. Praise God that all the corrupting, disintegrating work of sin and of the world has been dealt with.

The Church takes up the inner principle of the tree - the great, abnormal, 'freak' tree, as we called it - a mustard seed growing into a great tree, which it never does normally and naturally. It must be something absolutely abnormal to do it. But, over against that, the Church is something spiritually normal and healthy. There is nothing freakish about it. The Lord deliver us from all that is abnormal and all that is freakish. Ask the Lord to save you from being freakish! The Church is the true thing, and not the false thing like that great tree.

The Church is also the vessel of the good fish. Perhaps you do not like to think of yourself as a fish! But that is what the Church is. We may not think we are good fish - we may feel we are very poor fish! - nevertheless we are different; there is a difference.

And to crown it all, the Church is the "pearl of great price", and the "treasure hidden in the field".

All this, mark you, is within the compass of the teaching about the Kingdom; it all comes in the same chapter on the mysteries or parables of the Kingdom. They all issue in something positive, as over against something either negative or wrong; and the Church comes in and takes up all that is positive and right as the fruit of the word of the Kingdom. The Church then becomes the chosen, the elect, the holy nation, to whom this 'Kingdom', in this sense, is given. I will not enlarge upon that now; you will recall the Scriptures which I have cited.

THE SEAT OF THE SOVEREIGN RULE

But the Church is not only the embodiment of the fruit and triumph of the sovereign rule - it is that in which the immediate power of that rule is centred and then mediated. The sovereign rule of God, of Heaven, is centred in the Church. That is the first great truth about the Church in those early days, as it first comes into being. If you want to know where to find this sovereign rule, government, dominion, authority, of God and of Heaven, you will find it in the Church. There it is in Jerusalem, there it is in Antioch; there it is going everywhere. God has put authority and heavenly power in the

Church in a peculiar way.

Oh, that the Church were alive to the meaning of its existence, in this sense - alive to the great deposit with which it has been entrusted, as the very vessel of this sovereign operation, this mighty sovereign activity and rule of God. That deposit is there. When things have been as they should be, that is exactly what has been found in the Church. There were times when unbelievers coming in fell down on their faces, and said, 'God is in the midst of you' (1 Cor. 14:24,25). While joyous, while glad some, while very blessed in other respects, there ought yet to be something very awful about the Church. "Of the rest durst no man join himself to them" (Acts 5:13). Oh that that forbidding of Divine holiness might be found in the Church! The Church is the seat of this *JUDICIAL* activity of the Divine sovereignty. So it should be.

THE SOVEREIGN RULE MEDIATED THROUGH THE CHURCH

But then this sovereignty is mediated through the Church. It goes out and says: "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth..." (Acts 3:6). 'In the *NAME* of Jesus of Nazareth, I command you, I say unto you...' Here is the authority mediated, the Kingdom - poor word again - the sovereign rule, centred in and operating through the Church. That is how it ought to be. The authority of Jesus Christ is in the Church and should be exercised by the Church. Matthew 16 makes that quite clear. "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). If that is not authority in Heaven and earth, what is? But it is the authority of Him to whom it was given (Matt. 28:18) through His mighty victory.

THE EXPRESSION OF THE DIVINE AND HEAVENLY ORDER

The Church is, further, that in which the character of the Divine and heavenly order and rule is expressed. If the Kingdom of God and of Heaven has, as one of its essential aspects and components, the nature of Him that rules, then this is not just official, this is not just ecclesiastical - this is spiritual and moral in its very nature. At this point we ought to extend our meditations and go back to those three mighty chapters of Matthew's Gospel, embracing what is called 'the sermon on the mount'; for there is a revolution in ideas there. The whole conception of power is changed. Virtue is pre-eminent, character is predominant. The true values are shown to lie in what you *ARE*, not in that which is official and organized. "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit..." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom..."

That opens a very large field, which we cannot touch now. But it is all gathered into this, that the Kingdom is, from one standpoint, the expression of the nature, of the character, of Him who is sovereign, and that that is to be found in the Church. We may think of the Kingdom as a great, general thing, operating and active in the whole world, irrespective of anything and everything that is contrary to it; but it is not going to stop there. It is going to work until it has produced an expression of its own character; it will work, down and down until it has that nucleus that expresses the character of Him who is on the throne. And it is in the Church that the Divine and heavenly nature is found, and it is that nature that is sovereign.

There is perhaps no greater force operating from Heaven than the force of meekness. "He humbled himself, becoming obedient..." (Phil. 2:8); but the whole kingdom of Satan was shattered along that line. Men do not like that at all. Here is the revolution. But, you see, it is in the Church that this tremendous power is to be found - this being poor in spirit, this meekness, this being persecuted for righteousness' sake, and all the rest. But therein is power, therein is authority. It is very often not

until you get down on your knees, utterly broken as to your own pride, that you get through to God in absolute victory. To be emptied of all self is the way of power, the way of God, the way of Heaven. That is the essence of the Kingdom or sovereignty, and that is all to be taken up by the Church.

