

What is the Kingdom of God? Is it present or in the future? A Series on the Mysterious Nature of God's Kingdom: Part 9

There are a number of views about the Kingdom of God and whether it is presently in existence or not. Most views take a literal understanding, but there are a number that take an allegorical interpretation. For example, some take an Ecclesiastical interpretation and see the Kingdom of God as the present Church and deny the existence of a future kingdom for Israel. Some take a Personal interpretation and understand the Kingdom of God as a personal and spiritual experience with God; the kingdom is the rule of God in the hearts of Believers. And others see a Social interpretation where the Kingdom of God is the social order of equality and human rights as a consequence of doing what Jesus would do.

This variety of interpretations reflects the challenge of understanding Jesus' revelation of the Kingdom of God through parables, their hidden meaning and their eschatological nature. What is the Kingdom of God and what does it mean to Christians?

Old Testament – Background to the Kingdom

It is without a doubt that the Kingdom of God involves a King who rules, a people who are ruled and a sphere where this rule is recognized. Since Satan's challenge to God's rule, God plan has been to reassert His sovereignty through Divine Covenants with man.

With the Abrahamic Covenant (see the article: Divine Covenants... the basis for a plan for salvation at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/CovenantAbrahamic.aspx), seen in Genesis 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; and 22:15-18, God initiated the process to restore His created image of God from the corruption introduced by Satan. This unconditional covenant promised Abraham and his descendants a land, a nation and a blessing. It was a guarantee of a permanent national existence, a perpetual title to the land and the honor of being the means of blessing to all.

The Covenant of Land (see the article: Divine Covenants... the Land at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/CovenantLand.aspx) is developed in Deuteronomy 29:1-30:10 and expands on the Land portion of the Abrahamic Covenant. While the nation of Israel presently has a portion of the Promised Land, the nation of Israel has not returned to God nor have they obeyed Him; thus, the promises of the unconditional Land Covenant remain to be fulfilled.

The Covenant of the King (see the article: Divine Covenants... the King at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/CovenantDavidic.aspx), seen in 2 Samuel 7:8-17 and 1 Chronicles 17:8-15 expands on the promise of a descendant King and means of blessing to others through the Abrahamic Covenant. It is an unconditional covenant foreshadowing the Kingdom of God; it is a guarantee that David's lineage will be forever a royal line, the right of rule will forever belong to a descendant of David and through one of the house of David, the theocratic Kingdom of God will be fully realized.

Based on the Divine Covenants and prophetic revelation, the nation of Israel had a rising expectation of a Savior that would establish justice, destroy enemies and renew life (Isa 1:24-28; 9:6-7; 11:1-10, 64:1-12; 65:1-25; 66:1-24; Jer 23:5-8; 31:31-34; Ezek 37:24-28; Dan 2:44-45; 7:13-14; Zeph 3:14-20).

However, the nation of Israel expected a human messiah who was a military political leader like David and lower in divine position than God. Few understood that the Kingdom was a gift from God appointed to human beings by a unilateral covenant, but Jesus certainly did (Luke 22:29).

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New Testament – Essence of the Kingdom, Relationship to Jesus Christ, and Its coming

The New Testament introduces the term "Kingdom of God", and Old Testament references to it crystallize in the person of Jesus Christ.

While the Old Testament presents the idea that the Kingdom of God involves a King who rules, a people who are ruled and a sphere where this rule is recognized, the New Testament presents a concept that is unparalleled in human history.

The Kingdom is Inaugurated

With the birth of Jesus, the angel Gabriel signals the inauguration of the Kingdom of God by explicitly linking the birth to the covenant God made with David (Luke 1:31-33). Jesus will receive the throne of David, reign over the house of Jacob and His rule will be everlasting. The unconditional promise of a King begins the process of being fulfilled.

The Kingdom is Near

After John was put in prison, Jesus began His public ministry and announced the coming Kingdom of God to Israel, "The time **is** fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God **is** at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15 also Matt 3:2; 4:17).

The emphasized verb "is" is in the Greek grammatical form of past perfect tense, which means that something has happened and its results continue. In this sentence something decisive has happened and the result, "the Kingdom of God," is coming and near.

Jesus introduces the idea that the Kingdom of God is exclusively associated with salvation through Christ. To enter the Kingdom, one must be "reborn" (John 3:1-21).

