

## C. The Kingdom of God

A final consideration foundational to the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew's (and, by extension, the Bible's) understanding of the concept, *kingdom of God*. Because this discourse is a primary articulation of Jesus' gospel of His kingdom, it follows that the reader's understanding of the Lord's words depends directly on his understanding of the kingdom itself. In this regard, the natural tendency is to try to formulate a doctrine of the kingdom of God based on the content of the New Testament. But this is analogous to attempting to construct a building without first laying the proper foundation. The New Testament's doctrine of the kingdom becomes transparent and coherent only when its content is viewed and interpreted in the light of the Old Testament's developing storyline. The obvious reason is that the New Testament is the inspired record of the fulfillment (along with its various outcomes and implications) of the Old Testament scriptures in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. This means that the New Testament's doctrine of the kingdom is nothing but the Old Testament's as it has now found its ordained realization – in the present and unto future consummation – in Christ.

This promise-fulfillment relationship between the Old and New Testaments explains the notable fact that Jesus' teaching and the balance of the New Testament don't provide a specific definition of what the kingdom of God is. Jesus interacted with the notion of the kingdom from the vantage point that His hearers already had (or should have had) a clear, foundational understanding of it such that they would recognize its emerging presence when the messianic Servant arrived on the scene. *Jesus had come to usher in that which His Father had long promised and progressively revealed through His prophets*; the kingdom ought to have needed no definition or explanation, for it was a central theme in all the Law, Prophets, and Writings.

### 1. The Kingdom of God as a Creational Kingdom

Given its centrality, it's not surprising that the Bible introduces the notion of "kingdom" with the opening verses of Genesis. A kingdom implies kingship, and kingship implies a realm of dominion. At the very outset, Genesis establishes the obvious: God, the eternal and uncreated, is the supreme King – "*In the beginning, God...*" But God doesn't rule a kingdom consisting of Himself; the created order is the sphere of His dominion, and thus the first chapter of the Bible recounts His work of creation. Most importantly, it does so in a way that spotlights the two essentials of the concept of "kingdom": It presents a sequence of six creative fiats by which God first established three broad creational *realms* of dominion and then provided the three corresponding sets of creaturely *lords* designed to rule over them (cf. Genesis 1:3-5 and 1:14-19; 1:6-8 and 1:20-23; 1:9-13 and 1:24-25).

### 2. The Kingdom of God as a Relational Kingdom

As the means for exercising His own lordship over His creation, God had brought forth the various creational "kingdom" realms together with the creaturely lords appointed to administer immediate dominion over them. But His work wasn't yet complete; one more creature was needed to fulfill the Creator's wise design for His kingdom and His rule. This creature was to be ruler of all the other created lords; this one was to fill the earth and subdue it, ruling over every living thing that moves on the earth (1:28).

But this ruler's supremacy didn't exempt him from the Creator's lordship; he, too, was created under divine dominion. Yet his place of submission was unique: man was created to be image-son, exercising supreme creaturely lordship as royal vice-regent on behalf of his divine Father. Man's *lordship* was to express his *submission* as God's son. God intended that He would be sovereign Lord of His creation, but not as a detached, absentee ruler; His intimate rule was to be exercised in the creature who alone shares the divine image and likeness. The Creator-Lord would relate to His creation in and through man, the creature in whose being the divine and creaturely converge.

Thus, by means of a carefully crafted creation account, the Scripture introduces the fundamental structures of the divine kingdom long before it begins to employ the terminology of it. The kingdom of God speaks of God's sovereign rule over the works of His hands in and through man, His unique image-son. It is a creational kingdom, but one that is preeminently relational.

### **3. The Kingdom of God as a Redemptive Kingdom**

Most importantly, God's kingdom is a redemptive kingdom, meaning that it has its source and substance in redemption. The reason is revealed in the account of the Fall. No sooner does the Scripture present the basic themes and structures of the kingdom than it recounts the episode that rendered its realization impossible. Seeking to transcend the divine order and function, the image-son fractured his relationship with his Father-Lord, thereby introducing estrangement into the fabric of the creation and its relationship with its Creator. God designed and appointed man to mediate His relationship with the works of His hands; if man becomes alienated from Him, so does the rest of the created order.

