

Making the Point

Scripture forges an unbreakable link between Christ's resurrection, his kingship and kingdom, his coming again and the resurrection of all men (especially, for my purposes, the resurrection of believers), and the eternal consequences of all of that. Moreover, Scripture shows us that all these issues played a major role in the life of the early *ekklēsia*. The weight the apostles gave to these questions as they, in accordance with Christ's promise (John 14:26; 16:12-15,25), wrote Scripture for the *ekklēsia* in the opening years of the new covenant, leaves us with no other conclusion.

Where to start?

Consider what must surely be the principal passage. Paul knew that some believers in Corinth had strayed into error over the resurrection; some were even denying its very existence. This rightly filled the apostle with alarm. Consequently, before he signed off his first letter to Corinth, he devoted a considerable amount of time to dealing with all the ramifications of resurrection, and so leaving on record the classic doctrinal statement on the subject:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures... So we preach and so you believed.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not

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even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Paul has stated it bluntly: no resurrection, nothing! 'But', he thundered, using one of the most glorious words of the new covenant, 'but in fact...':

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death...

Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptised on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised on their behalf? Why are we in danger every hour? I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'...

...the resurrection of the dead... What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being', the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the

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twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:1-58).

I have quoted this passage at length to let Paul's majestic statement speak for itself. And how it does speak! Speak? It shouts its meaning from the rooftop. Paul was writing to believers. What is the believer's hope, the believer's comfort in suffering, his courage in persecution, his stimulus to holiness of life and effort in gospel labour, his consolation at the graveside of a fellow-believer and in facing his own death? It is Christ's resurrection, and hence the believer's own resurrection into the full experience of Christ's kingdom with all the saints at the last day. The last day! So important is this scriptural phrase, let me put it in capitals: the Last Day.

'The Last Day', 'the Day of the Lord', and the like – what 'Day' is this? Now it is true that the Old Testament is full of references (both explicit and implicit) which bear on this 'Day', but (as I have already noted and will explore more fully), since the first disciples needed to be taught to re-think their understanding of such references, and, consequently, their Messianic/kingdom expectations, we must let the New Testament (the new covenant) tell us what we are to understand by 'the Day'.¹ As it does, time and again. But just before I demonstrate the point, let

¹ How long the list would be if I included the Old Testament references! As for Old Testament passages bearing on God's kingdom, see, for instance, Ex. 15:18; Ps. 10:16; 29:10; 68:1-35; 146:10; Jer. 10:10; Lam. 5:19; Dan. 2:44; 4:34; 6:26; 7:27.

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us remind ourselves that the prophets had warned Israel that the coming Day – the Day they longed for – would be very different to their expectations:

Woe to you who desire ***the day of the LORD!*** Why would you have ***the day of the LORD?*** It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not ***the day of the LORD*** darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:18-24).

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure ***the day of his coming***, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap (Mal. 3:1-2).

On the basis of such prophecies, the Jews of Christ's day should have tempered their triumphalist expectations. Alas, as we know, they did not.

And now for the New Testament:

Concerning ***that day*** and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only (Matt. 24:36).

As the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his ***day***. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in ***the days of the Son of Man***. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot – they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when

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Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulphur rained from heaven and destroyed them all – so will it be on ***the day when the Son of Man is revealed*** (Luke 17:24-30).

Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and ***that day*** come upon you suddenly like a trap (Luke 21:34).

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on ***the last day***. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on ***the last day*** (John 6:39-40).

I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before ***the day of the Lord*** comes, ***the great and magnificent day*** (Acts 2:19-20; see Joel 2:28-32).

Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on ***the day of wrath*** when God's righteous ***judgment*** will be revealed... on ***that day*** when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:5,16).

Each one's work will become manifest, for ***the day*** will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done (1 Cor. 3:13).

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in ***the day of the Lord*** (1 Cor. 5:5).

We are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand... that on ***the day of our Lord Jesus*** you will boast of us as we will boast of you (2 Cor. 1:13-14).

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for ***the day of redemption*** (Eph. 4:30).

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at ***the day of Jesus Christ*** (Phil. 1:6).

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It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for ***the day of Christ*** (Phil. 1:9-10).

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in ***the day of Christ*** I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain (Phil. 2:14-19).

You yourselves are fully aware that ***the day of the Lord*** will come like a thief in the night... But you are not in darkness, brothers, for ***that day*** to surprise you like a thief (1 Thess. 5:2-4).

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that ***the day of the Lord*** has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For ***that day*** will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess. 2:1-12).

Christ Jesus... abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until ***that day*** what has been entrusted to me (2 Tim. 1:10-12).

There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on ***that day***, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing (2 Tim. 4:8).

