

A STUDY OF PAULINE PASSAGES ON INHERITING THE KINGDOM*

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DOES THE PHRASE “INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD” mean possession of rewards in the millennial kingdom, or entrance into it, or both? And does Paul’s use of the word “kingdom” refer solely to a *future* kingdom or to a present reality? A study of the many passages where Paul used the phrase “inherit the kingdom of God,” the term “inheritance,” and the word “kingdom” can help answer these questions.

ROMANS 4:13–14

“For not through the law was the promise given to Abraham or to his descendants that he would inherit the world, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they become heirs by the law, faith becomes invalid and the promise nullified.”¹ To “inherit the world” here is based on “the righteousness of faith,” not on merits obtained through the Law; otherwise faith and the promise are ineffective and voided.

The word “promise” does not refer to any of the promises given to national Israel (e.g., land, Gen. 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:18–21; 17:6–8; 22:17), but to the promise of justification by faith offered to both Israelites and Gentiles (Gen. 3:15; 12:3; Rom. 3:27–30; Gal. 3:7–8). Thus the church composed of Jews and Gentiles is in view. Those who by faith “belong to Christ” are Abraham’s “children” (i.e., descendants) and are “heirs according to [God’s] promise” (Gal. 3:29).

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¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are the author’s translations.

It follows that those who are Abraham’s children by faith and who will thus inherit “the world” (Rom. 4:13; in the millennium) are the same as those who are heirs of God by faith alone (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:29; 4:1).²

ROMANS 8:17

“But if children, then heirs, on the one hand heirs of God, on the other hand co-heirs with Christ, if indeed [εἴπερ] we suffer with Him that we may also be glorified with Him.” In this verse Paul seems to have united both concepts of inheritance: the nonmeritorious aspect, which pertains to faith alone, and the meritorious aspect associated with suffering with Christ.

The subordinating conjunction εἴπερ introduces a contingent action or fact that confirms the reality of an event.³ In 8:9 εἴπερ denotes “seeing that,” and some interpreters say it is equivalent to γάρ, or “if, as is the fact.”⁴ Yet several details argue against this view in verse 17b.

All Christians are “heirs of God” (κληρονόμοι θεοῦ) simply by faith. However, to be co-heirs or joint-heirs with (συγκληρονόμοι) Christ is conditioned (εἴπερ) on believers’ suffering with Christ.⁵

² See René López, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver*, rev. ed. (Springfield, MO: 21st Century, 2009), 93–94.

³ F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 237 §454.2.

⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1980), 407. William H. Simcox believes that εἴπερ in Romans 8:17 indicates a “fact.” See also Max Zerwick, *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples*, trans. Joseph Smith (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), 107; and William E. Brown, “The New Testament Concept of the Believer’s Inheritance” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984), 95–103.

⁵ Many commentators view the particle εἴπερ either as a conditional admonition to be fulfilled or as an encouragement to suffer with Christ in order to be glorified with Him. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 506 n. 50; Bernhard Weiss, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 9th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1899), 358; and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 502. James D. G. Dunn says, “Paul takes up the already established link between sonship and suffering in Jewish thought (as in Prov 3:12; Tob 13:4–5; Wisd Sol 3–5; Add Esth 16:14–16; Pss. Sol. 13.8–9 . . .) and adapts it to Christian eschatology. Here again a distinction between εἰ and εἴπερ is evident: in v 17a εἰ denotes a necessary and sufficient condition fulfilled (‘since’), but εἴπερ denotes a condition not yet fulfilled and therefore a consequence dependent on the fulfillment of the condition . . . ‘in order that we might be glorified with him.’ The final force of the *ὅτι* should not be weakened. The implication is again clear: suffering with Christ is

Only mature sons of God who live righteously as they are led by the Spirit (8:13–15) attain co-heirship with Christ.⁶ Four facts indicate that co-heirship with Christ (cf. 2 Tim. 2:11–13) is conditioned on suffering with Him.

First, the two Greek terms show the difference between the heirship (κληρονόμοι) obtained on believing in Christ and the co-heirship (συγκληρονόμοι) earned by suffering for Christ. This distinction is further seen by the use of the σύν compound verbs συμπάσχομεν (“suffer with”) so that believers may also be συνδοξασθῶμεν (“share in glory with”; cf. Rom. 8:18, where the meaning of glory is further defined).

Second, the first particle εἰ, which should be translated here as “since,” differs from the second conditional particle εἴπερ (“if indeed”), which introduces Christian suffering as an indispensable condition of future glory.⁷ The shift of particles then indicates a transition in thought, from an established fact to a condition that follows.