THE CHURCH JOINT-HEIR WITH CHRIST

Just one brief word in conclusion. The Church is the joint-heir with Christ of the inheritance, the universal rule, in the ages to come. We know this on the authority of Scripture. The Church is heir to the throne of the world to come - to the administrative place with the Lord Jesus over all that will be extra to itself. For a city presupposes a country, a metropolis presupposes a wider range. The City in the midst of the nations means that government over the nations is *THERE*, and at the end of the book of the Revelation (21:24, 22:2) that is where the whole matter issues.

Chapter 4 - The Priority of the Kingdom

"Be not anxious... which of you by being anxious... why are ye anxious? ...Be not therefore anxious... But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:25,27,28,31,33).

Let us remind ourselves once again, and keep it clearly before us, that the fundamental meaning of the word which has been translated into our English word 'kingdom' is *SOVEREIGN RULE*. It will then immediately be apparent that this verse 33 that we have read takes on new meaning and value: 'Seek ye first the sovereign rule of God, and then it follows that all these things will be added.'

You note the context. This verse is found right in the heart of what has come to be called 'the sermon on the mount', which covers three whole chapters, 5, 6 and 7 - one hundred and eleven verses. This is the first of five discourses by the Lord recorded by Matthew. You will notice, further, that what is here was given primarily to His disciples, who were the nucleus of this sovereignty, this rule, this Kingdom. "Seeing the multitudes, he went up into the mountain: and when he had sat down, his disciples came unto him: and he opened his mouth and taught them" (Matt. 5:1,2): so that it is evident that this has to do with those who are immediately and essentially within the compass and meaning of this sovereign rule. Dr. Campbell Morgan calls this section: 'Jesus the King, His Propaganda and Enunciating of Laws'. It is the enunciation of the laws of the King and His Kingdom, of the Ruler and His rule.

THE LAW OF HEART REST UNDER THE SOVEREIGN RULE OF GOD

Here, then, is a law of God's sovereign rule: "Seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." We see, from the context, that it has to do with fretful preoccupation over ways and means in this life, especially the cares of tomorrow - incidentally getting right to the root of many a nervous breakdown, of a good deal of neurosis. But we shall not attempt to deal with that. We are enunciating a law, a law of the sovereign rule, which stands over against this constantly reiterated word - anxious, anxious, anxious. It is therefore the law of heart rest under the sovereign rule of God - heart rest because you are in the Kingdom. Our mentality at once visualises a sphere, a realm; but that comes second. Because you are within the sovereign government of God, "all these things" are there.

A POSITIVE LAW

But note - it is not a passive law. The Lord Jesus does not say, here or anywhere else, what kindly people often say - 'Oh, don't worry, the Lord will take care of you, and will look after that. It will all come out all right.' He no more says that than He would say, on the other hand: 'Substitute an insurance society for God and all is taken care of.' Nor, to bring it into the realm of religion, does He say: 'Hand it over to the priest, and he will take care of that'; or: 'Hand it over to the church, and rid yourself of all responsibility.' I put it in that way, in order that we may get right at what He does say. Somehow or other, we must get to the real heart of this thing, the meaning of this, and so we strip off any mistaken or false ideas, and any wrong courses. There are many people who think that, if only they could adopt some policy (insurance or otherwise!), or some expedient, by which responsibility and liability could be taken off their own shoulders and placed for them somewhere else, they would come to rest - and it does not work that way. You may be the most heavily insured person in creation, and still be the most anxious person, the most worried, the most fretful. There is no

guarantee of heart rest along the lines of shelving of responsibility, nor along the line of a false passivity which says, 'Don't worry, it will all come out all right.' The law is not passive.

But notice - it *IS* positive. The Lord does not say, 'Oh, don't worry.' He says, 'Seek first...' The law is a very positive one, you see. 'Seek first...' and then responsibility will be taken, then the other will be looked after. 'Seek ye first the sovereign rule, the government, of God, and His righteousness.' It is the positive principle of viewing everything in the light of how it serves God's rule. If you will only do that, you come into the good that is here. Our own interests come second or last. His interests come first, and when life is arranged on that basis - *ARRANGED* on that basis - and kept on that basis, then the other follows; God looks after the other things.