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see ***the day*** drawing near (Heb. 10:24-25).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

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from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in ***the last time***. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at ***the revelation of Jesus Christ***. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:3-9).

Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at ***the revelation of Jesus Christ*** (1 Pet. 1:13).

Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad ***when his glory is revealed*** (1 Pet. 4:13).

I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in ***the glory that is going to be revealed...*** And ***when the chief Shepherd appears***, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:1,4).

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the ***judgment...*** The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until ***the day of judgment*** (2 Pet. 2:4,9).

The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until ***the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly...*** The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But ***the day of the Lord*** will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of ***the day of God***, because of which the heavens will be set on

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fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation... You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the *day* of eternity. Amen (2 Pet. 3:7-18).

And now, little children, abide in him, so that *when he appears* we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming (1 John 2:28).

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that *when he appears* we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3).

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for *the day of judgment*, because as he is so also are we in this world (1 John 4:13-17).

The angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until *the judgment of the great day* (Jude 6).

Have I overwhelmed you by this weight of quotation? I offer no apology. As I said in the Introduction, I want to set out as clearly as I can the amount of space – the weight – the New Testament gives (both explicitly and implicitly) to the resurrection and the kingdom. As these extracts show, not only in their addresses to unbelievers, but especially when speaking

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or writing to believers in order to encourage, comfort, challenge, exhort, urge, command, rebuke or stir them, the apostles were unstinted in their references to the coming Day, the last Day, the Day of Christ. Clearly, the thought of the day of Christ's return, that Day which will usher in the resurrection of all men, then their judgment, followed by their entrance either into the eternal glory of the kingdom or into eternal damnation, played a massive role in the life of the early *ekklēsia*. And not only as something to be preserved within the confines of the *ekklēsia*: since all men will be raised and face judgment, the coming Day figured prominently in the *ekklēsia*'s attitude and approach to outsiders.

Let me underline the material point: death is not the end, but there is a coming Day – Christ's Day – when all men will be raised, either to eternal glory or eternal damnation, and this is only possible because Christ himself was raised from the dead.

In order to emphasise the vital connection between all these issues, here are some more extracts (I include some of the extracts already quoted in order to preserve the full sense of the scriptural argument). I start with a couple from the Old Testament:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me! (Job 19:25-27).

My heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption (Ps. 16:9-10).

And now for the New:

As the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just

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as it was in the days of Lot – they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulphur rained from heaven and destroyed them all – so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed (Luke 17:24-30).

The powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near... When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near (Luke 21:26-28,31).

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:25-29).

In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (John 14:2-3).

I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day (Acts 2:19-20; see Joel 2:28-32).

My brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God (Rom. 7:4).

[Since] the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (Rom. 8:11).

We... who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our

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bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8:23-25).

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us (Rom. 8:33-34).

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:9).

You wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:7-8).

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (1 Cor. 5:5).

God raised the Lord (1 Cor. 6:14).

We are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand... that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you (2 Cor. 1:13-14).

We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence (2 Cor. 4:14).

Paul, an apostle... through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead (Gal. 1:1).

In [Christ]... when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, [you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it [that is, until God redeems his possession], to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:13-14).

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God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7).

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30).

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ (Phil. 1:9-10).

God has highly exalted [Christ] and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain (Phil. 2:14-19).

...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:10-11).

Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself (Phil. 3:20-21).

God... raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12).

If [since] then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are

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on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:1-4).

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy (1 Thess. 2:19-20).

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thess. 3:12-13).

You yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2).

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed... (2 Thess. 2:1-12).

Christ Jesus... abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me (2 Tim. 1:10-12).

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel... If we endure, we will also reign with him (2 Tim. 2:8,12).

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word... (1 Tim. 4:1-2).

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There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing (2 Tim. 4:8).

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Tim. 4:18).

[As believers, we are] waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ (Tit. 2:13).

[Abraham, the father of the faithful] was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God... [Believers] desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city... Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken... Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come (Heb. 11:10,16; 12:28; 13:14).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:3-9).

Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ... God...raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God (1 Pet. 1:13,21).

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death

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in the flesh but made alive in the spirit [or ‘in spirit’; or ‘in the Spirit’] (1 Pet. 3:18).

Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (1 Pet. 4:13).

When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:4).

I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed (1 Pet. 5:1).

The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly... The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation (2 Pet. 3:7-15).

Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3).

And let us never forget (alas, how often we do!) that Christ’s return is a note to be sounded (and in no muted or formal way, or as a mere tack-on!) at the Lord’s supper:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

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Of course, at the supper we look back – back to the cross – but every time we break bread we remind ourselves – we are to be reminded – that Christ will return and bring in his kingdom:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said: ‘Take, eat; this is my body’. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying: ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom’ (Matt. 26:26-29; see also Luke 22:16,29-30).

