

# ETERNITY IS NOW IN SESSION

A RADICAL REDISCOVERY OF WHAT JESUS  
REALLY TAUGHT ABOUT SALVATION,  
ETERNITY, AND GETTING TO THE GOOD PLACE

JOHN  
ORTBERG

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*Eternity Is Now in Session: A Radical Rediscovery of What Jesus Really Taught about Salvation, Eternity, and Getting to the Good Place*

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INTRODUCTION

# ARE WE THERE YET?

As leaders of the church, we are in the salvation business.

The whole of the gospel is intent on deliverance.

Our opportunity, and our problem, is making sure we understand exactly what salvation means. All of it.

DALLAS WILLARD

Are we there yet?

Every parent has heard it.

Every kid has asked it.

Every human being has felt it.

We suffer from destination impatience. We rush through life, always in a hurry. To get to where, we do not know.

The late cardiologist Meyer Friedman coined the phrase “hurry sickness” to describe this rushed, worried, preoccupied, time-poor quality of our lives after his upholsterer noted the unusual pattern of wear on the chairs in his waiting room. Apparently, they had only become worn out along the front edge. With nothing to do other than wait to meet with their cardiologist, people were *literally* sitting on the edge of their seats.

*Are we there yet?*

Something in us is waiting. For what, we do not know.

Something different? Something better? Sometimes it feels like we've been waiting forever.

In the Christian faith, the deepest and most mysterious expression of what we're waiting for is found in the word *eternity*. God has "set eternity in the human heart," we're told in Ecclesiastes 3:11. We have a haunting sense that there is something more than this transient world. We alone of all creatures know that "all flesh is as grass." But God has set eternity in the human heart.

*Are we there yet?*

Most of us think of eternity as an endless duration of time. And yet we hunger for more than just an infinite continuation of life as we now experience it, with all its sufferings and disappointments. In fact, the fear of unending existence carries its own label—*apeirophobia*—and can be as unsettling as the thought of death.<sup>1</sup>

But in her book *Images of Salvation in the New Testament*, Brenda Colijn writes that the eternal life the Bible talks about is *not* primarily marked by its duration. Eternal life is "qualitatively different from mortal human life. It is 'the life by which God Himself lives.'"<sup>2</sup> It is "primarily qualitative rather than quantitative."<sup>3</sup> "Eternal' describes the kind of life one has in Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Which means eternal life isn't just about the future. We can have it now. It's not just about there. We can have it here.

Most important, it's not something we simply receive through a transaction that arranges for our future destination. It's something we experience now through becoming Jesus' disciples, which death is then unable to stop.

This means many of us will have to think differently about the Good News that Jesus brought.

According to Boston University professor of religion Stephen Prothero, it is the notion of an "arrangement" for getting into eternal life someday that sets Christianity apart from other religions. In his book *God Is Not One*, Prothero defines Christianity as "the way of salvation." He describes the usual Christian message: "Sinners cannot be admitted to heaven or granted eternal life"; therefore, "anyone who hears this story [the gospel], confesses her sins, and turns to Jesus for forgiveness, can be saved," which results in "go[ing] to heaven." He goes on to say, "Today the price of admission to the Christian family continues to be orthodoxy (right thought) rather than orthopraxy," actually doing what Jesus said.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Christians are people who believe the right things and will therefore be allowed into heaven when they die.

This view calls to mind the climax of the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, when King Arthur and his knights come to the castle they've been seeking. Lying between them and the castle is a bottomless abyss, and a wizened old bridge keeper guards the only bridge that allows access. If they can give

the correct answer to his questions, they are allowed to cross. If not, they are cast into the abyss.

I believe this is how many people today think about salvation. When we die, we are either headed for the castle (heaven) or the abyss (hell), and “salvation” is knowing the right answer so that God has to allow us to cross the bridge.

The problem is, Jesus doesn’t talk about salvation that way. He doesn’t talk about *eternal life* that way either. In fact, Jesus—and the entire New Testament, for that matter—defines *eternal life* only once, with great precision, and in a way that has been largely lost in our day: “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3, NRSV).

