

HERE

THRIVING IN THE

AND

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN TODAY

NOW

ROBBY GALLATY

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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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PREFACE

As with any book that encourages the reader to rethink a familiar concept, it's important to establish the purpose of this work. The kingdom of heaven has been a concept discussed, debated, and preached on since the conception of the nation of Israel. Instead of trying to interpret what the concept means today, we must uncover what it meant to the ancient audience to which it was spoken.

My passion for many years has been to place Jesus back into the context in which He lived. Unlike the popular opinion of some today, He's not a blonde haired, blue-eyed American pastor. He was a dark-skinned, middle-eastern Rabbi. As a result, many implications can arise from our misunderstanding of Jesus and His ministry, one of which is our view of the kingdom of heaven.

Throughout this work, I will attempt to change your perspective from a futuristic mind-set of the kingdom only to a present reality of God's power today. The kingdom has two aspects working simultaneously: already/not yet. While Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of heaven with His first coming, we will not realize the fullness of the kingdom until His second coming. My goal with this work is to swing the pendulum back from an "under-realized eschatology," only future, to a more balanced understanding of the "both/and" nature of the eastern culture. Even though we will not experience every aspect of the kingdom

until Jesus returns, we are invited to enter into and experience, in part, the kingdom here and now.

Join me as we embark on a journey to join God in the work
H e is already engaged in today!

INTRODUCTION

Thoughts of Heaven

Imagine me, a six-foot-six, two hundred-and-eighty-five-pound twenty-six-year-old sitting in a practice room with my music teacher, preparing “I Can Only Imagine” for an upcoming music recital. See, I’d taken the hint. Weeks of people in my church secretly turning their heads to locate whoever it was making that awful racket during worship.

I couldn’t help it. I love singing Christian songs. I love the refrains that reflect on lives well lived and the future glory of heaven. For those who don’t know my story, God saved me as a twenty-six-year-old out of a life of drug and alcohol addiction. I’d never sung a Christian song prior to that time. Therefore, I found myself singing about “Beulah Land,” or exclaiming that “I’ll Fly Away” “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” because “This World Is Not My Home.” I couldn’t wait to see the “Mansion on a Hilltop” that waits for me on the other side of eternity.

Much of the way the gospel has been packaged in modern times revolves around this sort of language—joining up with God’s kingdom after we die. If you think about it, even our prayers, our services, our creeds, our liturgies, and our

motivation is geared toward tomorrow. If you boil the Christian life down for many, the ultimate hope of believers is to get to heaven, essentially leave this world, after you die. It seems that our obsession with the future causes us to care little about what God is doing today.

Think of the last time you heard a sermon about the kingdom of heaven. Better yet, think of the last conversation you discussed the kingdom of heaven. If you're like most Christians, you may not have an answer. Sadly, most rarely think about the kingdom, much less speak about it. This, however, was not the case for Jesus. For Him, the kingdom of heaven was the predominate topic of His ministry. His message about the kingdom was more than a reminder to obtain your ticket to the great Disney World in the Sky—something it would seem many Christians are hoping and waiting for.

Is our obsession with leaving this world and transporting to heaven the same message Jesus taught on the kingdom in the Gospels? Are we talking about the same concept? I believe we may have a kingdom conundrum on our hands and don't know it.

Let's answer a simpler question first: *Why did Jesus come to Earth?* You might respond, "To show people how to avoid hell and enter heaven." While this was a subset of His earthly agenda, we undervalue the thrust of Jesus' ministry message when we focus on the future at the expense of the present. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven in the Gospels, He envisioned God's kingdom rule and reign in the present day on Earth, not just a day when believers would be ejected into the spiritual realm. Sadly, this misunderstanding has plagued and paralyzed believers from experiencing the "abundant life" that Jesus promised (John 10:10).

Born for Today, Not Just Tomorrow

By focusing on one aspect of our salvation, we, whether knowingly or unknowingly, minimize other aspects of our Christian life. If justification is the entirety of our salvation experience, believers miss out on the joy and purpose of sanctification. Dallas Willard summarizes it this way:

The background assumption is that justification is the entirety of salvation. If you are justified—your sins forgiven—then you are saved and you will be “okay” after your death. I submit to you that this is what is offered, in still more specific forms, by current efforts (“evangelism”) to convert people to Christianity, and it is what people generally understand to be essential to the transaction.¹

If the purpose of Christianity is just to enter heaven, Jesus wouldn't have left us on Earth after He saved us. We'd be raptured without a second to spare to enjoy eternity with Him. Surely the purpose of the kingdom of heaven is greater than just achieving eternal life.

