

ONWARD

ENGAGING THE CULTURE
WITHOUT
LOSING THE GOSPEL

RUSSELL MOORE
BIBLE STUDY DEVELOPED BY
MICHAEL KELLEY

Published by LifeWay Press® ★ © 2015 Russell Moore

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ISBN 978-1-4300-4033-0 ★ Item 005727825

Dewey decimal classification: 261.1

Subject headings:

CHURCH AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS \ CHRISTIANITY \ POPULAR CULTURE

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Printed in the United States of America

Groups Ministry Publishing ★ LifeWay Resources
One LifeWay Plaza ★ Nashville, TN 37234-0152

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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INTRODUCTION

Onward explores how the kingdom of God informs the way Christians engage the culture with the gospel. In this Bible study I talk about how engaging the culture with the claims of the resurrected Jesus Christ has never been easy. The “good old days,” when people didn’t question the Bible or challenge the authority of Christ, never really existed. The world is the same in that regard as it was in the garden of Eden.

But it’s also true that, as Bob Dylan sang, “The times they are a-changin’.” We live in a culture that’s indeed undergone dramatic shifts in a remarkably short period of time. Many Christians are understandably distraught, not knowing how to carry out Christ’s mission in a world they don’t recognize anymore. Some Christians think we should regroup and try to be a politically weaponized moral majority once again. Some Christians think we should try to evolve on certain issues so that the culture will listen to us. Some think we should just retreat into our churches and “focus on the gospel.” Who’s right?

Well, Jesus is. So *Onward*, more than anything else, is about listening to what Jesus is telling us about how to live and work as citizens of His kingdom as we wait for it to come in fullness.

The project of engaging the culture while holding fast to the gospel isn’t an assignment for individuals. This task wasn’t given to the politicians and advocates of the world. It was given to you and me; to your local church and my local church; and to every gospel-believing, Bible-preaching local congregation throughout human history. That’s why this Bible study exists: to bring Christians together across racial, ethnic, class, and all other divisions erected by sinful humanity to carry out the task our Lord began and calls us to join. None of us can go onward alone. Thankfully, none of us have to.

I hope you’ll benefit from this Bible study. I hope it drives you deeper into the Scriptures and the promises of our Lord. I hope it strengthens your convictions and your conversations with the unsaved people around you. Most of all, I hope it renews your faith and confidence in the Galilean who promised that not even the gates of hell would overcome His church (see Matt. 16:18).

Onward!

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to explore Scriptures that shape a Christian response in six key areas of cultural engagement:

**KINGDOM
CULTURE
MISSION
HUMAN DIGNITY
FAMILY STABILITY
CONVICTIONAL KINDNESS**

One week of Bible study is devoted to each of these topics, and each week is divided into three sections of personal study:

**TEACHINGS OF JESUS
WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE
GOSPEL APPLICATION**

In these sections you'll find biblical teaching and interactive questions that will help you understand and apply the teaching.

In addition to the personal study, six group sessions are provided that are designed to spark gospel conversations around brief video teachings. Each group session is divided into three sections:

START focuses participants on the topic of the session's video teaching.

WATCH provides key Scriptures presented in the video and space to take notes.

RESPOND guides the group in a discussion of the video teaching.

If you want to go deeper in your study, you may want to read the book on which this Bible study is based. *Onward* (B&H Publishing) is ISBN 978-1-4336-8617-7.

TIPS FOR LEADING A GROUP

PRAYERFULLY PREPARE

Prepare for each meeting by—

REVIEWING the weekly material and group questions ahead of time;

PRAYING for each person in the group.

Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point to Jesus each week through God's Word.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

Create a comfortable environment. If group members are uncomfortable, they'll be distracted and therefore not engaged in the group experience. Plan ahead by taking into consideration—

**SEATING, TEMPERATURE, LIGHTING, FOOD OR DRINK,
SURROUNDING NOISE, AND GENERAL CLEANLINESS.**

At best, thoughtfulness and hospitality show guests and group members they're welcome and valued in whatever environment you choose to gather. At worst, people may never notice your effort, but they're also not distracted. Do everything in your ability to help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

INCLUDE OTHERS

Your goal is to foster a community in which people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually. Always be aware of opportunities to—

INCLUDE any people who visit the group;

INVITE new people to join your group.

