

Q&A with Robby Gallaty **Author of “Here and Now: Thriving in the Kingdom of Heaven Today”**

Q: Why has our religious language has been so focused on heaven coming after we die?

A: Much of the way the gospel has been packaged in modern times revolves around this sort of language—joining up with God’s kingdom after we die. If you think about it, even our prayers, our services, our creeds, our liturgies and our motivation are geared toward tomorrow. If you boil the Christian life down for many, the ultimate hope of believers is to get to heaven, essentially leave this world, after you die. It seems that our obsession with the future causes us to care little about what God is doing today. Think of the last time you heard a sermon about the kingdom of heaven. Better yet, think of the last conversation in which you discussed the kingdom of heaven. If you’re like most Christians, you may not have an answer. Sadly, most rarely think about the kingdom, much less speak about it.

Q: How did Jesus come to change our thinking about the kingdom?

A: For Jesus, the kingdom of heaven was the predominant topic of his ministry. His message about the kingdom was more than a reminder to obtain your ticket to the great Disney World in the Sky—something it would seem many Christians are hoping and waiting for. We undervalue the thrust of Jesus’s ministry message when we focus on the future at the expense of the present. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven in the gospels, He envisioned God’s kingdom rule and reign in the present day on earth, not just a day when believers would be ejected into the spiritual realm. Sadly, this misunderstanding has plagued and paralyzed believers from experiencing the “abundant life” that Jesus promised (John 10:10).

Q: In sum, would you say that while we’ve been focusing on the afterlife, God is focusing on the present-life?

A: Yes. God is a God who desires to break into civilization. He came down to be with Adam, He came down on Sinai, He came down in His Son Jesus and He will come down at the end of days. We’re trying to leave the world; God’s entering in.

Q: How is our obsession with getting to heaven paralyzing, or even problematic?

A: I heard someone say once, “When you’re so heavenly minded, you can become no earthly good.” When believers are self-absorbed, only focused on their own eternal rewards in heaven, we lose sight of our calling on earth. Jesus gave us a Commission to make reproducible followers of Him. It’s called the Great Co-Mission for a reason: God expects our involvement. The reason He didn’t eject us into the elysian fields of paradise the moment we were born again is because there’s work to be done. You were saved not just from the world, but for the world. Most evangelistic tactics move people toward making a decision or a convert; however, Jesus and His disciples focused on making disciples. New birth is necessary to move from life to death, but it doesn’t end there.

Q: How does after-life focus also hinder us from seeing the glorious end of God’s consummation of all things?

A: This happens when we reduce the Christian life simply to leaving earth to live in heaven. God who created heaven and earth in the beginning is going to renew and restore it in the end. God will not discard the old canvas in place of a new one. Rather, He will renew the existing one. The marriage picture, the joining of husband and wife on earth, and in this case Jesus Christ and His church, changes our perspective of the last days and the purpose of life today. As symbols of heaven on earth, our actions today have a deeper meaning to them, knowing one day that God will make all wrongs right and renew His creation on earth.

The effect can be that we get saved, and then we simply wait around for heaven. What is the fallout from viewing salvation in Christ as simply a way to escape hell?

A: It shouldn't end there. Jesus expects so much more; He commands so much more. But, in this model, spiritual disciplines in the Christian life become recommended but not required activities. Obedience is optional, reading the Bible is optional and memorizing Scripture is optional. Praying and fasting are optional as well. Whether I share the gospel with a lost person is a choice that I will never make. Surely this can't be what Jesus envisioned when He commanded His followers to "make disciples of all nations"?

Surprisingly, moving people through a process from making a decision to becoming a maturing follower of Jesus is foreign in many churches today. An escapism mentality, on the other hand, permeates our evangelistic conversations: "You don't want to go to hell, do you? It's hot down there. Choose heaven so you can spend eternity with God." While this is true, is it the whole gospel? For many years, we have preached half the gospel by encouraging people to be saved FROM something—namely sin, wrath, damnation and eternal punishment—and neglected the fact that we're also saved FOR something.

Q: How would you describe this heaven on earth?

A: What I'm envisioning is the satisfied, abundant life Jesus promised. A life that, regardless of your circumstances or your present context, experiences joy, happiness, and peace, which are difficult to encapsulate in human terms. What if heaven was available to us today? I think it is.

Q: In what way does the book of Genesis paint a picture of heaven on earth?

A: The good news, according to Scripture, is that believers don't have to wait to dwell with God. God's creation of the universe was miraculous, but His desire to live among us is paramount. God's design for heaven and earth in Genesis points to the concept of a temple, a dwelling place for God. God then populated His temple with people, fashioning mankind as an image of His glory. But sin marred that image; therefore, God took matters in His own hands by sending His Son to dwell as a man in order to accomplish the task Adam was incapable of doing—that is, living in perfect harmony with God. "What God does in sending the Son," says one theologian, "is to establish Jesus as the Messiah, which means King, and God established in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God, which means the King is ruling in his kingdom." God "with us" is sprinkled throughout the Bible.

Q: What role do the Ten Commandments play in our experiencing the kingdom now?

