

NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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(MARK 12:34)

Jesus met all types of people, and His remarks concerning them were always interesting. A kingdom is a territory over which someone is sovereign. Within the Bible, the term may relate to an established domain on earth; to the Church over which Christ reigns as Lord, or even to the sanctuary of the human soul. The Hebrews believed it related exclusively to the Jewish race, and were displeased with the teaching that God could reside within human hearts (Luke 17:21).

The term kingdom is better defined by a presence than a place. Some people accepted the Lord's teaching and hurried into God's kingdom. Others rejected it because they disliked the new interpretation, and many remained undecided whether to advance or retreat. Some people reached the entrance to God's kingdom, but failed to enter. The text suggests: (1) A Desired Destiny; (2) A Disturbing Doubt and (3) A Disastrous Delay.

The Concerned Man . . . who was very near  
(Mark 12:28-34)

"And when Jesus saw that he (the scribe) answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God . . ." (Mark 12:28-34). Scribes were among the most important people in Israel. They wrote or copied the scriptures, and were often required to interpret their writings. Occasionally, and under special circumstances, they became judges, for their legal knowledge enabled them to decide cases in the courts. Evidently, one of these men overheard remarks when the Sadducees endeavored to trick Jesus into making rash statements. The scribe, who might have been a Pharisee, perceived the Lord was fair in His replies to the arrogant interrogators, and proceeded to ask another question: "Which is the first commandment of all?" He agreed with the Savior's answer, and his response impressed the Lord. The scribe was not a bigoted zealot; he was a seeker after truth, and he was not afraid to express appreciation of the Savior. He exclaimed, "Well, Master, thou hast said the truth; for there is one God; and there is none other but he." Jesus recognized the man's sincerity, and said: "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." It would be interesting to know whether or not the scribe ever entered into the kingdom. He could have been within inches only to miss it by a mile!

The Challenged Man.., who was almost in!  
(Mark 10:17-23)

"And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" His conversation with the Lord revealed that even Christ admired the integrity of the man who said he had always obeyed the commandments of God. "Then Jesus beholding him, loved him." The ruler was morally commendable, but his initial statement was not as accurate as it seemed to be. He claimed he had loved his God with all his heart, soul and mind, but when he was asked to forsake his wealth and become an itinerant preacher, his love of money superseded his affection for Jehovah. He was certainly close to the kingdom of God—but not close enough!

Some years ago, an edition of The Presbyterian Banner carried an exciting story of an astonishing discovery made near the ruins of Pompeii, Italy. It was reported that workmen digging a foundation for a new building outside the area of the buried city,

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found the petrified body of a woman whose hands were full of jewels. Evidently, the anxious lady had tried to save her jewels, but was caught and buried in the downpour of hot ashes. The jewels were excellently preserved, having been protected by the body. The workmen found bracelets, necklaces, rings, amulets studded with gems, and a pair of earrings which were unique. Each earring contained twenty-one perfect pearls, set in gold, in imitation of a bunch of grapes. It was tragic to see a petrified corpse still grasping the jewels. Evidently the anxious woman had returned to save her gems, but, in so doing, lost her life.

The Cautious Man.. who stopped just outside! (Acts 5:34-40)

The council-chamber was in an uproar, men were standing

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and shouting; the chairman was helpless when he endeavored to restore order to the assembly. Two upstart heretics had ignored the authority of the council, and their defiance had incensed the leaders of the nation. Peter and his colleagues stood in the midst of the screaming counselor, and their attitude indicated they had no intention to obey anybody except Christ.

Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space" (Acts 5:34). It seemed miraculous when the noise subsided and the frustrated, angry representatives became silent. All eyes were focused on the eminent Doctor, who was probably the most respected member in the assembly. His quiet, insistent advice was as effective as a king commanding his subjects. "Yes, Gamaliel would know what to do with these despicable rebels!"

His short speech was tremendous; his tones authoritative; his logic unanswerable. He said: "Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men." With convincing words he calmed their ruffled spirits, and his concluding remarks were inspiring. "Refrain from these men, and let them alone; for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go" (Acts 5:38-40). Gamaliel saved the apostles' lives, but his policy of procrastination could not be commended. How long should his hearers wait before deciding whether or not the preachers were men of God? How much evidence was needed to overthrow the preconception of critics who never intended to change their opinions?

