

ANDREW KUYVENHOVEN



THE DAY

of Christ's Return

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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INTRODUCTION

“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.”

Romans 13:12

A Tough Topic

The day we discuss in this book is the one on which Jesus will come back to earth. All our days will climax on the day. We don't live for today but for the Day. We're supposed to keep thinking about the day when the Son of Man will come “in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27). In fact, we have been warned that we should not party too much nor worry too much because when we are “weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life . . . that day will close on you unexpectedly” (Luke 21:34). “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2), that is, without warning. When you live in expectation of the Lord, “this day” will not “surprise you like a thief,” but you will be happy when “the day dawns” (2 Pet. 1:19).

This day is the subject of this book. It's a fascinating topic. Yet no matter how hard I try, I find it impossible to imagine the arrival of Jesus and all the events that are associated with his coming. When I try to imagine “the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13), the best I can do is a sort of Star Trek kind of event, a space fantasy. I see a tremendous light, like a falling star, approaching the earth at great speed. It must be visible all over the globe. All of Mexico City, all of Canada, and a billion people in India see the light. When the blazing torch comes closer, we see a Person. And with a shattering noise the whole world is suddenly confronted with the Ultimate Reality. But when I am that far into my fantasy, I say to myself, you take the film industry too seriously.

It's not only the event of the Lord's coming that's impossible to imagine. The other happenings that are associated with his coming are totally baffling. “For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Cor. 15:52). The “we” who are to be changed are believers who are alive on that day. They will turn from mortal, fragile children of dust into gloriously immortal, recreated beings. It will happen “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (v. 52), faster than you can say “converted into another mode of exis-

tence.” And then they’ll meet all those who fell asleep in the Lord, millions more.

But to say that our forebears are “sleeping” and waiting for the alarm clock to go off is nonsense, of course. Sorry, it’s not nonsense, but it is an allegorical way of speaking that we may not take literally. You and I know very well that the bodies of our grandparents and their parents have returned to earth and dust—completely. As a matter of fact, the bodies of people who died long ago have been transformed into other bodies. They are in the cycle of organisms where dying and becoming food for other life is a well-known, age-old phenomenon. The bodies of the saints are irretrievably in the cycle. But the Bible says that on the day they will stand on their feet because the Voice will command them to do so. I find it unimaginable.

All who ever lived on this planet will rise when the Voice calls them. “Those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:29). Parts of our small planet are overpopulated right now. On that day billions who died will be added to the living. All of us will stand before the Lord, the Bible says. There won’t be standing room for all, one would think. And then what happens? Must all of us appear before the Judge? How many centuries will pass before your or my turn comes to stand before the Judge’s chair?

End-Time Language

It’s not only impossible to imagine the coming of Christ and the events associated with his coming, but the language in which the Bible tells us about these happenings is also painfully difficult. Bible students call it “eschatological” and “apocalyptic” language. That means it is language used to describe the end, the *eschaton*. Apocalyptic language is employed when the unutterable is put into pictures and written down in a book. It’s about stars falling like rotten apples and animals of grotesque shapes scaring the daylights out of us. It’s the extreme terror described in howling nights of horror.

The last book of the Bible is called the Apocalypse. Many wise Bible scholars, such as John Calvin and Martin Luther, have never written a commentary on that book. But many unwise people explain it as if they have next week’s answer to this week’s crossword puzzle.

No matter how our imagination fails and no matter how difficult it is to make sense of the images in the Book, we must think of the day. Christ’s final coming to bring us full salvation is a major promise and a central teaching of the New Testament. One might say that Jesus hung the validity of his claims on two predictions: the destruction of Jerusalem and his return as “the Son of Man,” who has received the everlasting kingdom from God himself. Jerusalem

has been destroyed in A.D. 70, and the temple religion has been replaced with the worship of God through the blood and the Spirit of Christ. But we are still expecting “the day of the Son of Man.”