In fact, our obsession with getting to heaven could be paralyzing, even problematic. I heard someone say once, “When you're so heavenly minded, you can become no earthly good.” When believers are self-absorbed, only focused on their own eternal rewards in heaven, we lose sight of our calling on Earth. Jesus gave us a commission to make reproducible followers of Him. It's called the Great Co-Mission for a reason: God expects our involvement. The reason He didn't eject us into the elysian fields of paradise the moment we were born again is because

there's work to be done. You were saved not just from the world, but for the world.

Most evangelistic tactics move people toward making a decision or a convert; however, Jesus and His disciples focused on making disciples. New birth is necessary to move from life to death, but it doesn't end there. Derwin Gray, pastor of Transformation Church, told me in a phone conversation, "The apostle Paul wouldn't understand the invitations issued at the conclusion of many services today." "Raise a hand," "walk an aisle," "say a prayer," and "repeat after me" are foreign concepts to the apostle. I'm not necessarily arguing for or against any of these methods. My point is that they should not be an end in themselves, but a means to introducing people to a life of discipleship.

Sadly, we have reduced salvation to a transaction where if sinners provide the correct answers to a mental, spiritual questionnaire and say "Amen" at the right spots, we pronounce they are saved with nothing else required of them. Whether they follow Jesus after saying this prayer is optional. Whether they enjoy the blessings of the kingdom is up to them. Whether they replicate their lives into the lives of others is a choice, and the choice is typically no.

We've failed to see that salvation in Christ starts from a confession to follow Jesus, but it doesn't end there. Jesus expects so much more; He commands so much more.

In this model, *spiritual disciplines in the Christian life become recommended but not required activities*. Obedience is optional, reading the Bible is optional, and memorizing Scripture is optional. Praying and fasting are optional as well. Whether I share the gospel with a lost person is merely a choice I make. Surely this can't be what Jesus envisioned when He commanded His followers to "make disciples of all nations"?

Surprisingly, moving people through a process from making a decision to becoming a maturing follower of Jesus is foreign in many churches today. An escapism mentality, on the other hand, permeates our evangelistic conversations: “You don’t want to go to hell, do you? It’s hot down there. Choose heaven so you can spend eternity with God.” While this is true, is it the whole gospel?

For many years, we have preached half the gospel by encouraging people to be saved FROM something—namely sin, wrath, damnation, and eternal punishment—and neglected the fact that we’re saved FOR something. Student ministries in churches across America will serve as an example. Typical youth pastors navigate students through the three-humped camel: disciple now or D-Now (which should be called E-Now because it leans toward being a one-time evangelistic event), summer camp, and fall retreat. Each of these is formative in the life of a student; however, the goal is to see lost people saved while believers hear sermons about going to a place they are already heading to. And we wonder why two-thirds of our students never come back to church after going off to college!²

Scot McKnight in his book, *The King Jesus Gospel*, stresses that by “focusing youth events, retreats, and programs on persuading people to make a decision disarms the gospel, distorts the numbers, and diminishes the significance of discipleship.”³ If we gauge our success by catching the lost only, we will overlook the saved. Rather than focusing on one over the other, I would submit we adopt a both/and mind-set.

According to Barna Research, half of all Christians who make a decision to follow Jesus do so before the age of thirteen, while two-thirds accept Christ before they turn eighteen.⁴ If we perpetuate the “three-humped camel” approach, the majority of

our ministry efforts will be directed toward the few lost people in the room. They will mostly hear evangelistic messages about avoiding hell and obtaining heaven. Six camp sermons a year for seven years (sixth–twelfth grade), forty-two messages to be exact, that didn't equip them to share their faith, to grow as a Christian, to defend what they believe, or to endure hardship when life gets tough. No wonder they don't know why they believe what they believe. No wonder they are unable to provide a defense for the hope that is within them.

