

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S SPIRITUAL KINGDOM

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In his example prayer, Jesus spoke the words: “Thy kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10). Thousands of people are still repeating those words. Many people think the kingdom is yet to come in the future.

There is so much confusion about God’s kingdom, so we will allow the Bible to tell us what God has to say about his kingdom. God planned for his kingdom long before it was set up.

The Kingdom in Prophecy

Many elements in the Old Testament were physical things that served as a preview of coming New Testament spiritual things. For example, the sacrifice of animals under the Law of Moses, served to give a preview of the coming of the final sacrifice of Jesus. That is why John said about the Lord: “Behold, the Lamb of God” (John 1:29).

The children of Israel, after being ruled by judges, asked for a king. Their first three kings were Saul, David, and Solomon. Even though David was not without sin, he did have a heart desirous of pleasing God (cf. 1 Samuel 13:14). So of these three kings, David showed the most wholehearted devotion to God.

David’s literal Old Testament kingship and rule, served as a preview of a greater spiritual kingdom to come.

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

The prophet Isaiah was inspired by God to write these words over 700 years before Jesus was born! Notice this verse tells us that “the government shall be upon his shoulder.” What does this mean? He would be in a position of ruling authority. We would like to know more about this rule of Jesus. The very next verse gives us more details.

“Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever” (Isaiah 9:7).

Jesus would rule over his government “upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom.” Remember, many Old Testament concepts were preparatory for spiritual New Testament realities. When reading this prophecy, describing the Messiah sitting upon “the throne of David,” many people *assume* that this will be just like David’s kingdom. So many are looking for a physical, earthly kingdom.

But Jesus himself said about his kingdom – “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). David’s kingdom served as a figure of the coming of the greater spiritual kingdom of Christ.

The prophet Daniel also foretold of the coming of the Messiah’s kingdom. By means of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and the interpretation, the general time of the kingdom’s coming is revealed.

The king's vision of a "great image" (Daniel 2:31), having four different parts, represented four different earthly kingdoms. The first kingdom was Babylon, the next would be the Medo-Persian Empire, the third would be the Greek rule, and the mighty Roman Empire would be the fourth. Read Daniel 2:36-40.

During the time of the Roman Empire (the fourth kingdom) a special kingdom would be set up.

"And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, ..." (Daniel 2:44).

Earthly kingdoms of men rise and fall, but this kingdom "shall stand for ever" (Daniel 2:44). This prediction tells of God's coming *spiritual* kingdom.

This prophecy revealed that God's kingdom would be set up during the time of the Roman Empire. The verse says that "in the days of those kings," would be the time when God would "set up a kingdom" (Daniel 2:44). The context reveals this to be the time of the fourth kingdom, which is the time of Roman rule.

The spiritual kingdom of Christ was indeed set up during the time of the Roman Empire. As an example, we learn that some in the city of Colossae had been translated "into the kingdom of the Son" (Colossians 1:13). Jesus himself spoke of entering the kingdom by experiencing a new birth (John 3:5).

The Kingdom is Spiritual

Here is a hard lesson for many to understand. We so quickly think in terms of literal things. Consider a few examples.

- Nicodemus. Read John 3:1-5. Jesus spoke of being born anew. Yet this man immediately thought of his literal mother and being born again physically (v.4). However, Jesus was speaking about the spiritual birth of baptism!
- Woman of Samaria. Read John 4:13-15. Jesus spoke of water leading to eternal life. The woman was still thinking of physical water and wanted to avoid having to come all the way to draw water. However, Jesus was speaking about the spiritual water of his life-giving words.
- The Apostles. Read Acts 1:6. John had preached that: "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). Jesus went about "preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23). Jesus also spoke many parables about the coming kingdom. But even after the Lord's resurrection, the apostles asked: "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Notice the word they used – "restore." They mistakenly thought that the old physical kingdom would be *reestablished* for the Jews. However, Jesus was planning on the Holy Spirit coming and revealing how people would enter his spiritual kingdom.

Many people today are making the same mistake the apostles made – thinking the kingdom of God would be a physical kingdom.

The kingdom of Christ has two basic elements – (1) A King, and (2) the subjects.

- Jesus the King

The Father “raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly *places*” (Ephesians 1:20). “Christ is, seated on the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). Jesus is already reigning over his kingdom!

- His Kingdom

Those who learn and obey the New Testament gospel are translated “into the kingdom” (Colossians 1:13). John the apostle was in the “kingdom” (Revelation 1:9). Christians in the first century were in the spiritual kingdom of Christ; they were not waiting for some future reign of Christ!

God’s people are described in various ways in the New Testament. Here are four examples.