Coming Soon

Every fresh reading of the New Testament leaves us not only with the message that Christ is coming but with the urgent news that he is coming *soon*. When Paul writes his letter to the Christians living in the capital of the Roman Empire, he writes this amazing sentence: “Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (Rom. 13:11-12). The astonishing thing is that he wrote these words in the year A.D. 57. He thought that in the year 57 they were closer to the return of the Lord than “when they first believed”—say, less than twenty years before that date. It’s like a person in the city of Toronto, Ontario, taking two steps in a southern direction in his living room and then saying, I am now a lot closer to Miami, Florida, than before I took these steps.

In church magazines and table talks we like to discuss the church’s “problems.” We write and speak of worldliness creeping in and of too little gospel truth shining out. We wonder what will happen to the Christian church in Europe and we ask each other if the North American era is coming to a close. Is God moving his candlesticks to Asia and Africa? We continue our debates about the role of women in the church and the influence of the charismatic movement on every denomination. But writers and talkers, myself included, usually fail to realize that the biggest problem of the church of Jesus Christ is that her Lord has not yet returned!

The not-yet-fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to return is also the biggest test of our faith. Do we really believe that he will come? And can we persist in prayer until he comes?



Good and Evil (detail of evil)

—Victor Orsel, 1795-1850



THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Every book of the New Testament refers to the second coming of Christ, except for the two short notes we call 2 John and 3 John.

Since the coming of Jesus is at the heart of the Christian faith, the expectation of the Lord must live in the heart of everyone who keeps the faith. By definition, a Christian is forward looking. We live by hope. The New Testament closes with a promise—"I am coming soon"—and a prayer—"Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). That promise is always on the mind of the church and that prayer lives in her heart.

The Old Testament is also forward-looking. The first promise followed the first sin (Gen. 3:15). Humanity would not always be deceived by the evil one; in the battle with the brood of the serpent, the offspring of the woman would win. When God called one man to become the father of all people, God promised that through Abraham's seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). Since the days of Abraham, God's people travel as pilgrims. Their horizons are aglow with the promises of God.

God made a covenant with the liberated slaves Moses led out of Egypt (Ex. 19-20). They broke the covenant and were punished for it. But God promised a new covenant (Jer. 31:31). Israel wanted a king and got a king, but the king disobeyed God and brought disaster on Israel. Yet God promised a future King, a good Ruler, an everlasting King (2 Sam. 7:14; Isa. 9:6-7; Ps. 110:1).

In great anger, God allowed Assyria and Babylonia to murder his people and to destroy his temple. Yet God promised a restoration of life and land and a better future for Israel.

The Old Testament closes with a vision of the day of the Lord (Mal. 4). "Surely the day is coming; . . . the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings . . ." (vv. 1-3). Then the wicked will be trampled but you will be so happy that "you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall" (v. 2).

The Old Testament believers lived by hope in the great future of God. In the New Testament that future became the present. But the end of one era was also a new beginning.

The Incomplete Fulfillment

The dawn of the sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2) occurred with the birth of Jesus. In him the hope of the Old Testament became reality. But the New Testament revealed something for which the Old had not prepared God's peo-

ple: there would be two comings of the Lord, one an appearance of grace and the other an appearance of glory. Christ came first in the form of a servant who “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:8). He died, but he arose from death. Then “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11). Today we kneel before Jesus. We confess him as Lord. But we must wait until he comes with glory before all knees will bow and all tongues confess. Only then will God’s kingdom fill the world with everlasting peace.

The great future promised in the Old Testament has partially come because the Messiah came. However, it’s only when he comes the second time that all the promises will be fulfilled.

The Old Testament does not distinguish between the first and the second comings of God in Christ. Old Testament believers saw the two comings as one event. Just as we cannot distinguish between two mountain peaks when we view them from a distance, so the Old Testament sees the two as one. We know that there’s a long distance between the first and the second mountain. We travel between the two peaks, the two comings of the Lord. God’s promises *have been* fulfilled and God’s promises *will be* fulfilled. We have been redeemed *already*. But we are *not yet* in the new country. Christ won the victory *already* but the war is *not yet* over.

Jesus Christ has not yet returned. Yet he is not absent.

We are not living in a world without Jesus. We await his coming but we are not abandoned. And we must say of his kingdom what we confess of the King: His kingdom is here *and* it is coming.