Third, two other important particles—μὲν . . . δὲ—appear between “heirs of God” and “joint-heirs with Christ” and indicate two contrasting heirships.⁸ Not seen in most English translations,⁹ the contrastive sense may be rendered as follows: “On the one hand” (μὲν) heirs of God, but “on the other hand” (δὲ) joint-heirs with Christ. Paul used this same structure throughout Romans (2:7–8, 25; 5:16; 6:11; 7:25; 8:10, 17; 9:21; 11:22, 28; 14:2, 5), and it always indicates contrastive, but never conjunctive, constructions.¹⁰

not an optional extra or a decline or lapse from the saving purpose of God. On the contrary, it is a necessary and indispensable part of that purpose. Without it future glory would not be attained” (*Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1988], 456).

⁶ Obviously the Holy Spirit does not automatically lead all believers. The Spirit’s leading depends on the believer’s choice, since Christians can grieve the Spirit and choose to ignore His leading (Gal. 5:16–18, 22, 25; 6:8; Eph. 4:30; 5:18).

⁷ Wilhelm Michaelis, “σμπάσχω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 925–26. Michaelis also sees συμπάσχω as indicative of genuine Christianity, fellowship with Christ, and the bestowal of divine sonship (ibid., 926).

⁸ This is not an innovative concept. An inheritance may be obtained (unmeritoriously) as a gift, and may also include stipulations necessary to obtain further blessings (meritoriously).

⁹ However, both the New Century Version and the New Living Translation employ the contrast by translating the second conjunction δὲ as “but.”

¹⁰ Although most commentators do not see this condition here, other interpreters do. See Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 376; Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel under Siege: Faith and Works in Tension* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981), 127, 129,

Fourth, Scripture clearly supports this view in other places by showing that rewards are conditioned on works or suffering (Matt. 6:1; 25:14–30; Luke 11:19–27; 1 Cor. 9:16–27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Phil. 3:8–11; Col. 3:24; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Heb. 10:35; 11:26; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:4; 1 John 2:28; 2 John 8; Rev. 2–3).¹¹ Thus Paul taught here that at regeneration all believers become heirs of God, but only those who suffer will “be glorified with Him.” This “glory” (δόξα) “revealed in” the “sons of God” (Rom. 8:18–19) refers to the faithful believers’ participation in the glorious honor, prestige, and reward of reigning with Christ over creation (vv. 18–23; cf. 2 Tim. 2:12; Heb. 1:8–9; Rev. 2:26–28). When a king was crowned (for his faithfulness to the kingdom he served; cf. Heb 1:5–9), he was “glorified.” So believers (as His “cabinet members” who remain faithful to Him) will also be crowned (1 Cor. 9:25; Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 2:10; 3:11) and glorified (for their faithfulness) with many rewards.¹²

181; Robert N. Wilkin, “Christians Who Lose Their Legacy: Galatians 5:21,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 4 (autumn 1991): 32. Earlier commentators have also held this view: C. H. Mackintosh, “A Voice from the Past: Sonship and Heirship,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 10 (spring 1997): 65–68; G. H. Lang, *Firstborn Sons, Their Rights and Risks: An Inquiry as to the Privileges and Perils of Members of the Church of God* (London: Oliphants, 1943; reprint, Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle, 1984), 65, 120–21; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (London: Rivingstons, 1865; reprint, Chicago: Moody, 1958 [4 vols. in 2]), 2:69; H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 148. Frederick L. Godet says, “Paul knows well that, as ambitious as we are of glory, we are equally ready to recoil from the necessary suffering. Now it is precisely in suffering that the bond between Christ and us, in virtue of which we shall be able to become His co-heirs, is closely drawn. We only enter into the possession of the common heritage of glory, by accepting our part in the common inheritance of suffering; εἴπερ: ‘if really, as we are called to it, we have the courage to’” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. A. Cusin [Edinburgh: Clark, 1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956], 311, italics his). Similar to Godet’s view is that of John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 299.

¹¹ See Harry Ashe Lane, “Paul’s Use of the Root *Kleronomeo* in Relationship to the Believer’s Inheritance in the Eternal Kingdom” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1978), 43–46; and Hodges, *The Gospel under Siege*, 127–30. A similar proverbial saying occurs in Sirach 22:23. “Obtain the trust of your neighbor in his poverty, that you may rejoice with him in his prosperity; stand by him in time of affliction, that you may share [κληρονομία] with him by being a co-heir [συγκληρονομήτης].”

