

Five Important Matters

1. **“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”** As I interact with believers in and around York, I’m appalled at the utter disinterest in the Return of Christ to earth. It’s as if the promise of a Return doesn’t even exist or, if so, it’s so far off in the distant future as to be irrelevant. Nobody cares about it. Jesus stated, **“Fear not little flock. It’s your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”** (Luke 12:32). To participate in the coming Kingdom is a gift, a terrific gift, that God is happy to offer to us. It will be a time when the demons and Satan himself will be bound in the abyss so unable to tempt anyone or carry out their hideous deeds, when the exalted Jesus will be ruling from Jerusalem, and there will be peace and righteousness on earth. There won’t be any more natural disasters or diseases. The physical world will be renewed to glorify God. And Israel will be enabled to serve God as originally intended. It will be totally glorious, and it will last for a thousand years. It should be our heart’s continuous and intense desire. But it isn’t. So what’s wrong with us? I suggest that we’re too invested in this world to want what God wants. We’re too in love with our freedoms, our prosperity, and our comforts to desire anything better. We in the West dwell in a counterfeit kingdom, and we’re too content with it. Worse, we ignore the misery that the rest of earth’s population endures, their poverty and profound ignorance, the injustices they must suffer, the violence that surrounds their daily lives, and worse. Most of the world today lives a sorrowful existence, and we seem not to care. They have only the hope of a better future to comfort them. We should pray with them, for them, **“Thy Kingdom come.”**

2. **“There was a certain man from . . . the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah . . . an Ephraimite”** (1 Samuel 1:1). But Elkanah is stated in 1 Chronicles to be a Levite. Should the 1 Samuel text be changed? More to the point: How should we read our Bibles? A Bible translator thoughtlessly suggested the text be re-written to indicate that Elkanah was a Levite, not an Ephraimite. But that’s wrong! The Scripture here is not in error. Levites had no tribal territory, but were dispersed among the territories of the other tribes. So Levites had two identities, their geographic one and their genealogic one. The 1 Samuel verse therefore is correct as it appears in the Masoretic text. The place is Ephraim because all good narratives have plot, place and persons. We need to learn to read our Bibles theologically! And to read theologically also means to read canonically. All Scripture is a whole; it’s unified, that is, its parts not only all harmonize but inter-relate. So, Ephraim is an out-of-the-way place, and Elkanah is a generic man in this unimportant, deeply rural hill country. **“God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are”** (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). This narrative in the opening chapters of Samuel is how God is starting to do something new and wonderful for His beloved nation, Israel. We have a reprise of the Creation narrative here in these chapters, along with God’s use of a lowly place and a lowly person, Hannah, a woman! A humiliated, barren woman at that. This woman is another example of from whom the seed will come, the One who will defeat Satan, fulfilling the Genesis 3:15 oracle. She adumbrates Mary, who will bring forth the promised ultimate Seed, the Messiah Jesus. Let’s learn this lesson: we don’t read our Bibles for mere information. No. We read our Bibles to be thrilled with God and all that He’s done and all that He will do. We need to know theology and read our Bibles theologically. The Scriptures were, after all, written theologically.

3. **“. . . in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But be cheerful [or courageous]. I have overcome the world”** (John 16:33). Jesus was at peace when He was taken before Pilate. He was at peace going to the cross. He was trusting in God, He knew He was obeying God’s will, and He knew He would be not only vindicated but rewarded, so He could be at peace. And He is our peace. It’s not that He has peace to give, but that He *is* our peace. Catch the difference! He offers Himself to us. Christianity is not a set of beliefs, it’s a Person. In this sin-saturated world we live in, cursed by God because of sin, there are going to be conflicts, adverse circumstances, and painful if not difficult situations facing us. They must come into our lives. And Jesus wants us to know that our response should be one of joy. Joy? Yes, because He offers us peace. But that peace (and the joy) only results from how we respond to those conflicts and the inevitable adversity. Jesus