Jesus Is Here and He Is Coming

Since, when Jesus left, he said, “I am with you” (Matt. 28:20), we should not say that the Lord is absent. He is present in a different way than when he walked and talked in Galilee. Today the Lord Jesus is present by the Holy Spirit. As such, he stays with us until the end of this age. Then we will see our glorified Savior and we too will be glorified. “When he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

“It is for your good that I am going away,” said Jesus to his disciples. “Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7).

The progression of salvation history brings advantages. Today we know Jesus better than the disciples did before the day of Pentecost, for it is the Spirit who

opens our eyes for the beauty of our Lord, our ears for his Word, and our hearts for his entrance.

Through the Spirit Jesus is with us without interruption. The disciples knew moments of great panic because Jesus was absent. When they were alone in the boat, buffeted by waves, and when they saw the ghost as a sure sign of approaching death, they cried out in fear (Matt. 14:22-27). When the traitor, Judas, came with the crowd that arrested Jesus, “everyone deserted him and fled” (Mark 14:50). However, after Pentecost, when Jesus’ presence became continuous through the Spirit, these same disciples were fearless in the crowd, sang hymns in prison, and died in hope. And we can do the same, because Jesus is with us continually.

Through the Spirit, Jesus is with us universally. During his earthly ministry, Jesus traveled less than a hundred miles. But since he ascended to God’s throne and leads the great mission, he covers the globe by his Word and Spirit. He sends his willing servants. And when people receive those who have been sent, they really respond to the Sender, to Jesus (Matt. 10:40; John 20:21).

Certainly Jesus is present today. Every first day of the week since the resurrection of Jesus, we have been meeting as Christian congregations. And whenever we come together in his name, he is with us (Matt. 18:20).

To our shame, we confess that we, the members of Christ’s church, have fought each other about the question of *how* our Savior is present in the Lord’s Supper. But none of us wants to deny that we truly meet him in holy communion whenever we break bread and drink wine as he told us to do.

In this present dispensation, Jesus is here without glamour and sometimes without dignity. Unexpectedly we meet him in one who has no food, or shelter, or home, or country. But he himself will never forget what we do to the least of these relatives of his, because we do to Jesus what we do to them (Matt. 25:31-46).

Jesus is always present but he is never visible to our eyes. What *is* visible, however, are the bad things: crimes, wars, sickness, death, and all of the evil he came to remove. Even in the most blessed Christian life there’s enough misery to make us long for a complete redemption and for Jesus to be tangibly present. We don’t deny that he is here, but we pray that he be “unveiled,” revealed as Lord and Savior. We “eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed” (1 Cor. 1:7). He has glory already. He is Lord. But we pray that this reality, which is unseen and widely denied in the present dispensation, will be manifested. Then we will be together with him as we are now (Rom. 8:38-39), but in a different mode, in glory.

God's Kingdom Is Here and It Is Coming

What we have just said of the person of Jesus, we may also say of his kingdom: it invaded this world at his first coming, and it will be fully consummated when he comes again. It is *here* and it is *coming*, just as he is here and he is coming.

The kingdom is the blessed rule of God that entered into the world through Jesus when he threw out the demons and forgave sinners. "The kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28), he said, because the Spirit of God, who was in Jesus, proved stronger than the Devil, who occupied the land and who held people in bondage.

The demons knew Jesus. "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?" (Matt. 8:29). Actually their final hour had not yet come. Jesus allowed the demons to continue their destructive work for a season. He sent them into the herd of pigs. But the wild man who was possessed by a legion of demons was saved. He was dressed and he looked healthy (Mark 5:1-20; see also Matt. 8:28-34).

The final hour had not yet come, but Jesus did win the decisive battle. "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven," said Jesus, when seventy-two of his followers performed their first assignment on behalf of the kingdom of God (Luke 10:18).

Already, but Not Yet

God used Paul to explain that the decisive battle in the ongoing war took place in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The death of Jesus was the final judgment. Here the wrath of God was poured out. God punished sinful humanity in the One who represented the many (Rom. 8:1, 3; 2 Cor. 5:21). That was *the end*. "One died for all, and therefore all died" (2 Cor. 5:14).

