

CHRIST AND THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

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SCRIPTURE: John 19: verses 1,2,3, and 12 through 16, with omissions.
 Then Pilate therefore took Jesus and scourged him. And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe, and said, Hail, King of the Jews! And they smote him with their hands ... And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat ... and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King. But they cried out, Away with him, Away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no King but Caesar. Then delivered he him therefore to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led him away.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, thy King cometh unto thee; he is just, and hath salvation.

In our last sermon of this series we said that God intended Israel to be the nucleus of his kingdom on earth -- the nation or people which should demonstrate to the world the benefits and blessings to be enjoyed under the government of God. In its beginnings, Israel was a theocracy, ruled by God through prophets and judges, and finally through kings. But with the advent of kings, the kingdom of Israel became more and more like the kingdoms of its heathen neighbors and less and less like the kingdom of God, and finally went down in destruction.

By many of the Old Testament prophets the expected Messiah had been pictured as a great King or Ruler or Prince. It was expected that this Messiah would be of David's line, and that he would establish Israel again as a kingdom and rule over all the earth forever. This is the gist or import of Isaiah's prophecy: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." In his prophecy of the reign of the righteous king, in chap. 32, Isaiah said: "Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness." Jeremiah (23:5) had prophesied that "A King shall reign and prosper," and that he should be a righteous branch from David. Zechariah had foretold the coming of this same righteous branch of David. Although Moses had not used the word "king," he had foretold a great prophet, and had counselled the people that this prophet should be heard in all things; that is, in matters of government as well as of religion. Micah had prophesied that out of Bethlehem should come one who was to be ruler in Israel. (Micah 5:2) Jacob had prophesied that "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh (Christ, or 'he whose it is') come ..." (Gen. 49:10)

When the wise men came from the east, they were seeking this king; for they asked "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" Notice that he was not elected, or appointed, or nominated, but born king of the Jews. The wise men were wiser than the people of Israel, who in spite of all the ancient prophecies, failed to recognize their king. Some of them did recognize Jesus as a king. Nathaniel said on meeting him, "Thou art the King of Israel!" (John 1:49) The populace of Jerusalem, when they heard that Jesus was coming into the city, strewed palm branches in his path and cried, "Hosannah: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord."

If Israel had been truly willing to accept Jesus as their King, and had been willing to join with him in setting up again the kingdom of God on earth, not by worldly methods, or by worldly force and power but by heavenly methods and power, what might have been the history of that nation and people which have been scattered and persecuted and homeless for over two thousand years? The chief priests, who saw their control of temple worship and temple income slipping from their hands if this King should be accepted by the people, took the lead in rejecting and destroying him. There is something ironical and at the same time depressingly sad about the fact that the Pharisees, who were supposedly so anxious for the coming of the Messiah and the re-establishment of Israel as a kingdom, should have been the leaders in destroying the King who came in the name of the Lord.

A point which is frequently overlooked in our study of the life and death of Jesus is the fact that he was tried, condemned, and executed under Roman law on a political -- not a religious charge. Luke 23:2,3 says: "And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is a King. And Pilate asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And he answered him, and said, Thou sayest it." John's account adds that when Pilate asked, "Art thou King of the Jews?" Jesus' reply included the explanation, "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence."

Of course it is true that Pilate found Jesus innocent of this political charge, but the chief priests still clamored for his death. Blasphemy, the charge originally made before the Sanhedrin, was punishable by death according to ancient Jewish law, but not under Roman law. Since Pilate could not condemn Jesus to death therefore on a charge of blasphemy, he allowed the political charge to stand, though convinced of Jesus' innocence. No doubt he was influenced by the crafty blackmailing argument of the priests: "If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend; whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar." Placing Jesus before the mob, Pilate asked: "Behold your king," but they continued to clamor for his death. "Shall I crucify your King?" asked Pilate. "We have no king but Caesar," replied the crowd; and thus gave final rejection to him who was born King of the Jews. There is something deeply tragic and awful in the fact that the very people who were looking for a great Messiah and King to deliver them from Rome should betray him whom they sought with the declaration "We have no king but Caesar."

Jesus was led away to be crucified. The title and superscription which Pilate ordered placed on the cross proclaimed him as "King of the Jews." The chief priests tried vainly to get the writing modified to read that Jesus had only said he was King of the Jews, but Pilate was adamant; "What I have written, I have written: let it alone," he said. Even on the cross Jesus had to bear the taunts of the scribes and chief priests who said, "If he be the king of Israel, let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe him."

By this rejection of their king, the nation and the people of Israel lost for thousands of years their right to be the ruling nation of earth -- the nation which under the government of God should show the other nations how to live in peace and love and prosperity. The Jews rejected the King, and therefore the kingdom of God. Some forty years later Jerusalem was destroyed, and the last vestiges of the kingdom of Israel with it, and the kingdom of God has been lost to Israel as a nation ever since.

Modern Gentiles, as well as ancient Jews, are ostensibly seeking the kingdom, but rebelliously rejecting the King and his laws, and are following false Gods and modern Caesars instead. Patiently the King awaits your allegiance and mine. Persistently this crucified, risen, ever-living King challenges us to cease our rebellion, pledge allegiance to him, enter his kingdom, obey his laws, and live under the blessings of his reign. Why not accept him as King, and enter into his kingdom?