is victor. That means He defeated by His atoning sacrifice and resurrection/ascension/exaltation everything that opposes God and God's will in our world. He overcame sin, Satan, idolatry, lusts, selfishness . . . everything. So despite the conflicts and the adverse circumstances, we can be filled with cheer, joy, courage, peace, and contentment. The indwelling Spirit of Christ continues to live out in us the same trusting attitude in God that Jesus expressed when He was here on earth. Our trusting attitude pleases God, and peace and joy result. So, never mind politics, nor threats of war, nor persecution or shame or injustice or anything that opposes God. We obediently do God's revealed will and wait for the future day when we see Jesus Himself, for that wonderful day will be our great reward.

4. **"Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said . . . 'only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better'"** (Luke 10:39-42). A renowned pastor whose messages are on TV, said, based on this text, that unlike what Martha was doing, Mary had fellowship with Jesus and that is the most important thing a believer can do. It sounded great . . . until I got to thinking, Is this really right? Both sisters were fellowshiping with Jesus. Jesus was there in that home precisely for the fellowship. He loved them, and they loved Him. There was an intense, intimate love relationship that was fulfilled by being in each others' presence. Martha expressed her love by serving Jesus. That's something we've been commanded to do, but I suspect that Martha did it not out of duty nor out of obedience, but out of love. Mary expressed her love by being close to Him, listening to Him. Jesus' statement that Mary chose what's better means that our great desire in life should be, likewise, to humble ourselves and be close to Jesus and listen to Him. Not to diminish the necessity of lovingly (and gratefully) serving Him, but to be sure our priorities are right: we're called into a deep, everlasting love relationship with the exalted Person of Jesus. Notice that Mary was at Jesus' feet listening to Him; she was exemplifying discipleship. She was not merely there to be thrilled at His words, she was learning them so as to live them. The implication here is that Martha allowed herself to be distracted; she could have been at Jesus' feet listening too, being discipled. In the busy-ness of life with all its demands, we need to be continually Christ-centered in attitude and live it out.

5. **"The truth shall make you free"** (John 8:32). Martin Luther King, Jr., made this statement of Jesus famous. When we read John, we probably pass over it, thinking, "everybody knows that." But have we grasped all that it means? I suspect not. Let's think about what "truth" is, and what "free" means, and how they go together. Truth is not just a fact that corresponds to reality. (That's how philosophers who specialize in epistemology define truth.) Truth is Jesus! Truth is a person. Jesus invites us to know Him, for to know Him is to know Truth. And He wants us to take Himself into our lives so that we live Him, for living out the indwelling Spirit of Jesus is living out Truth. Truth is something to be lived out. If we don't live it out, we probably don't know it, and/or don't believe it, and/or don't care about it. Truth isn't just an abstract word. Truth is powerful – or it's not true. Now, what does "free" mean. It means a lot! It means free from selfishness, from Satan's rule, from sin's dominion, from bondage to religious rituals and from human traditions, from the culture of shame versus honor, from condemnation due to sin, from the lusts of idolatry and worldliness, from the fear of death, and yet more. Jesus frees us from all these things. He gives us new life, *His* life, so that we can pursue lives that glorify God. Consider this example: The resurrection of Jesus isn't just a fact of history. Nor is it just a doctrine of the Church. It's Truth that demands the transformation of one's life. The resurrection of Jesus is the most important event to any Christian's life because it not only guarantees his own future resurrection but it imparts to him in the present a new life, Jesus' own life. That's life that is of infinite quality and that lasts eternally. So Truth lives. Why do we have the Book of Acts in our New Testament? Because it shows how Truth transformed the lives of those disciples and how it must transform our lives. This is a salvation issue, by the way. We're not saved by cognitive assent to certain true biblical statements, but by receiving the living Jesus, Who is Truth. Otherwise, we're still in bondage to all those things mentioned above.

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We've discussed here the importance of the Return, of how to read Scripture, of how to live with conflict, of discipleship, and of what Truth means; all so that we live biblically. May we, in all these areas, be faithful.