An inexpensive way to make first-time guests feel welcome or to invite someone to get involved is to give them their own copies of this Bible study book.

ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

A good small-group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES—NOT EVEN THE LEADER. Be sure that your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half of your time together as a group. Politely guide discussion if anyone dominates.

NOBODY IS RUSHED THROUGH QUESTIONS. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. People are less likely to speak up if they fear that you don't actually want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust Scripture to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

KEEP CONNECTING

Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Participation during the group session is always improved when members spend time connecting with one another outside the group sessions. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending.

Encourage group members with thoughts, commitments, or questions from the session by connecting through—

EMAILS, TEXTS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

When possible, build deeper friendships by planning or spontaneously inviting group members to join you outside your regularly scheduled group time for—

MEALS; FUN ACTIVITIES; AND PROJECTS AROUND YOUR HOME, CHURCH, OR COMMUNITY.

KINGDOM

CULTURE

MISSION

HUMAN

DIGNITY

FAMILY

STABILITY

CONVICTIONAL

KINDNESS

START

Welcome the group to session 1 of *Onward*. Open your group time by asking participants to introduce themselves with a quick answer to the following questions.

**What's your name, and what's one thing
you're looking forward to this week?**

**Would you describe yourself as
an optimist or a pessimist? Why?**

**Do you think others close to you would describe
you the same way? Why or why not?**

If you're a Christian, you have every reason to be an optimist. But the Christian sense of optimism isn't a hoping-for-the-best mentality; instead, it's born from the real hope afforded to us by God's promises in Christ. We can look to the future with confidence and joy because we're people who know what's coming. We're the people of God's kingdom.

Over the next six weeks we'll discover ways we as people of God's kingdom can boldly live in the present and look to the future as the kingdom marches onward.

Read together as a group Luke 4:16-21. Then watch video session 1, in which Dr. Moore starts us on the journey forward by helping us understand more about the nature of God's kingdom and who we are as kingdom citizens.

WATCH

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has
ANointed ME to proclaim **GOOD NEWS** to the
poor. He has sent me to proclaim **LIBERTY** to
the captives and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed.*

LUKE 4:18

*We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against
the **PRINCIPALITIES**, against the **POWERS**, against
the world rulers of this present darkness, against the
spiritual hosts of wickedness in the **HEAVENLY PLACES**.*

EPHESIANS 6:12, RSV

*Seek first the **KINGDOM OF GOD**
and his **RIGHTEOUSNESS**.*

MATTHEW 6:33

FEAR NOT, little flock, for it is your Father's
GOOD PLEASURE to give you the **KINGDOM**.

LUKE 12:32

RESPOND

For many people, the kingdom of God can be a confusing concept.

**When you think about the kingdom of God,
what images first come to your mind?**

**How did the video teaching challenge or broaden
your perspective on God's kingdom?**

Dr. Moore helped us see that the kingdom of God isn't only a new reality coming in the future but also a reality that's happening right now because it was inaugurated with the coming of Jesus.

**Why does the fact that the kingdom is here
mean we're now living in a time of war?**

**When have you experienced fighting and
struggling as a part of God's kingdom?**

**How does knowing that the kingdom of God
is in conflict with the kingdom of the world
change the way you view your life? How does
it influence the way you view the church?**

If the kingdom of God is in conflict with the kingdom of the world, then conflict is natural. The church is an outpost of the true kingdom in the midst of hostile territory.

**Reread Matthew 6:33. How would keeping our focus on the
kingdom shape our expectations not only for our lives but
also for the way we interact with the world around us?**

In closing, pray and thank God for inviting us to participate in His kingdom work.

Complete the three personal-study sections on the following pages before the next group session. One section will focus on the teachings of Jesus, one on broader teachings from Scripture, and one on how to apply these teachings to our lives.

TEACHINGS OF JESUS

Have you ever wondered what made Jesus so compelling to the first people who encountered Him? There are the obvious answers, of course—His miracles, His ability to speak with unashamed, fearless authority, and His willingness to associate with people who were deemed unapproachable in that society. But there was more. As you read the accounts of Jesus' life in the Gospels, you can't escape the fact that He was advancing something so dramatic and so opposite the predominant way of thinking that it could only be described as a new kingdom.

