

25. YOUR KINGDOM COME

The kingdom of God is near

From that time on, Jesus began to preach: Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near (Mt 4:17).

Jesus travelled everywhere proclaiming that the kingdom of God had come near. What could he mean? Does anyone understand this statement? Was the kingdom of God near in Jesus' time? Was it near in time? - coming soon but not quite yet, just wait a little while. Or was it near in space? It's close by somewhere if you only know where to look. Is there any evidence of it? Jesus' disciples didn't see God's kingdom appear. They were still asking Jesus about it on the day he ascended to heaven (Acts 1:6). Has the kingdom come since that time? Surely such a dramatic moment would be recorded in the world's history books. Augustine, the so-called Church Father, taught that the kingdom was the Catholic Church but this has no scriptural basis; Jesus did not teach that. The teaching that the kingdom is in heaven is also false. Heaven is not regarded as being near. Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand, but the Father's throne is not the seat of the kingdom of God. Jesus was victorious and sat down with his Father on *his Father's throne*. And he told us that if we're victorious we'll sit down with him on his throne (Rev 3:21). When we pray "your kingdom come," it's Jesus' kingdom we're praying for, the Messianic kingdom. It's the kingdom of God that Jesus preached, better translated as the kingdom *from* God rather than *of* God, because it's only of God in the sense that everything comes from him. God is always sovereign, we can't talk about his own kingdom coming!

Some say the kingdom is within believers, in their hearts, because wherever God is ruling, there's his kingdom. That's false teaching based on a poor translation of Luke 17:20. The kingdom wasn't within the Pharisees to whom Jesus was talking. This kingdom isn't a reign that's exercised in somebody, it involves the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven.

Jesus conducted his ministry in the first century when faithful Jews were eagerly waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah was the title of a Jewish king prophesied in many places in the OT and especially by the later prophets. They knew exactly what he was proclaiming when he spoke of the kingdom of God. You can't have a kingdom without a king and you can't have a king without a territory. Jesus' proclamation implied that the Messiah was near, he was near in space because Jesus was referring to himself obliquely, as he did when he referred to himself as the Son of Man. This is the first secret to understanding what the kingdom of God is all about. In a third of the kingdom of God verses, Jesus is, by metonymy, referring to himself surreptitiously to avoid being arrested by the Romans or the unbelieving Jewish religious authorities.

To us, a Child is born

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. ... The extent of his rule and of peace is endless. He'll reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever (Isa 9:6-7).

This is arguably the most popular Messianic prophecy that we're reminded of at Christmas. Jesus was born in Bethlehem in 4-5 BC and lived on Earth for 35-38 years. We tend to spiritualize the meaning of these verses rather than taking them literally. The 'us' in the prophecy is the Jewish nation. Jesus was born to be king of the Jews. He'll sit on David's throne and rule the world in peace and righteousness, but not until at least 2000 years later. He's a wonderful counselor for us as Christians, our mighty God, our Prince of Peace, and even one with

the Father, but the prophecy is not primarily for us, it was for Israel. When Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God, he was announcing to the faithful that the promised Messiah had arrived. But to their disappointment, he didn't sit on David's throne and rule the world from Jerusalem as expected. The prophecy still awaits its fulfillment.

The gospel of the kingdom

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Mt 4:23).

In Galatians the apostle Paul was adamant that his gospel was the only true gospel, yet it doesn't seem to be the same gospel that Jesus' preached. Jesus went everywhere throughout Galilee proclaiming the gospel of the *kingdom*. In all his teachings on the kingdom of God, he rarely referred to his death and resurrection because those events hadn't happened yet. The gospel that Jesus communicated to his disciples was the big story. He was the Messiah! He would fulfill prophecy and rule the world. God had granted him the authority to rule all the world's kingdoms, the entire planet. He'll bring healing to the sin-infected world as symbolized by his healing ministry. Paul's gospel on the other hand was all about Christ's death on the cross, and remember, Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew Messiah. Both gospels are very much Christ-centered. Paul's gospel has to do with our salvation without which we cannot enjoy Jesus' gospel which has to do with our glorification. When he rules the world, we'll rule with him in our immortal supernatural resurrection bodies.