And the resurrection was *the beginning* of the new age. The new world has actually come for all who are "in Christ." "The old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Anyone who is in Christ is already part of a new creation, even if we continue to carry the new treasure in jars of clay (2 Cor. 4:7). And even if we are "being given over to death for Jesus' sake" (v. 11), we live by faith in Christ and "we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen" (v. 18).

This teaching of the New Testament is the big surprise for those who waited for the kingdom according to the prophecies of the Old Testament. The Old Testament did not teach that the coming of the kingdom would first require a series of events: the death and resurrection of the Messiah, then two millennia of gospel preaching and divine compassion, and God only knows what more, before Christ's glory is revealed.

Both the Messiah and the kingdom are divinely different from what anyone expected. And yet, once we know Jesus as the Christ and ourselves as his own, we can see that all things happened “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3), and that the gospel of the kingdom is the beginning of the end.

Jewish Expectation and Response

Most Jews find it impossible to believe that the Messiah has already come. Some years ago, a great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, expressed the reason for Jewish unbelief in a memorable way during a discussion with Karl L. Schmidt. “You cannot convince us that the Messiah has come,” said Buber,

Our small children already know that Jesus came into the world to suffer and die for our sins. They know the mystery of the Messiah. And they may grow old without ever realizing that a suffering and dying King of Israel on a cross is an impossible folly to many.

One of the novels of Chaim Potok is *My Name Is Asher Lev*. Asher Lev grows up in a Brooklyn community of Hasidic Jews. He has the gift of drawing and painting, which brings him fame and rejection. One day Asher and his mother make the forbidden trip to the museum. There Asher meets artistic representations of Christ’s suffering.

“Can you explain those paintings to me, Mama?”

“The first ones we saw?”

“Yes.”

“They were about a man called Jesus.” . . .

“I know about Jesus,” I said. “Jesus is the God of the goyim” [Gentiles].

“Jesus was a Jew who lived in Eretz Yisroel [the land of Israel] at the time of the Romans. The Romans killed him. That was the way Romans executed people. They hung them from those big poles, the way you saw in the paintings.”

“Were many Jews killed by the Romans?”

“Thousands. Tens of thousands.”

“Why did the Romans kill Jesus?”

“He said he was the Moshiach [Messiah]. They thought he would make a revolution against them.”

“Was he the Moshiach, Mama?”

“No. He was not the Moshiach. The Moshiach has not yet come, Asher. Look how much suffering there is in the world. Would there be so much suffering if the Moshiach had really come?”

—Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, pp. 162-163

“because everyone can see that this world is still unredeemed” (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 28, and G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, p. 129).

The way in which Martin Buber expected the coming of the Messiah—in one great, liberating event—does not differ from the way John the Baptizer expected it. That’s because Mr. Buber and John the Baptizer both still belong to the Old Testament.

John the Baptizer—or “the Baptist” as English translations keep calling him—has his job description in Isaiah 40:3: “In the desert prepare the way of the LORD” (see Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4). But when John himself refers to the One for whom he is working, he speaks somewhat mysteriously about “the one who comes after me” (John 1:27). Without a doubt, his Jewish audience understood John to be speaking of the Messiah. John described the Messiah as the Mighty One and the Worthy One, whose sandals he was hardly permitted to carry.

John prepared the way for his Lord by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). The work of the Coming One he described as the baptism “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matt. 3:11). In John’s mouth these words do not refer to a marvelous experience but to the fiery furnace of God’s final judgment. That’s why the next verse reads, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). John the Baptizer announced the coming of the kingdom of heaven as the final judgment in which evil and evildoers would be done away with, but when those who repented and believed would be saved.

The Unbelief of Buber and the Frustration of the Baptizer

John the Baptizer ended up in prison, but not because he was a criminal. Wherever tyrants rule, good people pine in prison. John told Herod that he had no right to cohabit with his brother’s wife. That sermon put John in prison and finally cost him his head.

