

## Unit 2 Introduction

# The Kingdom of God

The idea of the kingdom of God is one of the most important ideas of the Bible; nothing in the New Testament can be rightly understood apart from this idea.

Let's begin with the Old Testament, where we find the repeated proclamation of God's rule. Psalm 47, for instance, tells us that God is "a great king over all the earth" and "over the nations" (Psalm 47:2, 8\*). God's kingdom is universal and embraces all of creation. However, as the Old Testament frequently notes, the nations do not acknowledge God's rule and often rebel against it. It often seems that God is absent and not ruling at all. There is thus opposition between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of the nations.

Israel's experience of this conflict contributed to the development of Jewish apocalyptic literature. This literature reflects Jewish hopes in the face of political realities—the belief in God's rule in contrast to its experience of foreign kingdoms and their power. The message of apocalyptic literature is that, although human kingdoms exercise power now and seem to be in control, 1) in the future God will put an end to those kingdoms and 2) God actually is ruling now, in the present, even if it is difficult to discern that rule. We see this message in the second chapter of Daniel, where (in Daniel's dream) a statue, representing four human kingdoms, is smashed by a great stone sent by God. After the smashing, God establishes an everlasting kingdom. Later in the book, Daniel has another dream in which he sees "one like a human being" (literally, "one like a son of man") receive from God "an everlasting dominion" (Daniel 7:13-14). The message of Daniel is, accordingly, one of hope. In the face of Israel's defeat, destruction, and persecution by the nations, this book promises that someday God will rule and that God's people will inherit the kingdom. Meanwhile, God is not absent but is instead controlling events behind the scenes.

This Jewish hope is the background of Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of God is "near" (Mark 1:15) and that it belongs to the poor in spirit and to those persecuted for their righteousness (Matthew 5:3 and 10). In His teaching and His deeds, Jesus was announcing the fulfillment of Israel's hopes for God's rule.

We cannot, accordingly, overestimate the importance of the kingdom for Jesus' ministry. It was, in fact, so central to that ministry that, according to the gospels, preaching about the kingdom was Jesus' purpose (Luke 4:43). But Jesus did more than just announce the nearness of the kingdom. His deeds were means by which God's rule was realized on earth. So, let us explore some features of the kingdom of God.

Careful readers have noted that the kingdom has some unex-

pected characteristics. In particular, it is both a present reality and a future hope. The kingdom's present aspect appears when, in the gospels, the crowd wonders about the source of Jesus' power to cast out demons. He replies, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). The act of casting out demons, in other words, signals that the kingdom is present, with power, in Jesus' actions. The kingdom is not merely near, but in fact it is here. As Jesus preaches, gathers disciples, heals the sick, and casts out demons, God's rule is extended. The kingdoms of the world may belong to Satan (Matthew 4:8-9), but in Jesus' ministry God's kingdom is encroaching on Satan's. It is already growing, like a seed (Mark 4:26-29); tax-collectors and prostitutes are already entering the kingdom before the priests and elders (Matthew 21:31). Jesus' ministry is, in a sense, a beachhead—the initial appearance of God's kingdom in the world.

At the same time, God's rule is contested; earthly kingdoms continue to ignore God and to persecute the people of God. The kingdom of God is therefore also sometimes portrayed as a future reality. The Lord's Prayer, for example, tells us to pray that God's kingdom may arrive (Matthew 6:10). Matthew 7:21 talks about the last judgment and those who will enter or not enter the kingdom at that time. In that future day of judgment, "People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). At one point Jesus warns His hearers not to expect the kingdom to arrive soon (Luke 19:11).

These verses and others remind us that although God's kingdom is present with power, God's enemies remain. The kingdom of God is not yet here in its fullness—the kingdoms of the earth continue to assert their authority and God's rule is not evident to all. There must, accordingly, be a future fulfillment of Israel's hopes.

This paradoxical nature of the kingdom—the fact that it is present, but not in its fullness—explains why the kingdom is hidden. In the ancient world, kingdoms were visible, with walled cities, armies, and symbols of power. But God's kingdom, though present, cannot be seen. Jesus expressly states that the kingdom of God "is not coming with things that can be observed" (Luke 17:20). It is like a treasure hidden in a field (Matthew 13:44). Even Jesus' mode of teaching preserves the hiddenness of the kingdom—the parables hide the "secret" of the kingdom from outsiders, while Jesus explains the kingdom to His followers (Mark 4:10-11). The kingdom, then, although powerfully present, is not evident, except to Jesus' followers, who can recognize and interpret its signs. It remains hidden from those who lack faith.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the present and future aspects of the kingdom are portrayed as the rule of the Son and the rule of the Father. The Son's rule encompasses the present age and involves strife: the Son is destroying rulers and authorities and putting His enemies under His feet (1 Corinthians 15:24-25). When the last enemy, death, has been subdued, the Son will deliver the kingdom to the Father, "so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:24, 28). At present, then, the kingdom of God strives with the powers of evil. It is present in the world, but it has not yet won the final victory. That victory will happen in the future. In the future, God alone will rule, without opposition from earthly powers.

The book of Revelation is also sensitive to the tension between God's rule and the power of earthly kingdoms. Chapters four and five present us with a vision of heaven, with "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth" worshipping God the king and the Lamb of God. But Revelation knows also that the earth has its own kingdoms, standing in opposition to God (see Revelation 19:19). These kingdoms, however, are false realities—not true kingdoms—because the Lamb is the true king, the King of Kings (Revelation 19:16). Although earthly kings continue to assert their power, in reality "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). As in 1 Corinthians 15, in Revelation God's kingdom is a present reality, but one engaged in warfare with evil. But in the future, "the kings of the earth will bring their glory into" the New Jerusalem as an offering to God, the true king (Revelation 21:24).

Beside the present and future aspects of the kingdom, several other points deserve comment. First, readers have noticed that Matthew's gospel uses the term "kingdom of heaven" in place of "kingdom of God." There is, however, no difference in meaning.

Second, because the kingdom is a present reality, it has this-worldly, political consequences. We see this in Jesus' sermon at Nazareth, where he proclaims release to the captives and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18). Jesus' words "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36) are sometimes thought to mean that the kingdom of God is a purely spiritual, other-worldly reality, but this is

a mistake. Here Jesus is saying only that His kingdom does not have its origin in the fallen world of sin.

Third, it is important to remember that human beings do not "advance" or "build" the kingdom. The kingdom is like seed. Humans can scatter the seed, but it grows on its own—the one who scatters "does not know how" it grows (Mark 4:26-27). The church's task is to scatter the seed, through acts of ministry and compassion, but the growth of the kingdom is not up to us; it is not our achievement. It is, after all, God's kingdom.

Finally, the idea of the kingdom of God can help us interpret Jesus' words and deeds and can reveal meanings that we would otherwise miss. For instance, the feeding of the multitude (Mark 6:30-44) is more than a humanitarian gesture. Besides filling empty stomachs, the feeding was a kingdom-event, a partial fulfillment of Isaiah 25:6. This verse portrays the Day of the Lord as a future banquet for God's people. By feeding the multitude, Jesus was 1) fulfilling the promise of this banquet in the present and 2) pointing toward the ultimate fulfillment of the kingdom-banquet in the future. Similarly, the idea of the kingdom explains some perplexing teachings, such as the parable about binding the strong man ("no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man," Mark 3:27). This is a parable about the kingdom of God: By casting out demons, Jesus is binding Satan (the strong man) and stealing his property (those who were demon-possessed). This parable thus illustrates the powerful presence of God's kingdom; however, this message is easily missed unless we interpret the parable in light of the kingdom.

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\*All biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.