- King and kingdom is only one figure used.
- Jesus is the head – Christians make up his body. Read Colossians 1:18. Notice that the body is also called the church.
- Living stones forming a spiritual house. Read 1 Peter 2:5.
- The “house of God” is “the church of the living God.” Read 1 Timothy 3:15.

Peter explained the spiritual nature of God’s kingdom in his sermon. Read Acts 2:29-36. “God had sworn with an oath” that he would “set *one* upon his [David’s] throne” (Acts 2:30). Did this mean Jesus would sit on David’s literal throne in Jerusalem? No! Peter explained more.

This prophecy foretold “of the resurrection of the Christ” (Acts 2:31). “David ascended not into the heavens,” but Jesus did go up to heaven, to sit at the Father’s “right hand” (Acts 2:34). The reign of Jesus is from heaven, not upon earth!

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, Christ was already reigning over his kingdom. Read 1 Corinthians 15:25. Note that the phrase “he must reign” is in a tense indicating – He must continue to reign until all his enemies are put under his feet! Williams’ translation renders this verse as: “He must continue to be king until He puts all His enemies under His feet.”

The Kingdom’s Beginning

We have already seen from prophecies that God was preparing for the kingdom. Daniel’s prophecy narrowed down the time of its coming to the days of Roman rule.

With the coming of John the baptizer, the kingdom of heaven was nearer – “at hand” (Matthew 3:2). The preaching of Jesus focused upon teaching about the coming kingdom.

- “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).
- The Lord spoke many parables telling about “the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 13:24, 31, 44, 45, 47).
- Jesus promised to build his “church” and to give keys to “the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:18, 19). Notice that he used “church” and “kingdom” interchangeably in this context.

The time was drawing near for the kingdom to begin. The Roman’s were in power, just as Daniel’s prophecy foretold, John said it was “at hand,” and Jesus was teaching extensively about it.

Our Lord then narrowed down the start time with this statement.

“Verily I say unto you, There are some here of them that stand *by*, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1).

The phrase “taste of death” is a euphemism for dying. Some of the people, who heard the voice of Jesus, would not die until they witnessed to kingdom coming. Therefore, the timing of the kingdom’s coming is narrowed to the lifetime of some in the first century.

Jesus revealed that the kingdom would come “with power” (Mark 9:1). After his resurrection, Jesus told his apostles to wait in Jerusalem to “receive power, when the Holy Spirit” would come upon them (Acts 1:8).

Reading Acts chapter 2 reveals the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the apostles preaching the message of salvation. About 3,000 were obedient to the command to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38,41). They experienced the “new birth” that Jesus had said would allow a person to “enter” the kingdom (John 3:3, 5).

Therefore, the kingdom of God began on that Sunday morning in the year A.D. 30 in the city of Jerusalem. This is exactly as Jesus foretold. He foretold that: “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47)! The Lord’s kingdom did begin in Jerusalem.

Jesus – King and High Priest

God’s plans are perfect! He revealed details about the kingdom long before it began. Scripture speaks of the Messiah as the “Branch” (cf. Zechariah 6:12).

“... he shall build the temple of Jehovah; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne;...” (Zechariah 6:13).

The Messiah was prophesied to be a king and priest at the same time! Consider carefully the significance of Jesus being king and priest at the same time.

- Christians have “a great high priest, ..., Jesus the Son of God,...” (Hebrews 4:14)
- “We have such a high priest, who sat down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Hebrews 8:1).

Since Jesus is serving as our High Priest he is also ruling as our King.

The old Mosaic system required that priests were to be selected from the tribe of Levi, and kings were appointed from the tribe of Judah. If the covenant of Moses were still in force, Jesus would not qualify to be a priest. “For it is evident that our Lord hath sprung out of Judah; as to which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priests” (Hebrews 7:14).

Therefore, the high priesthood of Jesus follows his New Testament and not the old Law of Moses. “For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law” (Hebrews 7:12).

The Kingdom in Eternity

Scriptures have clearly taught us that Jesus is now reigning over his kingdom. The kingdom grows as people are taught, obey the gospel, and become subjects of his kingdom. Before leaving his disciples, Jesus commissioned them to go “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19). This teaching ministry was to be perpetuated, and the Lord promised to be with us, “even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20). So what is to become of the kingdom at the end of time?

“Then *cometh* the end, when he [Jesus] shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power” (1 Corinthians 15:24).

The kingdom (people) will be delivered up to the Father in heaven!

The fifteenth chapter of first Corinthians is dealing with the resurrection day. When that day comes, the kingdom, which is already in existence, will be delivered up to God the Father in heaven. Sadly, many confused teachers are telling people the very opposite - that when that day comes the kingdom will be set up on earth. That is simply not true!

