

THE KINGDOM, THE END OF THE AGE, AND THE WORK AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

by Watchman Nee

The Kingdom and the End of the Age

We deeply believe that we have come to the end of the age. We know that after the age of the church is the age of the kingdom. We have said in other places that God's eyes are turned to the kingdom and concentrated on the kingdom. If we understand correctly, we deeply believe that in His eternal purpose He is earnestly trying to bring in the kingdom. The church is for the kingdom.

After servants of God see the position the kingdom occupies in God's eternal purpose, how willing are we to see the kingdom come quickly, and how eager are we to see all of God's children working with God to bring in this kingdom quickly! By receiving more new light, we become even more zealous for God's kingdom. The one verse that we have received is Matthew 24:14, which says, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."

Here we see the relationship between the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom and the coming of the end. It is hard to understand all that this verse says, and in the past, among God's children, many contentions have arisen from this verse. I do not wish to debate about anything here, for we can never arrive at the same understanding anyway. However, we can speak about the clear light that we have received.

The end refers to the end of this age. Strictly speaking, according to the study of prophecy, it refers to *great trial*. This short period of *great trial*, "the great tribulation," will end our present age. The age of the Holy Spirit, the age of the church, the age of grace, and the age of the gospel are the various names given to this age. The age

designated by these names will be terminated by "the great tribulation," which is "the end."

Before we go on, we have to know that the rapture is not determined at "the end" time, for believers can be raptured at any time. The great tribulation has to do with this age, but the great tribulation is not directly related to the church.

The church is responsible for working together with God to bring in His kingdom. At the same time, God's kingdom will appear physically only at the end time. For this reason, the church has to pay attention to the end time. The end has to come before the kingdom can come. Hence, in order for the kingdom to come, the end must first come. The end itself is not related to the church, but it has much to do with the work of the church.

The Lord Jesus said that only after the gospel of the kingdom has been preached will the end of this age come. In other words, the gospel of the kingdom must spread before the kingdom can come. The Lord Jesus was speaking of the condition that is necessary for this age to end quickly and the kingdom to come. He was also prophesying of the situation towards the end of this age and the coming of the kingdom. Indeed, if this age is to end, God's children must testify afresh for the gospel of the kingdom. At the end of this age, we must see the revival of the gospel of the kingdom.

The recent decades can be considered as a period of revival in the teaching concerning the kingdom. In particular, during the past few years, the Lord has turned His children in China to pay attention to the matter of God's kingdom. This is the best sign.

But what is God's kingdom, and what is the gospel of the

kingdom? Our common understanding is that the kingdom is the time when Christ and the church reign. Actually, there is a deeper significance than this.

Many people want to make a distinction between the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of grace. Actually this is not *all that* necessary. If our readers think that there should be such a distinction, we can say that the gospel of grace is particularly for the sinners, whereas the gospel of the kingdom is particularly to deal with the demons. The gospel of grace refers to sin and blessing, whereas the gospel of the kingdom refers to the oppression of Satan.

There are many ideas today about the kingdom. Let us look at what the Lord Jesus said: "If I, by the Spirit of God, cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). The kingdom means many things, but what the Lord says here is the most important meaning.

The kingdom has a great deal to do with Hades. The Lord Jesus said that the kingdom is the casting out of the demons, that is, the activity of the Spirit of God in casting out the demons. This is the proper meaning of the kingdom. One big lack in the present-day Bible expositions is the negligence concerning Hades. The church, in its position, work, thought, and speaking, has often forgotten that its unique enemy is Satan. It does not realize that God has chosen the church for the purpose of *opposing Satan and bringing in the kingdom of God*. This is why the first time the church is mentioned in the New Testament, it is linked with Hades (see Matthew 16).

The time of the kingdom will be for a thousand years. What does this one thousand years have to do with Satan? The first few verses in Revelation 20 tell us that this will be the time when Satan himself will be bound in the abyss (vv. 1-3). This will be the time when Satan is disgraced the most.

"Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (1 Cor. 6:3). Those who have not sinned need not be judged. Only those who have sinned need be judged. In the future the church will judge the angels who have sinned. These angels who have sinned joined Satan to rebel against God. They are the rulers and authorities today, the princes of the kingdom in Daniel 10:13. God said that

we will judge them. When will we judge them? We will judge them when Christ comes again to set up His kingdom (Rev. 20:4).