DELIBERATE ARRANGEMENT OF LIFE

I said, when life is *ARRANGED* on that basis. The fact is that it takes some of us a long time to get life on to that basis. It is only after having lived a long time that we begin to re-arrange life in this way. Well, better late than never! But here is a word for young people and for young Christians - especially to young people who are in a position to arrange their lives in any way. Perhaps you have just started married life together, or are contemplating doing so. Now is the time to arrange it on this principle of the sovereign rule. Now is your opportunity to make it quite unnecessary in after years either to undo much or to regret much. All these laws of the sovereign rule are very practical, as you see, and this is a very practical one. Where shall we live? What kind of a home shall we have? These are practical questions. You must arrange everything on this principle. The thing that matters and governs, and in relation to which everything now has to be arranged, is: How does this serve the interests of the sovereign rule of God?

Put that first, and you will escape many a tragedy, such as we see in many places. Oh, a nice house and a nice home, maybe, but altogether out of relation to the interests of the Lord, both in distance and in other ways. It is going to be an incubus, a hindrance and a limitation; the things of the Lord are going to be made to suffer. And there are many, many spiritual tragedies - lives that have lost out with the Lord, both in spiritual measure and in usefulness to Him, both in service and in a related way in His Church; and so we could spread it out. The whole matter of getting on in the world, of success or ambition - what a range this covers! Now the law and principle of this rule of Heaven is that life must be arranged in the first place in relation to God's interests and God's rule. This must come first, and if it is, you may rest assured that God will look after your interests. You will certainly not suffer in the long run. God will be true to His side of the undertaking.

And then there is the maintaining of the arrangement, the remaining on that basis. It is so easy to be drawn out by a thousand and one things. In fine points, all the way along, the enemy is trying somehow or other to divert, to draw away, to put something in that takes the place of the interests of the Lord. This is a serious and earnest business, calling for all diligence and watchfulness and steadfastness. It is, as I have said, not passive by any means. It will not just happen willy-nilly. "*SEEK* ye first..."

SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM

Now that word 'seek' is emphatic. "Seek, and ye shall find", said the Lord elsewhere, "for... he that seeketh findeth" (Matt. 7:7,8). Here is the picture of someone applying themselves with diligence. *SEEK*: set yourself upon this thing, make it your business and keep at it. Seek *FIRST* - and keep on seeking first - the sovereign rule of God. Take the alternative course - put your own affairs and interests first - and the inference is perfectly clear though the Lord does not say so explicitly. For He

is saying: 'You are anxious. *WHY* are you anxious?' He is dealing with people who are 'up against things', and the inference is that, if you adopt the alternative of putting your own interests first, then you must take responsibility for the consequences. You have to reckon with life without the sovereign rule of God. It is a terrible thing never to be able to appeal in the court of God, never to find that the Lord is really working everything for good, never to know that there is no need at all to be anxious. Take the burden, carry the weight yourself, work life out yourself, and sooner or later you will come up against some tremendous situation with which you cannot cope, and that is the alternative which many have so grievously found.

"*BUT*" - on that word there is a turnover, a turn round, a change of position - "*BUT* seek ye first..." It is just the question of God's sovereign rule in our affairs, in our life, which we may know and enjoy and prove and find to be real. It is a wonderful thing at long last to find that it has been real, even when we thought that it was not working that way, and that God was not at work in things in our interest, to find at long last that where He seemed to be least active He still had the situation in hand. Yes - to live long enough with God to be able to look back upon situations which at the time seemed to deny that the Lord was governing, was ruling, and to be able to see that those were the very things which worked out to good. It is true. Perhaps you who read these words find yourself today in a situation where it is difficult to trace the sovereign hand of God; but God's word stands and God's undertaking is sure. He says: 'You put first My interests, My rule, and I will look after the rest - all these things shall be added'.

Let us make sure that this has got home. We have to make this a personal matter - for anxiety, is a personal matter, is it not? It is *OUR* anxiety, it is *OUR* troubles and bothers, it is *OUR* complications and difficulties. It is all just *OURS*. May it not be that a lot of it is unnecessary? - unnecessary because, as we go here or there, proceed on some errand, some purpose, to transact something, or carry out some project we do not stop to ask: 'Now, what interest of the Lord can be served in this?' Impulse, whim, fleshly desire - what *WE* would like - all these things arise and govern the course of our lives, and the Lord says, 'Stop! The first thing is: Where do I come in? How are My interests going to be served?' Perhaps that might seem very exacting, even legal; but it is not so - it is the way into this beneficent rule of God.

'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness.' Here are two things. First the kingdom - the sovereign rule of God. Seek ye first, in other words, that which relates to God's place in life: that is, His sovereign rule. He is Lord, He is Sovereign: then seek first that which relates to His place. It sounds very simple and elementary, but God's place is a most important thing. What place has God in this? Where does He come in? His place is as Sovereign. His sovereign rule is His right.