And just as any kingdom has a certain set of cultural assumptions and expectations, so does the kingdom Jesus was ushering in. This kingdom is an upside-down kind of kingdom; it espouses a radically different way of thinking, believing, and living. Therefore, the kingdom of Jesus stands in stark contrast to the kingdoms of the earth. If we want to embrace the kingdom of God, we must begin by embracing the reality that this kingdom is unlike the kingdoms we were all born into.

Read Matthew 5:3–12. What are some differences between Jesus' kingdom and the kingdoms we were born into?

Can you think of other occasions when Jesus contradicted the popular way of thinking and believing in His time? Record some.

What do these examples show you about His kingdom?

To embrace the kingdom of Jesus, we must embrace an entirely new set of principles that guide our thoughts. Jesus was constantly urging those around Him to unlearn their patterns of thinking in favor of adopting this new set of standards. As we read His words, we hear the nearly constant refrain of “You have heard ... , but I say to you ...” This is an entry point for understanding the kingdom of God and the King who reigns there:

- ★ The last will be first.
- ★ The servant will be the leader.
- ★ The one who loses all will gain in the end.

You can see how the teaching of Jesus, not to mention His life, exemplified this opposite way of thinking. In a world and culture bent on accumulation, power, prestige, and self-gratification, Jesus brought a new kingdom with the opposite values. He ushered in the kingdom we were always meant to live in and love.

Of course, if Jesus was introducing a new kingdom into the existing kingdoms of the world, there would obviously be friction. Those who hungered for the prized possessions of the earthly kingdoms—power and prestige—would react violently to this intrusion. Today we must also be careful not to try and impose earthly values on this heavenly kingdom.

Read Matthew 20:20–28. In one column record characteristics of the earthly kingdom. In the other column write characteristics of the kingdom of God.

Earthly Kingdom

Kingdom of God

The sons of Zebedee, James and John, and their mother were having trouble reconciling their priorities with the values of this new kingdom. It's easy to understand why: they were born into a certain way of thinking, and that line of thought isn't easily swayed.

Referring to the list you made, how would you summarize the values of James, John, and their mother?

How do those values contradict the nature of the kingdom of God?

Read John 18:28–37. How are Pilate's reactions to Jesus' kingdom similar to those of James, John, and their mother?

We can see from these accounts that the introduction of a new kingdom not only challenges the status quo of the kingdoms of the earth but also threatens them. It's essential for us to recognize, as Paul later would, that we're in a time of war. However, we have to remember:

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

EPHESIANS 6:12

When Jesus' kingdom clashed with the kingdoms of the world, the result was, expectedly, violent. Jesus, as the Prince and Emissary of this new kingdom, was executed by the kingdom of the world as a threat to its very existence. The same thing has been happening to those who follow His lead ever since. This shouldn't surprise us; we're living in a time of war. The declaration of the kingdom is a declaration of war.

In what sense are we, as citizens of this new kingdom, living in a time of war?

How is this war similar to earthly conflicts? How is it different?

We're in a war, but just as this war is different from any earthly conflict, the means by which we wage that war are different from the weapons of earthly battles. We can get a glimpse of these differences when we understand the nature of the kingdom we represent.

Read the following Scripture passages. Record how each one depicts the spiritual battle between God's kingdom and the kingdom of darkness.

Matthew 8:16–17

Matthew 8:23–27

Mark 1:23–24

Describe the battle of the kingdom in a couple of sentences. What do these verses teach you about the nature of God's kingdom?

These passages, along with a host of others, don't just show us the work of Jesus; they show us the nature of the kingdom. In inaugurating the kingdom of God, Jesus was ushering in the rightful rule and reign of God. The kingdom of God reverses all the consequences that have come about because of human rebellion against His good and loving authority. In other words, embracing God's kingdom is lovingly and willingly submitting to His authority over all things.

Jesus Himself described life in the kingdom when He announced its advent in front of a waiting congregation in Nazareth. From this passage in the Book of Luke, we see that the kingdom of God is a holistic re-creation of both the spiritual and physical realms.

Read this account in Luke 4:16–21. Circle words or phrases that are signs of God's kingdom.

He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

LUKE 4:16-21

How does this passage show that God's kingdom is both physical and spiritual?

What's the danger if we tend to think of God's kingdom exclusively as either physical or spiritual?