The Good News

One of the problems is our understanding of the word *gospel*. It has pivoted from a “disciplistic” emphasis in Jesus' day to a “decisionistic” personal salvation event in ours. We now reduce the gospel to getting our sins forgiven so we go to heaven after we die. This explains why so few churches have a systematic process for discipling their people. What's the point? We're all going to heaven at the end, right?

Even the creeds we hold to as believers advance from Jesus' birth to death without a mention of His life. Take the Apostles' Creed, written in AD 390, for example:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the

Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.⁵

Nothing is mentioned after Jesus' birth about His life other than His suffering under Pilate. Similarly, the Nicene Creed (AD 325) gives a nod to Jesus' life with the phrase "and became man," but implies Christ's kingdom will launch at His second coming: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."⁶

Now, this is not to say the creeds are unimportant in the history of the church. Many men put their lives and their credibility on the line to contend for the central truths of the gospel. Moreover, the creeds were usually reactionary—responding to various heresies that arose in the early church—so they addressed specific doctrines, and not every prevailing issue of the times.

Because of this, the creeds can inadvertently contribute to the mistaken belief of many that Jesus' life was less important than His death. New Testament theologian N. T. Wright challenges those who gloss over Jesus' life by asking: "What is the *point*, I have asked, of the healing and feastings, the Sermon on the Mount and the controversies with the Pharisees, the stilling of the storm, Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, and so on, and so on."⁷ Jesus' earthly ministry prepared the disciples, and us, for future ministry.

Growing up as Catholic, I learned and recited the Lord's Prayer regularly. The assumption in praying those words was that by doing so, Christ would return one future day to instate His kingdom. As we will learn, this prayer, in contrast to what we've been taught, promises a *present* kingdom for those who obey the King today, not just a gold-paved one tomorrow.

But what are we to do, then, with the promise of eternal life? John 3:16 ends with this promise: “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have *eternal life*.” Some translations have “everlasting life” in place of eternal life, but the confusion still remains. What we will find is that when the rich young ruler asks, “What must I do to inherit *eternal life*?” he isn’t inquiring about what words to pray in order to secure a spot in heaven. He wants to know how to experience heaven on Earth. The Kingdom New Testament translates this verse, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit the life of the age to come” (Luke 18:18).⁸ Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t respond like many pastors today would by telling him to repeat a prayer in order to get saved. In fact, Jesus never mentions faith, trust, belief or repentance. He tells him to do something: “Sell everything you have and give it to the poor and then follow me.” We’ll unpack this concept in chapter six.

Where Is Heaven?

As we begin to get a full view of heaven, let’s look for a moment at what Paul wrote regarding the heavenly realm in 2 Corinthians 12:2–3: “I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the *third heaven* fourteen years ago. Whether he was in the body or out of the body, I don’t know; God knows. I know that this man—whether in the body or out of the body I don’t know; God knows.” This verse contains a phrase we’re not entirely familiar with today.

In Paul’s day, the Jews understood heaven in three categories (see Gen. 6:7, Deut. 4:19, and 2 Cor. 12:10 respectively). The first heaven was the atmosphere in which we live today. Humans,

animals, and sea creatures inhabit this realm. The second heaven was outer space where planets and stars reside. The third heaven was the dwelling place of God, at times given the designation “paradise.” We see this in Luke 23:43, “And he said to him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise,’” and in Revelation 2:7, “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Heaven is not a future destination hidden in the solar system; it's the supernatural dimension of God. But in the verses from 2 Corinthians, Paul connected the two worlds together. The spiritual and the physical meeting in one place. In his case, he experienced it in the present.