John was a great and fearless prophet—the greatest in fact—according to the word of Jesus (Matt. 11:11). But while he was incarcerated, John wasn’t worried about his own life, but whether Jesus was really the Messiah. He worried because he did not see the fire and the ax of the Lord which he, John himself, had announced and expected.

“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matt. 11:3). That was John’s question to Jesus.

Jesus’ answer deserves careful study, especially by Gentiles who have become Christians. We believe the New Testament and we think we know it. But we

often forget that we must also know the Bible of John the Baptizer and Martin Buber. For when we are Christians we belong to a Jewish family that reads a Jewish book and we are saved by a Jewish Messiah. Even the New Testament is full of allusions to the Old. Unless we know the Old, we miss all the finer points of the New.

We catch the meaning of Jesus' answer if we first read Isaiah 35, the poem about the land of hope and glory that will become reality when "your God will come" (v. 4). The desert will blossom, the hearts of the fearful will be vibrant with hope. The blind will see and the deaf will hear, the lame will leap and the mute will sing. The dry place will be a river and ruins will turn to pastures. Sorrow and sighing will flee away. Isaiah 35 pictures the country of Israel's dreams. This is God's kingdom. It is paradise restored.

Jesus answered John's disciples, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Matt. 11:4-6).

Jesus was saying that the great future had come! The blind see, the lame leap, and death departs at his command. But his last phrase, which comes from Isaiah 61:1, is the climax: "Good news is preached to the poor." The *poor* are the oppressed people of God. They hope for God's kingdom and they have nothing else to hope for. Now they receive the good news, "the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 24:14).

Jesus adds a warning: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Matt. 11:6). That means, in this connection, blessed is the person, and blessed is John, if he does not reject me because of the way in which I bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

We have no record of John's reaction to Jesus' message. But Martin Buber and his friends seem to say: You aren't the Coming One. If you were the Messiah, the world would have been redeemed at your coming. We wait for someone else, they say.

The Secret of the Messiah

Jesus is the Messiah (Christ, in Greek), which means "Anointed One." He is the promised King of Israel on whom the Spirit rests. "Jesus is the Messiah" is the oldest confession of those who were later called Christians.

In the beginning of his ministry on earth, Jesus revealed himself to his disciples by his teaching and by his works. Then he asked the big question, "Who do people say I am?" (Mark 8:27). In all three gospels this question is the conclusion and high point of the first part of Jesus' ministry (Matt. 16:13; Mark

8:27; Luke 9:18). The question is not only at the center of these writings, but by the answer to this question everyone will be judged.

Peter gave the right answer. According to Matthew, Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). Mark has, "You are the Christ" (8:29). Luke's version: "The Christ of God" (9:20).

The important word in the answer is *Christ* (in Hebrew, *Messiah*). Peter gave the right answer but he could not take credit for doing so. Flesh and blood had not revealed it. He did not find the answer by putting two and two together. No one knows the mystery of the Messiah but those to whom God reveals it.

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matt. 16:21). So also in Mark 8:31, "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things . . ." (compare with Luke 9:21f.).

The teaching that the Messiah would have to suffer and die was unheard of. Peter, the man who had just recognized the Messiah in Jesus, vehemently objected to the announcement of suffering. But Jesus commanded: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matt. 16:23). Jesus knows himself bound by a mandate from his Father and he knows that it is Satan who wants to keep him from this road of obedience. He tells Satan to get out of his way. All who do not agree with God's plan for bringing the kingdom by the way of servanthood, suffering, and the cross are the devil's advocates.

Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, he faced one great temptation: to take a shortcut to glory. He was tempted to avoid obedience until death on the cross. That was the issue in the three temptations in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). That was also the temptation in his agonizing struggle in the garden of Gethsemane. And that was the last temptation when the mockers around his cross cried: "Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe" (Mark 15:32). But he remained obedient. His loyalty to the Father and his love for us were the two nails that kept him on the cross until this phase of his work was "finished" (John 19:30). Against all expectations, but according to the will of God, Jesus was and is the crucified Messiah, who by love and suffering redeems and conquers the world.