This is the kingdom. The kingdom is the time when Satan is in the abyss. The kingdom is the time when the principalities and powers are judged. The power of Hades will be destroyed at the time of the kingdom. At the time of the kingdom, the "sons" under Satan's hand, who are the beast and the "spirit," the false prophet, will be thrown into the lake of fire. All the other countless evil spirits will be driven out of the world and will be imprisoned. Satan himself will be openly put to shame and spend one thousand years in a life of darkness in the abyss. That will be the time of disintegration for the household of Satan. It will be the time of the kingdom. It will also be the time for God's children to be vindicated, the time when the cross of God will gain the total victory. It

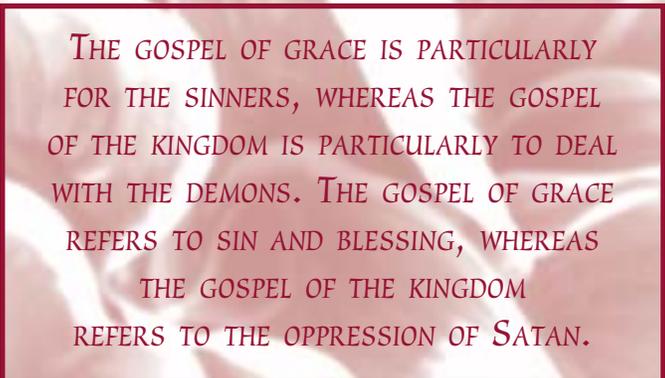
will be the time when God's purpose concerning Satan, which was purposed in eternity past, will be fulfilled. It will be the time for Isaiah 14 to be fulfilled. That will be the time of the kingdom. In this kingdom Satan will have no more power.

The gospel of the kingdom of heaven is nothing but God (who rules in heaven today) ruling

the earth and completely casting away the ruler of this present world together with his messengers and evil spirits, so that man (that is, Christ and the church) can rule on God's behalf.

The gospel of the kingdom of heaven is aimed particularly toward the power of darkness. When the Lord Jesus first preached the gospel of the kingdom of heaven, all His works were aimed at dealing with the power of darkness. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). He healed the sick and cast out the demons. The casting out of the demons is surely an annulling of the power of darkness. But what about healing the sick? The apostle gave us a footnote to healing: "Healing all those who were being oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). If we study the Gospels carefully, we will see that throughout His life, the Lord Jesus was destroying the work of the devil. Hence, His work in this world produced more effect on the demons than on men.

The Lord Jesus said that at the end time, some of His



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children will rise up to bear this testimony. We thank the Lord that during the past few years, quite a number of God's children have risen up to wage war against Satan. Spiritual warfare is no longer merely a term; it has become a reality that is experienced by many believers. Truly we are at the end of this age.

Brothers, if we want to see God's kingdom come, so that God's rule is manifested in this world, and the devil and his government cast out, we have to stand up to testify for the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. In other words, we have to bear testimony to the victory of the cross of Christ. We should declare that Christ has judged the prince of this world, that He is fully victorious, that the kingdom, glory, and power are all His, and that Satan, who has no further place in this present age, is occupying it illegally. Everyone who has accepted the Lord Jesus has been delivered from the power of darkness and has entered the kingdom of His beloved. We should preach the gospel of the kingdom of heaven, the gospel of the casting out of the demons, the gospel of the defeat of Satan, and the gospel of the destruction of Hades. This kind of testimony will bring this age to a close. This age is the age of the church because the church appears only in this age. But at the same time, the Bible calls this age "an evil and adulterous generation" (Matt. 12:39), an "unbelieving and perverted generation" (17:17), and "a crooked and perverted generation" (Phil. 2:15). God's purpose is to draw this age to an end. God desires that the end of this age come quickly so that His kingdom can follow. However, God's children have a duty to perform. God's children should work together with God to bring this age to a close. Prayer is one way, but testimony is also indispensable. Dear ones, we should stand up in an unprecedented way for the kingliness of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we should testify in an unprecedented way for His government. The kingdom of Antichrist will come before the kingdom of Christ. We should testify for the kingdom of Christ before the coming of the kingdom of Antichrist. We should bring this age to its end.

This is not a new gospel but one that has been neglected by the church. The apostles preached this gospel—Acts 14:22 and 28:23 testify to this. Furthermore, after the Lord Jesus resurrected, He preached this topic to them. If we want to be the true successors to the apostles, we have to bear the testimony that the apostles bore. The church has forgotten about the victory, majesty, and kingship of Christ. Those who dare to testify that only Christ is the king and that Satan is not the king are the ones who are truly preaching the gospel of the kingdom of heaven.