SEEK FIRST HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS

And then His righteousness - that which relates to God's character. Seek ye first that which is like God - God-like. The whole Bible is taken up with this matter of righteousness and unrighteousness, and righteousness is what God is like, what belongs to God. "Righteousness and judgment are the foundation of his throne" (Ps. 97:2). Unrighteousness is that which is against God, against which prophet and seer pronounce God's displeasure and God's wrath. So when we are told that what we are to seek, as a first priority, is (1) His rightful place in our lives, and (2) that which is God-like, we are getting to the very heart of this law. It means that you and I are to seek in the first place and at all times to be Christ-like, God-like - which is only an extension of 'godly'; to bring the likeness, the nature and character of God into the situation; to seek that there shall be found here some expression of what God is like as He has been revealed in Jesus Christ. It means that it is our first and primary business to see to it that our home shall be a place where God is known in truth, a place characterized

by what God is like; and it means that all our interests are to bring Him, as to what He truly is, into every situation in life.

That is not exaggerating this word. His righteousness, His character, His likeness, what He is in Himself: make it your business to bring *THAT* in first, and then you find the Lord right there in all His sovereign rule on your behalf. Forgive the simplicity of this, but we are accustomed to quoting this passage so glibly - 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.' Yes, but what does it mean? It is applied teaching, and that is one reason why the Lord Jesus kept it for the disciples. It is sheer nonsense to call upon unsaved men to live up to the Sermon on the Mount. This is not a rule of life for the unconverted. It is an impossible thing to present to them. This is a practical basis of everyday life for the children of the Kingdom.

GOD'S KINGDOM AGAINST THE ENEMY'S KINGDOM

But there is always lurking in the near vicinity another kingdom, another government, another rule, another god, and the object of that other kingdom is to bring the people of God into servitude, into bondage, to hold them in toilsome labour. Your mind will have immediately darted back to Egypt. You remember that it says that *ISRAEL* was in Egypt. Think for a moment. *Isra-el* - a prince with God. The nation were the sons of Israel, and they were in bondage, in servitude, in toilsome, wearisome labour in Egypt. It is a picture. The laws of the rule of God are intended for our emancipation, our deliverance, our freedom, our rest, our prosperity, and there is the shadow of this other rule always near. Not satisfied with bringing the poor world under its abominable rule, it seeks above all things to impinge upon the sons of God and to bring them into toilsome bondage.

Many, many a child of God is there, in the toils of anxiety, in the awful grip of this other kingdom that would rob God of His glory in His people, that would malign God in the very looks of His children - anxious, burdened, worried, fretful - sons of God! What a contradiction! It seems that some children of God have entered into a terrible conspiracy with themselves never to smile, afraid that they would be giving away some spirituality. It is a very grievous matter. God's thought for His people is that they shall be an emancipated and free people, and that does not only mean freedom from judgment and condemnation and the penalty of sin, but freedom from this tyranny of the anxious heart and melancholy face.

You see what the Devil is after. This law of the sovereignty is of deep, deep meaning and far-reaching effect. This other is another kingdom, another rule, so different. One of the chief objects of that other kingdom and rule is to bring God's own blood-bought children into anxious care, to deny the very redemption which God has wrought for them in Christ. And so, in order to defeat the Devil himself, to destroy the power of his rule - 'Seek ye first the sovereign rule of God, and His righteousness', and He will take responsibility and relieve you of your unnecessary care. Is that practical? Is that important? Well, Jesus came to bring in this Kingdom - this rule and this regime - and to undo the other kingdom.

So it comes surely with the backing of tremendous meaning: 'Seek ye first - give priority to - the sovereign rule of God, and His righteousness - His character, nature - and all these things shall be added unto you.'

Chapter 5 - The Proclamation of the Kingdom

"And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

Let us first analyse this verse, noticing its particular words.

"This Gospel [literally, 'good news'] of the Kingdom [literally, 'the royal reign'] shall be preached [this particular word means 'proclaimed', 'announced', 'heralded'] in the whole world [=the whole inhabited or habitable earth] for a testimony [=for a witness: Dr. Weymouth in his version translates that phrase - 'to set the evidence'].

Now with that analysis, let us build it all up into its full literal statement:

'This good news of the royal reign shall be heralded in the whole inhabited earth, to set the evidence before all the nations; and then shall the end come.'

That is a remarkable verse, for it comprehends nothing less than the whole mission, work, meaning and purpose of the person, incarnation, life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ, and it carries that through as the very meaning and business of His Church. It is a very comprehensive verse indeed.