¹² This “glory” should be distinguished from the “glory” that will be experienced by all believers in heaven. Glorification is the third and final stage of salvation (following redemption and sanctification). For an expanded discussion of this subject see López, *Romans Unlocked*, 173–82. Δόξα may be defined as “honor as enhancement or recognition of status or performance, fame, recognition, renown, honor, prestige reputation” (Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd

1 CORINTHIANS 15:50

“Now this is what I am saying, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, neither can corruption inherit incorruption.” Some believe that this verse refers to obedient believers who will inherit rewards in the millennial kingdom when Jesus will rule on the earth. In this view to inherit the kingdom is something earned by one’s faithfulness to Jesus rather than as a realm that all believers enter when He returns.¹³

However, several factors argue against interpreting inheritance in this verse as referring solely to rewards rather than entrance into the kingdom. First, 1 Corinthians 15:50 connects with verse 49, which affirms that all believers will have bodies of a different nature that will help them live an obedient life (like “the man from heaven”) in contrast to that of the “man of dust” (the fallen man whose substance is controlled by the flesh, as in v. 44).¹⁴ Then verse 50 connects with what precedes it (vv. 44–49) and with what follows (vv. 51–54) by the terms “corruption” and “incorruption.” Thus verse 50 affirms that those of the church (not saints of

ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 256–57, italics theirs).

¹³ Dillow holds this view. “Paul’s statement, in order to be made consistent with the rest of the Bible, requires that there is a difference between being a resident of the kingdom and inheriting it. Clearly, human beings in mortal bodies [will] live in the kingdom, but they are not heirs of that kingdom” (*The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 78). George H. Peters also equates inheriting the kingdom with becoming a ruler (*The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus, the Christ* [New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884], 1:602). Two problems plague this interpretation. First, Paul here spoke only of saints of the church age rather than all believers. The verse refers to church saints, not tribulation or millennial believers who will have mortal bodies. Second, the context does not address rewards. Instead, it motivates believers to be faithful by noting that they will receive a glorious, resurrected body before being transferred to the kingdom.

¹⁴ First Corinthians 15:44 states, “It [the present body] is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is a physical body.” Many believe this verse teaches that believers now have a “material-physical” body, but in the Resurrection they will have an “immaterial-spirit” body. Paul could not mean the resurrected body is “immaterial” because that would argue against the point he made that all matter is not of the same “kind” of substance. The contrasts in the analogies are not denoting two different substances of human existence (*immaterial-spirit* versus *material-flesh*) but two different *kinds* of material substance (*material-Spirit-controlled* versus *material-flesh-controlled*). Furthermore Paul did not use the adjectives “natural” (ψυχικός) and “spiritual” (πνευματικός) in the Corinthian letter to refer to objects or persons composed of immaterial or material substance. Instead he employed the terms to emphasize the kinds of powers that are controlling a person. Either a person is controlled by a *fleshly, carnal, or human* force or he is controlled by the *Spirit* (1 Cor. 2:13, 15; 3:1; 14:37). See René A. López, *The Jesus Family Tomb Examined: Did Jesus Rise Physically?* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century, 2008), 226–29.

every era)¹⁵ will not enter the kingdom of God in their present state, since everyone will be changed, as indicated in verse 51 (similar to 1 Thess. 4:13–5:10).¹⁶

Second, in 1 Corinthians 15:49 Paul used the first-person plural “we” to indicate that he included himself with the Corinthian believers. Also verse 49 is connected with verse 50 by the use of τοῦτο δὲ. Then in verses 51–54 he stated that this will take place at the rapture. In describing this Paul again used a first-person plural noun: “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed” (v. 51). At the rapture every living believer will be immediately changed. They will be given an incorruptible, Spirit-controlled nature (v. 44), unlike the present state of the Corinthian believers who were letting their fleshly nature control them (2:13, 15; 3:1; 14:34–39).

When all church-age believers undergo this transformation at the rapture, they will “inherit [i.e., enter] the kingdom of God.” Paul hoped that this coming transformation would inspire the Corinthian believers to experience something of that future reality by living a Spirit-controlled life now.

When Paul wrote in verse 50 that “flesh and blood [those alive at the rapture] cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” he simply meant that believers cannot take part in God’s future kingdom in their weak, frail, and sinfully driven condition.¹⁷ A fundamental change in their nature must take place in church saints in order for them to belong to that kingdom.¹⁸

GALATIANS 3:18, 29; 4:1, 7, 30

In Galatians 3:18, 29 “inheritance” refers to the “promise” that believers will experience in the world to come (i.e., the millennium). “For if the inheritance is founded on the Law, then it cannot be based on the promise, but God gave it to Abraham through prom-

¹⁵ The statement “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50) is not a universal truth applicable to all believers in every age; rather it applies only to church-age believers (as vv. 51–54 indicate), since many in the Tribulation will enter the millennium in natural bodies (Matt. 24:13; 25:34–46).