Jesus sent his disciples to announce his presence

Heal the sick who are there and tell them, "The kingdom of God has come near you (Lk 10:9).

It's recorded seven times that Jesus went to all the towns and villages proclaiming the kingdom. He also sent his disciples out to proclaim

the same message. The ‘kingdom of God’ that was proclaimed was Jesus himself. An abstract word like ‘kingdom’ cannot come near anybody, but the king can. Jesus said: The harvest is vast, but the workers are few. So ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers out into his harvest. This is the great work of evangelization that the Church has been involved in ever since. The original message was that the king was near. Today’s message is that the king came and died on the cross for repentant sinners and rose again from the dead so that they might have eternal life and reign with the king over the Earth forever. Through the paucity of eschatological teaching, many Christians think that heaven is their home. Believers indeed go to be with the Lord in the heavenly realm when they die and our rewards are often spoken of as being stored up in heaven, but an amorphous heaven is never portrayed as our destiny. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived as pilgrims in the promised land because their eternal hope was in a city with permanent foundations whose architect and builder is God. And this heavenly city will one day come down out of heaven from God to Earth, the New Jerusalem from where the Messiah and his monarchy will rule for a thousand years, after which the Messianic kingdom will merge into the eternal state of which we know virtually nothing (1 Cor 15:24, 28).

The Messiah has come upon you

If it’s by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Mt 12:28).

If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Lk 11:20).

Jesus drove out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit as evidence that he was the Messiah and he used the ‘kingdom of God’ phrase to refer to himself as the Messiah. These verses do not teach the presence or proximity of the Messianic kingdom; they proclaim the presence of the Messiah.

The kingdom of God is not within you

On being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied: The kingdom of God doesn't come with observable signs. People won't say look here or look there, for behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst (Lk 17:20-21).

The latest NIV translation corrected the earlier 1978 version where, following the KJV, they translated "the kingdom of God is within you," with the above reading as an alternative translation. This translation has given rise to the false teaching that the kingdom of God is within people. It certainly wasn't within the unbelieving Pharisees whom Jesus was teaching. A kingdom cannot be in somebody. The Bible doesn't teach that God's kingdom is in the heart of a believer. The peace of Christ can rule within our hearts (Col 3:15) but that's not the kingdom. The kingdom of God does have a geographic territory, but it's the entire Earth, not human hearts. Jesus told the Pharisees in cryptic language that the Messiah was right there *among* them. People wouldn't suddenly say: "Here he is" or "There he is" because he had been living in their midst for many years already.

The early disciples proclaimed the kingdom of God

But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women (Acts 8:12).

The early church went forth proclaiming the kingdom of God, but they were preaching Jesus as the Messiah, not the presence of a so-called "already but not yet kingdom." There was no kingdom yet, that awaits Jesus' return. The kingdom of God is not something that has been inaugurated and awaits Jesus' return for consummation. Where is that taught in scripture? The message was always Jesus, and it was couched in kingdom terminology because Jesus would return as king one day. As the thief on the cross said: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom, or, as some manuscripts read: when you come in your kingly power.

As children of God we're heirs of the kingdom, but we won't receive our inheritance until Jesus returns and we're resurrected. As far as the

Messianic kingdom is concerned, there's no evidence that it has been inaugurated. The kingdoms of the world are very much in power, and the whole world is under the control of the devil. Evil forces will rule until the Messiah returns to slay the arch-enemy, the Antichrist. Then, and only then will Jesus become king of the world. He's not the emasculated Jesus of the amillennialists who rules in heaven or peoples' hearts, he's the powerful monarch who will return to Earth and slay the armies arrayed against him at Armageddon and reign on David's throne and over his kingdom (Isa 9:7).

