

Small Group Session 4.2

Kingdom Reality



Many people think of heaven just as a place you go to after you die. But it is quite clear from Jesus' teaching and from the way he lived on earth that he didn't think of heaven this way. In the gospels Jesus repeatedly talked about the availability of the "kingdom of heaven" to the living, as though it was something or somewhere you could step into right now. To Jesus, the kingdom of heaven was a reality: it was as real, as close and as readily available as the air he breathed. In this session we will take a closer look at the reality of the kingdom of heaven.

Let God Speak First

Read the following verse from Matthew's gospel: 'He [Jesus] told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough". Ponder these words for a few minutes. Ask God to speak to you through them.'

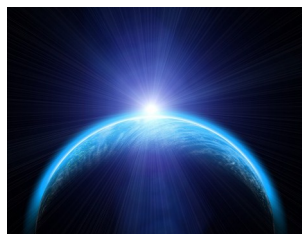
Report Back

Discuss with your group how you got on with the approaches to keeping the Sabbath. Don't forget to go through the memory verses together.

Kingdom of the heavens

What and where do you think the kingdom of heaven is?

Read Genesis 1:1 What do you understand by this statement?



It is important to note that Jesus' gospel message was not to announce the arrival of the kingdom of the heavens, but to announce its availability. Before Jesus was borne (even as far back as Genesis 1:1?), the kingdom of the heavens was very active. In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard says:

"The Old Testament experience of

God is one of the direct presence of God's person, knowledge and power to those who trust and serve him. Nothing—no human being or institution, no time, no space, no spiritual being, no event—stands between God and those who trust him." (p78)

Read 2 Kings 6:8-17. What do you think Elisha's prayer "Open his eyes, Lord, that he may see" means? Do you think what Elisha's servant saw was real?

The Jewish understanding of the kingdom of the heavens was that it was close, as close as the air you breath. Willard says:

"The 'heavens' are always there with you no matter what, and the 'first heaven', in biblical terms, is precisely the atmosphere or air that surrounds your body... it is precisely from this space immediately around us that God watches and acts." (p78)

What do you think of this understanding of the Kingdom of the heavens?

It is interesting to look at the language Jesus uses to talk about the kingdom of the heavens.

Read John 3:31 and 8:23 and 19:11. How would you interpret the phrase "from above" that Jesus uses here?

Read Matthew 14:19, (see also Mark 6:41 and Luke 9:16). Why do you think Jesus looks up to heaven? Why not down? Read Mark 16:19. Why was Jesus taken **up** into heaven?

Willard goes on to say:

"... Jesus chided Nicodemus, ... for not understanding the birth 'from above' - the receiving of a superhuman kind of life from the God who is literally with us in surrounding space. To be born 'from above', in New Testament language, means to be interactively joined with a dynamic, unseen system of divine reality in the midst of which all of humanity move about—whether it knows it or not. And that, of course, is 'The Kingdom Among Us'". (p78)

Read Isaiah 65:17, 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1. Why all this talk of a new heaven AND a new earth?

The kingdom of the heavens is intimately integrated with the reality that we experience on earth.

What difference does it make to everyday life that heaven and earth are intimately integrated?

Read Mark 1:9-11. What does the phrase "torn open" suggest to you?

Here is an age old but important question: what is reality? Is it the case that reality is only what is physically tangible, is it that what we see, hear, touch and smell is the totality of what is real, or do we live in a dual reality with heaven and earth each being part of one and the same creation, bound to each other, intimately connected, almost symbiotic?

Before you go ...

As usual, read through *The Daily Discipline* together and pray for each other before you leave.

The Daily Disciple

Fasting is Feasting



This week we continue to explore ways of getting the reality of the Kingdom of God sown deep into our being. One of the central ways that the saints have used throughout the ages to achieve this is fasting. In his article *The Key to the Keys of the Kingdom*

Willard writes¹:

"Fasting is ... where we live and do our work from the hand of God. In fasting we abstain from our ordinary food to some significant degree and for some significant length of time. Like solitude and silence, it is not done to impress God or merit favor, nor because there is anything wrong with food. Rather, it is done that we may consciously experience the direct sustenance of God to our body and our whole person. We are using the keys to access the kingdom.