¹⁶ Joachim Jeremias also connects 1 Corinthians 15:51 with 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 (“Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God,” *New Testament Studies* 2 [February 1956]: 153).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁸ Although Old Testament saints at the resurrection before the millennium (Rev. 20:1–6) may undergo a similar transformation like that of the church (1 Thess. 4:13–5:10), 1 Corinthians 15:50–54 speaks only of church-age saints.

ise.” As seen in 3:15–19 this inheritance is based purely on faith and is given to believing Jews and Gentiles.¹⁹

Galatians 3:29 refers to the same concept, but it connects the heirs of the promise (Jews and Gentiles, v. 28) with both belonging to Christ and being Abraham’s seed by faith (cf. vv. 3:9–14). “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (3:29). To be “heirs” (cf. “heir” in 4:1, 7, 30) is based solely on faith in Christ and is not earned (3:6–9). As shown in 4:1–7 a Jew or a Gentile becomes a child of God by faith in Christ.²⁰ “The inheritance promised to Abraham belongs to the children of the promise who, being believers themselves, are blessed with believing Abraham (3:9).”²¹ As Dunn concludes, “The inheritance promised to Abraham (see on 3:18) . . . had been the point to the argument: if Paul was correct, the Gentile Galatian believers need do or receive nothing more in order to be sure of belonging in God’s family; they were sons already, and so their share in the inheritance of Abraham was secure.”²²

EPHESIANS 1:11, 14, 18

Ephesians 1:11a may mean that believers are the inheritance (or the “chosen”; a passive verb ἐκληρώθημεν) whom God possesses in Christ along with everything else (v. 10). The New International Version translates it that way: “In him we were also chosen.” To interpret the verb ἐκληρώθημεν, “we were obtained by lot,” as Chrysostom does, and connect it with terms in Romans 8:28, 30, destroys the meaning of the verb and relegates κληρώω to a mere synonym of “to choose” or “to call.”

A better option is to see the passive verb ἐκληρώθημεν expressing the point that believers are God’s inheritance. This word, Hoehner says, “is a passive [verb] with the idea that the believer is viewed as God’s inheritance and could be translated ‘we were made a heritage (of God)’ (RV, ASV). The strength of this view is that it

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 174; and K. M. Campbell, “Covenant or Testament: Heb 9:16, 17 Reconsidered,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 44 (April–June 1972): 107–11.

²⁰ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 200, 225. See also Brown, “The New Testament Concept of the Believer’s Inheritance,” 106–10.

²¹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 225.

²² James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 222.

has OT precedent where Israel is called God's possession (Deut 4:20; 7:6; 14:2) or heritage (Deut 9:26, 29; 32:9; cf. 1QS 2:2).²³ Furthermore, since Ephesians 1:2–13 records a number of benefits believers receive from God, Hoehner concludes, "God possesses the believers because of all he has done for them."²⁴

Then in Ephesians 1:14 Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit "is the down payment [ἀρραβών] of our inheritance [κληρονομίας] until the redemption of God's possession to the praise of His glory." Here "inheritance" refers to the believer's eternal life, which is guaranteed by the sealing of the Holy Spirit (v. 13; cf. 4:30), who was given as a down payment or guarantee of the believer's future glorification (1:14). The genitive κληρονομίας seems to function as a partitive genitive, indicating that the Spirit does not represent the believer's entire inheritance.²⁵ As Hoehner observes, "This inheritance qualifies believers to live eternally in heaven in the presence of God. We have a little bit of heaven in us, namely, the Holy Spirit's presence, and a guarantee of a lot more in the future."²⁶

Although in verse 14 the term κληρονομίας refers to part of the believers' inheritance that guarantees them a share in heaven, κληρονομίας in verse 18 refers to *God's* inheritance in believers. "Because of his choosing, redeeming, adopting, and sealing us, we are his possession. Thus, his possession is located in the saints. He will fully gain his inheritance when the saints are removed from this earth and come into his presence. Therefore, not only do we have an inheritance (v. 14) but he also has an inheritance (vv. 11, 18)."²⁷

In all three verses (vv. 11, 14, 18) the inheritance is nothing that believers earn by obedience; instead this inheritance stems solely from God's grace.

COLOSSIANS 3:24

"Whatever you should be doing, work at it with all your soul, as to the Lord and not for people, since you know that from the Lord you

²³ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 226–27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁵ For a discussion of partitive genitives see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 84–86.

²⁶ Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 243.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 267.

will receive the reward of the inheritance [κληρονομίας]. Serve the Lord Christ.”²⁸ Some writers equate κληρονομίας here with “eternal life or salvation.” However, this view is highly questionable on a grammatical and theological level.²⁹

First, grammatically the inheritance the Lord’s servants can expect to receive is in the future, as indicated by the future middle indicative verb ἀπολήμψεσθε.³⁰ If they do wrong, however, they can also expect to receive just retribution for that action. This too is indicated by the future middle indicative verb κομίσειται, “will receive” (v. 25).³¹

Second, numerous passages show that Colossians 3:24 does not refer to receiving eternal life as a reward for obedience. Instead it is a gift (cf. John 3:16; 4:10–12; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 20:31; Rom. 3:21–

²⁸ The last sentence, “Serve the Lord Christ” (τῷ κυρίῳ Χριστῷ δουλεύετε) can be interpreted as indicative or imperative. Some manuscripts add the word γάρ (“for”) to clarify the relationship to the previous clause and to read the sentence as an indicative: “Because you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord, for it is the Lord Christ you are serving.” Yet other manuscripts exclude γάρ and present the sentence as imperative. In this sense “serve” matches the imperative ἐργάζεσθε (“work”) in verse 23. The imperative seems to fit best with the γάρ in verse 25, which explains the outcome that will result if the believer does not heed the command. For an extensive discussion of this issue see Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 185–86.