Eternal Life = Knowing God.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t say “that they may know *about* you.” He says “that they may *know* you.”

Philosophers distinguish between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.<sup>6</sup> For example, I might be able to *describe* Moscow because I’ve read about it in books and seen it in movies, but I know *by acquaintance* what Rockford, Illinois feels like on a hot August night and what it smells like after a thunderstorm. I know the sound of a tennis ball bouncing on the courts of East High School. I know its hopes and divisions and fears, and I know Stockholm Inn Swedish Pancakes because Rockford was my home.

Knowledge by acquaintance *includes* description but goes

far deeper. It is interactive and participatory and experiential. The kind of “knowing God” that is eternal life is an interactive relationship where I experience God’s presence and favor and power in my real life on this earth.

To know God is to live in a rich, moment-by-moment, gratitude-soaked, participatory life together.

To know God means to know myself as his beloved friend as a gift of grace.

To know God means to know what Paul called “the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10) in the details and tasks and challenges of my daily, ordinary life.

*This* is eternal life. It is not something far away in outer space that we can only hope to experience after we die. It is not simply being able to give the right answers at church, affirming the right doctrines, or achieving the minimum entrance requirements to cross over the bridge and get into heaven.

On the contrary, it’s something much bigger and far more amazing. The gospel Jesus preached is the Good News that this eternal kind of life is available *now*. By grace. Through Jesus. Forever and beyond death. “Eternal life in the individual does not begin after death, but at the point where God touches the individual with redeeming grace and draws them into a life interactive with himself and his kingdom.”<sup>7</sup>

I have a sign on the back wall of my office that I look at first thing every morning when I sit down at my desk. In large block

## ETERNITY IS NOW IN SESSION

letters, it echoes something my good friend Dallas Willard used to say: “Eternity Is Now in Session.”

God is not waiting for eternity to begin. God lives in it right now. It is the interactive fellowship and joy that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Eternity is rolling right along, and we are invited to be part of it—*now*.

Certainly, as long as we’re in this world, we have much to wait for. Are we there yet? Of course not. Death still robs us of those we love, children still go hungry, refugees have no place to live. We lose our jobs or our dreams or our loved ones. Our bodies age and decay. Every day when I look at the mirror, I’m reminded I’m not there yet. Paul wrote that creation itself is groaning for the day when it will be “liberated from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21). Amazingly, even the Spirit of God groans for this (verse 26). To anyone who wonders, along with an old neurotic Jack Nicholson movie character, “What if this is as good as it gets?” Paul says that not only we but all creation will one day taste the freedom and glory of the children of God. “What would become of us,” asked John Calvin, “if we did not take our stand on hope?”<sup>8</sup>

And yet, in another way, we *are* there. Or rather, *there* has come *here*. In the midst of our groaning, eternal life has slipped into our temporal world now through the carpenter of Nazareth. In the midst of disappointment and decay, the Sustainer comes alongside me. In the midst of loneliness, a Friend comes who will not let me go. In the midst of the valley of the shadow of

death, I will fear no evil, for he is with me. Eternity has invaded time. “There”—life in God’s presence and power—has come here. No one yet knows how deeply humanity in this world can enter into the peace and love of eternity. You can make your life a Great Experiment in this adventure.

Dallas once wrote, “We must . . . do nothing less than engage in a radical rethinking of the Christian conception of salvation.”<sup>9</sup> I think he’s right. Somewhere along the way, the power and the promise of the gospel has been lost. We’ve shrunk it down by making it solely about going to heaven when we die, and in doing so, we’ve shrunk God down too. We have often preached a gospel that does not naturally call for “knowing God,” a gospel that does not naturally call for disciples.

But what if we stopped thinking about the gospel as simply the minimum entrance requirements to get into heaven?

What if we stopped thinking about eternal life as something we can only experience after we die?

