

# Between Two Kingdoms

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Life often feels like a wrestling match.

Peace, pain, Peace, pain.

Thrown from crisis to calm to calamity.

All the while we are straining to look towards Jesus whilst muttering to ourselves.

Really?

Or perhaps we are surrounded by well-meaning people who proffer such timely advice as:

You must never ever punch these people, no matter how much you want.

It might be a sign of getting older.

Today I want to explore what it means to live between Kingdoms – not just pie in the sky when you die, but steak on a plate while you wait.

Nope – that's too simplistic.

It might be a sign of getting older, a growing sense of our mortality perhaps that causes us to question in the midst of the chaos of life – how should we live?

How should we live when our prayers seem unanswered and heaven seems silent?

How should we live when the pain becomes unbearable?

How should we live when old certainties start to shake and crumble?

I don't know, but I am learning.

Paul has much to say on this subject, this morning I want to touch on Paul's teaching to the church in Rome.

First, a bit of context.

His letter is aimed squarely at the Christians in Rome.

Paul is so eager to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God. If the book of Romans is a mountain, then Romans chapter 8 is the summit.

Paul writes; 'But if Christ in is you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness'.

We live in the tension between life and death, stuck waiting between two kingdoms, yearning for the miraculous and timely intervention of God but also living with the 'Not yet'.

Paul wrote earlier in Corinthians that ‘For now we only see a reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see him face to face’.

The now and then.

Often we hope that the now would get a shift off so that we can begin to enjoy the then.

Now we can only see a fraction of the Kingdom. It is like we are pressed up against a picture and all we can see are small shapes, indistinct colours.

Paul is trying to paint a bigger picture of Kingdom – encouraging to realize that what we see now is not the full picture

If only we could step back and see the whole of the plan, then we might understand or at least learn to be more content in our current circumstances.

Where we to step back instead of having our noses, pressed up against the present, we might see a bigger picture

So what is going on? Why not the healing I want or the answers I crave for?

To begin to understand that, we need to look briefly at the purpose of the miraculous.

Tillich is saying simply that miracles are signposts to the Kingdom. They are events that point to a bigger picture.

Often for us, the miracles are an end in themselves. Not so for Jesus - they heralded something far more important. Just have a brief look at two miracles of Jesus and what they meant.

Water into wine and the resurrection of Lazarus

Jesus Changes Water Into Wine. John 2:2-11

**2** On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, **2** and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. **3** When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, “They have no more wine.”

**4** “Woman,[a] why do you involve me?” Jesus replied. “My hour has not yet come.”

**5** His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

**6** Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.[b]

**7** Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim.

**8** Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

They did so, **9** and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside **10** and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

**11** What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

I love that it is Jesus Mum that, in essence, kick starts his ministry of the miraculous here. I get it. Jesus has been at home for 30 years. She tells him there is no more wine.

Any parent of maturing children will know how important it is to get them out into the world.

Jesus response is brilliant; 'Woman why do you involve me, my hour has not yet come'.

'Muuuum! Not yet!

The miracle when it happens is an appetizer, a taste of what is to come.

The wine is the best – it was approximately 690 litres of quality stuff.

Now it may well be that it was the end of the wedding and the now very merry guests would have drunk rain water through a scummy sock.

Or maybe it is the 3AM kebab effect.

Just a few servants witness this, the guests are unaware – no song and dance, no fireworks, but a gradual revelation of the greatness that is to come.

It is a foretaste of the Kingdom to come.

Some miracles are just there to point us towards the source – the miracle was not the water into wine, but rather the winemaker himself.

The raising of Lazarus really hammers home the power of this new Kingdom.

Jewish expectations were for a resurrection on the last day, the final judgment – no one is ready for what is about to happen here.

Jesus has delayed his return deliberately after hearing that Lazarus had fallen ill.

John 11:4 has Jesus explaining the purpose of this miracle, just in case it passed the onlookers by.

Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

Jesus loved Martha, Mary and her brother Lazarus. Mary that had washed her Jesus feet with perfume.

On his arrival, God incarnate with the power to speak universes into being weeps at the grave that is a cave.

He is moved – even though he knows that this is not the end of the story, his compassion for those around him is overwhelming.

Jesus instruction to take away the stone was met with house proud Martha's insistence that it might whiff. Four days in a grave and no Febreze.

