

DAY 2 | MATTHEW 11:4, 5; PHILLIPPIANS 3:4-8

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Fable, Fairytale, or Reality

by Padraic “Paddy” McCoy

Did you know that at the end of April 2011, one of the biggest events in history occurred? In fact, it is a moment that I’m sure everyone in the world well remembers. It was one of those moments that we’ll be talking about twenty years from now with the phrase, “Do you remember where you were when...?”

What was that event? It was the day when one Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, was joined in holy matrimony to one Catherine Elizabeth Middleton. The royal wedding was the most watched event in history, like the wedding of William’s father before him, back in the 1980’s. According to statistics, the royal wedding was watched by nearly 2.5 billion people, approximately 35 percent of the world’s population; that’s one out of every three people on the planet.



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Created for a Kingdom

As an observer of life I am forced to ask, what was it about this event that drew the attention of so many? As I thought about this over several weeks, the conclusion that I’ve come to is that we as a human race desire to live in the pages of our own fairytale. We have written inside of us, maybe on our DNA, this hunger to be a part of another story. We all, at one point or another, have longed to live as a part of these fantastical stories. C.S. Lewis once said, “If there are longings in our

hearts that nothing in this world can satisfy, it can only mean one thing. We were meant for another world.”

When we were kids, we believed in this other world, this other story, and it sounded an awful lot like a fairytale. Webster defines *fairytale*s as “stories (as for children) involving fantastic forces and beings - a story in which improbable events lead to a happy ending.”

I used to believe in all manners of fairytales: Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and even the tooth fairy. But then I grew up and I don’t believe in those fairytales anymore. I know better now. I’m educated. Two degrees on my office wall and years of experience under my belt tell me that fairytales are simply too good to be true. No one lives happily ever after—fifteen minutes watching the news will tell you that—famine, disease, sex trafficking, natural disasters, terrorism, divorce. The world is a pretty awful place, and the fairytales of my youth have all but faded away.

But interestingly enough, I do read Bible stories to my kids. I don’t want them to miss out on dreaming real dreams and learning about real heroes. Yet, as I read these stories to them, I find my mind drifting, longing, hoping, and even fearing. I find myself hoping that life was guaranteed to end with everyone living happily ever after. But I also find myself fearing that perhaps my children will stop believing.

A Tale of Two Stories

I am going to tell two stories. The first is about the reality of this world—the life we face every day—the life of the seemingly mundane, the incredibly stressed, the constant disappointments, and the painful predicaments that fill our days. But then there’s this other possibility, this other story, maybe even another reality—one that may seem, for all intents and purposes, like a fairytale, but one worth believing in because it is true. My hope, my wish, my prayer is that through the telling of these two stories your eyes will be opened and you will choose to live out the other story, what we will call the “Kingdom Tale.”

It happens to all of us eventually, the day fairytales died. Something happened to steal them away from us: our parent's divorce, a friend dies, a well-meaning teacher tells us we can't actually make money as an artist. Maybe we're diagnosed with depression or some other mental health challenge. Or maybe we just simply "grow-up" and get an education. Whatever it is, it happens for almost everyone. And as far as I can tell, we respond to this great loss by buckling down and trying our best to make the most of this life. We trade the castles and horses of the past for sports cars and a nice corner office with a home in the country. We seek out degrees to make us feel important, we buy grown-up toys to help us forget about the emptiness. Some hit the bar to numb their souls or seek after meaningless relationships, real and/or virtually—to at least achieve the illusion of intimacy. Or maybe we throw ourselves into religion and seek the "perfect" life, or at least the appearance thereof. We go for the perfect spouse complete with 2.5 children. We are tricked into believing that if we just try hard enough, act good enough, and work long enough, meaning in life will follow.

In a study done in 2012 by the Institute of Higher Education, they found that 78.1 percent of first-time college freshmen viewed being "well-off financially" as the most important thing in life.

Now, being well off financially and owning things, in and of themselves, is not what's wrong. WE are what's wrong. We've stopped believing in the Kingdom tale and so we've gotten off track of what's most important in life. We search for meaning in places devoid of meaning. We ask important questions like, "*Who am I? What is my purpose? And what is the meaning of life?*" But the answers we find in this world's reality still leave us empty. I mean, what if we obtain everything we ever dreamed of only to realize that the path leads nowhere?

Tom Brady, NFL Quarterback for the New England Patriots, one of the highest paid players in football, once said in an interview, "Why do I have three super bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say 'Hey man, this is what it's all about.' I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think, 'It's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't – this can't be – all it's cracked up to be" (CBS TV interview).

Actor Brad Pitt responded to the question of having achieved the American dream by saying, "I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us – the car, the condo, our version of success – but if that's the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more impotence and isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this – we gotta find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a deadend, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don't want that" (*Rolling Stone* magazine).

Well, what if the reality that we can see with our eyes, the famines, the diseases, the meaninglessness, the pain...what if it isn't the *real* story? What if the life so many are living is simply a fable...a falsehood, a lie, a result of the curse? What if the answer to our search for meaning depended on our ability to believe in the Kingdom tale?