And what a promise at the supper:

I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29-30).

As these many extracts show – I said I would be unstinted in my quotation of Scripture – the apostles, and thus first believers in general, made much of the resurrection of Christ, his return, and the resurrection of all men. In particular, they made much of their own resurrection (because of the resurrection of Christ, himself the firstfruits or pledge), and their subsequent, certain entrance into the full glories of the kingdom.

The kingdom? Yes, indeed, with Christ as King of that kingdom.

From start to finish in Christ’s life on earth, the message the Gospel writers convey is the same: from his birth, through death to his resurrection, Jesus always was and always is the expected (as promised by the prophets) Messiah, the Anointed, the King, the Son of God. Let me highlight the appropriate words in Luke’s account of the birth of Christ, and Matthew’s account of the crucifixion:

[The angel, addressing Mary, told her:] ‘You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called *the Son of the Most High*. And the Lord God will give to him *the throne of his father*

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David, and **he will reign over the house of Jacob forever**, and of **his kingdom** there will be no end... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – **the Son of God**’...

[Elizabeth addressed Mary as] ‘the mother of my **Lord**’...

[Zechariah declared:] ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up **a horn of salvation** for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, [that is, John] will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before **the Lord** to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace’ (Luke 1:31-35,43,68-79).

And:

When they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read: ‘This is Jesus, **the King of the Jews**’. Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying: ‘You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are **the Son of God**, come down from the cross’. So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying: ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is **the King of Israel**; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said: **“I am the Son of God”**’. And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way (Matt. 27:35-44).

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The kingdom was the major topic of Christ's ministry.² Use of a search engine will soon verify it. Consider these passages.

In preparing the way for Christ, John the Baptist (Isa. 40:3-5; Mal. 3:1-2; Luke 1:76-79; 7:27-28), as a herald, opened with the startling announcement of the imminence of the long-expected kingdom:

John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'. For this [that is John the Baptist] is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight'" (Matt. 3:1-3).

And Christ, following hard on John, confirmed his words:

Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:14-15).

The kingdom! How did Christ begin the model prayer which showed his disciples how to pray? Like this:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come (Luke 11:2).

How did he respond to Nicodemus? Like this:

Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... he cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3,6).

And so on. The Gospels are full of kingdom references.

One of the most significant – but most misunderstood – episodes in Christ's kingdom-ministry occurred even as he was undergoing the agony of Calvary; it was recorded by Luke

² See the series 'Thoughts on the Kingdom' on my sermonaudio.com page. George Eldon Ladd: 'The hope of the establishment of God's kingdom is the central theme of the prophets. It was also the central theme of Jesus' proclamation' (George Eldon Ladd: *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1975, p144). See also Gordon Fee: 'The Kingdom of God'.

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(Luke 23:36-43). For centuries, men have debated the placing of the comma in Luke 23:43. This, however, badly misses the point. The fact is, there was no comma in the original – this kind of punctuation mark was only invented centuries after Luke wrote. Traditionally, this unassuming punctuation mark has been placed after ‘you’: ‘I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise’. I have become convinced it should be thus: ‘I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise’.³

The relevance of this seeming semantic – not to say, pedantic – digression lies in the fact that misplacing the comma leads to playing down the thought of the kingdom – which I have come to see as the main point of the passage – and playing up the thought of the intermediate state – which I have come to see as a theological (Christendom) import into the passage. This confusion bespeaks a serious loss.

Taking the argument about the comma for granted,⁴ here is the relevant passage (properly punctuated):

The soldiers also mocked [Christ], coming up and offering him sour wine and saying: ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him: ‘This is the King of the Jews’. One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying: ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong’. And he said: ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom’. And he said to him: ‘Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:36-43).

The essence of the exchange between the thief and Christ was not heaven – heaven today, or whenever – but Christ as King, Christ’s kingdom. Above all, the thief wanted to have a part in that kingdom. In other words, the thief had come to see Christ as a king, a king with a kingdom – *and he had come to see it on*

³ For my full argument, see Appendix 2.

⁴ See the previous note.

