

Be the kingdom: Isaiah 65:17-25

The promise of Isaiah 65 is that God is doing a new thing. What's taking God so long?

by [Jin S. Kim](#) in the [March 23, 2010](#) issue

The promise of Isaiah 65 is that God is doing a new thing. There will be a new creation: a new heaven and a new earth. In this new dispensation things are going to change big time. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” No longer must one consume another to survive in this new world. The old ways—dog eat dog, human eat human, male against female, race against race, nation against nation—no longer apply.

What’s taking God so long? Doesn’t God see the suffering, the injustice, the tragedy of this world? In Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, the atheistic intellectual Ivan chronicles the daily outrages, absurdities and humiliations suffered by the destitute and oppressed peasants of Russia. He dares his seminarian brother to offer a counterargument. Either God does not exist or God is heinously indifferent. Is God active, or has this prophecy been forgotten?

This hopeful word was uttered thousands of years ago, and the people are still impatient. If we just pray hard enough, believe hard enough, work hard enough, might we convince God to bring universal peace and justice *now*? The apocalyptic impulse has been a consistent strain in the church since its beginning. When that impulse is magnified by impatience, triumphalism and vengeance, one gets a movement like premillennial dispensationalism, a fringe ideology from the 19th century that has captured the imagination and loyalty of millions of Christians around the world.

Most dispensationalists believe that they are the last or close-to-the-last generation before Christ comes to bring final judgment on the world. Instead of seeing this prospect as cause for mourning or repentance, dispensationalists hope to be vindicated: those who are “right with God” will be saved from tribulation, and the rest damned.

I see dispensationalism as little more than a religious revenge fantasy, but I am sympathetic to the originating impulse. I too wonder what is taking God so long. It's not just that wolves and lambs, friends and enemies will dine together in peace, though that is no small thing; it's that in this new dispensation infants will not die prematurely, old people will live out a lifetime, people will reap what they sow and not be exploited, and all children will be safe. "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord." As Carly Simon put it in the '70s, "Anticipation is making me late, is keeping me waiting."

Or is it? As people of God who live in this "already, and not yet" time, we eagerly anticipate the kingdom in which the former things will not be remembered and everything will be made new. But we need to distinguish between a longing for Jesus, who makes all things new, and a fetish for novelty. We need to distinguish between anticipation and impatience, although they often bleed into each other. To anticipate is to believe that God will act decisively in God's good time and according to God's good judgment. To be impatient is to wrest the mantle of authority from God and to judge God as slow, uncaring or even evil.

Once we give in to impatience we've opened the door to violence as a means to an end, however good that end might be. Once we walk through this door, we make Machiavelli our master rather than Jesus. Isaiah announces the undivided sovereignty of God over every dispensation and insists that God will be God in both the means and the end. For those of us who follow Christ, this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. He will not wage war to bring peace. He will not use violence to end violence. In Jesus Christ the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the ox, will break bread together. In Jesus Christ "we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." Our impulses of impatience, vengeance and violence will be changed, not by a violent inauguration of the last dispensation, but by the eschatological pull of God's kingdom on all creation, old and new.

When Jesus suffered violence on the cross without retaliating, he emptied violence of its power once and for all. Violence itself was crucified in Jesus. When we follow Jesus unto death, on the third day we are raised in power to reign with him in a new dispensation of justice and peace. Jesus was the messenger and the message. He pointed to the kingdom and embodied the kingdom. We are called to embody this reign of God by renouncing the violent ways of the world and living into the call to be a new creation. In the risen Christ, the people of God are the peace and justice that the world has been waiting for.