What if we stopped thinking of Christians as people who *know about* God and instead focused on becoming disciples who are learning to *know* God?

What if salvation isn’t mostly about getting us into heaven but about getting heaven into us?

Much of the way we’re taught to view eternal life is as a destination we reach, and until we get there, we’re like anxious kids on a long car trip asking, “Are we there yet?” We think we’re

just biding time until we get there, when the real enjoyment will begin. But what if we're missing out along the way?

This book contrasts two ways of thinking about Jesus' gospel. The more common version is thought to involve how people ensure they will go to heaven when they die. It's about how to go from "down here" to "up there." It usually involves affirming certain beliefs or praying a particular prayer that is thought to make a person a "Christian."

The other understanding is that the gospel announces the availability of life under God's reign and power *now*. It's about "up there" coming "down here." By grace. Through Jesus. Transcending death. To all who will. For the sake of the world.

The first version tends to produce consumers of Jesus' merit. The second tends to produce disciples of Jesus' Way.

I believe the latter version is the correct one, the one that Jesus taught, the one that "snapped history into B.C. and A.D. as if it were a dry twig."<sup>10</sup> He is still recruiting people for this, the great journey of inner change and outer purpose.

Maybe he's recruiting you.

Are we there yet?

It's time to "engage in a radical rethinking of the Christian conception of salvation."

Eternity is now in session.

PART 1

# RETHINKING SALVATION



# BREAKING NEWS

[The Widow Douglas] told me all about the bad place, and I said I wished I was there. . . . She said it was wicked to say what I said . . . she was going to live so as to go to the good place. . . . She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. . . . Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it.

MARK TWAIN, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Most human beings believe in an afterlife. And in most cases, this belief involves a good place and a bad place.

If you're a good person, and you embrace the right beliefs, you go to the good place. If you're not, and you don't, you go to the bad place. Seems simple enough.

If you were to ask people what they believe heaven will be like, some would halfheartedly describe it like the Widow Douglas's harp community. Others think of it as an eternal pleasure factory, where you are always happy, you have amazing superpowers, and you can do whatever you want. In the movie *Defending Your Life*, heaven is depicted as a place where you can eat all the carbs and fat you want because they have no calories. The TV series *The Good Place* features a utopian afterlife where

angel Ted Danson allows only “good people.” In the initial plot twist, the central character is allowed in by accident and has to fake being good. In the season’s final plot twist, it turns out that Ted Danson is not an angel (should have seen that one coming) and the Good Place is actually the Bad Place.

Most people think heaven is a place where anybody would *love* to spend eternity as long as they’re allowed in. This view of heaven leads people to wonder, *Why doesn’t God let more people in?*

The problem with these views of heaven is that they’re not true. People are taking their picture of heaven from movies rather than thoughtful, sober, grown-up reflection on what Jesus said. “Movie heaven” is pretty much a pleasure factory that anybody would enjoy as long as they were allowed in.

But the life after death that Jesus describes is very different from “movie heaven.” Here’s the main truth to know about heaven: heaven will be life with God.

In fact, in heaven, it will be impossible to avoid God.

It’s not like heaven is an immense place and you have to track God down somewhere, like finding the Wizard of Oz. Heaven does not contain God; God contains heaven. So becoming the kind of person who *wants* heaven—uninterrupted life with God—is a problem because I often want freedom to do things I don’t want God to see. Real heaven means life where my every thought, deed, and word lie ceaselessly open to God. For eternity.

Have you ever committed a sexual sin? I'll bet you didn't do it while your mother was watching you. That would have taken all the fun out of it. In order to commit sin and enjoy it, you have to be someplace your mother isn't. In heaven, there is no place where God is not. Once you're in heaven, there is nowhere to run to for a quick sin. If you want to gossip, hoard, judge, self-promote, overindulge, or be cynical, where will you go?