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that particular day, at that dreadful time, under those wretched circumstances; and he openly said so! Remember that at the start of the agony he had joined his fellow thief in verbally abusing Christ (Mark 15:32). It follows therefore, that as he witnessed the way in which Christ was responding to the torment he was enduring, the thief's eyes – spiritually speaking – must have been opened. Moreover – as the proper punctuation of Christ's words brings out – 'Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise' – Christ gloriously endorsed the thief's discernment and faith *on that very day, under those most appalling and unpropitious circumstances*. If I may be permitted an accommodation of Luke 9:7, Christ's commendation of the centurion's faith might well be applied to the thief on the cross: 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith'. The leap is not too big. Compare the thief's evident faith with Pilate's apoplectic, sneering outburst when faced with Christ as king: 'You are a king, then!' (John 18:37). Surely, then, in the words of the thief, we have a very strong faith contrasted with a dismissive, political piece of sarcasm, scorn, derision and mockery.

How much did the thief understand when he addressed Christ as king? Did he fully appreciate what he was saying? I doubt it!⁵ Indeed, that is why I have used lower case for 'king' in the relevant text above. But then, believers so often have to confess

⁵ Had James, John and their mother really weighed Christ's reference to his sufferings when they approached him with their request: 'Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom' (Matt. 20:17-21; Mark 10:32-37)? I doubt it. Calvin, I fear, in his *Commentary* on Matthew overstated the case: 'It was worthy of commendation in the sons of Zebedee that they expected some kingdom of Christ, of which not even the slightest trace was then visible. They see Christ exposed to contempt under the mean aspect of a servant; indeed more, they see him despised and loaded with many reproaches by the world; but they are convinced that he will soon become a magnificent king, for so he had taught them. It is unquestionably a noble specimen of faith'. To my mind, Calvin's words are more applicable to the thief – he spoke of the kingdom at the very time Christ was at his nadir, suffering such ignominy.

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that they are guilty of saying things which go far beyond what their minds grasp and their hearts feel. Take hymn singing as a case in point: do we not all profess things which, in the cold light of day, go far beyond our experience, even, alas, beyond our real, heartfelt aspiration? What about our prayers? Which preacher stands guiltless? My guess is that the thief was in much the same boat here. (Indeed, some of us have to confess that we would be on a lower deck than he).

Nevertheless, I also think that we are justified in reminding ourselves just what the Jews felt about kingship. The thief had, however tenuously, been raised in that culture,⁶ and, just as the average Briton today retains some vestiges of Christendom, so the thief might well have remembered snatches from the psalms dealing with kingship:

O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices, and in your salvation how greatly he exults! You have given him his heart's desire and have not withheld the request of his lips... For you meet him with rich blessings; you set a crown of fine gold upon his head. He asked life of you; you gave it to him, length of days forever and ever. His glory is great through your salvation; splendour and majesty you bestow on him. For you make him most blessed forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence. For the king trusts in the LORD, and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved (Ps. 21:1-7).

Kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations (Ps. 22:28).

Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors,

⁶ I am taking it that the thief was a Jew. Of course, he might have been a Gentile. (As you may imagine, here is yet another fruitful topic for the speculators, and much ink has been spilled over its ins and outs). If he was not a Jew, his faith was even more remarkable – a Gentile, a pagan, who could, at that time, see Christ as king, one who had a kingdom?

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that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory! (Ps. 24:7-10).

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever (Ps. 29:10).

You are my King, O God; ordain salvation for Jacob! Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down those who rise up against us. For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who hate us. In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever (Ps. 44:4-8).

And so on. Supremely:

My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever. Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendour and majesty! In your majesty ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness; let your right hand teach you awesome deeds! Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; the peoples fall under you. Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The sceptre of your kingdom is a sceptre of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions; your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad; daughters of kings are among your ladies of honour; at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir. Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear: forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him. The people of Tyre will seek your favour with gifts, the richest of the people. All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. In many-collared robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions following behind her. With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king. In place of your fathers shall be your sons; you will make them princes in all the earth. I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations; therefore nations will praise you forever and ever (Ps. 45:1-17).

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And:

I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. On the glorious splendour of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your saints shall bless you! They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendour of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. [The LORD is faithful in all his words and kind in all his works]. The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfils the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The LORD preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever (Ps. 145:1-21).

It is not without significance that, speaking about the Lord Jesus, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews actually quoted some of those very words:

‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’. And: ‘You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a

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garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end’.

And to which of the angels has he ever said: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’? (Heb. 1:8-13).

Whether or not the thief had reached the depth of understanding which gripped the writer to the Hebrews in this, I cannot say; I doubt it. But then, does any believer? Let me make a dangerous suggestion: did the writer to the Hebrews fully appreciate it in all its ramifications?

Even so, this is what Luke 23:43 is all about. Whether or not the thief knew Daniel’s prophecy:

The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever (Dan. 2:44)...

To him [that is, Christ] was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:14)...

...if he had lived, the thief would not have been surprised to read John’s words from Patmos:

There were loud voices in heaven, saying: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever’.

And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying: ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth’.

Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of

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lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail (Rev. 11:15-19).

Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come (Rev. 12:10).

Those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name... sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: 'Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed' (Rev. 15:2-4).

[The enemies of God and his people] will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Rev. 17:14).

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:11-16).⁷

Before I leave the Calvary exchange between the thief and Christ, let me make a (very) tentative suggestion. Consider Christ's statement, made not long before Calvary:

Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Matt. 16:28).

⁷ And victory – the victory and triumph of Christ over all his and his people's enemies – is the outcome (Rev. 19:6-21).

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Is it possible that the thief was one of those Christ was speaking of? Christ's statement is almost always taken in the most literal sense. Is it possible we should view it as comparable to his statement to the Jews regarding the faith of Abraham? Christ declared:

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad (John 8:56).

In other words, by faith Abraham (I am convinced it was in the substitution of the ram for Isaac in sacrifice recorded in Genesis 22:1-19) saw Christ and his work – dimly, no doubt – but he saw the day of Christ; that is, in his case, Christ's accomplishment of redemption. Moreover, he longed for it – that is the meaning of Christ's words.⁸ The same could be said about the thief with his desire to be a part of Christ's kingdom.

It might well be argued that kingship was the core issue at the crucifixion,⁹ certainly as far as Luke was concerned. (And not only when writing his Gospel; see below, for Acts). This, of course, dovetails with the fact (already noted) that the kingdom was the major topic of Christ's ministry.

Luke was not alone in emphasising the kingdom as *the* issue at the crucifixion. The Jewish bigwigs saw it. Pilate saw it. The soldiers and the crowd saw it. The thief saw it, and that was the truly remarkable thing!¹⁰ Consider Luke's record:

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him [that is, Christ] before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying: 'We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a **king**'. And Pilate asked him: 'Are you the **King** of the Jews?'... The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying: 'If you are the **King** of the Jews, save

⁸ See my discourse on John 8:56, 'Longing Anticipation', on my sermonaudio.com page.

⁹ Christ made it clear to the disciples at the final Passover (Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:16-18,29-30).

¹⁰ All this makes it even more remarkable (sadly remarkable) that contemporary evangelicals often miss it altogether.

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yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the **King** of the Jews’.

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying: ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying: ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong’. And he said: ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your **kingdom**’. And he said to him: ‘Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:1-3,36-43).

And we have John’s account:

Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him: ‘Are you the **King** of the Jews?’ Jesus answered: ‘Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?’ Pilate answered: ‘Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?’ Jesus answered: ‘My **kingdom** is not of this world. If my **kingdom** were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my **kingdom** is not from the world’. Then Pilate said to him: ‘So you are a **king**?’ Jesus answered: ‘You say that I am a **king**. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice’. Pilate said to him: ‘What is truth?’ (John 18:33-38).

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying: ‘Hail, **King** of the Jews!’ and struck him with their hands (John 19:1-3).

Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out: ‘If you release this man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a **king** opposes Caesar’. So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Aramaic Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews: ‘Behold your **King**!’ They cried out: ‘Away with him, away with him, crucify him!’ Pilate said to them: ‘Shall I crucify your **King**?’ The chief priests answered: ‘We have no **king** but

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Caesar'. So he delivered him over to them to be crucified (John 19:12-16).

Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read: 'Jesus of Nazareth, the **King** of the Jews'. Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate: 'Do not write: "The **King** of the Jews"', but rather: "This man said, I am **King** of the Jews". Pilate answered: 'What I have written I have written' (John 19:19-22).

And Mark:

Pilate asked [Jesus]: 'Are you the **King** of the Jews?' And he answered him: 'You have said so'... [Pilate asked the crowd]: 'Do you want me to release for you the **King** of the Jews?'... Pilate again said to them: 'Then what shall I do with the man you call the **King** of the Jews?'... [The soldiers] began to salute [Jesus]: 'Hail, **King** of the Jews!'... The inscription of the charge against him read: 'The **King** of the Jews'... The chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying: 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the **King** of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe'... Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the **kingdom** of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus (Mark 15:2,9,12,18,26,31-32,43).

Nor should we forget Matthew's contribution; his Gospel might well be described as 'The Gospel of the Kingdom'.¹¹

Luke made sure we did not miss it. Having published his Gospel – with its emphasis on the kingdom – look how he opened Acts, his follow-up volume. As he explained, after Christ's resurrection the kingdom was never far below the surface for the *ekklēsia*. Far beneath the surface? As we have seen, it was the very topic which Christ chose when teaching his disciples in the days following his resurrection:

¹¹ The title C.H. Spurgeon gave to his commentary on Matthew. See also my *Smoke*.