But we must get behind this tremendous statement, try to get inside it. It is then to be noticed that what is called the Gospel, the good news - everything that Christianity has to say and to give - is defined in terms of a Kingdom, a sovereign rule, the outworking of a Kingship. Of course, we are so familiar with the language and with the idea that perhaps we have never really stopped to think what that means. Why is Christianity not spoken of as something else - 'this gospel of the communal state', 'this gospel of the social state', or some other designation? It is called 'the gospel of the sovereign rule, the royal reign'; in other words, the gospel of the Kingship of Jesus Christ. It is that, and nothing less and nothing other than that.

CHRIST'S KINGSHIP OF HEAVENLY ORIGIN

And that leads us to a further enquiry and investigation. Where did that idea originate and come from? Now it is very difficult for us to trace back the idea of kingship so far as man is concerned. We do not know who was the first person to hold the title of king. We can see the idea in its primitive form evolving, developing, until it reached the full status of monarchy; we will return to that in a moment. But what we do know from the Bible is that this did not begin with man at all. It began in Heaven with God. The idea of royal reign, sovereign rule, was with God, and was transmitted to His Son Jesus Christ before ever this world was created, and before there ever was such a thing as kingship on this earth, either in principle or in actuality. The Bible tells us that God appointed His Son Jesus Christ as the Heir of all things (Heb. 1:2), and that God speaks of His Son as His King. It comes out in one of the psalms, where God is speaking: "I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion" (Ps. 2:6). That is a prophetic utterance concerning the Lord Jesus, as you well know. The idea of kingship originated with God and was centred in His Son Jesus Christ.

ANOTHER KING

The next thing that the Bible makes known to us is that someone was jealous of that. The highest created being among the angelic hosts found in his heart jealousy of God's Son and allowed that jealousy to take such a hold upon him that he projected a device and a scheme and a movement to supplant God's Son and to secure that rule in himself and for himself. That revolt against God's determination concerning His Son took place somewhere outside of this world, before the present order of creation was brought into being; but God proceeded according to plan and according to purpose, and through the instrumentality of His Son created this world to be the realm of His Son's dominion; and in it He placed man.

The next thing was that that being who had by his revolt, his rebellion, been cast out of Heaven, made his way forthwith to the realm of God's appointed and pre-destined King. The story is known how, for the time being, he gained his point through a subtle, deeply laid plan of deception - his appeal to man's soul-life. He gained his point by winning man over to his side; and thus he became, for the time being - as even Jesus recognised and acknowledged him to be - "the prince of this world" (John 12:31, etc.) although illegitimately so. There you have the root of the whole matter, the background of our passage of Scripture.

THE VICTORY OF GOD'S KING

Of course, God is not going to tolerate that for ever. God is not going to be spoiled of His intention, neither is His Son going to be deprived of His inheritance. The story of the incarnation finds its explanation there: it was the coming of God's Son into this world in the flesh to take up this whole matter of God's intention, and of His own (the Son's) inheritance, and of man's place in that inheritance, and to fight it out to a final, glorious triumphant issue. And seeing that it was not something official, but a spiritual and moral matter, it went right to the depths of things - of the very nature of sin and wickedness, out of which it all came. It focused upon and dealt with all that evil, as personified in the Evil One himself. Jesus met it, He took up the battle of the eternal rule, the royal reign, and fought out all its implicates to a victorious issue. 'By His Cross He triumphed', and in His Cross He 'stripped off the principalities and the powers, made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it' (Col. 2:15). He plucked the sceptre from the hand of the usurper, and cast out, as He said, the prince of this world (John 12:31); and, rising triumphant from death and the grave, received at the hands of His Father the Kingdom, together with 'all authority in Heaven and in earth' (Matt. 28:18), 'the Name which is above every name' (Phil. 2:9), and the place 'far above all rule and authority, every name that is named' (Eph. 1:21). That is the great drama that the Bible contains and sets forth; and out of that issues what is called the Gospel, the good news - the good news of His royal reign in virtue of all that He has done.

THE NEED FOR HUMAN KINGSHIP

Now we come back to the human side, the history of kingship, rulership. It is quite clear that it commenced in a very simple way. First of all the principle was found in expression in a family. Trouble in the family has a very long and remote history. It seems that almost immediately the family existed there was trouble, and somebody in the family had to take authority. The first kings, although they were not called that, were heads over families. Thence their authority extended to the tribe, and from the tribe to the tribes, and from the tribes to the nation. And then, as far as they could, they tried to get kingship over a number of nations, and finally over all the nations.

But our point is this. This situation was brought about by reason of circumstances and man's need. A ruler or governor - a king in principle or in name - was a necessity, for somebody had to adjudicate in man's troubles and decide in matters of strife, whether in families or tribes or nations; somebody had

to give the verdict of right or wrong. Because of the further circumstances of conflict in the world, antagonism setting people against people, tribe against tribe, nation against nation, somebody must take up the cause and lead out in warfare to victory. Because peace was not the normal state of things, but 'dispeace' - anything but peace - somebody must assume the responsibility of trying to provide man with peace, of trying to secure peace and establish peace.