²⁹ Numerous scholars equate this “inheritance” (as they do almost all of Paul’s usages of the word elsewhere) with eternal life. Eduard Lohse says this verse refers to salvation that could be lost. “No one would want to forfeit this precious gift through disobedience” (*A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971], 161). But if it is a gift, how can it be based on obedience (cf. Rom. 4:2–5)? The contradiction is evident. See also Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 185; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 229; James D. G. Dunn, *The First Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 257; Brown, “The New Testament Concept of the Believer’s Inheritance,” 152–53; and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 174.

³⁰ R. McL. Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, International Critical Commentary (London: Clark, 2005), 285.

³¹ Robert W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 162. Rewards (Judg. 9:16; 2 Sam. 19:37) and just retribution in the future were common concerns in the Old Testament (Pss. 69:22; 91:8; 94:2; Jer. 51:57; Hos. 9:7). This is true especially in the eschaton (Isa. 34:8; 61:2; 63:4). The same emphasis is seen in Second-Temple Judaism (1 Enoch 22:11; *Testament of Abraham* 10:15; 12:15). Philo mentioned that future inheritance comes to those who obey with all their hearts and so they will be rewarded (*De Specialibus Legibus* 2.90; 3:1.137–38; cf. 1 Pet. 2:19–20). See also Dunn, *The First Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 256.

4:25; Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:3–7; Rev. 22:17). The heavenly inheritance (κληῆρος, “lot” or “portion”) mentioned in Colossians 1:12 and prepared for believers in heaven (termed “hope” and “glory”; 1:5, 27; 3:1–4) differs from κληρονομία.³² As the context makes clear, this κληῆρος is based solely on faith in Christ (1:12–14).

Third, 3:23–25 indicates that obedience is a requirement for attaining this κληρονομία. If this inheritance refers to justification, then that contradicts Pauline thought elsewhere (Gal. 3:6–9, 18, 29; 4:1, 7, 30; cf. 4:2–5, 13). Instead κληρονομία in Colossians 3:24 is a reward paid to obedient believers.³³ As Bruce observes,

The judgment on disobedience is as certain as the reward for faithfulness. While salvation in the Bible is according to grace, judgment is according to works, whether good or bad, for believers as for unbelievers. It is probably implied that, while sowing is now, the reaping is hereafter—before the tribunal of Christ (as in 2 Cor. 5:10 [cf. Rom. 14:10–12; 1 Cor. 3:12–17; 4:4–5]). It may be difficult to understand how one who by grace is blessed with God’s salvation in Christ will nevertheless be requited for wrongdoing before the divine tribunal, but it is in accordance with biblical teaching that judgment should “begin with the household of God” (1 Pet. 4:17), and even if the tribunal is a domestic one, for members of the family of God, it is by no means to be contemplated lightly.³⁴

In Colossians 3:24 κληρονομία then refers to a reward received for a believer’s faithfulness to the Lord.

TITUS 3:7

Titus 3:7 mentions that believers are heirs and have a confident expectation of eternal life. When believers are saved apart from works (v. 5), “through [διὰ, ‘by means of’] Jesus Christ” (v. 6) and are “justified” (aorist passive participle, v. 7), they become κληρονόμοι (“heirs,” v. 7) who will receive eternal life. To become an heir of eternal life is based on God’s “mercy” (v. 5), and the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ is for those who believe.³⁵ To

³² Werner Foerster, “κληρονόμος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (1965), 758–60.

³³ Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 68.

³⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 169–70.