"This understanding of fasting is clearly indicated by Jesus in Matt. 4:4 (with its back reference to Deut. 8:2-6) and in John 4:32-34. Fasting is, indeed, feasting. When we have learned well to fast, we will not suffer from it. It will bring strength and joy. We will not be miserable, and so Jesus tells us not to look miserable. (Matt 6:16) Was he suggesting that we fake a condition of joy and sufficiency when we fast? Surely not. He knew that we would "have meat to eat" that others "know not of." I and many others can report that we have repeatedly verified this in experience.

"Fasting is one way of seeking and finding the actual kingdom of God present and active in our lives. And because we are then more immersed in the reality of the kingdom, practically utilizing the "keys," our lives take on the character and power of Jesus. This will assure us that our work is his work and that he is working. Though we act, and work hard, it is after all not our battle and the outcome is in his hands."

In another article, Willard writes²:

Fasting, another one of the central disci-

plines, retrains us away from dependence upon the satisfaction of desire and makes the kingdom of God a vital factor in our concrete existence. It is an indispensable application of what Jesus called the cross. In the simplest of terms the cross means not doing or getting what you want. And of course from the merely human viewpoint getting what one wants is everything. ...

"Fasting, which primarily concerns voluntary abstention from food, all or some, and can also be extended to drink, has the function of freeing us from having to have what we want. We learn to remain calm, serene and strong when we are deprived—even severely deprived. If our desires are unsatisfied, we learn, so what?

Positively, we learn that God meets our needs in his own ways. There are "words of God" other than "bread" or physical food, and these are capable of directly sustaining our bodies along with our whole being. (Deut. 8:3-5, Matt. 4:4, John 4:32-34) Fasting liberates us, on the basis of experience, into the abundance of God. The effects of this for the reordering of our soul are vast. Christian practitioners through the ages have understood that to fast well brought one out from under domination of desire and feeling generally, not just in the area of food.

In *Celebration of Discipline* Richard Forster offers some advice on how to approach fasting:

"As with all the Disciplines, a progression should be observed; it is wise to learn to walk well before we try to run. Begin with a partial fast of twenty-four hours' duration; many have found lunch to lunch to be the best time. This means that you would not eat two meals. Fresh fruit juices are excellent to drink during the fast. Attempt this once a week for several weeks. In the beginning you will be fascinated with the physical aspects of your experience, but the most important thing to monitor is the inner attitude of the heart. Outwardly you will be performing the regular duties of your day, but inwardly you will be in prayer and adoration, song and worship. ... Break your fast with a light meal of fresh fruits and vegetables and a good deal of

inner rejoicing.

"After two or three weeks you are prepared to attempt a normal fast of twenty-four hours. Drink only water but use healthy amounts of it. ... If the taste of water bothers you, add one teaspoon of lemon juice. You will probably feel some hunger pangs or discomfort before the time is up. That is not real hunger; your stomach has been trained through years of conditioning to give signals of hunger at certain hours. In many ways the stomach is like a spoiled child, and a spoiled child does not need indulgence, but needs discipline. ... you must not give in to this 'grumbling'. Ignore the signals, or even tell your 'spoiled child to calm down, and in a brief time the hunger pangs will pass" (p69-70).

For some of us as far as fasting is concerned we have to learn to stand up, never mind walk or run. So choose one or both of the following over the next two weeks:

- 1. For one day in the week miss one main meal (lunch or dinner).*
- 2. Miss two meals in a twenty-four hour period (e.g. lunch to lunch).*

Remember to 'feast on God' as you fast. We are learning how to receive sustenance for our bodies directly from him.

Memory Verses

Week 1: Matthew 5:11

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."

Week 2: Matthew 5:12

"Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

| Week 1 | Week 2 |
|----------------|--------------|
| Acts 1:1-11 | Acts 3:11-26 |
| Acts 1:12-26 | Acts 4:1-22 |
| Acts 2:1-13 | Acts 4:23-37 |
| Acts 2:14-41 | Acts 5:1-16 |
| Acts 2:42-3:10 | Acts 5:17-42 |

¹ <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=40> ² <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=57>