Paul's message was couched in kingdom terms

“Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8).

“Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again” (Acts 20:25).

“They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus” (Acts 28:23).

“He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ – with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31).

The above scriptures show us that Paul's message was couched in kingdom terms, but more importantly, he was preaching Jesus as the Messiah who would return to rule the world.

THE MONARCHY

Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Mt 6:33).

The kingdom was such an important subject in Jesus' estimation that he said we should seek it first, together with the righteousness that God provides. Neither of these should be regarded as God's possession, but rather what he provides. God is the source of all things, not least of which is the kingdom that he prepared for the righteous since the creation of the world (Mt 25:34) and the righteousness that he provides for us so that we might have a right and holy standing before him. It's by grace that we're saved through faith which doesn't come from us, it's God's gift. Our righteousness doesn't result from our actions; no man can boast. We're God's masterpiece, created in the Messiah Jesus to perform good actions that God prepared long ago to be our way of life.

How do we seek the kingdom? By seeking the Messiah! By putting our faith in him, giving up all, and surrendering ourselves to his loving care. Jesus spoke these words in the context of teaching about worry. His disciples were not to worry about anything, even the food they ate and the clothes they wore, because just as God feeds and clothes his creation, he'll look after his people. The Messianic community is not to live like unbelievers who spend their whole lives working to procure these things. Seek the Messiah and his righteousness and all these things will be provided for, Jesus promised.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are the humble, for they'll inherit the Earth (Mt 5:3, 5).

The beatitudes describe the blessings of the true followers of Jesus, those born again of God's Spirit and who become God's people. It's they who constitute the monarchy in the coming kingdom. This is the second secret of understanding the kingdom of God. Believers are not subjects in the kingdom as is sometimes taught, they're the rulers. As God's children, they're royal family, and as such, they'll inherit the Earth. Jesus often said the first would be the last and the last first. The leaders of this present world, the billionaires, the powerful, the glitterati – they have their reward – they'll be nowhere to be found. The humble, the servants, the poor in spirit; they'll be glorified and will inhabit New Jerusalem with its Tree of Life and the River of Life. The blessed are also described as those who are merciful, pure in heart, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and those who are persecuted for being good, especially those who are insulted and falsely accused because of their faith in Jesus.

How do they do it? Wherein lies their strength? They'll be called God's children, and they are, because they have been born again of God's Spirit and have become new creatures in Christ. They have been born again, not of a seed that perishes, but of what cannot perish; the living and everlasting word of God.

Becoming God's children

He came to his own people and they didn't receive him. However, to all who accepted him and believed in him, he gave the right to become God's children. They weren't born in a physical sense, nor of lust or a man's desire; it was God who bore them (Jn 1:11-13).

How wonderful it'll be to be recognized as a child of God! Faith requires that we take God's word literally and that's what it says. The elect may number a billion, no one knows the number, but that makes it no less wonderful. The creation eagerly awaits the revelation of God's children because it'll also share in the freedom of their glorious state. The resurrected righteous will enjoy the same sort of resurrection body that Jesus has: not restricted by space or time.

The righteous will have more glory and prestige than the angels. As children of Almighty God, the Creator of all things, they'll reign with him forever and ever (Rev 22:5).

Only those born from above can enter the kingdom

Jesus said to him: I'm telling you, unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . Jesus answered: I'm telling you the truth, unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3:3, 5).

John said that all who accepted Jesus and believed in him, he gave the right to become God's children (Jn 1:12). When people believe in Jesus and surrender their lives to him as to God, they're born again of the Holy Spirit, they become new people; part of God's family. As children they're heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17). When Christ returns to reign over the Earth, they'll inherit the kingdom and reign with him (Dan 7:27, Rev 5:10). No one can enter the kingdom without that experience. Entering the kingdom (which in Greek means kingship or royal power) is entering the monarchy, the King's royal family. Born of water and of the Spirit is best explained by Ezekiel: I'll sprinkle clean water on you, and you'll be clean. I'll cleanse you from all your impurities and the defilements of your idols. I'll give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I'll remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I'll put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and carefully obey my laws (Ezek 36:25-27). That's what being born again is all about.

Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we're God's children. Now if we're children, we're heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:16-17).

As children we're heirs of God, receiving our inheritance by lot or reward on the day Jesus returns to establish his kingdom. Jesus is also

an heir, so he's not reigning yet, we're co-heirs together. When Jesus ascended to heaven, he sat down at the right hand of God as prophesied in Psalm 110, and from that exalted position he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. He'll begin his reign when he descends from heaven in power and glory to defeat his enemies at the battle of Armageddon. Daniel 7 tells us that the Son of Man will be given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all peoples and nations of every language will worship him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that never passes away, and his kingdom is never destroyed. Daniel adds that the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and possess it forever. So the Messiah and his people receive their inheritance together after the last world kingdom arises and after the Antichrist oppresses God's people for 3 1/2 years. Then the court sits, and the Antichrist's power is taken away and destroyed forever. The sovereignty, power, and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven are then handed over to the saints of the Most High. The Messiah's kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all the earthly rulers will worship and obey him.

Creation waits for the children of God to be revealed

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19-20).

Flesh and blood can't inherit the kingdom of God. They have to be resurrected first. The new bodies are imperishable and immortal, raised in power and glory. They're spiritual bodies that can exist in heaven and on Earth, as the post-resurrection Jesus existed before his ascension to heaven. That's our glorification: death will be swallowed up in victory. The creation eagerly awaits that day. Jesus talked about the renewal of all things when he would sit on his glorious throne and his followers would also sit on thrones and judge. All who have left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother or wife for Jesus' sake will

receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. All the nations will be gathered before the king and he'll say to those on his right: Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance: the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

The Messianic rule is a theocracy. The survivors will be ruled by the Messiah with an iron rod during a long era of peace, justice, and righteousness. Wolves will live with lambs, leopards with young goats, and children will put their hands into vipers' nests.

There's a hierarchy in the Messianic monarchy

Therefore if a person sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly, he'll be considered least in the Messianic monarchy, and if a person practices and teaches these commands, he'll be considered great in the Messianic monarchy (Mt 5:19).

At that time Jesus' disciples came and asked him: Who is the greatest in the Messianic monarchy? ... And he said: I'm telling you the truth, if you don't change and become like children, you'll never enter the Messianic monarchy. If a person humbles himself and becomes like this child, he'll be great in the Messianic monarchy (Mt 18:1, 3-4).

Mat 20:21 What do you want? he asked. She said: Grant that these two sons of mine (James and John) may sit beside you in your monarchy, one on your right and one on your left.

All the saints will be glorified but not all will be equal. The judgment seat of Christ determines rewards for service and determines status during the millennium. Many who are first now will be last. Salvation is by grace but there are rewards for faithful service. In the parable of the minas, the returning king rewards one servant by giving him charge of five cities, and another, ten cities.

Rewards for faithful service

Jesus said to them: I'm telling you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have

followed me will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Anyone who has left his house or brothers or sisters or parents or wife and children or lands for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and he'll inherit eternal life (Mt 19:28-29).

Jesus said we should serve God faithfully and then say: We're unworthy servants, we have only done our duty. So our faithful service is not done for our own sake but for God's glory. Paul said: Judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He'll bring to light what's hidden in darkness and he'll expose the motives of the heart. At that time everybody will receive their praise from God (1 Cor 4:5). He also said: If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, and costly stones, or wood, hay, and straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It'll be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it's burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved like someone escaping from a fire empty-handed (1 Cor 3:12-15). And Paul said: Therefore my dear friends, stand firm and don't retreat. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that the work you do for the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor 15:58).