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## **The Kingdom of Love**

Colossians 1:13

When the long nightmare of the American Civil War was almost over, the capital city of the Confederacy fell to Union troops. Abraham Lincoln then came to Richmond to celebrate this milestone. Doris Kearns Goodwin has described Lincoln's entry into the city in these words:

No sooner had the presidential party reached the landing than Lincoln was surrounded by a small group of black laborers shouting, "Bless de Lord! Here is de great Messiah!...Glory Hallelujah!" First one and then several others fell on their knees. "Don't kneel to me," Lincoln said, "that's not right. You might kneel to God only, and thank him for the liberty you will hereafter enjoy (*Team of Rivals*, page 719)."

Lincoln understood that human leaders are mortal and fallible. At their best they make mistakes. At their worst they abuse the trust of their people. In the end only God can be trusted.

The prophet makes a similar point in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Jeremiah. There we find leaders who are described as shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep. These leaders have done great damage to their people and no one is able to hold them accountable. But the prophet announces that God will hold them accountable while making provision for the people. God will find a way to bring the people back together again and see that their needs are addressed.

The prophet looks forward to the day when a different kind of leader will emerge. A righteous branch will spring up from the dead stump of Davidic kings. This leader will embody God's justice and righteousness. This leader will guide the people into a new kingdom of love. The early church saw these verses as a description of the coming messiah. They believed that these words had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. They understood Jesus as the only leader who was truly worthy of their trust.

It was this theological understanding which fueled the rebellion of the people of Scotland in 1638. King Charles I began implementing a major change in the worship and governance of the Scottish Church. Presbyteries were dissolved and bishops appointed to take their place. An Anglican style prayer book devoid of Calvinist theology was imposed on all the Scottish churches. Worshipers were required to kneel for communion. The church reforms instituted by John Knox in the previous century were being swept away to enhance the power of the King.

The Scottish people understood that this king was not serving the needs of the people. When the newly appointed bishop climbed into the pulpit of the High Kirk of St. Giles in Edinburgh to read from the new non-Calvinist prayer book a riot broke out. When prayer books, walking sticks, and stools began flying in the direction of the bishop he fled from the church. Bishop Whitford of the cathedral church of Brechin was no doubt aware of what happened in Edinburgh. When he stepped into his pulpit to read from the new prayer book he was prepared to confront rioting members. He pulled two loaded pistols from his robe and placed them on the pulpit desk. One historian referred to that as a remarkable case of episcopal tough love (Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, page 522). Tough love was not enough to save Charles I from what came next. The Scottish people drafted and signed a Solemn League and Covenant which affirmed the reforms of John Knox. When they defeated

the army Charles I sent to subdue them, civil war broke out in England which resulted in the defeat and execution of the King.

The Scots understood the meaning of Jeremiah 23. They knew that rulers who cannot be held accountable can never be trusted. They also knew that simply removing the Pope as head of the church and replacing him with the King as the English had done would not in the end meet the needs of God's people. They believed that the only true head of the church was Jesus Christ. This point had been driven home to James I (father of Charles I) when he had tried to shut down the General Assembly of the Scottish Church in 1596. The historian John T. McNeill has described the response of church leader Andrew Melville in these words:

Melville took his majesty by the sleeve and calling him "God's feeble vassal" told him with vehement emphasis: "King James is the subject of King Jesus... You are not the head of the Church (*The History and Character of Calvinism*, page 306).

The Scots learned through bitter experience that only one leader can really be trusted. That leader is the good shepherd who guides us into the kingdom of love.

The apostle Paul emphasizes the this truth in his letter to the Colossians. Here Paul is writing to a fledgling church that is struggling with the problem of destructive leaders. They are false teachers. Paul wants the Colossians to recognize that these teachers are serving themselves and not the people. The result of their teaching will not be to build up the church or nourish the faith of the people. What they teach will inevitably divide and scatter the people, leaving the church in a weakened condition. At the heart of their teaching is the assertion that Jesus Christ is not their king. They claim that Jesus is only one of many members of an angelic hierarchy. They deny that Jesus is the one in whom the fullness of God is found. They do not accept Jesus as God's unique agent of salvation.

Paul responds to this threat by calling the people to remember a favorite hymn. It is a hymn that emphasizes the role of Christ in God's redemptive process. Christ is the one who "has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son (Colossians 1:13)." This truth is reenacted every week in worship as they sing praise to God. The act of singing opens their hearts for Jesus to guide them through the darkness of their lives and into the kingdom of love.

Our Scottish forebears understood this process. In the singing of the psalms they experienced Jesus Christ as the one leader who is always worthy of our trust. The setting of Psalm 121 in the Scottish Psalter of 1615 says it like this:

I to the hills will lift my eyes;  
From whence shall come my aid?  
My help is from the Lord alone,  
Who heaven and earth has made.