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He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the *kingdom* of God (Acts 1:3).

And the disciples, although they were utterly at sea about it, were nevertheless deeply interested in the subject. Understandably so! Had they not been raised in a culture of Messianic-kingdom expectation, this hope having been repeatedly stimulated by the reading of the prophets? This was the background to their question:

So when they had come together, they asked him: ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the *kingdom* to Israel?’ (Acts 1:6).

Christ immediately set them on the right course:

It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:7-8).

Moreover, having witnessed Christ’s ascension into glory, they were tempted to stand staring (no doubt) open-mouthed into the sky. Heavenly messengers quickly disabused them, however:

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven (Acts 1:11).

In other words: ‘Christ will return; meanwhile, you need to get on with kingdom work, including the preaching of the resurrected Christ!’ You have been taught to pray for the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 6:10), and commanded to preach the gospel to advance the kingdom (Matt. 28:18-20), so... when you are empowered, get on with it!

They got the message. In a very short while they were thinking of a replacement for Judas, looking for one who would be ‘a witness to [Christ’s] resurrection’ taking the traitor’s ‘place in this ministry and apostleship’ (Acts 1:21-26).

And on the day of Pentecost, following hard on Christ’s bestowal of the Spirit, the new covenant now being fully

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established, Peter (I am sure to his amazement) found himself majestically proclaiming the glorious truth of the resurrection. No! Let me express it more accurately. Peter did not lecture on a doctrine, consulting previously prepared notes: as a town crier, he simply stood and proclaimed a person – the person of Jesus, the crucified, resurrected and ascended Messiah and King. David, he thundered, being:

...a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne... foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ... that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing (Acts 2:30-33).

And that was only the start of it! From that point on, the kingdom with Christ as the risen King was the constant theme of the apostolic ministry. How frequent are the references to the kingdom in the post-Pentecost Scriptures! Take Luke's follow-up volume (Acts 1:3,6; 8:12; 14:22; 17:7; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31). Take the rest of the apostolic Scriptures (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:8,20; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:24,50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Col. 1:13; 4:11; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:14-16; 2 Tim. 4:1,18; Heb. 1:8; 7:1-2; 12:28; Jas. 2:5; 2 Pet. 1:11; Revelation *passim*). And it's to be seen not only in direct 'kingdom' references but in all the scriptural allusions to Christ's reign, kingship and rule, and, of course, the believer's reign in Christ (Matt. 25:20-21; Luke 22:28-30; Rom. 5:17,21; 1 Cor. 6:3; Eph. 2:6; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 1:6 with 5:10; 20:1-6).

Until I was writing this book I had not sufficiently appreciated the role played by Melchizedek in the link between Christ's kingship and his priesthood, especially regarding what I am trying to say here. Consider the way the writer to the Hebrews argued:

We who have fled [to Christ] for refuge... have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have

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this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 6:18-20).

That is to say, believers have a hope – a certain, confident expectation – which is entirely bound up in the person of Christ, especially his permanent, heavenly priesthood following his life, death, resurrection and ascension into glory. The writer to the Hebrews, having introduced Melchizedek as typical of Christ in this respect, immediately develops the point he wants to make:

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever (Heb. 7:1-3).

The material point is, of course, that in the old covenant no man could be both king and priest (Ex. 3:10; 16:40; 2 Chron. 26:18; witness the sin of Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12:25 – 13:6). In the new covenant, however, not only is Christ both King *and* great High Priest, all his people in him are both kings and priests (1 Pet. 2:4-10; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). No wonder then, that the writer to the Hebrews made so much of the change of covenant brought about by Christ:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power

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of an indestructible life. For it is witnessed of him: 'You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek' (Heb. 7:11-17).

And so to the contrast between the covenants:

The former [that is, levitical] priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he [that is, Christ] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens (Heb. 7:23-26).

The writer sums it up:

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven (Heb. 8:1).

No wonder then that the writer could say:

In speaking of a new covenant, he [that is, God speaking through Jeremiah the prophet] makes the first one obsolete (Heb. 8:13).

* * *

When will the kingdom actually come? I do not ask this question out of carnal curiosity, or to kick start an orgy of speculation. Far from it. It has a huge bearing on what I am trying to say in this book. When will the kingdom come?

John the Baptist immediately pre-dated the coming of the kingdom:

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you'. I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he (Luke 7:26-28).

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The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it (Luke 16:16).

As we have seen, in preparing the people of Israel for Christ, John the Baptist was explicit about the imminence of the kingdom (Matt. 3:1-3), and Christ himself, in opening his ministry, immediately confirmed John's assurance (Mark 1:14-15). Moreover, some time later, when the Pharisees wanted to know when the kingdom would come, Christ declared:

The kingdom of God is in the midst of you [that is, among you, or within your grasp] (Luke 17:21).

