

Unit 2 Introduction

The Kingdom of God as “Already” and “Not Yet”

KINGDOMS

In a freshman class I teach at a Christian university we have a section where we talk about the kingdom of God. Every semester I’m reminded how few real-life reference points my students have for the concept of kings and kingdoms. They have heard the terms, certainly, and have taken history classes where they memorized some of the names of prominent kings and queens. But when I ask what images come to mind when they hear the word “kingdom,” they often struggle a bit.

KINGS AND KINGDOMS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The first use of the term “king” in Scripture comes in Genesis 14. Abram’s nephew Lot gets captured by the army of an alliance of four kings. Abram and Lot have no king of their own, so it is up to Abram to rescue his nephew, his family, and all of his belongings. When the dust settles, Abram declines any offers of alliance with kings, and in the next chapter (Genesis 15) there is a ceremony that seals a covenant between Abram and God. Abram has cast his lot with God and gives no consideration to seeking (or becoming) an earthly king.

For all the rest of the story in the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), including the story of the captivity of God’s people in Egypt, there is no thought given to an earthly king for the people of God. God chooses Moses to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt, but no one proposes Moses as king. When the baton is passed on to Joshua as he leads God’s people into the promised land there is still no earthly king for Israel. God is their king; God is their leader; God is their protector.

The books of Joshua and Judges both unfold without there being an earthly king for Israel, but in 1 Samuel 8 the people of Israel begin to demand an earthly king. Their leader, Samuel, is old and his sons are not devoted to God, so the people tell Samuel to appoint a king to lead them, “such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:5). Samuel is displeased by this request, but God tells him it is not a sign that they have rejected Samuel’s leadership, but “they have rejected me as their king.” God warns the people of all the ways a king will make their life more difficult, but they insist and God relents. With the anointing of Saul in 1 Samuel 9, Israel has, for the first time, this separation of the concept of a king: an earthly king in addition to God, their ultimate king.

The ideal is that the earthly king’s heart and ways of leading will be in alignment with the heart and mind of God—that the king of

Israel will be an accurate representation of God, Israel’s true king. But as the unfolding story in Scripture makes abundantly clear, that was rarely the case.

Saul, the very first king of Israel, failed to live up to that ideal and he was replaced by David, who also failed to always live up to that ideal. David suffered consequences for his sins, but he also received a promise from God, through the prophet Nathan, that “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16).

This promise of a “forever” kingdom, led by a descendant of David, became a source of buoyant hope for the people of God. Even during the time of their exile, God used the prophets to remind them of this promise.

The promise through the prophet Jeremiah was this: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.’” (Jeremiah 23:5). The promise through the prophet Isaiah was this: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. . . . Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom” (Isaiah 9:6-7a). The end of the Old Testament era, however, comes without this promise having been fulfilled. The people of God are still longing and waiting for the promised king.

KINGS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In each of the four gospels, the writer makes a reference in their very first chapter that connects Jesus to these longings for a king in the line of David. None of the gospel writers give us the full picture right away of what this looks like or what it means, but none of them get past their first chapter without planting that seed of thought.

Matthew begins with a record of the genealogy of “Jesus Christ the son of David” (Matthew 1:1). In the list of names Matthew gives us, several of whom were kings, only David is specifically identified as king—highlighting the promise of a Davidic king (1:6). Matthew also gives us the story of the magi from the east who come to King Herod inquiring about the birth of Jesus, who they identify as “king of the Jews” (2:1-2).

In Mark’s gospel, after a brief reference to the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus’ baptism, and Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, John is moved off stage and the focus is on Jesus’ preaching. His

message begins with the words, “The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15).

John’s gospel has its own unique beginning, identifying Jesus as the Word, who was with God in the beginning, and who was God (John 1:1-2). But before his first chapter ends, John has introduced us to Nathanael, who has just met Jesus and declares, “You are the King of Israel” (John 1:49).

Luke’s gospel gives us the most direct identification of Jesus as this longed-for one who will be a king in the line of David, and who will establish an everlasting kingdom. The words come to Mary, via the angel Gabriel: “You will conceive and give birth to a Son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:31-33).

In the person of Jesus, the Messiah, then, the promise made to David is fulfilled. This one born of “the house and line of David” (Luke 2:4) becomes a king in the line of David. On the one hand, the meaning was so clear—Jesus was the King. On the other hand, questions linger. Despite being announced as king, He had no throne. Was Jesus intended to be the king of an earthly kingdom? What did the name “King of the Jews” mean? Was He truly a threat to King Herod, who ruled over the Jews at that time? There is no evidence that Jesus was waiting for the right time to have a coup and overthrow an earthly king. While all four gospels connect Jesus’ birth with the language of kings and kingdoms, not all of the dots are connected immediately.

As the gospels reveal the teachings and ministry of Jesus, the language of “kingdom” is frequent.

- Jesus tells numerous parables that begin with, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .”
- In the gospel of Luke, when the Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:20-21).
- In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

In the book of Acts, Luke tells us that after the resurrection Jesus appeared to His disciples over a period of 40 days and spoke about “the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3b). Yet, His disciples were not clear about what He meant, right up to the time of His ascension into heaven. Their final question to Jesus was whether in that moment

He was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. Jesus’ response to them was, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority” (Acts 1:6-7).

CONNECTING THE DOTS

One of our challenges in sorting out what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God is that we typically think of a kingdom solely as a “place.” Because we don’t see a visible geographical location that Jesus established as His kingdom, we don’t see any signs that the kingdom is now in existence. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III suggests that perhaps a better translation of the biblical term is “dominion,” rather than “kingdom.” The words “can refer to an activity (God exercises or has dominion over us and we are in turn ruled by God) or a place (God’s Dominion is where the divine rule is manifest).”¹ In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the kingdom was inaugurated. In Jesus, we were able to see (for the first time ever) what it looks like for a human life to be fully surrendered to the will of the Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and living according to all the principles of God’s kingdom. In this sense, then, wherever Jesus went, people encountered God’s dominion (kingdom). God exercised dominion over the man named Jesus, so that Jesus’ life and teachings showed us what life looks like in God’s kingdom.

Dallas Willard gives us another way to define the kingdom: “The Kingdom of God is the range of God’s effective will, where what God wants done is done.”² Jesus is the first example of this; but now, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can also live lives in which what God wants done is done—in and through us. The prayer that Jesus taught us to pray (Matthew 6:9-13) is a recognition that God’s dominion exists, and a petition that God’s dominion will be evident more and more here on earth as it is fully evident in heaven. The more lives that are surrendered to God’s dominion in them, the more outposts of God’s dominion become visible. God’s dominion is “already” evident in part, but we recognize that God’s dominion will not fully be acknowledged until Christ returns. Our posture, then, can be one of both celebrating the “already” (every example we see of God’s dominion being made visible) and anticipating what is “not yet” (the day when God’s dominion is fully established).

1 Ben Witherington III. *Imminent Domain: The Story of the Kingdom of God and Its Celebration*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009 2).

2 Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2021, 86).

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