First-century residents of Israel would have understood the immediacy of God's kingdom on Earth. Wright explains the mind-set of the early Christians:

When Jesus tells the brigand [thief on the cross] that he will join him in paradise that very day, paradise clearly cannot be their ultimate destination, as Luke's next chapter makes clear. Paradise is, rather, the blissful garden where God's people rest prior to the resurrection. When Jesus declares that there are many dwelling places in his father's house, the word for dwelling place is *mone*, which denotes a temporary lodging. When Paul says that his desire is “to depart to be with Christ which is far better,” he is indeed shining of a blissful life with his Lord immediately after death, but this is only the prelude to the resurrection itself.⁹

The prevailing mind-set of a first-century believer was a renewed vocation on Earth, not a spot in heaven. *Today, most Christians are trying to get out of this world; Jesus desires to break into this world through them.* His is not a salvation “out of” the world; it is a rescue mission “within” the world.¹⁰

What if the Christian life was so much more than just a one-time decision to secure a place in heaven? What if our absorption with having our names called on the heavenly roll has perpetuated missed opportunities in ministry here and now? What if you could experience heaven on Earth today? I’m not promising flying angels singing praise music as we enjoy our renewed, resurrected bodies. What I’m envisioning is the satisfied, abundant life Jesus promised. A life that—regardless of your circumstances or your present context—experiences joy, happiness, and peace that is difficult to encapsulate in human terms. What if heaven was available to us today?

I think it is.

Jesus spoke about God’s kingdom more than any other topic. No other concept is even close. In *Here and Now*, we will journey together to uncover the nucleus of Jesus’ message, which promises both a present and future reality for all who respond to the invitation to follow Him.

I will not devote much time explaining the nature of salvation, which is through faith alone, by grace alone, and in Christ alone. (For more information on the topic, I recommend Greg Gilbert’s book *What Is the Gospel?* and Bruce Demarest’s work *The Cross and Salvation*.) We don’t work for our salvation: “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). However, good works for the Lord will necessarily proceed from our salvation: “For we are his workmanship,

created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do” (Eph. 2:10).

Also, I’m not arguing for or against a particular eschatological system, whether premillennialism, postmillennialism, or amillennialism. Scholars before me have written extensively on this topic. My concern is simply what is expected of Christ followers after they are born again until the time of death or until Christ’s return, whichever comes first.

We will ask and answer the question: Now that we are saved *from* sin, what are we actually saved *for*?

SECTION 1

The King Among His People

CHAPTER 1

Good News for Today

Time Together

Driving up the mountain in Montreat, North Carolina, to spend the day with Billy Graham was an experience I will never forget. During my seminary studies, I had the privilege of listening to and examining many of his messages in the writing of my dissertation. To say I was excited was an understatement. Dr. Don Wilton, Graham's pastor, led his son Rob and I into his old log cabin home. After some introductions, we read Scripture out loud as Dr. Graham sat and listened. Reading Acts 2 on the revival of the early church to the man who gave his life to witnessing the world revived for Christ is humbling.

I was asked to share my testimony of God's grace in saving me from a life of alcohol abuse and addiction. Dr. Graham's response was "Praise the Lord!" Before departing, each of us took turns praying for him. As we drove down the mountain, I cherished the time we spent hanging out with a living hero of the faith. Since then, I've thought about that day often, but as

impactful as it was, it fades in comparison to a single day in the presence of the Lord. The psalmist declared, “Better a day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere” (Ps. 84:10 NIV). Imagine the eternal bliss of being enveloped in the presence of God. The good news, according to Scripture, is that believers don’t have to wait to dwell with God.

In fact, the Bible is bookended with images of God dwelling among His people. Genesis begins with it, and Revelation ends with it. The Torah—the first five books of the Bible—devotes two chapters to the account of God’s creation of the world, but it allocates thirty describing the construction of the tabernacle, the duties of the priesthood, the rituals, and their meanings (thirteen in Exodus, thirteen in Leviticus, two in Numbers, and two in Deuteronomy). Years after entering the promised land, God gives Solomon specific instructions to construct a permanent structure, the Temple on Mount Moriah, so that He could dwell in the midst of His people permanently. In essence, God’s creation of the universe was miraculous, but His desire to live among us is *paramount*.