As he had announced earlier:

The kingdom of God has come upon you (Luke 11:20).

So far, so good; the kingdom was already here, with Christ when he was on earth. But when would the kingdom come in its fullness? And what would that fullness be? What would mark it? Christ's incarnation had been obscure, lowly, almost secret (except to some favoured few) – would it be the same when he brought in the kingdom in all its glory? John the Baptist, in preparing Israel for the first coming of Christ, had included an intriguing prophecy; speaking in apocalyptic terms, he declared:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:12).

And this, of course, was just as the prophet had foretold:

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap (Mal. 3:1-2).

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But this winnowing ministry, in the fullest sense, did not form part of Christ's ministry when he was on earth.¹² So what did Christ say about this aspect of his kingdom, his ministry of judgment and final, eternal separation of all men? He made it clear that while his first coming was to redeem his people from their sin:

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17; see also John 8:15; 12:47)...

...his second coming would be very different. In the Parable of the Talents, he explained to those who 'supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately' that it was not so: he would be going away in order 'to receive for himself a kingdom and then return' – and return as judge:

When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business.

After various awards to his people, the king will turn to his enemies:

As for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me (Luke 19:11-27).

Again:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

¹² This surprised John – or was he asking for his disciples? So much so: 'When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me"' (Matt. 11:2-6).

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And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right: ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’ (Matt. 25:31-34).

And, speaking of two ‘hearings’ – the hearing in regeneration and the hearing at the trumpet call for the final resurrection – Christ asserted:

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:25-29).

As Paul, writing to believers, would later put it:

Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying: ‘There is peace and security’, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape (1 Thess. 4:14 – 5:3).

Your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring... is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering – since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who

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afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus... Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him... (2 Thess. 1:4-8; 2:1).

But, of course, all that was long in the future. Meanwhile:

When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet (Heb. 10:12-13).

But that time – the bringing in of the kingdom in all its fullness – will come:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away’. And he who was seated on the throne said: ‘Behold, I am making all things new’ (Rev. 21:1-4).

As Christ declared:

Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done (Rev. 22:12).

In short, the kingdom will come in all its fullness at the return of Christ, with the resurrection of all men (either to eternal life or eternal damnation), and only then. The important point here is that Christ’s resurrection and kingdom are intimately connected in Scripture. Moreover – and this has a vital bearing on what I am trying to say – the two were major and constant themes of the first believers. And, as we have seen, the resurrection of

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Christ was key to it all. I have already quoted Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost. I return to that discourse:

...the resurrection of the Christ... This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing... Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:29-36).

And so, as they had begun, so the apostles continued:

And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Acts 4:33).

And so on.

As for the apostolic letters, just one example for now; namely Paul's opening of his letter to the Romans:

...[Paul] a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1-6).¹³

Clearly, it is not merely that – as a historical fact – that Christ rose from the dead, but that by his resurrection he openly declared himself to be the Son of God, the true and only King. Tyrants, emperors, dictators, and the like can torment and kill

¹³ Remember the high priest's demand at Christ's trial: 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God' and Jesus' answer: 'You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven' (Matt. 26:63-64). Here in Rom. 1:1-6 we have a major contribution to that riposte: 'Jesus Christ our Lord' 'was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead'.

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the body, but God alone controls the destiny of the entire man, of every man (not excluding tyrants!) (Matt. 10:28); Christ has conquered death – the tyrant’s ultimate sanction. And the first believers made sure the world faced this fact, and faced it fair and square; the hostile cultures surrounding the early *ekklēsia* were never allowed to forget it. It was no cosy dollop of syrup that believers held out to unbelievers: they had crucified the Christ; but Christ was raised; Christ was King; Christ was coming back; all men had to face him; get ready! The hostile cultures got the message, and they didn’t like it! Hence conflict was inevitable when the saints preached the resurrected Christ *in* a hostile world, and preached the resurrected Christ *to* a hostile world – which they knew they had to do.

Paul made this very clear: Christ ‘was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Rom. 1:4), he declared. Clearly, the resurrection – and its inevitable consequence, Christ as the Son of God, the Lord, the King – was not some choice morsel of esoteric knowledge to be hidden within the confines of the *ekklēsia* – some special, secret insight reserved for the elite, the elect: it – indeed, – Christ himself – was to be proclaimed, and proclaimed as publicly as possible, not apologetically, but in triumph: ‘What we proclaim is... Jesus Christ as Lord’ (2 Cor. 4:5). With the death and resurrection of Christ, a new day had dawned, opening a new age, with a new covenant, a new kingdom in which every believer will, at the last Day, receive a new, immortal body like Christ’s, to live forever in bliss in a new heaven and a new earth, where the Lord Jesus Christ will be eternally exalted for his complete victory over sin, and death, and the utter eradication of all evil in every shape and form and consequence. David Pawson made a telling rhetorical point:

The word ‘new’ hardly ever occurs in the Old Testament. The only text that springs readily to mind is: ‘There is nothing new

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under the sun' (Eccles. 1:9). Yet the New Testament is full of the word. What has caused the change?¹⁴

The new covenant, of course, inaugurated by Christ's resurrection and bestowal of the Spirit!