Dallas Willard writes of a time his two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter wanted to play in the forbidden mud, so she kept saying to her grandmother, "Don't look at me, Nana." Thus "the tender soul of a little child shows us how necessary it is to us that we be unobserved in our wrong."<sup>1</sup> That's why the promise of hiddenness sells. "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." This is perhaps the *real* sinner's prayer, offered before every forbidden act, word, and thought: "Don't look at me, God." In heaven that prayer can be neither offered nor answered.

In other words, heaven is the kind of place where people who want to sin would be miserable. A nonsmoking restaurant is great if you're a nonsmoker but miserable to a nicotine addict. What brings joy to one creature may torture another. C. S. Lewis once wrote that "a heaven for mosquitoes and a hell for men could very conveniently be combined."<sup>2</sup>

Heaven is a certain kind of community where humility and honesty and servanthood and generosity of spirit are as

predictable as gravity is here. As John Henry Newman wrote, “Heaven is not for everyone: it is an acquired taste.”<sup>3</sup>

People often criticize Christianity because they think it envisions heaven as an exclusive club that everyone desperately wants to get into and that God is trying to keep people out of. The reality that Jesus taught, however, is that no one really wants heaven.

The hymn “Rock of Ages” has a telling line:

*Be of sin the double cure;  
Save from wrath and make me pure.*

It’s not hard to want the “save from wrath” part of the cure. God was so willing to save us from wrath that he sent Jesus to the cross so that he could experience ultimate spiritual death in our place. Anyone would want to be saved from wrath. We’re often a little more ambivalent about “make me pure.”<sup>4</sup>

Our issue with heaven is not so much about getting in; it’s about becoming the kind of person for whom heaven would be an appropriate and welcome setting. If I don’t want the unceasing presence of God in my life now, how could I truly want an eternity in the ceaseless presence of God, where the possibility of any sinful action or thought—no matter how desirable—is forever cut off?

If that’s the case, who *will* get in?

If you ever find yourself anxious about “getting in,” the best

thought I know is not about what arrangement can take away your anxiety but about God. And the thought is this: God will do the absolute best he can by every human being for all eternity. Including you. In light of his Father's goodness, Jesus advised, "Do not worry about tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34). And if God can take care of one tomorrow, he can take care of an eternity of them.

Surely the message that God gave his Son to die on a cross for our sins is the ultimate statement of his limitless desire to forgive and restore human beings. Dallas Willard put it like this: "I am thoroughly convinced that God will let everyone into heaven who, in his considered opinion, can stand it."<sup>5</sup>

That statement often provokes surprise or a chuckle. But if you stop to think about it, it must be true. Why else would God send his Son to die on our behalf?

The problem is that "standing it" may be more difficult than we imagine—especially for those of us hoping for the eternal pleasure factory. That is why, in *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis writes that "the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*."<sup>6</sup> Hell is the absence of God, and more people want that than you think. I suspect that's why we sometimes speak of only a stairway to heaven but a highway to hell.

There is some good news, though. Eternal life is far more than getting into heaven. Remember, eternal life is *qualitative*—it makes a difference in the *kind* of life we live—more than it is quantitative. And Jesus taught about that life. More

than getting us into heaven, he taught how to get heaven into us.

## THE GOOD NEWS

You can tell a lot about people by where they get their news. If people are on one side of the political spectrum, they might get their news from one source; if they're on the other side, they might get it from another source.

Where do you get your news?

Jesus was, among other things, in the news-announcing business. That may sound odd; we often think of news as a modern invention. Yet we read that “Jesus went throughout Galilee, *teaching* in their synagogues, *preaching* the good *news* of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. *News* about him spread all over Syria” (Matthew 4:23-24, emphasis added).

There's a key distinction here that we can miss. Jesus *teaches*—he gives instruction or advice on how to live. But he also *preaches*, or proclaims. Today we associate preaching with churches and telling people what to do. But *preaching* wasn't used that way in Jesus' time. It wasn't even a religious word. It was a “news” word.

Jesus went around announcing that something had happened. And it wasn't just news; it was *good* news. That's what the word *gospel* means.