For those Christians who remain faithful subjects in the kingdom (church), they will enjoy being ushered into the presence of God.

“Wherefore, brethren, give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never stumble: for thus shall be richly supplied unto you the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:10, 11).

Thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus, he paid for our sins by his blood, “and he made us *to be* a kingdom, *to be* priests unto his God and Father” (Revelation 1:6).

“Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28).

God’s children are challenged to offer service that is pleasing to God. Christians cannot live sinfully and expect to keep their place in the kingdom when it is delivered up into heaven.

“The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire” (Matthew 13:41, 42).

Do you understand the great value of the Lord’s kingdom? It is the only place of salvation. The kingdom is made up of people who have voluntarily bowed their will to king Jesus.

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field; which a man found, and hid; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field” (Matthew 13:44).

In this parable, Jesus is impressing upon us, that if we realize the preciousness of the kingdom, we will be willing to forsake all we have, in order to obtain it.

Are you willing to repent of your sins, confess Jesus as Lord, and be immersed for the forgiveness of your sins? Read Hebrews 11:6; Acts 2:38; 17:30; Romans 10:9, 10; Galatians 3:26, 27; Colossians 1:13.

Questions & Answers

There are so many false ideas relating to God’s kingdom. These misconceptions are often assumed to be true, since they have become so popular. However, by being repeated often, error does not become truth.

1. When will be the “Last Days”?

We read in the Bible of the “last days” (or “latter days”). When will they be? Special events were prophesied to begin in the last days.

“And it shall come to pass in the latter days, that the mountain of Jehovah’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of Jehovah, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of Jehovah from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:2, 3).

Isaiah's prediction provides key details. Prophetic language often uses symbols. Mountains and hills represent governments – large and small. God's mountain (singular) would be exalted above all others (plural). God's special government would be established in the "latter days."

The prophet reveals that God's "house shall be established" (Isaiah 2:2). What is this "house" of God? The New Testament gives the answer.

"... the house of God, which is the church of the living God,..." (1 Timothy 3:15).

Isaiah's prophecy of God's "house" being established, was foretelling the establishment of the church. Therefore, Isaiah was foretelling that the "house of God," also called "the church," would be established in the "last days."

Look back again at the text in Isaiah, and see that this new message would first "go forth" – "from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3). The apostles first preached the New Testament gospel, in the city of Jerusalem (Acts 2). Just as had been foretold. On that day, the apostles received the Holy Spirit. The prophet Joel had prophesied of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Peter declared: "... this is that which hath been spoken through the prophet Joel:

And it shall be in the last days, saith God, I will pour forth of my Spirit..." (Acts 2:16, 17).

Peter was inspired to quote this Old Testament prophecy and apply it to what was beginning on that day. We learn that the "last days" began when the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles. The "last days" are the days of the New Testament era.

The last days began, and they will continue till the Lord returns.

Listen to the rebuke James gave to Christians who were hoarding earthly riches: "Ye have laid up your treasures in the last days" (James 5:3).

Paul warned Timothy of the ungodliness that would come "in the last days" (2 Timothy 3:1ff). Peter also spoke of mockers coming "in the last days," who would ridicule the teaching of the coming judgment (2 Peter 3:3ff). Already such ungodliness and mocking is seen these days.

Therefore, a general way to explain the "last days" is – The time between the first and second coming of the Lord. More technically it is – The time from the church's beginning in Jerusalem until the Lord returns. Another way to explain it is – From the beginning of the Lord's kingdom (Acts 2) until the kingdom is delivered up to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24) at the last day!

2. What is the "1,000 years reign" of Jesus?

Very often we hear about the "millennium" or "the 1,000 year reign." The word *millennium* simply means *a period of 1,000 years*. However, there is a hugely popular belief that Jesus will, at some time in the future, return to earth and rule for 1,000 years. This is often called the "millennial reign of Christ." Supposedly, this will be a reign in the literal city of Jerusalem.

This belief is based largely on a *mishandling* of the passage in Revelation 20:1-7. Proponents of the literal 1,000 year reign theory, make the mistake of viewing the number as a literal period of time.

Bible students must remember that the Book of Revelation is highly figurative. The Book begins by telling the readers that the message was “signified” unto John (Revelation 1:1). We might notice that the first four letters of that word are “sign.” The Revelation unto John was given in *signs* or *images*. To take the signs as literal would be a grave mistake.

Repeatedly, we read that John “saw” this and that (Revelation 1:12, 17, etc.). He was told:

“What thou seest, write in a book and send it to the seven churches:...” (Revelation 1:11).