In view of the Fall, if God's original design for His creation were ever to be realized, the estranged created order must be restored back to Him; the realization of the kingdom demanded a comprehensive work of redemption. Thus this third quality of the kingdom is both preeminent and overarching, subsuming the previous two:

- a. The redemptive quality of the kingdom subsumes the creaturely aspect precisely because redemption pertains to the creation. Because of man's mediatorial role, his failure and consequent condemnation brought judgment and a curse upon the whole of the created order (Genesis 3:17-18). Not just man, but the entire creation needed to be redeemed in order for God to realize His grand scheme of His kingdom (cf. Isaiah 11:1-9 with 65:17-25, 66:1-23 and Revelation 21:1-5).
- b. But redemption also encompasses the relational aspect of the kingdom because redemption has its goal in the restoration of the Creator-creature relationship. In order for the creation to realize its intended purpose – in order for the kingdom of God to be established, every created thing must exist in perfect harmony with itself, every other thing, and its Creator-Lord under the benevolent rule of His image-son. But Adam's failure secured and sealed the whole creation's estrangement; the only hope for realizing the kingdom was divine intervention in the form of a sovereign deliverance and the restoration of all things to the King.

This is the reason that the Old Testament's doctrine of the kingdom is so thoroughly framed by the principle of redemption. The protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 indirectly introduced that association, and from that point forward until the coming of the Redeemer every scriptural allusion, description, portrayal and reference to God's kingdom presumes its fundamental redemptive quality.

- The account of the Flood provides the first explicit connection between the concepts of kingdom and redemption as God brought forth a "new creation" out of comprehensive judgment and destruction. The earth was purged of its uncleanness and God set about reestablishing it as His sanctuary-kingdom through Noah, a new "Adam" (cf. Genesis 1:27-28, 9:1-7). A new order – a new manifestation of God's kingdom – had been inaugurated, but through a great redemptive act. Man, the image-son, was again to fill and subdue the earth, but this time having been delivered from destruction through divine redemption.
- So redemption was central to God's oath to Abraham and its realization in the theocratic nation of Israel. The Lord promised Abraham that He would establish a kingdom for him by giving his descendents an inheritance in a land that was to be His own sanctuary (Exodus 15:16-18). This promise echoed the kingdom structure introduced in Eden: The Creator was to again express and exercise His lordship in the earth by means of His intimate communion with His royal sons (cf. Exodus 19:1-6, 25:1-8), but this time as the outcome of a sovereign act of redemption (cf. Genesis 15:1-16; Exodus 3:1-8, 20:1-2).

The Israelite theocracy presented the most complete and important portrait of God's kingdom in the time preceding Christ's coming, but the Scripture is careful to emphasize that it didn't fulfill the promise of the kingdom.

- The Old Covenant kingdom of Israel *prefigured* the kingdom of God, and thus the prophets appropriately spoke of that coming kingdom in the language and forms of the Israelite theocracy.
- But the prophets were also clear that the kingdom they predicted would infinitely *transcend* the Israelite kingdom by as much as the spiritual and cosmic transcend the physical and earthly. God's promise to Abraham was perpetuated and advanced in the Israelite theocracy, but not ultimately fulfilled; that awaited the coming of the true Abrahamic seed (cf. John 8:31-40, 56; Galatians 3:15ff).

This explains why neither Jesus nor the New Testament writers ever referred to the Old Covenant kingdom as the "kingdom of God." Neither do the Old Testament scriptures employ that phrase in describing the Israelite theocracy; *in fact the expression doesn't appear at all in the biblical text until it sounds forth from the mouth of the King Himself* (Matthew 12:28). And when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, He was indicating the "in-breaking" of that all-encompassing dominion which the Old Testament promised – the kingdom that, having been inaugurated with His coming (Mark 1:14-15; cf. Daniel 7:9-27), would continue and flourish until its consummation at the end of the age.

#### 4. The Kingdom of God as the Kingdom of Heaven

The transcendent nature of the kingdom of God is perhaps most evident in the fact that Jesus alternatively referred to it under the title, *kingdom of heaven*. This phrase is unique to Matthew's gospel and, with two exceptions (3:2, 18:1), was employed only by Christ Himself. Because this expression is restricted to Matthew's account, some scholars have sought to find in it some theological or personal distinctive peculiar to that one apostle.

One common explanation is that, writing to a Jewish audience, Matthew was keenly aware of the Jews' reluctance to use the name of God and so adopted an equivalent euphemism for the phrase, kingdom of God, that wouldn't offend his readers. (The use of the word *heaven* as a substitute for direct reference to God or the mention of His name is supported by such texts as Luke 15:21 and 20:4.) While this view recognizes the equivalence of the phrases *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of heaven* (which is almost certainly correct), it has a couple of notable difficulties.

First and most obvious is its implication for Matthew's account itself. If Matthew did indeed record Jesus' words exactly as He spoke them, then this view implies that Jesus had the same sensitivity regarding the use of the divine name as Matthew did. If, on the other hand, Matthew altered Jesus' wording according to his own personal sensibilities, it raises the larger question of the accuracy of his record in capturing the Lord's meaning.

