

The Kingdom of God In the New Testament

By Steve Sebastian

The New Testament describes God's kingdom as one kingdom that consists of God, the angels, and the saints of every age, living in accordance with God's character. It also describes God's kingdom as ruling over other kingdoms without them being included in His kingdom. God's kingdom does not contain unholiness or unrighteousness, which would include the world, the kingdom of Satan, and sinners. In fact, whenever any of these come into contact with God's kingdom, there is conflict (John 7:7; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 5:8).

Currently, in the age of grace, God offers man the plan of salvation as the means of resolving this conflict with Him and His kingdom. Unrighteous sinners are invited to repent, escape condemnation, and become members of God's kingdom, but most refuse, loving darkness more than light (John 3:18-20). Eventually, after this age, Christ and His kingdom will come, as promised, and rule the nations (*ethnos*) as Israel's Messiah for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4). Once that period is over, God will settle all remaining conflicts by conquering Satan, his followers, and all other sin and rebellion that still exists. God will destroy this present earth (2 Peter 3:10) and create a new heaven and earth, which will be holy, acceptable, and joined to His eternal kingdom (Revelation 21:1-5).

In this paper, I will highlight three aspects of God's kingdom in the New Testament. It is eternal, stands apart, and is coming to reign. But first I would like to discuss Matthew's use of the term "kingdom of heaven," and what is meant by the term "gospel of the kingdom."

The "Kingdom of Heaven" In Matthew

One of the first things we notice in the New Testament is Matthew's use of the term "kingdom of heaven," which appears 32 times in his gospel account. Its use is second only to the term "kingdom of God," which appears 72 times in the entire New Testament. [Walvoord-Kingdom of Heaven-Walvoord.com] Scholars continue to argue whether these terms are fully synonymous with one another. My view is that they are fully synonymous, and that Matthew has chosen a complimentary term for describing God's kingdom. This is evident when comparing the use of both terms interchangeably in the gospel accounts of the kingdom parables (Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10).

Also, Jesus used the two terms interchangeably when speaking about the "rich young ruler" in Matthew 19:23, "...*Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*" (NASB), and in Matthew 19:24, "*Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*" (NASB).

Here are two possibilities as to why Matthew chose this term to describe God's kingdom:

1. It sets the tone that this new era will not be about earthly nations or kingdoms, but God's heavenly kingdom. God's plan was not to restore Israel at that time, but rather to take for Himself a different people who would not be defined by earthly national borders (Acts 10:35). They become citizens of heaven itself. A holy, royal priesthood formed in the midst of Satan's hostile territory (John 15:19; 1 Peter 2:9).
2. It automatically refutes corrupt ideas about the nature of God's kingdom, such as those made by Pope Francis in 2020:

In today's celebration of Earth Day, we are called to renew our sense of sacred respect for the earth, for it is not just our home but also God's home. This should

make us all the more aware that we stand on holy ground! [April 22, 2020, Catholicculture.org
(Acts 7:49)]

The Gospel of the Kingdom

The term “gospel” has been narrowly defined by many to always mean the plan of salvation. But this definition causes problems when the word “gospel” is used in a context that says something more or different. For example, Mark 1:1 says, *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. The context clearly points to all of Christ’s teachings contained in the book, not just the plan of salvation.

The word “gospel” is properly translated “good message,” “good” meaning a true message, but not necessarily “good news,” in the sense of something you want to hear. An example of this is found in Revelation 14:6-7, when the angel, *having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth*, instructs them to *fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come*. This is not “good news” or a message about salvation but of impending wrath and judgment.

The Gospel In Acts

In the book of Acts, the *gospel* that was preached contained two overlapping elements: the kingdom of God and the person of Christ. The following verses give this picture:

- **Acts 8:12**, *But when they (Samaritans) believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*
- **Acts 8:25**, *when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.*
- **Acts 28:28, 31**, *...the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves. ...And he [Paul] stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.*

The message of the kingdom is the gospel (Matthew 24:14), but the gospel is not always the plan of salvation. So when the word *gospel* is used, we should examine the context to see if it means the plan of salvation, or some other aspect of the kingdom.

I will now consider three unique aspects that describe God’s kingdom in the New Testament.

The Kingdom Is Eternal

There are two basic eternal aspects of God’s kingdom—its outcomes and its values.