Thus kingship has as its components these ideas of adjudicating, of judging, of determining the right and the wrong, of leading against that which threatens man's well-being, and the very integration of man, and of establishing peace. These are the constituents of kingship, as we find it in its development. The kingship exists because of the existent conditions, as something set over against them. This gives us the background and the principle of the matter.

KING OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

In a far, far greater realm than the temporal and the earthly, the Lord Jesus, as God's King, has taken up those very issues. These are components of His Kingship. In this world everything has gone wrong; a state of anarchy and iniquity - of 'inequity', unfairness, wrong from man to man - prevails. It is what the Bible sums up in one word: unrighteousness. It affects all man's dealings with man, all human relationships and transactions. The whole system of human relationships just is not right; it is not straight, it is not 'fair and square' - it is unrighteous. The whole question of unrighteousness is bound up with this matter of Kingship; and it is therefore very significant that, in a day when, in that marked-out nation of Israel, the Kingship, the sovereign rule, the royal rule of God was intended to be displayed, the worst state of unrighteousness existed.

But in the midst of it all - all this unrighteousness, yes, even of the kings themselves - a prophet rises up and shouts: "*A king shall reign in righteousness*"! (Isa. 22:1). A beam of light is thrown right forward to this One who was coming. We know that the Lord Jesus, in His life and death, took up this whole question of righteousness - in the first place as relating to the rights of God. His first aim, His first task, was to bring God His rights, His due, to put things straight with God where man is concerned. How much Gospel is contained in that! Paul's whole wonderful letter to the Romans is really gathered into that idea of God requiring righteousness, of man being unable to provide Him with it, and Jesus Christ stepping into the breach and satisfying God in this matter on man's behalf. And having done that Godward, he proceeds to do it amongst men, and where this royal reign of Jesus Christ is found in men's hearts you have justice and truth and equity, 'fairness and squareness' and rightness - all that is meant by righteousness. He 'reigns in righteousness.'

KING OF PEACE

Then, as to this matter of conflict. It goes far beyond the wars amongst men. Whence come all these wars? They emanate from that Evil One who has struck this universe through with conflict, contention, strife, hatred, malice. This great warfare in the universe is first of all spiritual before it becomes temporal, and it was from Satan that it came. We know quite well that it is here. We know that in our hearts; before Christ takes them as His throne, there is no peace, and there is no peace there apart from Him. We know all about contention and strife within ourselves; we know, too, that it is the most difficult thing to live with other people for long without finding some contention, some strife, some antagonism. In the realm where Christ is not Lord, it is there. Perhaps Christians, more than anyone else, sense the antagonisms that are abroad. Satan has concentrated his forces and attention especially upon Christians, to destroy the testimony of what Jesus has done; to spoil this royal rule by undercutting and undermining its meaning of oneness, fellowship, unity. Fellowship and unity is a real battle in any realm, but perhaps more among Christians than anywhere.

But there is a King to lead out to that battle. This royal rule means that there need not be this state of things, that there can be victory over human strife and contentions and divisions and antagonisms and malice and all this. He has gained the victory over Satan's terrible work of rending this universe asunder and making it one mighty realm of conflict. Christ, we are told, has "made peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). The idea of a King was, as far as possible, to keep and establish peace. No king has ever done that for very long, or within more than a limited realm, but Christ has entered that hostile kingdom, led forth into battle, and secured peace.

Here, too, while we know naturally, in our own hearts, the elements of strife and contention and warfare, in Christ we know the other side. We know that He has brought His reign of peace into our hearts. "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1), and the peace of God passing all understanding garrisons our hearts (Phil. 4:7), but while there is so much more needed, and we have always to be on our guard and always to be standing into His victory in this matter, nevertheless there is the glorious fact that we do know something of a fellowship, a blessed and wonderful fellowship amongst ourselves as God's people, which is unique, which is not known after its kind anywhere else in all the universe. The most precious and blessed thing that Christians have inherited through the sovereign Lordship of Jesus Christ in their hearts is their fellowship with one another. How much is bound up with that! How much we owe to one another in Christ, how necessary we are to one another, how impossible it is to get on without one another simply because God is against our getting on without one another. We find that to try and get on without one another simply brings the Lord into controversy with us.