A: The first four commandments speak to our relationship with God, and the final six deal with our relationship with others. The commandments were not unfair restrictions or infringements on their personal liberties; they were revolutionary, counter-cultural decrees. In Egypt the people were tempted by rampant paganism, sexual immorality, selfishness, greed and lust for power. God was setting a new standard. The law should not be viewed as a mere conduct to live by; it was a means for intimacy with a personal God who desired to dwell among His people. Their ultimate obedience to the commands of God was out of devotion, never mere duty. The commandments were a compass to righteous living and a right relationship with God.

Q: How does Jesus point out that our good works to build the kingdom will come out of relationship, rather than requirement?

A: Grace from God precedes work for God. Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount by stating the importance of obeying the words He just shared. Obedience to the commands of Christ is not legalism. Legalism says, "I must obey God in order to be saved." Grace says, "I must obey because I am saved." The same is true today. God saved us apart from any good deed we could offer. Although God redeemed us by His gracious initiative, He expects us to live for Him through obedience. We are not saved by good works, but we will do good works after being saved because of the relationship we have been brought into.

Q: What are the three ways Jesus spoke of the "kingdom"?

For Jesus, the kingdom is multi-dimensional in its scope and significance. Dwight Pryor identifies three primary ways that Jesus used the phrase: “The kingdom draws attention to a person. The kingdom emphasizes a power presently at work. The kingdom refers collectively to a people who have entered it as followers of Jesus.” Most often, Jesus referred to the kingdom as a present power that is ruling over one’s life, not in terms of a future place to wait for after we die. A citizen of the kingdom follows the instructions of the king, a response that garners blessings, favor and abundant life today. The good news of the gospel is that born again believers can experience true life today.

Q: How does Jesus use the element of “waiting” to help keep believers alert to the kingdom?

A: Jesus said they didn’t need to know when He was returning. What they needed to know was what to do until He returns. Surprisingly, Jesus encourages them to wait for ten days in prayer for the spirit’s power to fall. Wait. Waiting is tough. But the kingdom advances not just through our working but also through our waiting. Kingdom living requires patience, knowing God’s timing is best because some virtues like trust, perseverance and long-suffering are only learned through waiting. Remember, God works in our waiting. Jesus directed the disciples to wait so that His plan could come to fruition as ordered.

Q: How else are kingdom-minded believers to act?

A: Kingdom living aligns with the rule and standard of King Jesus as opposed to the desires of oneself. When we submit to “walk by the Spirit and not by the flesh,” as Paul suggests in Galatians 5, God’s kingdom agenda advances in our lives. After entering the kingdom, your desire for godliness will increase, your passion for the lost will grow, your time in the word will flourish, your prayer life will be more intimate, etc. as you walk with Christ. You should look more like Christ today than yesterday, or last month, or last year. Don’t hear what I’m not saying. Believers are not immune from the effects of sin; however, we will not remain in habitual sin without conviction or consequences.

Q: Where do we find our freedom in this kingdom living?

A: We find our freedom within the restraints of Christ’s commands to love God and to love others. We don’t obey the commands out of duty or drudgery. We follow Jesus’ instruction out of love and devotion. Freedom in the Spirit is not a license to sin. I’ve heard some people say, “I’m free in the Spirit to do as I please. I can lie, steal, cheat and enjoy all the world has to offer. No one can tell me what to do.” Being led by the Spirit doesn’t mean you’re free to do as you please. It allows you to finally worship God freely, live a pleasing life to God, experience victory over sin and enjoy the abundant life Jesus promised.

Q: This isn’t all to say we shouldn’t be focused on sharing the gospel with lost people.

A: No. Don’t read between the lines of what I’m suggesting. We need to keep sharing the gospel with lost people and then call them to repent and believe. My doctoral dissertation investigated how to give an evangelistic appeal to lost people. Nevertheless, we shouldn’t be discouraged when they don’t respond. What should be more concerning is what believers do after they respond to the gospel. Making converts is not the end goal. Making disciples should be. The mass evangelism movement hijacked the concept and reprogrammed our minds to think it is. Our obsession with “getting people saved” may be the reason we have overlooked our role as kingdom citizens today.

Q: How is kingdom living an invitation to employ a long view of life instead of an immediate view?

A: Our salvation in Jesus is not a ticket to the heavenly amusement park. It’s a summons into the service of King Jesus. What makes the Great Commission so great is the fact that we are co-laborers with God in

His mission of making disciples. He enlisted us to partner with Him in advancing the gospel by investing in the next generation of kingdom citizens. As we have seen already, the kingdom is a mustard seed movement that develops over time in the most unexpected places and through the most difficult environment. In a culture of “have it now” or “have it your way today,” we can become impatient when results are not seen early on.



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Q: How does Jesus define this abundant life, this good life, this God-life?

A: In the Beatitudes, Jesus shows how our present kingdom life is the result of recognizing our poverty of spirit, our complete dependence on God's Spirit, and the expectation to live peaceably and meekly in spite of negative circumstances. By seeking righteousness and God's kingdom first, the reality of the kingdom is experienced today in our present lives.