In this passage Jesus spoke of the future to which God was drawing His creation. This future had been pictured in the tabernacle and the temple, where God would draw close to His people. But it had also been pictured in the year of jubilee, a time when debts were canceled and prisoners were freed (see Lev. 25:8-55). The jubilee year of Israel signified that the existing power structures wouldn't always be as they were, that God would turn all things upside down.

The prophet Isaiah, whose words Jesus quoted, had been writing to a people weary of war and exile. He spoke of a jubilee that wouldn't be part of the cycle of a century but a new, lasting order (see Isa. 61:1-2). This would be ushered in by One whom God would anoint. The word *anointed* (see Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18) is kingly talk. When God anointed David, for example, with the Spirit, David was empowered to take on the enemies of the people, to fight for their safety. In the reign of the coming anointed Ruler, the prisoners would find freedom; the blind would find sight; the poor would find hope; and most important of all, the favor of God would rest again on His people. This is what we're fighting for.

God's kingdom is both a spiritual and physical reality, just as it's both here and now yet still coming. Because we live in the now, however, we live in the battle of the meantime. Jesus has shown us the end to keep in mind so that we can be active in the present battle. When we take up the battle, we join with Him in bringing His kingdom even as we pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10).

WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE

One of the more popular messages of the earthly kingdom all of us were born into can be summarized like this: “Find yourself.” This is typically an exhortation to find whatever makes you happiest, whatever brings you fulfillment, whatever you want to do and be and pursue that thing, lifestyle, person, or adventure with all the vigor you can muster.

How have you seen this message around you this week?

**What are one or two areas of your life
you’ve seen this belief try to invade?**

**How does this message contradict
the message of God’s kingdom?**

Of course, there’s a major fallacy in that line of thinking. The problem is that we’re looking inside ourselves to find our deepest meaning and satisfaction. Implicit in that search is the idea that we actually know what would be most fulfilling and meaningful to us; it’s based on the assumption that the answers to who we are and what we’re doing here are actually found inside ourselves. But anyone who has the tiniest amount of self-awareness can tell you that we humans have an immense capacity to deceive ourselves. We can think we’re doing one thing for the best reasons and purposes only to find out we were deceiving ourselves. We lied to ourselves, and that thing we went after with all the vigor we could muster ended up not being satisfying at all.

We promise ourselves happiness, and we deliver ourselves despair.

Can you relate to that statement? Identify a time when you were disappointed by something you heavily invested in.

Because everything about us, including our ability to know what's good and right for us, has been broken by sin, we must look outside ourselves to see who we really are and what we should really care about. It's through God's kingdom that we find out the answers to our most pressing questions. So who are we, in light of God's kingdom invasion?

Read Philippians 3:18–21 and circle words that describe those who are part of God's kingdom.

Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, 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.

PHILIPPIANS 3:18-21

Why do you think Paul chose those words to describe us? What are some of the implications that come with terms like these?

If we begin with the knowledge that the kingdom of God is an invasion of an opposite and upside-down-minded kingdom into the existing realm of earth, we begin to clearly see why Paul used the word *citizen* to describe who we are in the kingdom.

**What does it mean to be a citizen of a nation?
What are some of the rights, privileges, and implications that come with that designation?**

How does a person become a citizen? What does that process reveal about the kingdom of God?

Citizenship describes a person's origin and home. No matter where in the world people find themselves, they carry this identification with them. Furthermore, the most common way to become a citizen is simply a matter of birth; you're a citizen of the nation, or kingdom, into which you were born.

The same dynamics hold true in the kingdom of God. You become a citizen of God's kingdom by being spiritually born again. And just as with earthly citizenship, there are certain rights and privileges that come with spiritual citizenship in God's kingdom. This designation tells us that no matter where we are, what our vocation is, or what our present circumstances are, we have a lasting, permanent home. But the place where we currently dwell is far from it; that's why the Bible has other instructions for us as well.

Read 1 Peter 2:11–17 and circle the words Peter used to describe Christians.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

1 PETER 2:11-17

**How do these words inform our perspective
on being kingdom citizens?**

We're displaced citizens, dwelling in a land that's not our home. It's helpful in this instance to think of ourselves in terms of national diplomats who, like us, find themselves living in another land that isn't their home. Despite their nation of residency, these people live in a foreign land with a specific purpose: they're representatives of their home, emissaries of their own nation. To be true to their home country, they must represent the interests, retain the customs, and function in a way that's true to the place where they ultimately have their allegiance.