But assuming that Jesus did indeed use the expression, *kingdom of heaven*, it is extremely unlikely that He would do so out of conscientiousness for His hearers' reluctance to use the divine name. Quite the opposite, Jesus repeatedly aggravated the Jews and provoked charges of blasphemy from them by speaking of His Father in familiar terms, even to the point of assuming equality with God. And far from being reluctant to offend their traditional religious sensibilities, Jesus everywhere rebuked His Jewish brethren for their faulty understanding and practice. The last thing He'd do is defer to their silly and hypocritical conception of reverence for the divine name.

Following John's annunciation, Jesus appropriated the phrase, *kingdom of heaven*, connecting it with His self-presentation to Israel and His explanation of His presence and purpose in the world. Jesus used this expression in only one way: to refer to the end-of-the-ages phenomenon of judgment, purging, and everlasting renewal and restoration that the prophets had predicted and that had now been initiated with His incarnation. The long-awaited kingdom was at hand, and Israel must not miss it (Matthew 4:17; cf. 3:1-2).

The kingdom of heaven refers to the scriptural eschatological kingdom only portrayed by the Israelite theocracy. By this phrase, then, Jesus pointedly distinguished between the Old Covenant kingdom and the kingdom of God. But more than that, He forced His generation to see that their conception of God's kingdom as a virtual resurrection of David's kingdom (albeit more glorious), was a dangerous error. God's kingdom is *heavenly* rather than earthly; it isn't, as they expected, a physical kingdom based in ethnicity and the righteousness of outward conformity to law. It is transcendent and transformative, and Israel needed to repent if they hoped to enter it (Luke 3:1-9).

## 5. The Kingdom of God as a Spiritual and Staged Kingdom

The spiritual quality of the kingdom of God is clearly evident in what has already been discussed (even as it is a focal point of the Old Testament's revelation of it), but because of its crucial significance in Jesus' teaching, it is worthy of further consideration.

Of first importance is the confrontation between the transcendent spirituality of the kingdom and the expectations of the sons of Israel. The Jews' national history combined with their traditional way of reading the Scriptures to produce a theology of the kingdom of God that was earthly, political, and fiercely nationalistic. For more than seven centuries the covenant nation had effectively been in exile under Gentile domination. The destruction of the Israelite kingdom began with the fracturing of Israel and Judah and, by 586 B.C., nothing was left of it. A remnant of Judah returned from exile, but the kingdom wasn't restored; the house of Israel remained a vassal state under Gentile control.

This historical situation – and particularly the fact that the sons of Israel remained largely dispersed among the nations – led to the emergence of the synagogue system and rabbinical schools as a way to preserve Jewish community and religious traditions away from the Israelite homeland. It was during this period that Israel's theology of the coming kingdom became more fully developed, not surprisingly taking a form that reflected the dominant issues of Jewish life: the ever-present sting of exile and the longing to see the return of Israel's former "glory days." Increasingly the Jews envisioned the future kingdom as a cataclysmic work of God whereby He would send the son covenanted to David to break the yoke of Gentile domination, restore the covenant nation to its land and establish his own sovereign reign in Jerusalem. In that day, the Lord would exalt Israel to be chief among all the nations of the earth. This triumphal, nationalistic view of the promised kingdom (which was readily supported by a literal reading of the Scriptures) was central to the theology of Israel at the time of Jesus' incarnation, and was therefore a focal point of His confrontation with His generation and their misguided expectations.

The Jews of Jesus' day conceived of the kingdom of God in earthly and nationalistic terms, but they also believed that God would usher it in through a supernatural, point-in-time cataclysm in connection with the coming of the messianic Servant. This, too, was largely the result of the way the prophets spoke of the kingdom, and it's reflected in John's confusion as he tried to reconcile Jesus' ministry with what he expected the Messiah's arrival and inauguration of the kingdom to look like (cf. Matthew 3:7-12 with 11:2-6). Having the same perspective as the prophets before him, John envisioned that the messianic cataclysm of judgment, purgation and creational renewal was to occur at once, and what he saw in Jesus didn't accord with that expectation.

As Jesus confronted Israel's temporal conception of the kingdom, so He sought to correct their sense of its timing and progress. The kingdom would not be fully realized at once, but, from its inception, would grow as a mustard seed, extending its influence like leaven until, with Jesus' Parousia, it would at last attain its fullness in the renewal of all things. The kingdom's consummation – just as its insignificant beginning – was to result, not from progressive growth, but from divine intervention in the person of the Lord's Christ.