Most people have heard of the word *gospel*. But most people—even most church people—do not know the gospel that Jesus *himself* announced.

So what *is* the Good News that Jesus himself proclaimed?

When that question was first posed to me, I had been a pastor for many years. I had been through seminary and then some. I was a “licensed minister of the gospel,” and if you are licensed in something, you should understand it. Yet I had never thought about *Jesus* preaching a gospel. I had thought of the gospel as something that got invented after he died.

But Jesus *did* have a gospel. The New Testament writers are very clear about it. And if Jesus thought something was the biggest news in history, it is unthinkable that people who follow him don’t know it.

Mark summarizes Jesus’ gospel carefully at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry: “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news [gospel] of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15).

After choosing his disciples, Jesus “called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:1-2).

After Jesus rose from the dead, “he appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

And in the last glimpse we have of the early church in the book of Acts, Paul “boldly and without hindrance . . . preached the kingdom of God” (Acts 28:31).

Jesus’ good news—his *gospel*—is simply this: the Kingdom of God has now, through Jesus, become available for ordinary human beings to live in.

It’s here. Now. You can live in it if you want to.

This good news was ultimately vindicated by his death and resurrection and has since gone viral, but it is still Jesus’ gospel.

New Testament scholar Matthew Bates notes that from the earliest days of the church, the accounts of Jesus’ life were not titled “The Gospel of Mark,” “The Gospel of Matthew,” and so on. Instead they were titled “The gospel *according to* Mark” and “The gospel *according to* Matthew.”<sup>7</sup> The idea here is that there is only one gospel, and it belongs to Jesus. It was first expressed by him. It is the gospel of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (and Peter and Paul, too, for that matter) were simply writing about the gospel that Jesus articulated and made possible.

Which raises a question: What is the gospel according to *you*? We all—religious or not—build our lives on some gospel, some “good news” that we believe can redeem our existence. Maybe it’s money or success or reputation or health or marriage. *Everybody* has a gospel.

This is Jesus’ gospel: God is present here and now. God is acting. You can revise your plans for living around this cosmic opportunity to daily experience God’s favor and power.

Some people teach that the only real reason Jesus came to earth was to die on the cross. But death on the cross was only one part of his mission. His overall mission was to be the Kingdom bringer.<sup>8</sup>

His one gospel was the gospel of the availability of the Kingdom.

His one purpose was to model the reality of that Kingdom in his life, death, and resurrection.

His one command was to pursue the Kingdom.

His one plan was for his people to extend the Kingdom.

He invites you, as a gracious gift, to become an agent of the Kingdom—to experience God’s reign in your own life, body, and will and then to become a conduit of God’s power, joy, and love to bruised and bleeding humanity all around you.

Jesus himself had a gospel to proclaim, and unless we begin with that gospel and take it as our central framework, clarified and deepened by the Crucifixion and Resurrection, we are apt to distort the gospel into a backstage, all-access pass to heaven. If we do not start with the gospel Jesus taught, we will end up with a gospel he did *not* teach. The gospel of Jesus’ Kingdom offers the salvation of despairing individuals and the healing of systemic injustice. It is the hope of the world.

Yet millions of people who claim his name could not tell you what the Kingdom is.

We don’t use the word *Kingdom* often anymore. So let’s start there.

## WELCOME TO THE KINGDOM

Everyone has a kingdom—in the biblical sense.

Your kingdom is that little sphere in which what you say goes. Your kingdom is the “range of [y]our effective will.”<sup>9</sup>

People learn they were made to have kingdoms early on. It’s why we don’t like to be told what to do. One of my wife’s favorite expressions is “You’re not the boss of me.” It’s one of my favorites too.

What is a two-year-old’s favorite word? *No*. Their second favorite? *Mine*. They’re learning they have a kingdom. That’s kingdom language.