Similarly, we as Christian strangers find ourselves living in a foreign kingdom, one that's hostile in many ways to the kingdom we represent. Our customs, priorities, and values don't mesh well with our surroundings, and that's not a bad thing. It's the strangeness of Christians that sets them apart and makes them unique. If you look back at the words of Peter, you'll see that he too recognized this unique strangeness. He didn't urge his audience to normalize their behavior, to simply fit in with the context surrounding them; instead, he urged them to maintain their distinction, knowing that the values of the kingdom they represented would be so strangely out of place that they would inevitably attract the attention of those around them.

**Look back at the passage from 1 Peter. What was the
goal of the lives of the Christians described there?**

**What are some ways we might be tempted to "normalize"
our Christianity? Why is it so tempting to do so?**

**Look again at the text. How do you see a
balance between retaining our citizenship
in heaven and respecting those around us?**

Peter recognized the practicality of living in a foreign land. He said, for example, that believers, as strangers and aliens in an earthly kingdom, should submit to the laws around them as much as it was possible. For Peter, it wasn't resistance to the culture that marked the followers of Christ as much as it was their good deeds and honor. In other words, they weren't marked so much by standing against the culture around them as they were by standing for the kingdom they represented.

What's the difference between being known for what you're against and being recognized for what you're in favor of?

Which do you think we tend to gravitate toward as Christians? Why?

As anyone can attest who's lived for a time in a radically different culture from the one in which they were born, it's a lonely business. At times you can feel as if you're all alone; you're the lonely voice with different interests and priorities from those around you. That's why it's helpful for us to remember that we, as God's strangers, aren't really alone.

The church is the gathering of these strangers and aliens; it's the outpost of God's kingdom. As participants not only in God's great kingdom but also in these local outposts of that kingdom, we serve a greater purpose in the cosmos than we might even be aware.

Read the following verses.

{God} put all things under {Jesus}' feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

EPHESIANS 1:22-23

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

EPHESIANS 3:8-10

How does Ephesians 1:22–23 describe Jesus and the church?

According to Ephesians 3:8–10, what’s the purpose of the church?

When we gather together as the body of Christ, under Jesus as our Head, we not only become an outpost for the values and priorities of the kingdom of God in the midst of a hostile earthly kingdom, but we also become the showplace for God’s wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavens.

It’s a profound thing indeed to know that when the church comes together, we not only bear witness to the citizens of the earthly kingdoms around us, but we also bear witness to cosmic powers that we can’t even see. It’s as if God has put these outposts on the shelf of the universe to showcase His power and glory. In these smaller gatherings God displays His great character to any and every universal power.

Being a citizen of the kingdom of God tells us who we are and what we ought to care about. And as the strangers of God in the midst of hostile territory, we have the incredible opportunity and privilege to represent His kingdom on earth—and beyond.

GOSPEL APPLICATION

I don't know who you are, reading this page right now, but I know this. There's a cemetery plot out there somewhere, maybe not even set aside yet, waiting for your corpse. One day, no matter who you are and what you're doing, you'll be dead. And in one hundred years chances are that no one will remember your name, including the people carrying your genes in their bloodstreams. The universe seems to be conspiring against you, in everything from the natural forces that are sapping the color from your hair to the bacteria that will eventually grind your body to a maggoty pulp. The universe, it seems, isn't your friend. The universe is trying to kill you. And it will.

Indicate on the scale how often you think about the reality of death.

Never 1 2 3 4 5 Daily

How have you seen your perspective on death change as you've grown older?

What are some ways you think the knowledge of God's kingdom is changing your perspective on death?

There are different ways we might approach the reality of death. Some have a bucket-list mentality and think of all the things they want to do before they die: "I want to go skydiving," "I want to climb Mount Kilimanjaro," or "I want to see the pyramids." Of course, there's nothing wrong with doing these things, but there's

something deeply wrong with the subtext behind them. What props up these bucket lists is the idea that you live only once and that because our life span is only a span of the next 10, 20, or 100 years, we'd better make the most of it.

Jesus' gospel of the kingdom reminds us that for citizens of God's kingdom, there's much, much more.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:30–32, looking closely at the end of this passage.

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."

1 CORINTHIANS 15:30-32

What was Paul's point in relation to our perspective on trouble and difficulty in life?