1. Eternal Outcomes

God’s kingdom contains His glorious throne, from which comes eternal outcomes for all mankind (Revelation 5:13). The saints receive eternal blessings, an eternal inheritance, and eternal life. Matthew 19:29 says,

And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

Conversely, sinners receive eternal judgements and punishments: *And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal* (Matthew 25:46; see also Revelation 20:11-12).

God created man to exist somewhere forever, and God has given man the choice of where they will spend their eternity. William Law (1686–1761), a priest in the Church of England, put it like this: “If you have not chosen the kingdom of God first, it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead.”

2. Eternal Values

God’s kingdom deals with change. Changes occurred when Satan rebelled, when man was created, when Christ came to earth, and when He returned to glory. It will also deal with changes in the future. Revelation 21:3 says,

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

But when God’s kingdom deals with a change in circumstances, its values are never compromised. They eternally reflect the character and will of God. James 1:17 says, *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning* (see also Hebrews 13:8).

Unlike earthly kings and kingdoms, God’s kingdom never compromises righteousness to do “good,” not even to save sinners. Only the righteous may enter God’s kingdom. Christ solved the problem of man’s unrighteousness, not by lowering the standard of righteousness or by redefining it, but by laying down His perfect, righteous life to justify the unrighteous sinner. *I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep* (John 10:11).

There is a lot of talk among Christians today about our God-given rights, but little about our God-given values. These are the eternal values we receive as those belonging to God’s kingdom. Some of these values are listed in Galatians 5:22-23, *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance...* In short, they are the values that reflect God’s character and His will. These should determine who we become, and how we live, without regard to social status, culture, or personal freedom. We belong to the kingdom of God. Matthew 6:10, *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*

The Kingdom Stands Apart

The New Testament describes God’s kingdom as exclusive, peaceful, holy, and undivided.

1. The Kingdom Is Exclusive

Abraham is an important figure in the New Testament, being mentioned 74 times by name in 11 books. Since Genesis 12, only those with the same type and object of faith as Abraham inherit the promises of God’s kingdom. Galatians 3:29 says, *And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.* Christ was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that his seed would bring about a blessing to *all the nations of the earth*. Galatians 3:16 explains how this works. *Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but rather to one, “And to your seed,” that is, Christ.*

The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day were faced with having to change their mind (repent) in order to inherit these promises, a change that they refused to understand or accept. They were clinging to their false notion that being physical descendants of Abraham and the Mosaic Law were all they needed, to which John the Baptist calls them out in Matthew 3:8-9,

Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: and think not to say within yourselves, "We have Abraham to our father"; for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

The Jewish people were looking for the Messiah and a Messianic kingdom being established on earth... To enter this kingdom one needed repentance. What was new about John's message was not the Messianic expectation... What was new about his message was that repentance was required to be a part of the kingdom of God. The fact that you had to repent to enter it showed that you were not already in it. That's what was news to the Pharisees and Sadducees... they thought being sons of Abraham allowed them into heaven. But John said that was not sufficient. One needed repentance. [Matthew Commentary, p. 4, RelationalConcepts.org]

Jesus said, "*Not everyone that saith unto me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven*" (Matthew 7:21).

2. The Kingdom Is Peaceful

God's kingdom is a kingdom of peace, which means everything it contains is in harmony with God's character and will. There is no internal conflict in God's heavenly kingdom. *For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost* (Romans 14:17).

Peace is an attribute of God's kingdom, so we should always pursue it. Hebrews 12:14 says, *Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.* This does not mean being a wimp or a pushover, but honest, merciful, and loving, which is in keeping with God's character and His kingdom.

Romans 8:6 says, *For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace,* which means that our carnal nature, along with the unsaved world, may have times of temporary calmness, but that is not peace. In order to have peace, you must have righteousness. Isaiah 57:21 says, "*There is no peace,*" says my God, "*for the wicked.*"

Peace and righteousness work together in God's kingdom (James 3:18). Therefore, living in peace requires us to purge unrighteousness from our thoughts, actions, and relationships. Though we will experience conflicts and difficulties in this world, unlike the world, God's peace is available to us (John 14:27). *And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:7).

3. The Kingdom Is Holy

Everything in God's kingdom is holy:

- **God Is Holy**, *For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one* (1 John 5:7).