On car trips, little kids asked to “share” the backseat will usually draw an invisible line. In doing so, they’re saying, “You’d better not cross over. This is *my* kingdom.” They begin to defend their kingdoms. But Dad thinks the car is *his* kingdom. He warns the kids to settle down and sends his hand into the backseat. The kids shrink into the corner. Comedian Ken Davis advises that when this happens, “a touch on the brakes brings them right into play.” Thy kingdom come.

My kingdom is the range of my effective will. It’s the sphere where things go the way I want them to go.

Having a kingdom is a good thing. It’s part of what God made you for: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion’” (Genesis 1:26, NRSV). “Dominion” is kingdom language.

My family was taking a walk on a path through some hills. A man whose house was on the path came out of his house and asked us what our dog's name was. I thought he was being friendly.

Suddenly he screamed at us that we were on private property. He unleashed a barrage of profanity-laced hostility that caught us all off guard in its meanness.

Whose kingdom was he living in?

That man was living in what might be called the “kingdom of self.” *This is my kingdom. I'll guard it. I won't share it. If you violate my kingdom, I'll kill you.* We had trespassed on his kingdom.

On earth, all our little kingdoms intersect and merge and form larger kingdoms—families, corporations, nations, and economic, political, and cultural systems. We could call that whole conglomeration the “kingdom of the earth.” And that kingdom is junked up by sin.

Let's do a contrast study for a moment.

Jesus says there is a domain called the “Kingdom of God.” It is the range of God's effective will. It is wherever God's will is done. It is the sphere in which everything that happens meets with God's approval and delight. Everything is precisely as God wants it to be—where the greatest humble themselves like little children. There are no big shots. No arrogant egos. No one ever has an anxious thought. Every encounter between people causes them to walk away with more joy than they had before they

met. As the apostle Paul says, “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). Watching over this whole realm as its greatest servant and most joyful caretaker is the magnificent God—the Father of Jesus—who is endlessly celebrated for his infinite, self-giving love.

This, Jesus said, is the Kingdom of God. It exists. Right now. People you know and love who trusted God and have died and gone before us are immersed in this reality right now.

Then there is the “kingdom of the earth.” How’s that going?

Violence. Betrayal. Thousands of babies dying daily due to malnutrition. Women being sexually assaulted or marginalized or objectified by men. People killing others in the name of religion. God’s creation getting polluted. Vows of fidelity being broken. Racial injustice constantly smoldering and often exploding. Culture wars. The politicization of almost everything. Cynicism and fear and depression and isolation. Who does it look like is running the show here?

Things in the kingdom of the earth are not going well. There is not much good news for the poor or weak or old or plain or uneducated or vulnerable.

But Jesus has a plan. He describes it in the world’s most famous prayer:

Our Father, who art in Heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In other words, “Here’s my plan. I’m going to bring *this* down *here*.”

Like a lot of Christians, I grew up praying the “Beam me up, Scotty” prayer from the old Star Trek series. I thought we were supposed to ask God to get us out of this messed-up earth so we could go to heaven.

But Jesus taught a different prayer. Not “Get me out of here so I can go up there.” But “Make up there come down here.” “Make things down here run the way they do up there.”

Jesus told us to ask God to bring heaven—“*your* kingdom,” “*your* will”—down here to my office, my neighborhood, my small group, my family, my country. Starting with my life, my body, my little kingdom.

Jesus’ gospel involves the greatest offer of all time. The salvation of your whole life, both now *and* then. Not just getting you into heaven but getting heaven into you. When you get what Jesus is offering, it’s like finding treasure in a field that you’d sell everything to possess and laugh all the way to the bank. If it were a late-night TV infomercial, you’d call without delay.

It is *good news*.

The great question is this: Do you really believe it can happen? Do you really believe that the Kingdom of God can be established on this earth, starting with you?

Many people do not understand that this was Jesus' message, his plan, his good news. Even people who are actively involved in church life were taught to pray, "Beam me up."

But Jesus never told anybody to pray, "Get me out of here so I can go up there." He said we were to ask God to establish his Kingdom where we are.