³⁵ “Before moving on to the goal of God’s salvific endeavors (v 7b), Paul summarizes the discussion so far (vv 4–6), much in the same fashion that Rom. 5:1 summarizes 3:21–4:24. Δικαιωθέντες, ‘having been justified,’ stands in stark contrast to δικαιοσύνη, ‘righteousness,’ in v 5. There it describes human attempts to perform certain

be an heir in this context is tantamount to being a Christian. As Brown explains, “Here, becoming an heir is described as a benefit of justification.”³⁶

ROMANS 14:17

In seeking to settle matters between believers on questionable practices (whether one can eat foods offered to idols), Paul encouraged believers to focus on the most important issues in order to live in harmony with one another, “for the kingdom of God does not consist of food or drink, but of righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” The “kingdom” may refer to the sphere where only the regenerate exist and where God rules in the lives of believers. Yet in the eight times the expression “the kingdom of God” occurs in Paul’s epistles (1 Cor. 4:20; 6:9–10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Col. 4:11; 2 Thess. 1:5), it is more consistent to interpret it as a literal future kingdom, with present operative principles to be fully realized in the future after Christ returns.³⁷

As McClain makes clear, “The thought here fits a *future* kingdom better than a present one. For surely in the present life no one can deny the importance of meat and drink; but in the future kingdom these things will be of no consequence. Therefore since the church is to reign in that kingdom, its members should not judge or grieve one another in such matters here and now (cf. vv. 13–21). All disputes of this nature should be left for ‘the judgment seat of Christ.’”³⁸

works and to earn one’s salvation; here it describes true justification, which can only be received as a result of God’s graciousness and the believer’s faith. . . . God initiates the process that is carried out through the work of Christ and the Spirit, and as a result believers become heirs” (William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000], 450–51).

³⁶ Brown, “The New Testament Concept of the Believer’s Inheritance,” 110.

³⁷ Moo acknowledges that almost all the passages noted above “refer to the future state of the kingdom established by Christ at his return.” However, he believes that 1 Corinthians 4:20 is “the only other clear reference in Paul to the present kingdom of God” (and perhaps Col. 1:13) (*Romans*, 857 n. 40). Since he says “the only *other* clear reference,” he may think that Romans 14:17 refers to a present form of the kingdom. This does not mean Paul could not use the term in question differently here than elsewhere, but the burden of proof lies on the person saying so, especially since the context points to future realizations (Rom. 14:4, 11–12).

³⁸ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: Moody, 1968; reprint, Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1974), 434 (italics his).

1 CORINTHIANS 4:20; 15:24

In 1 Corinthians 4:20 Paul wrote, “For the kingdom of God does not consist of [idle] speech [ἐν λόγῳ] but of power [ἐν δυνάμει].” The “*condition of its [the kingdom’s] existence*” is “not in speech, but in power.”³⁹

Fee admits that most of Paul’s uses of the term “kingdom” refer to the consummation of this era on Christ’s return. Yet he favors an “already, not yet” perspective and believes this verse refers to the kingdom’s present reality begun by Jesus’ resurrection and by the Spirit’s coming in power.⁴⁰ “Here is the line of demarcation between their view of spirituality and Paul’s. They were living in the Spirit as though the future had dawned in its fullness.”⁴¹ Barrett also holds this view and places Romans 14:17 in the same category.⁴²

Conzelmann believes that “the eschatological character of the ‘kingdom of God’ is not abrogated by the fact that it provides a criterion in the present; 6:9f; 15:50; Rom 14:17; Gal 5:21; 1 Thess 2:12 (2 Thess 1:5).”⁴³ That is, some characteristics of the future kingdom can apply to believers in the church. But what aspect of the kingdom did Paul have in mind? According to 1 Corinthians 4:3–8 Paul was seeking to influence the present behavior of the Corinthians in light of their potential rule in the future kingdom. That is consistent with the fact that in verses 5 and 8 he referred to the future reign in the kingdom in connection with present behavior. McClain observes the latter and notes another detail about the use of δύναμις elsewhere. “The same Greek term is used to describe the great public miracles which, according to Hebrews 6:5, belong to ‘the age to come,’ that is, the Kingdom age. To interpret 1 Corinthians 4:20 as a present kingdom of the saints would make Paul

³⁹ Heinrich A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistles to the Corinthians*, trans. D. Douglas Bannerman, 5th ed. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884), 104 (italics his).

⁴⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 192.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 118.

⁴³ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 93 n. 29.

contradict what he had already written in verses five and eight.”⁴⁴ As Meyer concludes, “The βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, again, is not here, as it never is elsewhere . . . the *church*, or the *kingdom* of God in the *ethical* sense, . . . but the *Messianic kingdom*.”⁴⁵

First Corinthians 15:24 mentions that when τὸ τέλος (“the end”) arrives, Christ will hand over the kingdom to God the Father. What aspect of the kingdom did Paul have in mind here? First, one view suggests that this kingdom began at Christ’s exaltation to the right hand of God at His resurrection (Ps. 110:1; cf. Acts 2:26–36). Bruce defends this view.