Yet Jesus' proclamation is more than calling human beings to repentance. It is an announcement of the immediacy of the Kingdom of God; God is about to initiate His world wide reign.

Under Jesus' instruction, there were other messengers proclaiming the nearness of the Kingdom of God. The proclamation was made to towns, cities and homes that 72 messengers visited (Luke 10:2-16).

For those who accept Jesus' message, there is blessing and healing, "... and heal those who in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The Kingdom of God has come near to you.'"

For those who reject His message, Jesus makes clear that their disapproval does not impede the Kingdom of God, "Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the Kingdom of God has come near."

There are consequences for those who do not receive the messengers, "The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me." (Luke 10:16)

The Kingdom of God that Jesus presents appears to be intimately associated with Jesus Himself. Faith in the Messiah is integral to the Kingdom and here the verdict that will be passed on to a person in final judgment was determined by the attitude that he adopted towards Jesus at that present moment (Matt 11:20-24; Luke 10:2-16).

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The Kingdom is Here

While Jesus speaks of the nearness of the Kingdom of God, there are instances where He says that the Kingdom is here especially when speaking to Jewish religious authorities!

As Jesus' ministry grows, Jewish religious authorities increasingly object to Jesus' portrayal of Himself as the Messiah, Son of David. Opposition becomes rejection when, after healing the demon possessed deaf mute, Jesus is accused of using demonic power. Jesus responds, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God **has** come upon you." (Matt 12:22-28; Luke 11:14-20).

The emphasized verb "has" is in the Greek aorist tense which means that something has taken place at a point in time. Usually this refers to an action in the past; in the context of the passage, the Kingdom of God has arrived by the time of Jesus' exorcism controversy.

The Jews fully expected their messiah to perform miracles; but, not this Messiah. While Jesus' exorcism was performed by the Holy Spirit and proof that the Kingdom of God has dawned, the Jews denied the supernatural event testifying that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Jesus' reference to "the finger of God" (Luke 11:14-20) affirmed that the source of His power was God Himself (Ex 8:19). Indicative of the authoritative presence of the Kingdom was the unleashing of God's power against demons.

Despite Jesus' many supernatural miracles, the Pharisees continue to ask for evidence that heralded the Kingdom of God. Jesus responds with, "The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the Kingdom of God is in your midst (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus makes clear that the onset of the Kingdom of God is not an observable process. The paradox here is that is that the Pharisees did not objectively observe and recognized the Messiah and the presence of the Kingdom of God!

There has been some controversy in the translation of Luke 17:21. The Greek preposition "entos" mean "pertaining to a specific area inside something." This has led some translations to read, "... because the Kingdom of God is within you" (NIV, KJ, NKJ). Given that the Pharisees whom Jesus is speaking to are non-Believers, this translation does not make sense. When speaking of the Kingdom of God, Jesus speaks in the context of human beings entering into the Kingdom not visa versa; thus a more accurate translation, which fits the context of the verse, is "the Kingdom of God is among you" (NASB, NET).

Jesus' Kingdom of God is supernatural; defying Judaism's concept of a conquering king and national statehood, Jesus' speaks of one based on grace, not merit, and inseparable from His own person and power.

Theologian Dr. Bertold Klappert sees it succinctly as: "It is Jesus Himself in whom alone the future kingdom of God is present, in whose words and deeds that kingdom has already appeared. It has come already in that Jesus seeks out the company of tax collectors and sinners offering them fellowship at table and so promising them forgiveness of their sins. As the king invites to His feast the beggars and homeless (Matt 22:1-10), as the father's love receives back the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), as the shepherd goes out after the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7), as the woman searches for the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), as the master out of goodness of his heart pays the laborers hired at the last hour the full day's pay (Matt 20:1-15), so Jesus goes to the poor to give them the promise of forgiveness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3)."

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The Kingdom is Yet Future

While there is an intimacy of the Kingdom of God to His Person, Jesus reveals to the disciples that the Kingdom of God is ushered in suddenly and without warning with the return of the Son of Man (Mark 13:1-37; 14:62; Luke 17:22-37). The arrival of the Kingdom will be unexpected and apocalyptic.