Jesus' gospel is not about something that might happen sometime in the future. It has already begun. In him. In hiddenness. In sacrificial love. Right in the midst of the kingdoms that oppose it.

You may wonder, *If the Kingdom has come in Jesus, why is the earth still a mess? Why are pain and suffering still with us?* And the answer—which took the early church decades to come to grips with—is that other "kingdoms" still remain. Other wills that are opposed to God's will are still present. Thank God, because one of those stubborn wills is mine. One day all opposition will end. But it endures now because God chooses to act not with coercive power but in suffering love.

When Jesus was born, Rome had a gospel. An old Roman inscription read, "The birthday of the god [referring to Caesar Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings [Good News, gospel] that have come to [men through him]."

The gospel of Jesus is a claim that Rome's "good news"—a "good news" purchased by violence and fear—is fake news.

No merely human kingdom can redeem and transform the earth. Only King Jesus can do that.

His ultimate success is certain. And if you want, you can be a part of his Kingdom.

Right here. Right now.

## **BREAKING IT DOWN**

Bringing up there down here is God's project. "Salvation belongs to our God" (Revelation 7:10). One day he will complete it. The promise of the Bible is not that in eternity we will be disembodied spirits living in a cloud-furnished, pearly-gated, gold-bricked spiritual retirement community. It's also not that we will be stuck in a never-ending church service. The promise is that resurrection will come, and God's creation will be made glorious. Our destiny, a good friend of mine used to say, is to be part of a tremendously creative team effort, under unimaginably splendid leadership, on an inconceivably vast scale, with ever-increasing cycles of productivity and fulfillment, and that is what "eye has not seen and ear has not heard" in the prophetic vision.<sup>10</sup>

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann distinguished two kinds of futures: *futurum* and *adventus*. *Futurum* is the kind of future that human beings can explain and hope to manage; *adventus* is a future that breaks into history from the outside. The end of history, Moltmann said, is *adventus*. It will happen when *God* comes.<sup>11</sup>

We wait for this. We are not in control of it. When human beings try to enforce utopia on one another, bad things happen.

## ETERNITY IS NOW IN SESSION

But waiting doesn't mean inactivity. We are not in charge, but we are not idle. We are engaged. We become a part of God's project. Every time you bring a slice of this up-there life down here, the Kingdom of God breaks into all the messed-up kingdoms of this world.

Every time you are in conflict with someone, when you want to hurt them, gossip about them, avoid them, but instead you go to them and seek reconciliation and forgiveness, the Kingdom is breaking into this world.

Every time you have a chunk of money and you decide to give sacrificially to somebody who is hungry or homeless or poor, the Kingdom is breaking into the world.

Every time somebody who has an addiction wants to partner with God so badly that they're willing to stop hiding, acknowledge the truth, and get help from a loving community, the Kingdom is breaking into the world.

Every time a workaholic parent decides to stop idolizing their job and rearranges their life to begin to love and care for the little children entrusted to them, the Kingdom is breaking into the world.

This good news happens through Jesus. Jesus himself—through his incarnation—is literally “up there” coming “down here.” “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

The Good News is *not* that we're called to do these things on our own, as though we're being given a longer to-do list. The

Good News is that a power has become available to increasingly turn us into the kind of people who *naturally and recreationally* do such things.

That's why when Jesus goes to Zacchaeus's house and Zacchaeus gives half his possessions to the poor and agrees to pay back all he has cheated four times over, Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). That doesn't just mean that Zacchaeus will be with God when he dies (although of course he will!). It means Jesus has come to this house, that up there is coming down here, because now—through Jesus—a corrupt tax collector has become a Kingdom bringer, the poor are being helped, the cheated are receiving justice, and God's will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.

The gospel—including the Good News of the Cross itself—means the renewal of all things. Miroslav Volf writes, "The cross is not forgiveness pure and simple, but *God's setting aright* the world of injustice and deception."<sup>12</sup> That is what the gospel announces. Starting with Zacchaeus. And you and me.