The temporal adverb *eita* implies an interval of indeterminate duration between the parousia and the **end**, when Christ hands his dominion back to God; the context suggests that the interval is short. Earlier in this letter Paul has indicated that in the final phase of Christ’s kingship his people will share it with him (4:8) and judge the world (6:2). When this has been accomplished, the present age comes to an **end**. The kingship of Christ, the age of the Messiah, began with his exaltation to “the right hand of God”; Paul envisages him as reigning from that position of supremacy, in terms of Ps. 110:1.⁴⁶

Although Bruce believes the context hints that the interval between the παρουσία and the end “is short,” nothing contextually suggests this. In fact, as he admits, εἶτα entails “an interval of indeterminate duration” and rather suggests a chronological order of time. Furthermore the term “king” is never used of Christ for His rule over the New Testament church; instead the term used is “Lord” (e.g., Acts 2:36; 16:31).⁴⁷ Thus it seems highly improbable that Paul meant that the kingdom in 1 Corinthians 15:24 is a spiritual form over which Christ is now ruling as King.

⁴⁴ McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 435. Of course this does not prove that δύναμις is always used with the future kingdom in mind, since Paul clearly used it in Romans 1:16 to reveal that God’s power is able to justify, sanctify, and glorify church-age believers in the future, as well as to fulfill His Old Testament promises to Israel. For a discussion of the latter see López, *Romans Unlocked*, 25, 38–40. Yet δύναμις can also be used as McClain suggests.

⁴⁵ Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistles to the Corinthians*, 104 (italics his). Mary Katherine Birge believes that in 1 Corinthians 4:20 the kingdom of God “invariably carries an eschatological notion with it, as it does here” (*The Language of Belonging: A Rhetorical Analysis of Kingship Language in First Corinthians* [Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2002], 43).

⁴⁶ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, New Century Bible (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971), 147 (bold face copy his). See also Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 357.

⁴⁷ First Timothy 1:17 designates God the Father, rather than Christ, as King, as is typical throughout the Old Testament, New Testament, and rabbinic literature. For a detailed discussion see Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 60–62.

Second, some have suggested that τέλος should be translated “rest” or “remainder.” Three groups of resurrected ones would then be in order: first, Christ as the first fruits, then believers at Christ’s coming, then the *rest* of mankind after an interval period in which believers rule with Christ in the millennium. While scholars hesitate to interpret τέλος as “end” (though that is possible), a threefold order can still be seen in verses 23–24, as McClain suggests:

The time of this Kingdom may be ascertained from the main subject matter of the context, which is *resurrection*. Every man must be raised from the dead, “but each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then they that are Christ’s, at His coming, then cometh the end” . . . (vv. 23–24, ASV). This threefold order of resurrection fits the eschatological system of the New Testament; first, the resurrection of Christ Himself; second, the resurrection of His saints . . . (1 Thess. 4:13–18); third, the resurrection of the unsaved at the “end” (cf. Rev. 20:11–15). Since the Kingdom is to be established at the second coming of Christ, and is to be delivered up to the Father at the “end,” the period of the Kingdom must be located in the future between the two resurrections, as also indicated clearly in Revelation 20.⁴⁸

Two key elements favor McClain’s view. First, the context of 1 Corinthians 15 refers to the Resurrection. Thus the resurrection of unbelievers must also be in view, “of which their *resurrection* is the necessary premiss [*sic*],”⁴⁹ since only after the resurrection of the righteous and unrighteous will the end come, as various passages indicate (Dan. 12:2–3; cf. John 11:24; Rev. 20:11–15).⁵⁰ Second, since another rebellion and resurrection will occur at the end of the millennial reign of Christ (Rev. 20:5–15), the “end to all rule and authority” when Christ delivers the kingdom cannot come until after these events occur. Hence it seems better to understand that in 1 Corinthians 15:24 Paul referred to the end after the future millennial kingdom has transpired.

COLOSSIANS 1:13; 4:11

“He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son He loves.” This suggests a present form

⁴⁸ McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 435 (italics his).

⁴⁹ Ibid. (italics his).

⁵⁰ For a thorough discussion similar to McClain’s view see Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistles to the Corinthians*, 356–60.

of the kingdom (without excluding the realization of a future kingdom), which occurs in a person's life the moment he or she believes in Christ for eternal life.⁵¹

However, the positional language and the wider context suggest, as McClain writes, that this verse should be taken as "*de jure* rather than *de facto*."⁵² Colossians 1:13 should not be viewed as denoting the actual presence of a "spiritual kingdom," but rather a judicial reality that transpires the moment one believes in Christ for justification. Ephesians 2:6 makes the same point: God "raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places with Christ." As McClain explains, "Although we are not yet *de facto* seated in the heavenlies, the thing is so certain that God can speak of it as already done. In the same sense, we have been (aorist tense) transferred *judicially* into the Kingdom of our Lord even before its establishment. Being what He is, God 'callethe the things that are not, as though they were' (Rom. 4:17, ASV)."⁵³

Colossians 4:11 states, "These are the only fellow workers for [or 'unto' = εἰς] the kingdom of God, who became a comfort to me." The preposition εἰς can be seen as pointing to the direction to which these believers in the church were working as present representatives of the future kingdom.⁵⁴ For ambassadors, however, both realms exist, even though the future realm is not yet present.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 52. Dunn also notes the tension of the present and future reality (*The First Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 79).

