

17. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

What is the kingdom of God?

The kingdom of God is an ambiguous expression, difficult for the modern reader to understand. Many preachers use the phrase loosely as if it meant the Church. Building, or working for, the kingdom are not biblical concepts. This is sad really, because the terminology Jesus used when teaching the Jews was so full of excitement and expectation for faithful Jews. Jesus preached about the kingdom wherever he went. He told people to seek the kingdom of God as of first importance. It was central to his message and is spoken about in most NT books.

The background to the phrase is steeped in Jewish theology going back 3,000 years to promises made by God to King David and even to the Jewish patriarch Abraham 1,000 years earlier. The God of Israel is the God of history; he has a plan for his chosen people which will be revealed at the end of the present age: a plan for his chosen nation, Israel, and an even greater plan for his Church, the elect from every tribe, people, nation, and language.

God is the source of all things and many ‘of God’ expressions are better translated as ‘from God’. The peace of God that passes all understanding is not God’s own personal peace, it’s the peace he gives. Similarly, with the joy of the Lord. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is not God’s pet lamb, but the Lamb he provided for the perfect sacrifice, which takes away our sin. The translation ‘kingdom of God’ gives the wrong impression because it’s easily interpreted as possessive, God’s kingdom or sovereignty, which is not the real meaning. God’s kingdom cannot be spoken of

as coming or as being inherited by man. For Jesus' Jewish audience, the kingdom of God was always an earthly kingdom that they longed for, with a Jewish Messiah as their king.

The word 'kingdom' conjures up many meanings, and to the modern reader, it usually means a country led by a monarch. The Greek word, βασιλεία, is attested by all Greek lexicons to mean kingship, an abstract word that refers to the royal authority of a king and his government, the monarchy. In many contexts, it refers to the kingship in action, his reign, where that authority is exercised. There are 140 references to the kingdom in seventeen books of the NT of which:

43 occurrences relate to Jesus as *king*

46 relate to Jesus' disciples, his *monarchy*, God's elect

51 relate to the future Messianic *reign*

When those three meanings are understood, the meaning of the kingdom of God verses becomes clearer. The tradition of English Bible translations to consistently translate βασιλεία as kingdom is not helpful and has resulted in confusion and ignorance of this important concept. Who is the king? Is it God the Father or God the Son? Where is the reign? Is it in heaven or on Earth? Has the reign begun or is it still to come? The answers to these questions become clear when we understand the meaning of βασιλεία του θεού is the kingship from God.

Jesus, although born king of the Jews (Mt 2:2), had to proclaim his message in the presence of hostile Jewish religious leaders and a Roman military whose job was to suppress any signs of rebellion. He could not speak openly and clearly about his identity as the Messiah or of God's plan for him to rule the world, so he used some cryptic Jewish terminology. He referred to himself as 'The Son of Man' instead of saying he was the Messiah, and he referred to his kingdom as 'the kingdom of God' or 'the kingdom of Heaven' because his kingship would be established by God. There was no doubt among his followers that he was claiming to be the promised Jewish Messiah who would save Israel from her enemies. The OT prophets had declared that the Messiah would be a descendant of David who would one day sit on David's throne and rule over the remnant of his people, Israel. Jesus used this kingdom terminology

to teach the Jewish faithful and his disciples that he was the promised Messiah, while at the same time, his terminology and parables made it difficult for his enemies to accuse him of blasphemy or sedition.

The kingdom of God in the book of Daniel

The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had a dream which Daniel interpreted for him. This dream is foundational to the Jewish Messianic hope (Dan 2:31-45). In his dream, the king saw a huge statue, the parts of which represented powerful world empires centered around the Middle East, including parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The head of gold was the Babylonian Empire, the chest and arms of silver, the Persian Empire, the belly and thighs of bronze, the Greek Empire, the legs of iron, the Roman Empire, and the feet of iron and clay, an extension of the Roman Empire, a coalition of nations that would come into being at the end of the present age. As the king dreamed, a rock was cut out, not by human hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them, and all the world empires were swept away without leaving a trace. Then the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain that filled the whole Earth. Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar: In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It'll crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever (Dan 2:44). The rock is the Messiah. The destruction of world empires will occur when Jesus returns to Earth and strikes down the nations gathered in rebellion against Jerusalem at the battle of Armageddon (Rev 16:12-16). The Messiah will rule over the survivors with an iron scepter as 'King of kings and Lord of lords.' His kingdom is what is known as the Messianic kingdom.

Daniel had his own dream about the coming of the conquering Messiah (Dan 7:7-27). He saw four beasts (world empires) and the final one had ten horns, three of which were uprooted by a little horn, the Antichrist, who spoke boastfully and exercised his authority for a time, times, and half a time, the forty-two months during which the saints will be delivered into his hands (Rev 13:5-7). This little horn is the man of lawlessness that Paul warns us about (2 Thess 2:1-4), the beast whom all the inhabitants of the

Earth will worship (Rev 13:1-10) and who is eventually slain and thrown into hell (Rev 19:20).

The following verses reveal the outcome of what Jesus called “great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now” (Mt 24:15-22).