God’s design for heaven and Earth in Genesis points to the concept of a temple, a dwelling place for God. God then populated His Temple with people, fashioning mankind as an image of His glory. But sin marred that image; therefore, God took matters in His own hands by sending His Son to dwell as a man in order to accomplish the task Adam was incapable of doing—that is, living in perfect harmony with God. “What God does in sending the Son,” says one theologian, “is to establish Jesus as the Messiah, which means King, and God established in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God, which means the King is ruling in His kingdom.”¹¹ God “with us” is spoken of throughout the Bible (see Gen. 5:22; 21:14–22; 28:11–21; 39:3, 21–23; Exod. 4:1–15;

1 Sam. 18:12–16; 2 Chron. 15:2, 15; Ezra 8:22, 31; Pss. 37 and 121; Matt. 28:20; John 14:16–17; and Heb. 13:5–6).

The tabernacle in the Old Testament, and later the Temple, was a visible reminder of the transcendent, eternal God who had come to live with His people, and it was a sight to behold. The Sages of Israel used to say of the Second Temple (the Temple during the time of Jesus), “One who did not see the Temple in its constructed state, never saw a magnificent structure” (B. Sukkah 51b).¹² But even a finite structure was not the final resting place of God among His people.

When He created the Universe, the King of kings did so with a Word. John tells us that this Word created all things, came into the world, wrapped himself in flesh, and took up residence (tabernacled) among us (John 1:3, 14). God’s kingdom came to Earth in the form of His Son, Jesus. While God brought His kingdom in the form of a temple in the Old Testament, the New Testament shows us that His kingdom came to Earth in the form of a *living* Temple, His Son, Jesus Christ. And what was the most talked about concept of Jesus’ ministry? The kingdom of heaven.

What Is the Kingdom of Heaven?

The first time I heard the statement I’m about to share with you, it caught me completely off guard. As a result, it changed the way I viewed Jesus’ ministry. Here’s the statement: Jesus borrowed concepts and terms from the Jewish Sages, later called Rabbis, of His day.

The kingdom of heaven was a well-known concept spoken of by the Sages and the later Rabbis of Israel. When Jewish people recite the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9) twice daily, they are committing to take on the yoke of the kingdom by following God. By

repeating these words—“Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one’ Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead.’ Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates” (Deut. 6:4–9). Jews were taking on the yoke of the kingdom. Not in some distant future, but right then, in that moment, and every moment thereafter.

In the New Testament, Jesus personalizes the concept by attaching it to God’s authority over a person’s responsibility to accept or commit to aligning his life with God’s will after salvation, as seen in John 14:23: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” For Jesus, it becomes a moral obligation to obey the Lord. It’s not a political overhaul, as some thought in His day, namely John the Baptist, where God destroys Israel’s enemies and restores justice. The kingdom of heaven is the work of God in the world today through kingdom citizens. It’s not just a realm to enter but also a ruling of God over our present life.

A Hebraic Perspective

The first-century Hebrew understood the kingdom to be the era of universal peace for God’s chosen people. It’s the messianic reign promised specifically in Isaiah 11, Jeremiah 31, and Ezekiel 36. At this time, the throne will be restored to Israel through the Messiah, God’s anointed son of David, and the people will

enjoy prosperity, peace, and protection forever and ever as God removes their sins as far as the East is from the West. A new covenant will be formed with the people as God places His spirit within them by writing His law upon each of their hearts. Christ will reign over the Earth and every one of His followers will seek His kingdom first.¹³

When Jesus came to Earth, He extended this offer to us today. We can find the peace of our Messiah and enjoy aspects of His kingdom today. Think about it: It would not be good news if we had to wait for the kingdom to be set up, for we are still waiting after two thousand years for Jesus' second coming. Jesus consistently emphasized the present immediacy of God's power to heal, save, and redeem mankind. The kingdom has arrived in the person of Jesus and the power of Holy Spirit and is available to all who walk by the Spirit. We could say that Jesus is breaking into the present world today. If that's the case, we should quit asking to get out of it.

Notes

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7. N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 41.
8. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004).
9. N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’ Crucifixion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 72.
10. The idea of leaving this world to go to another world with Christ originated in Greek philosophy, particularly with Plato, who believed the body was a prison cell that held the soul. Our job as humans was to find a way to free our souls to reach the great oversoul. He viewed everything physical as bad, including the body.
11. McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 36.

12. Talmud, Sukkah 51b; Bava' bathra' 4, <https://www.sefaria.org/Sukkah.51b?lang=bi>.

13. D. T. Lancaster, *What Is the Kingdom of God?* First Fruits of Zion, audio, <http://www.ffoz.org>. Lancaster expounds what the Messianic age meant for the Jewish people in his lecture on the concept.