The sudden arrival of the Kingdom of God is portrayed by images of the sudden onset of the catastrophic Flood (Matt 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27), the sudden destruction of Sodom (Luke 17:28-33), the unexpected burglar (Matt 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-40), the sudden arrival of the homeowner (Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:35-48), or the sudden arrival of the bridegroom (Matt 25:1-13).

For the benefit of His disciples, Jesus interprets many of His parables with images of violence and judgment. The Parable of the Tares (Matt 13:24-30; 36-43, see the article: [The Parable of the Tares at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/2JesusChrist/ParableKOGTares.aspx](http://www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/2JesusChrist/ParableKOGTares.aspx)) and the Parable of the Dragnet (Matt 13:47-50, see the article: [The Parable of the Dragnet at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/2JesusChrist/ParableKOGDragnet.aspx](http://www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/2JesusChrist/ParableKOGDragnet.aspx)) reveal that the Kingdom of God does not culminate until Judgment takes place.

In contrast, just before His crucifixion, Jesus saw the advent of the Kingdom in the imminent future. He speaks of not eating the weekly Passover again "until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God" (Luke 22:15-16) nor "drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the Kingdom of God comes" (Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18).

And while dying on the cross, Jesus tells the repentant thief that "today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42-43). Implied is the idea that upon death, they both will enter the Kingdom of God.

It is not apparent to the followers of Jesus that the Crucifixion is essential for the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mark 15:43). Cleopas, who does not recognize the resurrected Jesus, tells Him, "... we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21).

Only after the resurrection do the disciples fully understand the Crucifixion and truly believe the exalted status of Jesus as Lord and Christ, heir to the throne of David and Son of Man (Acts 2:22-36; Phil 2:9-11).

Jesus' crucifixion pays the price for atonement, and the redemption of one's sin provides the means for a human being who believes in Jesus to be righteous before God and gain entrance to His Kingdom.

With His crucifixion, Jesus fulfills His prophetic words, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom" (Matt 16:28; Mark 9:1).

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus preached the dawning of the Kingdom of God; after the resurrection, the disciples preached about the gospel of Jesus Christ and the proclaimed of the Kingdom (Acts 8:12; 28:31). The Kingdom of God was seen synonymously as the Kingdom of Christ (Eph 5:5), and Christians were encouraged to be patient as they look forward to His return (James 5:8).

The Kingdom is Realized

While the Bible is not completely explicit about details of the final consummation of the Kingdom of God, one can gain some sense of its realization.

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The consummation of the Kingdom of God begins with the return of Jesus Christ (Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Rev 19:11-19).

With the rule of God prevailing, there is Judgment when all living beings are judged for their sins (Rev 20:1-15) and culminated with the destruction of death and Hades (Rev 20:14).

At the end of time, Jesus Christ hands back to the Father the Kingdom that He received from Him (1 Cor 15:24-28).

The rule of Christ and the rule of God are not two kingdoms that follow one another in succession, but one kingdom of Christ that issues finally in the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of Christ is seen as identical to the Kingdom of God (Rev 11:15; 22:1-5).

There is a new heaven, new earth, and a new Jerusalem (Rev 21:1-27).

The people of God's Kingdom would only be those whose name is in the Book of Life (Rev 21:27).

God's plan of reclaiming His rule over His Creation, which began with His Divine Covenants with man, is finally fulfilled with the return of the King, Jesus son of David, Messiah Son of Man who restores the image of God and makes human beings righteous through atonement, and Lord God of the new heaven and earth and whose rule will last forever.

It is only in the sense that the Kingdom of God is tied up inextricably with His own person and actions does Jesus declare it to be near and already present. This is the secret and mystery of the Kingdom of God.

With the Kingdom of God manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, the individual is confronted with a decision. Belief in the Savior demands obedience to the words of Jesus and a call to ethical reforms that mean self denial. Yet it can only be received with the faith of a child (Matt 18:3; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17; John 3:3).

With Jesus' resurrection, Paul explains what the Kingdom of God is in the absence of Jesus on earth, and John's comment about the Holy Spirit explains how it is still inextricably tied with His Person:

for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Rom 14:17)

The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us. (1 John 3:24)

Aware that the future rule of God is predicated on His personal return and judgment, Jesus, can say that the Kingdom of God is seen as both "already" and "not yet." (Matt 25:31-34).

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