Brothers, we should not be ones who have fallen behind in this age. There is only one gospel today that matches this age. We are not saying that we should not preach anything else; we are merely saying that God wants us to pay

special attention to this. We must catch up with all that God has ordained for this age. God's emphasis in this age is the expatriation of Satan and the triumph of His Son. If we are not one with God in this matter and do not pay attention to what God pays attention to, we are not accomplishing God's eternal will, no matter how much work we have done. We are too far off from God's best. What we need today are Christians who match this age. God needs to gain a group of people who will sympathize with Him, who will work with Him, who will bring this age to a close, and who will bring God's kingdom in. If Christians think that their highest responsibility in this world is to save souls—which is a glorious work, and we have no intention to despise it—and they merely save souls for the sake of saving souls, they have not accomplished God's highest goal. They have to realize that they have a greater responsibility in this world than saving souls, which is to bring this age to an end and to usher in God's kingdom. Their greatest responsibility lies in the destruction of God's enemy together with all the powers of darkness. They must see that all their work should have this as their final goal. Prayer is not for prayer alone; it is to inflict a loss on Satan. Saving souls is not for saving souls alone; it is for the infliction of loss on Satan. Whatever we do, it is done with a view to inflict a loss on Satan. We do not despise the work of saving souls, but we should not lose sight of the kingdom in saving souls. Those who always put God's kingdom before them—that which touches God's will and His enemy—are the most useful workers in the hands of God.

Why will the end come when God's children testify for the kingdom of heaven in this way? Here again we see the cooperation between God and man. God desires that the end come. But unless God's children work together with Him to oppose this age and insist on the coming of God's age (the kingdom), God would rather delay. When His children truly hate the condition of this age and truly seek for His termination of this age and His giving of the kingdom, He will rise up to work. When God's children rise up to testify for the gospel of the kingdom of heaven, they will want what God wants and hate what God hates; their will will become one with God's will, and God will rise up to work. We should never think that the end will come by itself. If we reject God's will, it is possible to hinder His will. God is waiting for those who are one with Him and who will work with Him so that He can bring this age to an end. Who is willing to participate in such a great work?

The Work and Responsibility of the Church before God

The book of Ephesians reveals the church which God has purposed in eternity. Chapter five tells how the church will be a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle or any

such things, holy and without blemish. Then chapter six speaks of the practical work of the church, the spiritual warfare.

When we read Ephesians 6:10-12, we realize that the work and responsibility of the church is spiritual warfare. The opponents in this warfare are not flesh and blood, but spiritual beings whose dwelling is in the air. Let us read verses 13 and 14. "Therefore take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore." Here we are told that we should stand, not that we should attack. The spiritual warfare is defensive, not offensive, because the Lord Jesus has already fought the battle and won the victory. The work of the church on the earth is simply to maintain the Lord's victory. The Lord has already won the battle, and the church is here to maintain His victory. The church's work is not to overcome the devil, but to resist him who has already been overcome by the Lord. Her work is not to bind the strong man—the strong man has already been bound. Her work is not to let him be loosed. There is no need to attack; simply guarding is sufficient. The starting point of spiritual warfare is standing upon the victory of Christ; it is seeing that Christ has already overcome. It is not dealing with Satan, but trusting in the Lord. It is not hoping that we will win the victory, because the victory has already been won. The devil can do nothing.

The church's work and responsibility is spiritual warfare. It is a matter of the conflict between God's authority and Satan's power. We come now to see the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God.

Some people think that the kingdom of God simply concerns the matter of rewards. This is too low of an estimate of the kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus once explained what the kingdom of God is. He said, "But if I, by the Spirit of God, cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). What is the kingdom of God? It is the overthrowing of the power of Satan by the power of God. When the devil is unable to stand in a certain place, the kingdom has come to that place. Wherever the devil has been cast out, wherever the work of the enemy has been displaced by God's power, His kingdom is there.

Revelation 12:9-10 says,

The great dragon was cast down, the ancient serpent, he who is called the Devil and Satan, he who deceives the whole inhabited earth; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ, for the accuser of our brothers has been cast down, who accuses them before our God day and night.

We must pay attention to this word *for* in verse 10. The kingdom of God could come, "for" Satan had been cast down. Satan lost his place and could no longer stand there. At that time there was a loud voice in heaven saying, "Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ." Whenever Satan leaves a place, it is because the

kingdom of God is there. Wherever the kingdom of God is, Satan cannot be there. This shows us clearly that in the Scriptures, the first, essential meaning of the kingdom of God is in regard to dealing with Satan.