As just noted, Paul opened his letter to the Romans by describing himself and his ministry in terms of the resurrection of Christ in accordance with the promise of the prophets (Rom. 1:1-6). And he virtually closed the letter with (quoting, respectively, 2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10):

I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: 'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name'.

And again it is said: 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'.

And again: 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him'.

And again Isaiah says: 'The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope'.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope (Rom. 15:8-13).

Christ's resurrection proved that he was indeed the Messiah, and that all the promises were or would be fulfilled in him. The fact is, if Christ has not been raised, there can be no kingdom, there is no resurrection for the believer; it is all a delusion, a pipedream.¹⁵

¹⁴ J.David Pawson: *Explaining The Resurrection*, Sovereign World, Tonbridge, 1993, p50.

¹⁵ Norman L.Geisler on why it essential to maintain that Christ rose with the same physical body as he had from his incarnation: 'Anything less than the resurrection of the material body [of Christ] would not restore God's perfect material creation, including mankind. Hence, an immaterial resurrection is contrary to God's creative purposes. Just as God will recreate the material universe (Rev. 21:1-4; 2 Pet. 3:10-13) in redeeming the old one, even so he will reconstitute the material body in redeeming the one that died. Anything short of a material recreation of

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Daniel P.Fuller:

The New Testament conceives of the resurrection of Jesus as the basis for all of the events of redemptive history... ‘Thus the resurrection becomes the fulcrum of theology’... ‘When once we grasp clearly the momentous interests which are involved in the belief in the resurrection, we shall be prepared to understand how it formed the central point of the apostolic teachings; and yet more than this, how the event itself is the central point of history’.¹⁶

No wonder! The Father and the Son and the Spirit are all and each involved in the resurrection¹⁷ – thus giving the resurrection a vital role in the early believers’ understanding of the triune God, with, especially, Christ as the Son of God. His name to them was ‘Immanuel... God with us’ (Matt. 1:23); he was ‘God... manifested in the flesh’ (1 Tim. 3:16). This, of course, dominated their preaching of the gospel.

the world and a material reconstruction of the body would spell failure for God’s creative purpose... Without a physical resurrection there is no ground for celebrating Christ’s victory over physical death... Unless Christ rose in the flesh, his full human nature was not restored, and he is not our divine/human Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5)... It is only through [his] physical resurrection that Christ has “destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). Paul told the Corinthians: “If Christ has not been raised... those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost” (1 Cor. 15:17-18)... If Jesus’ resurrection body was only an immaterial body, then [he] was knowingly misleading his disciples [when he met them again after his resurrection – see Luke 24; John 20]. That is, he was intentionally leading them to believe what he knew was not true. In short, if Jesus’ resurrection body was not a physical, material body, then he was lying... Unless Jesus rose in a material body, there is no way to verify his resurrection. It loses its historically persuasive value’ (‘It Makes a Difference’, in Norman L.Geisler: *The Battle for the Resurrection*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1989, pp30-39, especially pp33-36).

¹⁶ Daniel P.Fuller: *Easter Faith and History*, The Tyndale Press, London, 1968, p19, quoting Walter Kunneth and B.F.Westcott.

¹⁷ For more on this, see Peter Masters: ‘Eight Purposes and Lessons in the Resurrection’, *Sword & Trowel*, number 4, 1993, pp12-13.

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No resurrection? No hope! The kingdom prophecies made null and void. Paul made this clear when facing the Jewish council:

Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council: 'Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial' (Acts 23:6).

* * *

Having dealt with this in general terms, let us now sharpen the focus. In specific terms, how did the early believers make use of 'resurrection' and 'kingdom'? What did these things mean to them – in detail?

What follows can be thought of under three main headings: Confrontation, Consecration and Comfort.

I start with the first believers' attitude to unbelievers. How did the early *ekklēsia* use the Kingship of Christ in their approach to those who were trapped in cultures hostile to Christ and his gospel? One word epitomises it: Confrontation.¹⁸ Proving it takes us to the next chapter.

¹⁸ See my *To Confront; Evangelical Dilemma*.