Jesus speaks out loud 'This is for the benefit of the people standing here that they may believe that you sent me'.

It couldn't be any clearer – the purpose of this miracle is to leave no in any doubt about who he is his credentials – what better calling card that resurrecting the dead.

Further Jesus then states that he is the 'resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me even though they die, yet shall they live'.

Tradition has it that after his resurrection, Lazarus fled persecution to Cyprus, modern day Larnaca where he was installed as a Bishop.

This is the fireworks.

This is the kingdom established.

Rewriting the rules, changing expectations - taking on death and beating it.

However, no one gets out alive – all miracles are temporary, all healings are for a moment, but a time will come when we will finally see the death of death.

Whilst we wait, this is a signpost of hope for us who live in the inbetween space .

Final, ultimate healing means full salvation of body, mind and soul.

Like many of you I have prayed for and seen the miraculous – more often than not in the lives of others.

Andy – car bricks – collar – oil – healing.

In my own experience I live in what can best be described as a mostly peaceful contentment amongst the wreckage and the wonderful.

Paul writes with some understanding of this experience when he says.

Paul's last letter was from prison, most likely in Rome – a letter punctuated with joy.

A man used to persecuting and finally being persecuted faces his death with incredible optimism before most likely losing his head under Nero around 67AD.

Many fairy tales begin ... "My life was awful, but then I met Jesus and everything became perfect".

Let us not be under any illusion. Jesus did not promise an end to troubles in this life, only the promise that he would be with us in the middle of them.

Our bodies are subject to decay and death. In his closing days, Paul spoke of the 'thorn in his flesh' and many commentators have speculated that it could be a physical infirmity, an eye condition, an aching hip or even a relentless spiritual attack. Paul pleaded three times for it to be taken from him.

The response from God is both profound and unsettling.

When we are struck on all sides, when our pleading and our pain seems to overwhelm the defences of our faith, what should we do?

Keith said it last week. We fix our eyes on Jesus.

Paul's weakness leads to a greater reliance on God's ability.

It may be true that I have learnt far more about the love and faithfulness of God in my suffering than I ever have in the calmer days.

Does this mean that we shouldn't pray for healing? We accept what we are given? If social media posts have taught us anything it is this;

Jesus remains the source of all healing and it is right to reach out, to plead, to scream and shout and it is okay to wait and grow.

And learn to be content in all circumstances – something that I am still learning.

No matter what happens to me – I have Jesus and that cannot be taken from me.

When I am weak – then I am strong.

Paul wrote that 'All things work together for good' which is completely different to 'Everything happens for a reason'.

I don't buy that. To say that everything happens for a reason is to suggest that all the pain and calamity that is visited upon us has been orchestrated by God intentionally.

You might get away with saying that to someone who has missed a bus, but it's a harder sell when you are trying to justify unbelievable cruelty or pain.

Rather, this is a God who joins with us in the middle of our challenges and through these times can use them to develop and strengthen our character or just make us lean on him more than perhaps we had.

Thanks goodness though this is not the end of the story – the best truly is yet to come.

Hope is a brilliant word, even more so when you apply it to Kingdom teaching.

Our hope as friends and followers of Jesus is not just that he would meet us in the here and now, but that there will be a there and then.

Paul writes in Romans 8:18.

In other words; short term pain, eternal gain.

In the midst of suffering or unanswered prayer it can be very easy, with our noses pressed up against the present, to fail to comprehend future glories.

Toothache is all consuming. Heartache even more so.

So what is this future glory? Nothing less than the death of death. (Romans 8:18).

Rev 21:1-6 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth, ...

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

The crucified Jesus uttered the words 'It is finished, establishing firmly the Kingdom of God on earth and with the final turn of the final chapter, God speaks the words 'It is done' a new creation, a place where we are united finally and fully with God, a place where I hope to meet one day with my Dad, whole and in his right mind.

Amongst the noise, the wind and the waves, all is not lost. God, the great retriever and restorer brings all things finally together under himself.

Finally – we find ourselves living between these two kingdoms.

A place of tension and one that is not always easily resolved, if at all in this life and I am learning that that is okay.

So I will keep on praying, seeking God, walking with Jesus.

But I will also learn to live with contentment and grace and believe that in spite of appearances, the best is yet to come.