In order to explore this other reality, this other kingdom, we have to go to an ancient book. It is, to say the least, one of the most controversial books ever written. Some, in fact, *would* label it a fairytale: full of "out of this world stories" and far-fetched teachings. Some would say they are simply too smart and too educated to believe in such ridiculous ideas. Nineteenth-century agnostic, Robert Ingersoll, once said this book was "a fable, an obscenity, a humbug, a sham and a lie." Famous actor Sir Ian McKellan said, "I've always thought [this book] should come with a disclaimer at the beginning announcing to the reader that it is fiction, not fact." But truth be told, hundreds of thousands have died to make sure this book, and its stories, have been passed on from generation to generation for thousands of years. No other book has been so carefully preserved and so tediously reproduced. And to many around the world, this book is believed to be much more than a fairytale. Instead, it holds the secrets to the meaning of life.

I'll give you the really condensed version of the story.

Once upon a time, in a land of darkness, a Creator full of love to share came and created light and life. He spoke the world into existence. He then created His most beloved creation; in His own image He created them, male and female, and

He gave them a most amazing, albeit risky, gift. He gave them the gift of freewill: the ability to make their own choices and to choose to either follow the Creator, or reject Him. It was the only way they could love Him freely. Things were great and life was full of love and purpose and meaning, until a talking serpent entered the scene. He lied to the creation and caused them to question the Creator's intentions. They began to doubt in the goodness of the Creator, and so they bit the fruit, sweet on the outside but bitter on the inside, and brought a curse upon themselves and this world. The curse brought with it pain, toil, hardships, disease, rejection, and death. Lost was the ability to commune with the Creator in the garden in the cool of the day. Lost was paradise. Much happened along the way, but the Creator never abandoned His creation; never. His love for them wouldn't allow it. In fact, the Creator eventually did something even more amazing than that first gift of freewill. At just the right time, while the creations were still powerless to save themselves from the curse, the Creator came down to this planet and became one of His creation. He gave up paradise, sacrificed His own life, to enter the world of the curse in order to introduce us to a new story.

“When God gave His Son to our world, He endowed human beings with imperishable riches—riches compared with which the treasured wealth of men since the world began is nothingness. Christ came to the earth and stood before the children of men with the hoarded love of eternity, and this is the treasure that, through our connection with Him, we are to receive, to reveal, and to impart” (*God's Amazing Grace*, 16.6).

The four Gospels, along with modern scholars, all seem to agree that Jesus' central theme in all His teaching was to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God, a new reality. This kingdom is mentioned more than 120 times in the New Testament, mostly by Jesus Himself. Jesus talked about three kingdoms; the first was the kingdom of this world; the second was the kingdom that is at hand, near, in our midst; and the third is the kingdom that is to come. We've already talked about the kingdom of this world and what it has to offer, and in order to cut to the chase, we'll talk about the kingdom that is already here, for it is a taste of the kingdom that is to come.

What is this kingdom? Well, first of all, it's not what you'd expect. It never is. You see, God likes to show up in ways that you'd never expect: a burning bush, a whisper, a talking donkey, a boy with a sling, a baby in a manger, a carpenter, a cross. God loves surprises. And so in order to be open to this kingdom reality, a change must first occur. We must, as Jesus said, repent.

The True Kingdom Reality

Jesus began His ministry with the words, “**Repent** for the kingdom of heaven, or God, is at hand.” Some of us have heard that the word *repent* means to turn or change, and we associate it with a turning from our sin. If we sin, we need to repent or turn away from it. This is true, but the word for *repent* in Greek is the word, *metanoēō* and, like many Greek words, *it has multiple meanings*. *Metanoēō* can also mean to think differently. In other words, Jesus is announcing that it's time to begin thinking differently because the kingdom of God is here.

Repentance is associated with faith and is urged in the gospel as essential to salvation. Paul preached repentance. He said, “I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20, 21). “There is no salvation without repentance” (Ellen G. White: *Selected Messages, Vol. 1*, page 365.2).

It's a powerful idea, thinking differently. In fact, one company used this slogan to turn its business from a struggling company on the verge of bankruptcy, to one of the most successful companies of all time and the only company in the world market that hasn't lost value during the recession. That company? Apple.

So to be open to the reality of the kingdom of God, we need to think differently, but how? Think how? Fortunately, Jesus gave us that answer too. Surrounded by a group of educated men and honestly seeking disciples, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Why must we become like children? I mean, haven't we spent a lot

of time and money growing up and leaving our childish ways behind us? Might I suggest that the reason Jesus says we need to become like children has to do with a child's ability to dream and imagine and believe in the impossible; to believe that fairytales actually do exist.

So let's take that framework, the challenge to think differently, as a child, about the kingdom of God reality. Let's explore how Jesus describes what this kingdom is.