The Heart of the Gospel of the Kingdom

Liberal teachers used to say that Jesus *thought* he was the Messiah of Israel. But when Israel rejected him, he accepted the way of the cross as God's will. Thereby he taught us valuable, moral lessons, they said. But they denied that he came into the world to offer himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

Today many evangelical teachers say that Jesus offered himself to Israel as the Messiah, but that Israel rejected him. Therefore the plans were modified. He became the suffering Messiah, who died to save all those who would believe in him—the church. But he will come back as the kind of Messiah Israel wanted in the first place, an earthly king in an earthly Jerusalem. At his second coming, they say, the nation will be converted to God. Israel will be independent and victorious over its enemies, while Messiah Jesus sits on David’s throne for a thousand years. They consider the sacrifice of Jesus an intermezzo, an act that became necessary because of the unbelief of Israel.

I will address this teaching of dispensationalism in chapter 4. At this point it is important for us to realize that Christ’s suffering is the only way for him to bring the kingdom. The cross is not a detour, as dispensationalists argue, after which Judaism gets its earthly king. But by his suffering and self-sacrifice Christ brings to us the kingdom and the glory. This is the kind of Messiah God has given us. And there is no other.

The Cross Is the Pacification of the Universe

Judaism does not have the cross, the symbol of suffering. But for the Christian religion the cross is central. On the cross Jesus offered the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2). The cross of Jesus Christ is the means by which the whole universe is reconciled to God.

Christ is the Savior of the individual believer, the Jew first, but also the Gentile. Everyone may and must confess personally, “[he] loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). However, the individual is always part of “the

In Potok’s novel *My Name Is Asher Lev*, when Asher matures as a man and a painter, he becomes famous with a painting that his agent calls “Brooklyn Crucifixion.” In it he uses the symbol of the cross and his mother as the crucified one—to express her agony due to her husband and her son:

I painted swiftly in a strange nerveless frenzy of energy. For all the pain you suffered, my mama. For all the torment of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you. . . . For the Master of the Universe, whose suffering world I do not comprehend . . . for all these I created this painting—an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment.

—Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, p. 313

body,” and apart from the body of Christ, no one can have the benefits of Christ. “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor. 12:13), the Spirit of Christ.

But having said that, we have not yet exhausted the scope of Christ’s saving work. “Through him [God was pleased] to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:20). That means that Christ went to the cross to pacify the whole rebellious cosmos. It pleased God to restore creation through the sacrifice of Jesus, so that the universe should be what he intended it to be from the beginning. And Christ himself is the heart and harmony of the cosmos. “In him all things hold together” (v. 17).

This situation, the restored dominion of God over creation, reconciled by the cross, is the kingdom for which we pray and work.

The mystery of this kingdom is not, as the dispensationalists say, that the kingdom of David’s Son was postponed on behalf of the church age. But the mystery of the kingdom is the mystery of the King. He had to suffer and die. Only by being lifted up on a cross (John 12:32) would he draw all people to himself. The cross is the heart of the Christian religion. No one who wants to bypass the cross can enter into the kingdom.

According to Jesus, John the Baptizer, who expected the kingdom of God as the judgment on evil and the removal of wickedness, was still the greatest of all Old Testament prophets. He was the greatest of all, “yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11). In this sentence greatness must not be understood in a moral sense, like being courageous. Greatness must be understood in the light of the history of salvation. As it is used here, greatness depends on one’s closeness to Jesus.

In the long row of Old Testament prophets, John was the last and *therefore* the greatest. The others saw from afar. But John could stretch out his hand and say, There he is, the Messiah! Compared with the Old Testament prophets, none was greater than John because none was closer to Jesus.

But the least in the kingdom is greater than John, because any and every New Testament believer knows the Messiah more intimately than John could have known him. John knew that the Messiah would bring the judgment; we know how Christ had to bear that judgment. John knew that the wrath of God would be displayed; we know that the wrath of God was poured out on the Messiah! The least in the kingdom is greater than John because every New Testament believer knows a Messiah who died on the cross for us. We know the mystery that was hidden. It has now been revealed.