⁵² McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 435.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 435–36. Romans 8:30 expresses the future glorification of believers in the aorist tense (ἐδόξασεν) as if it has already occurred. Here Paul again described an event that has not yet occurred as though it is already accomplished (see Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 563–64). Lohse says, "Wherever Paul mentions the 'rule of God' (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) in his letters, the futuristic meaning of the concept is presupposed" (*Colossians and to Philemon*, 37–38).

⁵⁴ McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 436. Also Wilson believes that "perhaps" Paul referred to the future kingdom in this passage (*Colossians and Philemon*, 117).

⁵⁵ Although Lohse states in an earlier comment that the future aspect of the kingdom of God is presupposed in Pauline letters, he says of this passage that "the eschatological character of the concept is no longer in the foreground" (*Colossians and to Philemon*, 172). However, the fact that someone works for his "retirement" does not mean that he is presently retired. One can work *toward* something or *for* someone as a representative without the *state* or *realm* actually existing at the time the work is taking place.

1 THESSALONIANS 2:12

In 1 Thessalonians 2:12 Paul exhorted believers to “live worthy of God, who calls” believers “unto [εἰς] His own kingdom and glory.” Walvoord says this verse encourages believers to walk in light of God’s future kingdom. “In view of these things, God has called us to a walk that is in keeping with our destiny.”⁵⁶ The concept of a future kingdom here resembles 1 Peter 5:10, “God . . . has called us unto His eternal glory.” “The language here is similar to other passages where believers are said to be called unto (*eis*) things not yet realized in Christian experience.” Although Milligan says Paul was speaking of a present kingdom elsewhere (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13), he believes various details in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 and elsewhere (1 Cor. 6:10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18) point to a future kingdom. “That this is the case here [in 1 Thess. 2:12] is shown by its inclusion with the eschatological δόξαν under one article.”⁵⁷

2 THESSALONIANS 1:5

In this verse Paul wrote, “This is proof of God’s righteous judgment that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.”

The context suggests that this verse refers to the future aspect of the kingdom. In verses 4–5 suffering believers are exhorted to endure persecutions and tribulations. In the future this will be reversed “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels” to repay those who persecuted Christians (vv. 6–9).

Walvoord too says this kingdom is in the future. “The Thessa-

⁵⁶ John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonians Epistles* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1955), 32.

⁵⁷ George Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 27. David J. Williams notes, “The two concepts of kingdom and of glory are drawn together in the phrase before us by the single preposition and article to give the sense ‘God’s glorious kingdom.’ This denotes the aspect of his kingdom that is yet to be revealed, when the restoration of God’s rule to his rebellious creation will be completed at his return” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New International Bible Commentary [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992], 44). Other commentators also see this as a reference to a future kingdom: Charles J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (London: Parker and Son, 1858), 26; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), 68; I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 68; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 37; and Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), 108.

lonians were in trial now, but this was to them evidence of their future glory.”⁵⁸ Marshall also concludes, “The goal of faith is entry to the kingdom of God, here conceived, as in 1 Th. 2:12, as the future sphere of divine blessing to which God calls his faithful people.”⁵⁹ And Bruce writes, “The kingdom of God here, as in 1 Thess 2:12, is identical with ‘that age’ in which the children of God will enjoy resurrection life.”⁶⁰

2 TIMOTHY 4:1, 18

In verse 1 there is little doubt that Paul referred to the future kingdom when he wrote, “God and Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.” Regarding verses 1 and 18 McClain says:

The Apostle Paul brackets together in point of time the future “appearing” (*epiphaneia*) of Christ with “his kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:1). Later in the same chapter he expresses his firm assurance that the Lord will preserve him unto his “heavenly kingdom” (vs. 18). This expression is not synonymous [with] heaven, but rather indicates that the long-awaited Messianic Kingdom will be heavenly in origin and character as contrasted with earthly kingdoms. It is the closest approximation to the familiar phrase “kingdom of heaven” so frequently used in Matthew’s Gospel. Peter exhorts Christian believers to be diligent in walk and work so that they may have an abundant “entrance . . . into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11). In these texts cited there can be no question about the futurity of the Kingdom.⁶¹

The next article in this series will discuss Paul’s vice list in Galatians 5:19–21 and the phrase “will not inherit the kingdom of God” in verse 21.

⁵⁸ Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 10.

⁵⁹ Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 173; and Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 149.

⁶⁰ Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 149.

⁶¹ McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 433. See also Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 205, 210, 220; Davies, *The Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 83, 88; Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1924), 112, 120; Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 799, 826; and Mounce, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 572, 598.