The clearest description of the kingdom of God was given by Jesus in response to the disciples of John the Baptist while their teacher sat in prison. Even John the Baptist, the one who came to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, the one who identified Jesus as the Messiah, the one who heard the voice of God declare that Jesus was God's Son, was stuck in this other reality. After all, if the Messiah had come to establish His kingdom, then why was John rotting behind bars?

Jesus responded to John's doubts by telling him about the kinds of things that happen in the kingdom. (Read Matthew 11: 4-5.)

Jesus goes on, throughout the Gospels, to explain the kingdom as a place where the broken are made whole; where the worst of sinners are let in first; a place that invades every aspect of our lives and can actually bring out the good in us; a place so amazing that when we discover it we'd give up everything we have to keep it. It is a place that is open to everyone who would accept it. It is a kingdom that is not measured by the letters behind your name or the number of commas in your bank account or the depth of your dimples, but by the way in which you are loved and love others. It is a generous kingdom, a grace-filled kingdom, a purpose-giving kingdom, a hope-drenched kingdom, a love-driven kingdom, and it is available for us to enter into right here and right now. Don't miss it.

"Remember that Christ risked all; "tempted like as we are," he staked even his own eternal existence upon the issue of the conflict. Heaven itself was imperiled for our redemption. At the foot of the cross, remembering that for one sinner Jesus would have yielded up his life, we may estimate the value of a soul." (GCB - The General Conference Bulletin, December 1, 1895 par. 22)

Jesus risked everything to come and give us a new story. A third-century theologian, Origen, described the kingdom of God by saying that Jesus is the *auto basilia*; which means that Jesus Himself is the kingdom of God. Wherever the presence of Jesus is on this earth, the curse from the Garden of Eden begins to be reversed. The deaf can hear, the blind can see, the lame can walk, the dead are raised, the hopeless find hope, the lost find direction, and worthless-no-good sinners like me realize that we are actually worth more to God than we could ever possibly imagine.

PERSONAL STORY: A few years ago, I faced a storm of anxiety that ruled my life for many months. In the midst of that storm, I had created an alternate reality, another story, than the one Jesus was trying to give me. In my telling of the story, I was certain to fail. One morning, my beloved wife came into the room as I was curled up, resting on a tear-soaked pillow, and she bravely took me by the hand and led me from the fable of my own making to the fairytale of the kingdom of God. She told me, as if God was the one giving me the message, how much I was loved and how the Father had never left me and never would. She painted pictures of a kingdom reality where the only thing that mattered was that I was loved and the One who loved me called me and would be with me always. I couldn't see that story on my own. With her help, I began to see that reality over the next several months. I've slowly begun walking out of the kingdom of this world and the makings of my own story and I've started living in the kingdom of God and the story He came and lived and died to give me. 1 Corinthians 2:9 says, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (English Standard Version). So I am beginning to see with new eyes, hear with new ears, and there are some occasions where you might even see me leaping. But to begin accepting this version of the story and to walk out of the fable and into the really true "fairytale," I had to think differently, more like a child, so I could once again believe in the impossible.

The apostle Paul learned to live in this kingdom. Before Jesus blinded him on the road to Damascus, Paul had it all: esteem, power, wealth, influence, education. He was high up in the kingdom of this world. But after Jesus, Paul would come to



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your own life.

write this: “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything [the money, the fame, the education, the power, the position, the good times...all of it] as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him” (Philippians 3:7-8).

The Message says it a bit more emphatically: “Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him.”

Learning to Live in the Kingdom

Paul learned that the things of this world, minus Jesus, are meaningless. He learned that the most important thing is to know Jesus Christ and that everything else, without Jesus, is garbage. Education, wealth, power, comfort, and the American dream...it’s all meaningless without knowing Jesus. It was this belief that allowed Paul to sing God’s praises in prison, to write letters of joy and encouragement while rotting in chains, and to go to his death singing hymns of praise because the reality that he lived in was not of this world. Paul’s reality was the kingdom of God and nothing and no one could take that away from him. They could strip him of his clothes, but they could never touch his title as a son of the living God. They could beat him senseless with sticks made of wood, but they could never extinguish the fire in his eyes. They could spit on his face, but the only way to stop him from proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God was to take his life, which he gladly gave up to be with Jesus.

And so with that kind of passion the good news of the kingdom of God spread like wildfire in the ancient world. Merchants and slaves, young people and old people, the sick, the poor, the diseased, and the outcasts accepted the good news and shouted it from mountaintops and the street corners. It grew from twelve believers to millions of believers in what seemed like moments in the pages of history.

What drew so many people so quickly? It was the story that is simply so good it just has to be true, the story that tops all stories, the place where the curse is reversed: the story of the kingdom of God. It was this story that allowed hundreds of thousands of followers in the early church to go bravely to their death because they couldn't imagine going back to the confines of their previous story. They believed in and knew the "fairytale" was the only true story and they were willing to die for the truth.

Do you have something in your life worth living for? Worth dying for? Might I suggest a new reality? The kingdom of the living God. It is no fable; it is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life, and its Leader extends His nail-scarred hand to you tonight, asking you, begging you, to believe.

Fable or fairytale? The choice is yours. ●