Righteousness and peace - these are the elements of His reign. The enemy is overthrown, his captives and victims are released, peace is established; whilst the guardian within attends to the question of the establishment of righteousness. All this is our need, as it ever was man's need, and He has met it completely, fully. Now, that is all framed by this wonderful word 'Gospel' - good news. But there are multitudes - perhaps there is even one reading these lines - who do not know this wonderful work that Jesus Christ has done, who are not in the good and enjoyment of the peace with God, and peace in their own hearts, that we know. This all seems to them so strange, although perhaps they look on us wistfully and enviously. This fellowship among Christians is an impressive thing; it is not something feigned, put on or made up. We have known of unsaved people coming into Christian gatherings, and going away, if not actually saved, yet saying to one another, 'There is a wonderful atmosphere there. You feel that these people have got something that others have not got.' They speak of the impression made upon them by the wonderful fellowship of God's people, and that constitutes a testimony. It is, in fact *THE* testimony; it is the evidence.

SETTING THE EVIDENCE

So I follow on at once. This good news of the royal rule or reign, in these terms of spiritual values - inward life, blessed fellowship, strife overcome, righteousness established - this good news is committed to the Church and to the heralds to take into all the nations. But note that it is not just somebody going out and announcing it as a theory. We need to get hold of this quite strongly. There would be a very, very different situation in the world today, as the result of Christianity and evangelization, if this one point had been more firmly and clearly grasped. While it is the work of the herald to make the announcement, the passage we have been considering does not just stop there, with 'This good news of the royal reign shall be proclaimed in the whole inhabited earth'. It does not stop there, and that is just where the failure and weakness lies. It continues: 'shall be proclaimed... *FOR A WITNESS*'. Weymouth's translation, which I quoted earlier, gives us the very heart of the matter. He says: 'to set the evidence'. The herald is not just announcing some abstract theory, or even fact, objectively. He is there actually to set or provide the evidence that it is so.

Go back to your New Testament, and what do you have? You have the heralds going into the inhabited earth, right enough: but what are they doing? Are they just walking into some city and getting up onto a platform and making an announcement, and then going off? Do they make the announcement, and then go on to the next place and the next place and the next place, till they cover the whole inhabited earth with the announcement? Did they do that? They certainly did not. They had a better apprehension of their business, and of what the Lord meant, than that. The meaning that was in their hearts and minds of being in any place was this: 'Something has got to be established in this place which will be concrete evidence that Jesus is on the throne!' Whereas the announcement of some teaching, some objective truth, might never have bothered anybody, when they went in on that ground and with that idea and motive, all Hell rose up to say, 'We will quench that thing here if we can!'

So you have an apostle going into a city and making the proclamation, and Hell rising up and stirring up men to stone him, drag him out of the city, and leave him for dead. When they have withdrawn, he rises; and what does he say? 'I have made my announcement in this city - I will go to the next one'? He goes back again into the city, right back there. Why? He says, 'We have not got the concrete evidence here yet. We have not got that which is the embodiment of this testimony; until we have, we hold on. The Devil is not going to have his way about this matter.'

And so in every place they left behind something that was concrete. It was not just a word thrown out into the air. There was something there which was the embodiment of the truth that Jesus is Lord, and that Satan's kingdom is not universal. It has been broken into here and here, and in that which is left behind is the evidence. Read about those churches again, those vessels of the evidence; read about them. There they were in that place, persecuted, assailed, going through a terrible time, and yet - and yet - holding the ground: because they knew that if they did not, Satan would have it, and they were not allowing that. They were committed to this royal rule. And so the proclamation was more than a proclamation. It had in view a setting of the evidence, the establishment of a witness there. It is good to hear local companies of the Lord's people speaking of themselves like this: 'We are here to have a witness in this place.'

Now, *THAT* is the purpose of the heralds, *THAT* is the function of the churches. That is why we are here on this earth, as Christians - namely, that wherever we are, at home, in business, or anywhere, we may provide the evidence that Jesus is Lord. That will be the explanation of the suffering and the opposition, and all the efforts of the Devil to quench us and drive us out. We are there as evidence of something. As I said a little while back, if only this had been grasped and held and understood from the beginning, what a different situation there would be. The preaching of the Gospel seems to have so largely resolved itself into giving out the truths, the doctrines, of Christianity; but there has to be something far more than that. There is need that everyone who felt themselves so called should say: 'Yes, but there has to be concrete evidence that this is true. There must be proof positive about this matter, embodied in something here that declares that Jesus is Lord.'

Have you set the evidence? Are you standing for that? That is the challenge in the proclamation of the Gospel. It is good news, but that good news has to be embodied in something that constitutes its very evidence and proof.

A CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANS

It is a challenge to us as Christians, it is also a blessed, helpful explanation of very much. It does explain why the Devil hates us so intensely. It explains all the pressure that is brought to bear upon us by him. It explains that stirring up, that terrible stirring up, which is always the prelude to some

activity of the enemy, 'If only we can prevent that, spoil that, in some way upset that - !' So it is an explanation and a help to know that. And it is a challenge to us Christians that we are not going to be moved until the Lord moves us. Yes, the Lord may move us, the Lord may take us up, the Lord may lead us away, but by the grace of God the Devil never shall. We are not standing where we are just for our own interests, to get something that we want. We are standing in far more serious issues than that - in nothing less than this great cosmic conflict between the two princes, the two kings. We are there to set the evidence. It is a very great challenge to us.