Gamaliel was the greatest theologian in Israel, but one of his students was named Saul. He had come from Tarsus to study under the influence of the famous teacher. This young man became a fierce persecutor, and his attacks on the Christians were known by every citizen in the country. Whether or not Gamaliel approved of such ferocity is extremely doubtful, but

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he had no authority to condemn what the high priest had sanctioned. When Saul was miraculously transformed, the president of the Hebrew seminary knew his best student had become an advocate of the new faith. Probably he who had been so close to the Kingdom of God, stopped in its entrance, when fear paralyzed his feet!

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When the governor of one of our great states unexpectedly visited a Sunday school convention, the audience applauded his entry, and requested a speech. The man had no prepared manuscript, but he stood on the platform and said: "Friends, I really have nothing to say, but I am heartily in sympathy with your work, and I can at least stand up and be counted." Gamaliel, an inferior man, was handicapped. He could neither stand nor advance.

The Condemned Man ... who had no desire to enter!  
(Luke 23:32)

It has often been claimed that whereas the sun softens wax, it hardens clay. Paul said of Christ and the gospel: "For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life" (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

The glorious gospel of God's grace either redeems or repels, and in support of that fact, it is only necessary to consider Christ's companions in death. Two criminals were close to the Savior of the world. One was near enough to hear Christ's voice and respond to His love, the other was far away and unreachable. The conversion of the one man revealed a magnificent triumph of God's grace; the other, whose cursing was only silenced by death, expressed a tragedy of unresponsiveness. One man, accompanied by his greatest Friend, went into the kingdom of God; the other, into the gloom of a hopeless eternity. Yet, that unrepentant sinner was within two or three yards of the entrance to God's kingdom. The overflowing heart of the Redeemer was only a prayer away. C. D. Martin truly expressed the situation when he wrote:

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So near to the kingdom of heaven,  
Yet halting at the door.  
Oh, shall your soul through doubting  
Be lost for ever more?

The Convicted Man..., who was afraid to enter!  
(Acts 26:28)

For a little while Paul was very excited, for it appeared he was about to win a sensational convert. He had been permitted to testify before a glamorous audience. Agrippa had come to stay with Festus, the Roman governor, and a special interview had been arranged in which Paul would be permitted to speak. His entire future could easily rest upon the results of his preaching that day.

The listener became convicted by the Spirit of God, and, exultantly, Paul cried: "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." The monarch was restless; his eyes were staring at the questioner, and every person present knew Paul had not preached in vain. Agrippa frowned. Why had he gotten himself into such a situation? The challenging eyes of the prisoner seemed to be piercing his soul; he could not remain mute. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

His testimony that Paul might have been released had he not appealed to Caesar, was an excuse. How could he embrace the doctrines of Paul when they violated every Roman law? How could he accept the prisoner's Savior and permit the preacher to remain shackled? Unwise and premature action could be harbingers of disaster, people throughout the nation would spread

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the news of the king's leniency, and that could lead to undesired repercussions. The troubled man thought only of his own welfare, and he forgot his eternal destiny. He was close enough to the kingdom of God to see within its portals, but he remained a troubled coward.

Many years ago, the British sailing ship, Royal Charter, after a voyage around the world, was approaching its home port of Liverpool. At that time, Dr. William M. Taylor was a pastor in that city, and the wife of the first mate was a member of his church. Crowds of people waited throughout the night to wel-

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come the men who had navigated the vessel through many hazards. Alas, the ship sank during the night, and a devastated nation mourned its loss. When news of the tragedy was confirmed, Dr. Taylor was asked to break the news to the family of the first mate. As he laid his finger upon the bell, the door was suddenly opened by a small girl who excitedly exclaimed: "Oh, Dr. Taylor, I thought it was my papa; he is coming home today." The preacher felt he was like an executioner entering the home. The table was set for breakfast, and the lady of the house stepped forward to say: "Dr. Taylor, this is indeed a privilege. If you will wait a little while, perhaps you will sit at our table with us. My husband was on the Royal Charter, and he will be home soon."

Dr. Taylor looked at her for a moment, and then said: "Poor woman, your husband will never come home. The Royal Charter went down last night, and your husband sank with the ship." The lady grasped her head; staggered for a moment, and as she slumped to the floor, said: "Oh my God, so near home and then lost" (condensed from One Hundred Texts and Their Treatment, J. Wilbur Chapman, pg. 232).

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