As I was looking at night in a vision, I saw something like a son of man coming in the clouds. When he arrived, he was paraded and presented to the Ancient of Days. He was given kingship, authority, and glory, and everyone paid him homage, people from every country and language. His dominion is everlasting and has no end, his kingdom will never be destroyed (Dan 7:13-14).

But the saints of the high places will receive the kingdom and possess it forever (Dan 7:18)

The kingship, authority, and greatness of all the world’s kingdoms will be given to the saints of the high places. Their kingdom is everlasting, and all rulers will pay them homage and submit to them (Dan 7:27).

The Lord will be king over the whole Earth ... Then the survivors from all the nations that attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty (Zech 14:9, 16). The nations will walk by the Holy City’s light, and the kings of the Earth will bring their splendor to it (Rev 21:24).

In the resulting kingdom, all nations and peoples of every language pay homage to the Messiah, but it’s the saints who possess the kingdom, as repeated three times (Dan 7:18, 22, 27). In Daniel, the phrase ‘saints of the Most High’ contrasts with the Jews who are consistently referred to as Daniel’s people (Dan 9:15-16, 19, 24, 10:14, 11:14, 12:1). Keil says: “The saints of the Most High, or briefly the saints, are neither the Jews, who are accustomed to call themselves ‘saints’ in contrast with the heathen, nor the converted Israel of the millennium; they are the congregation of the New Covenant, consisting of Israel and the faithful of all nations; for the kingdom which God gives to the Son of Man will, according to Daniel 7:14, comprehend those who are redeemed from among all the nations of the Earth” (Commentary on Daniel, p. 239).

Details about the final years of this age when a world coalition under the Antichrist devours the whole Earth are given in Daniel 7 and Revelation 6-19. God gives victory to the Messiah and the saints. I have explained elsewhere why I believe ‘saints of the Most High’ should be interpreted as ‘saints of the high places’.

One-third of the kingdom of God/Heaven verses have Jesus’ disciples, as representative of all the saints, in focus. The kingdom of God is *theirs*. They enter it through being *born again*. They are presently *heirs* of the kingdom, and they hold *the keys* to the kingdom. They’ll sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom, which is the Messianic monarchy because Jesus confers kingship on them (Lk 22:29-30). They’ll eat and drink at his royal table and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. They are called into his kingdom (kingship) and glory (1 Thess 2:12). They are not there as subjects of the kingdom but rulers. God chose those who are poor in the eyes of the world to inherit the kingdom he promised to those who love him (James 2:5). They’ll receive a rich welcome into the eternal reign of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:11). The Lamb is praised in heaven because he was slain and he purchased with his blood people from every tribe, language, people, and nation, and made them a kingdom of priests who will rule over the Earth (Rev 5:10). That is the divine purpose for redeemed mankind.

The kingdom is not mentioned specifically everywhere where it’s in focus. For example:

To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I’ll give authority over the nations, to rule them with an iron rod and dash them to pieces like pottery – just as my Father gave me that authority (Rev 2:26-27).

I’ll give the one who is victorious the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne (Rev 3:21).

The kingdom of God phraseology has three distinct meanings. If they are not understood, it's difficult for interpreters to harmonize the kingdom of God verses.

1. When Jesus spoke about the *kingship* in its present context, he was often, by metonymy, referring to himself as the Messiah.
2. When he spoke about the *kingship* in relation to his disciples, he was referring to his future government, the Messianic monarchy. He explained on many occasions, usually via parables, that the Jewish nation had disobeyed God, broken the covenant, and forfeited the kingship that had been promised to them. As a result, the kingship would be given to others, those who believe in Jesus, including faithful Jews of all ages. As children of God, they constitute the royal family and they'll inherit the kingship and rule with the Messiah.
3. When Jesus spoke about the kingdom in a future context, he was referring to his earthly *reign*, a concept that was understood and eagerly expected by godly first-century Jews.

This interpretation avoids the clumsy conclusion that the kingdom is both present and future; that it has been inaugurated but is not yet. It maintains the focus on 'kingship,' and avoids the unbiblical and contrary-to-fact teaching that Jesus is ruling the world now. It emphasizes the fact that Jesus' disciples are heirs of the kingship, a concept that is generally misunderstood and ignored. As God's children, they are co-heirs with the Messiah and will share in his glory (Rom 8:17). The visible church is not, as per Augustine, the kingdom of God. Rather, it's the elect who are the monarchy, a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language who will reign with Christ over the Earth (Rev 5:9-10). They'll begin their reign when the Messiah returns to Earth and they are resurrected and raptured. But as heirs, they have already entered the Messianic kingship and monarchy. That is their status. As flesh and blood people in their present bodies, they cannot inherit the kingdom (1 Cor 15:50); the kingdom will follow the resurrection. The resurrected monarchy will rule the Earth, but they will not live on Earth. Their

home during the millennium will be in New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2 – 2:5). This city is presently in heaven (Heb 12:22-25), but as this age passes at Jesus' return, New Jerusalem will come down out of heaven from God and its glory will be seen above the earthly Jerusalem (Rev 21:2). The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the Earth will bring their splendor to it (Rev 21:24).