When the Pharisees asked when the kingdom of God would come, the Lord Jesus answered, "The king-

dom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, Behold, here it is! or, There! For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:20-21). What did the Lord mean when He said that "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you"? He meant, "I am standing here." Of course, we all know that the kingdom of God could not be within the Pharisees. On that day the kingdom of God was in their midst because the Lord Jesus stood in their midst. When He was there, Satan could not be there. The Lord Jesus said, "The ruler of the world is coming, and in Me he has nothing" (John 14:30). Wherever the Lord Jesus is, Satan must depart. In Luke 4 there was a man possessed by a demon. How did the demon react when he saw the Lord? Before the Lord said anything to cast him out, the demon cried out, "Ah! What do we have to do with You, Jesus, Nazarene? Have You come to destroy us?" (v. 34). Where the Lord is, the demons cannot be there. The very presence of the Lord Jesus represents the kingdom of God, and He is the kingdom of God. Where He is, the kingdom of God is also.

What does this have to do with us? Revelation 1:5-6 says,

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“To Him who loves us and has released us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be the glory and the might forever and ever. Amen.” Notice the word *kingdom* in verse 6. This shows us that not only where the Lord Jesus is, but also where the church is, the kingdom of God is. Not only does the Lord Jesus Himself represent the kingdom of God, the church also represents the kingdom of God. The important point here is not a matter of future reward or position in the kingdom, whether large or small, high or low. The concern is not with these things. The vital matter is that God wants the church to represent His kingdom.

The work of the church on earth is to bring in the kingdom of God. All the work of the church is governed by the principle of the kingdom of God. The saving of souls is under this principle, and so is the casting out of demons and all other works as well. Everything should be under the principle of God’s kingdom. Why should we win souls? For the sake of the kingdom of God—not just because man needs salvation. We must stand on the position of the kingdom of God whenever we work, and we must apply the kingdom of God to deal with the power of Satan.

The Lord wants us to pray, “Our Father who is in the heavens, Your name be sanctified; Your kingdom come; Your will be done, as in heaven, so also on earth” (Matt. 6:9-10). If the coming of the kingdom of God was automatic, the Lord would never have taught us to pray in this way. But since the Lord asked us to pray in this way, He simply showed us that this is the work of the church. Yes, the church should preach the gospel, but much more, the church should pray to bring in the kingdom of God. Some people think that whether or not we pray, the kingdom of God will come automatically. But if we know God, we will never say this. The principle of God’s work is to wait for His people to move. Then He will move.

God told Abraham that the people of Israel would come out from the nation which afflicted them. However, this was not accomplished until four hundred thirty years later. When the Israelites cried unto God, He heard their cry and came to deliver them. Never presume that whether or not we cry things will happen in their own way. God needs man to cooperate with Him in His work. When God’s people move, He will also move. When God’s people saw that they should leave Egypt (though not all the Israelites realized this, yet some did), they cried to God, and He moved to deliver them.

Even the birth of the Lord Jesus was the result of the cooperation of some of God’s people with Him. In Jerusalem there were some who were continually looking for the consolation of Israel. This is why the Lord was

born. Although the purpose of God is to bring in His kingdom, His part alone is not sufficient. He needs the church to work with Him. Through prayer, the church must release the power of the kingdom of God upon the earth. When the Lord comes, the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev. 11:15).

Since the work of the church is to stand for God and not give any ground to Satan, what manner of living should we have to accomplish this task? All our sins and unrighteousness must be dealt with, our consecration to God must be thorough, our soul-life must be put to death, and our natural man must be abandoned. The ability of the flesh is absolutely useless in spiritual warfare. “I” cannot resist Satan. “I” must go! Whenever “I” goes out, the Lord Jesus will come in. Whenever “I” enters, there is failure. Whenever the Lord comes in, there is victory. Satan recognizes only one person—the Lord Jesus. We cannot resist Satan. The fiery darts of Satan can penetrate our flesh, but, praise God, we can put on Christ who has won the victory.

We believe that Christ is going to come again. But do not think that the Lord Jesus will automatically come if we sit and passively wait. No, there is a work which the church must do. As the Body of Christ, we must learn to work together with God. We should never think that it is enough just to be saved. It is not. We must be concerned with God’s need. There are two consequences of man’s fall: one is the problem of man’s moral responsibility, and the other is Satan’s usurping of authority over the earth. On the one hand, man suffered loss, but on the other hand, God also suffered loss. Redemption solves the problem of man’s moral responsibility and man’s loss, but the loss which God suffered has not been solved. God’s loss cannot be restored through redemption; it can only be restored by the kingdom. Man’s moral responsibility has been dealt with by the cross, but the problem of Satan’s authority must be dealt with by the kingdom. The direct purpose of redemption is for man, while the direct purpose of the kingdom is to deal with Satan. Redemption gained what man lost; the kingdom will destroy what Satan gained.