In this passage Paul was in the middle of a discourse about the future resurrection of the dead for those who are in Christ. His point was that if the resurrection of the dead isn't a reality, if there's no future for us and the kingdom of God, then the best option for us would indeed be to adopt a "You live only once" philosophy. Why not? There's nothing else coming, after all, so make the most of the limited life you have.

But the gospel of the kingdom tells us there's indeed more in store for the strangers and aliens on the earth. We can't think of our present life and our future life in two segments, planning and achieving in the one and simply waiting around for the other to kick in. The gospel is more than just a ferry ticket to get us from this world to the next. The gospel is the message of holistic transformation, not only of ourselves but also of the world in which we live.

What would your life look like if you saw the gospel of the kingdom only as a ticket to heaven?

The gospel of the kingdom ought to create in us an equal measure of urgency in the present and anticipation of the future. That's because the gospel of the kingdom is both a present and a future proclamation. If we start to emphasize either of those aspects to the detriment of the other, we'll find ourselves misshapen as citizens of this kingdom.

For example, we might focus so much on the heaven that's coming that we act as though justice and righteousness in this world are irrelevant. We have no need or urgency to pursue the freedom of slaves, food for the hungry, or shelter for the homeless because heaven is about worship, so why should we care what happens on earth?

Conversely, we might frantically engage with the culture around, wringing our hands over the state of things, because we forget that the promised kingdom is yet to come in its fullness. In either case we're expressing a worldly attitude. When we see the word *worldly*, we might automatically think in terms of sin. But worldliness really means being shaped and patterned by the world around us.

Read James 1:27. Underline the two commands in this verse.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

JAMES 1:27

How does this verse strike a balance between a present focus and a future focus?

Do you tend to focus more on the future aspect of the gospel or the present implications? Why?

Jesus knew about this balance; He's the One in whom the kingdom has come. This is why we see Jesus not only urging repentance for salvation but also alleviating the physical suffering around Him. It's why we see Him not only preaching the gospel of eternal salvation but also driving out the demons in the world around Him.

When we hold these truths in balance, we're recognizing the present and future implications of the gospel both for the world around us and for ourselves. It means we don't have the luxury of classifying certain things in our lives as spiritual things and viewing the natural world around us as just a temporary environment. Everything we do matters in the present and in the future.

To really understand both the present and the future aspects of the kingdom, we have to understand the cosmic nature of the gospel of the kingdom. While we might think of the gospel message as being about our destiny, our eternity, our final place in either heaven or hell, Jesus' gospel goes well beyond that. The goal of history isn't our escape to heaven but rather the merger of heaven and earth.

Do you think most Christians would agree with the previous statement? Why or why not?

What characterizes our lives if we hold the view that we'll someday escape to heaven?

On the other hand, what kinds of things would characterize our lives if we understood that the promise of the gospel is the merger of heaven and earth?

Read the following verses.

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."

REVELATION 21:1-4

What emotions do you feel when you read these verses?

What do these verses suggest about the relationship between present and future realities?

The reality of the future informs the decisions of the present. That's why every decision we make is really a gospel-informed decision. That's why decisions like the way we treat our bodies have significance; we respect the body because we believe our material bodies are part of God's goal for us and the universe. We care about the environment because we believe this world isn't ultimately going to be scrapped. We engage in issues of politics and culture because God is preparing us to rule with Christ.

At the same time, we don't make the body ultimate. We don't worship the environment. And we don't wring our hands in fretful worry at the state of the culture. A holistic view of the gospel and the kingdom frees us to pour ourselves into loving, serving, and working because these things are seeds of the tasks God has for us in eternity.

Read Romans 8:31–39. Underline all the rhetorical questions Paul asked. Then circle around the words referring to us as Christians.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 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. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed
all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ROMANS 8:31-39

Notice the tension Paul created in this passage. Do you see it? Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Nothing in all creation, but Paul lists several things that will try. We're more than victorious, and yet we're being put to death all day long, counted as sheep to be slaughtered. This is a description of life in the kingdom in the present age.

Because of the gospel we know we're strangers and exiles in the present time. But we aren't losers. There will be "wars and rumors of wars" (Matt. 24:6)—literal and cultural—but Jesus is on the move. We fight, but we fight from triumph, not from defeat. The gospel has secured our future in the kingdom, so we now engage this conflict as members of God's victorious kingdom.