- **God’s Word Is Holy**, *And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15).*
- **The Angels Are Holy**, *...when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:38).*
- **The Prophets Are Holy**, *Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began (Acts 3:21).*
- **The Saints Are Holy**, *Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus (Hebrews 3:1; see also 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 2:5).*

4. The Kingdom Is Undivided

Many theologians incorrectly posit that since God’s kingdom dominates all other kingdoms, they are a part of His kingdom. This “universal kingdom of God” concept means that all kingdoms are part of God’s kingdom in a universal, external sense. This misunderstanding comes primarily from how they interpret the kingdom parables.

For example, in his article entitled “The Kingdom of Heaven,” John Walvoord writes,

Within the universal kingdom of God, however, various subdivisions exist. Matthew 12:26 refers to Satan’s kingdom, i.e., the sphere of rule which God has permitted Satan... The general character of Matthew 13 is that it is dealing with the external aspect of the kingdom, or Christendom in its largest dimension, rather than with the body of the saved particularly. [Walvoord.com/article/111]

Warren Wiersbe echoes this false idea in his Bible commentary of Matthew’s kingdom parables. During this present age, “the kingdom of heaven” is a mixture of true and false, good and bad, as pictured in these parables. It is “Christendom,” professing allegiance to the King, and yet containing much that is contrary to the principles of the King.

In John 3:3, Jesus told Nicodemus that *except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*, and in Mark 3:24-25. Jesus told the scribes, *If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand...* In these two statements alone, Jesus nails the door shut on the possibility that God’s kingdom includes good and bad. We should not assume that the kingdom parables (Matthew 13:1-52) teach that the kingdom is “a mixture of true and false, good and bad,” or that it includes Satan’s kingdom. That is reading the world and the institutional church back into the kingdom. “Christendom” is not God’s kingdom on earth. God’s kingdom is presently on earth through born-again believers, who, positionally, are also NOT “a mixture of true and false, good and bad” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Kingdom Is Coming to Reign

The New Testament states that the kingdom is coming (Matthew 16:28), which means in the future, when God decides, Jesus Christ will come in power and set up His thousand-year reign upon the earth as Israel’s Messiah and King. As of today, this Messianic kingdom is still coming. Although God is sovereign, Satan is still the *god [theos] of this world* (2 Corinthians 4:4; see also John 12:31).

1. The Messianic Kingdom Comes Through Battle

Believers are delivered from Satan's kingdom, and made citizens of God's kingdom (Colossians 1:13), which places them in direct conflict with evil (Luke 6:22; John 7:7). God provides them everything necessary to stand against Satan's evil schemes. *Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil* (Ephesians 6:11).

But the battle is not finished when the saint departs this life because these conflicts with evil all point to the great battle, which ushers in the Millennium, a battle that includes the resurrected saints.

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war...And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses (Revelation 19:11, 14).

2. The Messianic Kingdom and Beyond

During the thousand-year Messianic kingdom age, Christ will rule the nations (*ethnos*) with a *rod of iron* from Jerusalem (Revelation 2:26-27; Psalm 2:6-9). He will establish rules, and things will go well for those who obey, but disobedience will be met with punishment, personally and/or corporately. Christ's reign will bring peace to the earth through abundant resources, strength, and swift justice (Isaiah 2:4), not because the hearts of the people on earth have changed. During the Millennium, God's kingdom is not fully upon the earth because God's purpose is not to join heaven and earth at that time.

The purpose of the millennium is to fulfill various promises God made to the world. Some of these promises, called covenants, were given specifically to Israel. Others were given to Jesus, the nations of the world, and creation. [What is the purpose of the thousand-year reign of Christ? GotQuestions.org].

The millennial earth is not the millennial kingdom of God but is ruled by the kingdom of God.

Near the end of the thousand years, Satan is released to lead the nations in one final rebellion. At that time, God will destroy them all, along with this present earth, and then create a new holy and acceptable heaven and earth where man will dwell with God and be His people (Revelation 21:1-5).

Conclusion

While the New Testament teaches many things about God's kingdom, it is always God, the angels, and the saints of every age, living in accordance with God's character. We can take comfort in knowing that through every age and in every evil culture, God has provided knowledge of His heavenly kingdom to instruct and encourage His people, just as He does today.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof (Matthew 6:33-34).