Man was originally given the responsibility to overthrow the authority of Satan, but instead, man fell, leaving the authority to Satan. Man himself even became subject to him. Satan became the strong man, and man became his goods (Matt. 12:29). This situation demands the kingdom to deal with it. If there is no kingdom, then due to man’s fall the work of Satan cannot be overthrown.

The new heaven and the new earth did not appear immediately after redemption was accomplished, because the problem of Satan had not yet been dealt with. Before the

new heaven and new earth come, there must first be the kingdom. Revelation 11:15 says, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever." Once the kingdom comes, eternity is ushered in. The kingdom connects with eternity. We may say that the kingdom is the introduction to the new heaven and the new earth. Revelation 21 and 22 show us that the new heaven and new earth appear after the kingdom. Isaiah 65 even describes the kingdom as the new heaven and new earth. This means that Isaiah viewed the kingdom as the introduction to the new heaven and the new earth. Thus, when the kingdom begins, the new heaven and the new earth begin also.

May God open our eyes so that we may not consider ourselves as the center. Why were we saved? Was it just so we should not go to hell? No. This is not the center. Why then did Christ want to save us? We can answer this question from two different viewpoints—from man's viewpoint and from God's viewpoint. When we view the same thing from two angles, it is seen in a different light. We should not just consider this matter from man's viewpoint. We must see it from God's viewpoint. In fact, the recovery of man's loss is for the recovery of God's loss. God's loss must be recovered through the kingdom. Today God has caused us to share the victory of the Lord Jesus. Wherever the victory of the Lord Jesus is displayed, there Satan must leave. We must simply stand steadfast, because the Lord Jesus has already won the victory. In His redemptive work, the Lord Jesus destroyed all the legal ground of the devil. All of Satan's

legal rule has been terminated through redemption. Redemption was the sentence by which Satan was deprived of his legal position. Now the responsibility of executing this sentence is upon the church. When God sees that the church has sufficiently fulfilled this task, the kingdom will come, and the new heaven and the new earth will follow. The new heaven and new earth in the book of Isaiah will lead to the new heaven and new earth in Revelation.

Today we are standing midway between redemption and the kingdom. As we look backward, we see redemption; when we look forward, we see the kingdom. Our responsibility is twofold. On the one hand, we must lead the people of the world to be saved, and on the other hand, we must stand fast for the kingdom. Oh, may we have this vision so that we see the responsibility committed to the church by the Lord.

Let us review what the kingdom of God is. The kingdom of God is the realm where God exercises His authority. We must have such a kingdom among us. While we allow God to exercise His authority in the heavens, we must also allow Him to exercise His authority over us. God must have His authority, His power, and His glory among us. Not only must we seek to live before God according to Ephesians 5, but we must also pursue the responsibility revealed to us in Ephesians 6. Then we will not only be a church which is glorious, holy, and without blemish, but we will also be those who have cooperated with God to bring in His kingdom and caused Satan to suffer loss on this earth. **AF**

Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians

"Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the stratagems of the devil" (Eph. 6:11).

Verse 11 opens with the words, "Put on the whole armor of God." To fight the spiritual warfare, we need not only the power of the Lord, but also the armor of God. Our weapons do not avail, but God's armor, even the whole armor of God, does. The whole armor of God is for the entire Body, not for any individual member of the Body. The church is a corporate warrior, and the believers together make up this unique warrior. Only the corporate warrior can wear the whole armor of God; no individual believer can. We must fight the spiritual warfare in the Body, not individually. The charge to put on the whole armor of God is an imperative, a command. God has provided the armor for us, but He does not put it on for us. Rather, we ourselves must put on the armor God has provided. For this, we need to be empowered. Although God can empower us, we still must exercise our will to cooperate with Him. In the same principle, we must cooperate with God's command to put on the armor.

We need to put on the whole armor of God so that we "may be able to stand" (v. 11). In chapter six the word *stand* is crucial. In chapter two we sit with Christ in the heavenlies (v. 6), and in chapters four and five we walk in His Body on the earth (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15). Then in chapter six we stand in His power in the heavenlies. To sit with Christ is to participate in all His accomplishments; to walk in His Body is to fulfill God's eternal purpose; and to stand in His power is to fight against God's enemy.

From the *Life-study of Ephesians* by Witness Lee, pp. 531-532