Interpreting the ‘kingdom of God’ phrase

The – the definite article indicates that the Jews knew what Jesus was talking about. It is not an indefinite kingdom, it's *the* kingdom that the OT prophets had predicted would come, the kingdom of the promised Messiah. Jesus' teaching was focused on his coming kingdom that we pray for when we say: Your kingdom come!

kingdom – A complex word that may refer to the king, his kingship, his monarchy, his domain, or his reign. The basic meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words for kingdom is ‘kingship,’ royal power or authority exercised by the king and his monarchy. Put into action, it means ‘reign’.

of – It looks like a simple word, but it translates the Greek genitive, which has many shades of meaning; basically, that of a close relationship. The most common meaning is possession, which would mean that the kingdom of God is God's kingdom. However, God's kingdom, his sovereign reign over the universe, can't come as the kingdom of God comes, and humans can't possess it. The kingdom of God is something else. In this expression, the *of* is ablative, meaning ‘from.’ The kingdom of God is about kingship that originates in God. It is about a king whom God has appointed, and about the elect, whom God has chosen to be his children and to be heirs of the kingdom. God is the source and origin of the kingdom. The kingdom verses are about the king, Jesus the Messiah, his monarchy, the Church, and his future reign on Earth.

God – God the Father is the source of all things, and in that sense, the kingdom comes from him. But the king is a man, Jesus the

Messiah, the Son of God, so the kingdom should normally be thought of as belonging to him, as the Jews believed. It is an earthly kingdom ruled by a man, the Jewish Messiah, when he descends from heaven to rule the new world.

What the kingdom of God is not

Accepting the above explanation of the kingdom of God phrase, we can discard some common false teachings about the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is not, following popular belief, heaven. There is only one Bible verse that calls the kingdom of God heavenly (2 Tim 4:18), where ‘heavenly’ relates to its origin. The Jewish hope was always that the kingdom would be on a renewed Earth. Like Abraham, who was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God, we are looking for the city that is to come (Heb 13:14), a city that comes down out of heaven from God (Rev 21:10).

The kingdom of God is not, following Augustine, the Catholic church or any other organized church. The Jews that Jesus taught about the kingdom of God knew nothing about the Church, which had not yet commenced. However, the true followers of Jesus, referred to in Scripture as the elect, the righteous, the saints, and the servants of God, are the true Church, the monarchy that will reign with the Messiah. This is the only connection between the kingdom of God and the Church.

The kingdom of God is not, following Luke 17:21, God’s rule in our hearts. Inaccurate translations (NIV 1978, GNT, LST) say: “the kingdom of God is within you,” but a careful study of the kingdom verses shows that this is not taught. The focus is on Jesus and his followers ruling the world, not on God ruling in people’s hearts. The correct translation is ‘the kingdom of God is in your midst’ as the NIV 1984 has it.

The kingdom of God is not, as many eschatologists claim, ‘now but not yet’ or ‘inaugurated but not yet established.’ Christ’s kingdom on Earth cannot exist without him present. This present evil age (Gal

1:4) is under the control of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19). Christ is not ruling here yet. Kingdom terminology is political, and it should be obvious to all that Jesus is not yet in charge. God's purpose for the present age is to call out a people for himself from every tribe, people, language, and nation to be a kingdom of priests during the coming kingdom age. Born-again believers are co-heirs with Christ, and neither they nor Christ has yet received their inheritance. We are only heirs. God has exalted us and seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus so that in the coming ages he might show us the incomparable riches of his grace. Paul made it clear to the Corinthians that they were not reigning yet (1 Cor 4:8). Jesus will begin his reign when he returns (Rev 11:15, 19:6), not before. The verbs for 'reign' are aorist, meaning that Jesus becomes king at a point in time, precisely when the kingdoms of the world are defeated by him and Satan is imprisoned in the Abyss. Jesus ascended to heaven and is seated at God's right hand, and there he *waits* for his enemies to become his footstool at Armageddon, after which time he'll begin his reign.

The substitution of Jesus' cryptic phrase in the following verses by overtly Messianic phrases is not presented as a new translation, but to show the meaning that Jesus intended in his proclamation. It reflects what would have been the Jewish understanding of his message. However, making the meaning overt does not convey the care that Jesus had to take in the sensitive political situation in which he lived. You'll find that understanding the kingdom of God verses in this way results in an accurate, harmonious, and enlightening interpretation of this elusive subject.

When Jesus proclaimed the kingship in a present context, he was, by metonymy, ***referring to himself as the Messiah.***

When he spoke about kingship in relation to his disciples, he was ***referring to the Messianic monarchy.*** He explained on many occasions that most of the Jews had disobeyed God and were rejected, but those who believed in him would become God's children, and as a royal family, they would inherit the kingship and rule with him.

When he spoke about the kingship in a future context, he was referring to his earthly *Messianic reign*, as was understood and expected by godly first-century Jews. The kingdom of God verses are now presented in three groups, reflecting the focus of the verses, whether it be on the king, the monarchy, or the reign.