A CHALLENGE TO THE UNSAVED

But it is also a challenge to anyone reading these lines who is not the Lord's. The challenge is this: *There are only two kings in this universe.* There is no neutral zone in this matter, there is no 'no man's land' here. There are only two rules, two kingdoms; Christ, God's eternally appointed King, and the Devil, the usurper from of old. We make the declaration, the announcement to you that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11). God has appointed Him Lord, and He is Lord by right of His own conquest of the Devil. It is for you to decide in which of the two kingdoms, realms and governments you are. That is the challenge which has to go into the whole inhabited earth, and you cannot get out of it.

If you do not believe that you are in the kingdom and rule of Satan, if you are not definitely committed and given to Jesus Christ, I can give you the most perfect and complete proof of it, if you will accept it. Try to get out of Satan's kingdom! Try to become a Christian! You will find that it does not happen and go through automatically. You will at once discover that spiritual forces rise up, and the thing becomes full of complications and difficulties. They rise up from within you - either revolt or antagonism at the idea, or questions and doubts about it, or fears concerning it. Immediately you move in this matter you find that other things begin to move - not that you have moved them, but that they begin to move of themselves.

The Old Testament illustration of this is Israel, God's people, in Egypt. They were in bondage, but things were fairly quiet until the idea of their going out of Egypt was mooted. But immediately this thought of an exodus from Egypt began to take shape, then things began to happen. It seemed that the whole kingdom was in a ferment, working itself up to the final furore to prevent this. Now, you go on quietly without thinking of coming to the Lord Jesus, and, while you may have questions and may not be having an altogether lovely time, nevertheless your life may be comparatively easy. But when you begin to contemplate coming to the Lord Jesus and entering into His reign and kingdom, then you discover, without your doing anything at all, that things begin to work, things are happening to stop that. They come up from within, and they come from without. No one is born into the Kingdom of Heaven without conflict, without a fight; and what a fight it is for some souls - a long-drawn-out fight until they are through. As I said, you can put this to the test. You make a gesture toward Jesus Christ, and you will find that you are in a bondage that you did not know of before. It is there, it is a fact. But, blessed be God, there is victory for you with the Lord Jesus Christ, to get you out of that bondage, right through into His victory.

But my immediate point is this. We are declaring that Jesus Christ is God's King, and that the final rule of this universe is vested in Him. By nature we are born into the other kingdom, the kingdom of the Evil One, to whom we belong. The Bible says that we are 'children of darkness' and 'children of wrath'. We are children of the Devil by birth, for Adam put us all into his power and into his hand. Jesus came to rescue us, to get us out, to bring us into His own reign. Where are you? That is the issue presented. It is announced, declared. It is a tremendous thing, for eternal destiny hangs upon your response to this.

And it is a solemn thing - oh, that men realised it - to have in any neighbourhood a testimony, to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The whole of such an area is going to be judged one day because that company was there with this testimony. Yes, it will mean judgment. The indictment will be: 'But you knew it was there: Your house was visited, you were told, you were invited; Jesus Christ was right there in the midst of that people. You would not have it. You either ignored it or rebelled against it or repudiated it. But it was there in evidence. You cannot say that you did not know.' It is a tremendous thing for God to plant in a district a living testimony to the Lordship of His Son. All in that district are going to be judged by their attitude to that.

Do not misunderstand or misinterpret this. It is a spiritual matter. This is God's method, to put down in the nations something which is a set evidence to the great fact of the Lordship of His Son, and to judge everything by it. It sounds stern, but we must be faithful, and we must warn as well as entreat. In love for your soul we would say, Do not abide under the flag of the usurper. Here is God's King, and we proclaim to you this good news of His sovereign rule.

And when the evidence for it has been set, says this word in Matthew, "in the whole inhabited earth", God's time will come for winding up the dispensation. I will not go further into that, but there is very much bound up with it. The dispensation waits for that, and therefore there is an urgency about things, because we never know, in a day like this, when the testimony will have found its last declaration in this world. Whereas the kingdom of Satan is ousting the personal messengers, they cannot close down the air. This Gospel of the sovereignty, is getting through, for it is, in truth, sovereign.

May the Lord help us as His people to meet the challenge as to the real meaning and purpose of our being here on this earth. And if you do not belong to the Lord Jesus, if you are not in His Kingdom, may He help you to meet the other challenge - to forsake the false usurper's flag and dominion, and seek citizenship in the Kingdom of our Lord.