We read the descriptions of the visions he saw, and must learn what they represent. Unfortunately, many teachers take some signs and interpret them as literal, while taking others (more obvious ones) as representative. They randomly pick what signs they want to interpret as literal.

Consider a few examples.

John “saw” a “Lamb” standing, as though it had been slain (Revelation 5:6). Do you think this “Lamb” should be interpreted as a literal four-footed animal? Of course not! Jesus is called “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29, 36). Lamb is the symbol that represents Jesus.

John wrote of a “great red dragon” (Revelation 12:3). Should we interpret this as a literal monster with “seven heads and ten horns” (Revelation 12:3)? No! This “great dragon” is explained to mean “the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). Dragon is the symbol that represents Satan.

John also wrote of people that were faithful to Jesus, who “reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4). Should we interpret this as a literal period of time? Not at all! Faithful Christians are sharing with Jesus as he reigns over his spiritual kingdom. 1,000 years is a symbol for the time the gospel is preached in the New Testament era. The reign of Jesus began in the first century and is still continuing.

3. What about the “Tribulation”?

Many religious teachers are preaching about a coming tribulation. However, our Lord was persecuted, and so were his apostles. After the church (kingdom) began, the early Christians were persecuted.

“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1).

Near the end of the first century, John was the only living apostle remaining. When he wrote the Revelation letter, he was banished on the island of Patmos. He wrote to his fellow Christians, who were back on the mainland, saying: “I John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and

kingdom..." (Revelation 1:9). According to John, was the tribulation yet in the future? No! John was enduring tribulation.

Other Christians were suffering tribulation. Note also, he was already in the kingdom! Christians in the first century were already in the kingdom and already suffering tribulation. Tribulation continues still for saints.

4. What about the "signs" of Jesus' second coming?

It is common to hear people speak of current events (earthquakes, governmental changes, turmoil, etc.) as indications of the nearness of the coming of Jesus. Will there be warning signs just before Jesus returns? Allow the Bible to give the answer.

"And as were the days of Noah, so shall be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and they knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall be the coming of the Son of man" (Matthew 24:37-39).

In this section, Jesus was speaking about his second coming. There will be no warning signs. This agrees exactly with what Peter wrote.

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10).

But you might ask: Doesn't the Bible speak somewhere about signs? Yes it does. Jesus foretold of the coming destruction of Jerusalem. His disciples *assumed* that Jerusalem's destruction and the end of the world would happen at the same time (read Matthew 24:3).

Jesus however, separated the events in his explanation.

First the Lord spoke of the coming devastation upon Jerusalem (Matthew 24:4-34). In that section, warning signs are named that would indicate the coming attack. When Christians saw these signs, they were forewarned to "flee unto the mountains" (Matthew 24:16).

For those who did not escape there would be "great tribulation" (24:21). This would be a specific, citywide tribulation. History records that when the Roman armies surrounded the city there was intense suffering and starvation inside the walls. It is thought that over 1 million Jews were slaughtered, and the city fell in A.D. 70. That is all now in the past!

Second, Jesus spoke of his second coming (Matthew 24:36-44). There would be no warning signs before his return. Just as the people of Noah's day "knew not until the flood came," (Matthew 24:39) the generation living when Jesus returns will not have any warning.

It is a serious mistake to take the warning signs detailed in the first part of Matthew chapter 24 and apply them to some time in the future. After giving the warning signs, Jesus said: “This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished” (Matthew 24:34). The signs had application to that generation living in the first century. Many Jews died in Jerusalem because they heeded not the Lord’s warning.

5. What about the “Rapture”?

The word *rapture* simply means to be *caught up*. Many denominations teach that sometime in the future, the righteous ones will be “raptured” away, while the wicked will remain behind on earth.

In contrast, the Bible teaches that all people, both good and evil, will be raised at the same time.

“Marvel not at this: for the hour cometh, in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28, 29).

Notice that this information from the Lord, addresses both groups – the righteous and the wicked. All will be raised when the Lord returns!

There were some Christians in Thessalonica that were confused about the Lord’s return. They *mistakenly* thought he was soon to return.

While they waited for Jesus’ coming, some of their fellow Christians died. In sadness and confusion, they thought their departed loved ones would miss out on being with the Lord. So Paul corrected their misunderstanding.

“But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep; that ye sorrow not, even as the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede [go before] them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

This section reveals that faithful Christians who are still alive when the Lord returns, along with the resurrected righteous, shall together be “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air.

This context is written to encourage Christians, and is not even addressing the wicked. *They will not be left behind*. On the resurrection day, all who are still living, both good and evil, will be taken to the judgment.

“For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he hath done, whether *it be* good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

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