

**The
Kingdom
of
God**

—

**Revolution
on Earth!**

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1. The Good News of the Kingdom – What does it mean?

Jesus and John the Baptist each started their ministry with the same call: “Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!” (**Matthew 3:2 & 4:17**).

“Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom . . .” (**Matthew 4:23**).

When he sent out the twelve, he told them: “Go and preach, ‘The Kingdom of heaven is near!’” (**Matthew 10:7**). When he sent the seventy ahead of him into “every city and place where he himself was going to come”, he told them to say “The Kingdom of God has come near you.” (**Luke 10:9 & 11**).

He said that he would give Peter and the disciples the keys of the Kingdom of heaven (**Matthew 16:19**), that the Good News about the Kingdom would be preached through all the world, and that he would drink the new wine of his Father’s Kingdom with his disciples.

What was he talking about?

Do we hear the Good News of the Kingdom declared today?

Would we recognise it if we did hear it?

Is it the same as what we think of as the Gospel?

Is it relevant to the world in which we live?

This emphasis on the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God is not restricted to Matthew's Gospel or in fact just to the Gospels. What do we make of the account at the start of Jesus’s ministry in **Mark: 1:15**? “The right time has come, and

the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!” What was ‘the right time’?

What would the Jewish people at the time, and then the Gentiles, have thought as they heard first John, then Jesus, the twelve, the seventy, Paul and the early church all talk about “the Kingdom of God” or “the Kingdom of heaven” or just “the Kingdom”?

For us, the phrases are familiar and have therefore almost lost their meaning; they certainly do not have the same force as they had when they were first spoken. We do not think in terms of kingdoms these days; our reference points are countries, ethnic groups, geography and history. Kings and queens are very largely left-overs from the past, from a time when kingdoms often had their roots in warring families and clans, when kings were perhaps just slightly more permanent than warrior chiefs!

Even our understanding of ‘ruling’ or ‘reigning’ is weakened. In what we call the developed world, government is by consent, and the will of the people is at least supposed to be the final authority. Any rulers who try to command personal obedience and loyalty are branded as dictators and every effort is made to oust them from power as soon as possible.

It is clear from the New Testament that the message of “the Good News of the kingdom” was disruptive. It encouraged just that sort of personal loyalty and obedience which would be rejected today and was seen as a threat to established rulers then. In **John 18 & 19**, it is clear to see that Jesus’s kingship posed a very direct threat to the Roman establishment and that, once the chief priests had stated that “The only king we have is the Emperor”, Pilate had no option but to hand Jesus over to be crucified.

We tend to think that it was all a terrible mistake and that, if only Pilate had really understood when Jesus said “My kingdom does not belong to this world”, he would never have authorised the crucifixion. Were the disciples so seriously mistaken? After all, they did ask Jesus in **Acts 1:6** “Lord, will you at this time give the Kingdom back to Israel?” After all the years of teaching about the Kingdom, had Jesus failed to get the point across? Once the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Church, would it all become clear that Jesus was ‘only’ talking about a spiritual kingdom, not a real one?

We have already seen that Paul and the early church spoke about the Kingdom of God. Look at **Acts 1:3 & 6, 8:12, 14:22, 19:8, 20:25, 28:23 & 31** for direct references, and of course there are more in the letters. Although the word ‘kingdom’ does not feature quite so much in Acts, the word ‘Christ’ (‘anointed one’) is used far more, and the message is still that he will return when “the time comes for all things to be made new” (**Acts 3:21**).

The message of the Kingdom of God was not just a message about spiritual transactions and relationship with God, but neither was it what we might now call a ‘social gospel’, which plays down the spiritual and emphasises the need for good works and responsible social life. It included both spiritual and social relationships, but went much further.

When John and Jesus first spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, they were speaking into a society which was hurting under an oppressive occupying regime, to people whose whole outlook for more than five hundred years had been coloured by a growing awareness of the promise of a man who would rescue the whole nation. They expected their divine superhero, their Messiah (= ‘anointed one’ = ‘Christ’) to establish the rule of God **there and then** in Judea, to kick out the Romans and

re-establish the Jews as a nation under God as they had been under King David.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the issue will have been settled for many people; here was their promised King, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” For three years more and more of them had listened to him talk about the rule of God on earth; now he was going to establish it. Jerusalem seemed to hold its breath as Jesus confronted traders in the temple courts, challenged the authority of the chief priests and elders and denounced the hypocrisy of the religious fundamentalists. (See ***Matthew chapters 21 to 23***).

But then Jesus’s disciples get a surprise. He starts talking about the Kingdom as being some distance off in the future (***Matthew 24 & 25***). Then he says plainly that he will be crucified and talks about betrayal and desertion (***Matthew 26***) – how can these things fit in with their high hopes? They don’t understand; no wonder they are disillusioned and discouraged.

When he dies and is buried, they don’t understand anything about redemption, forgiveness and deliverance; all that becomes clearer later on. Even when he is raised from death, they don’t really know what is going on. Jesus spends nearly six weeks with them, still talking about the Kingdom of God, and they ask questions which display their ignorance (***Acts 1:3-6***). But when the promised gift of the Holy Spirit is given and received, they **know** that this man has now been confirmed by the Father as the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ, and that he will be coming back soon **to reign on earth as promised** (***Acts 2***). No wonder they proclaimed it. This was the news about the coming rule of God on earth, and there was no doubt that it was

the Good News of the Kingdom!

2. *The Kingdom of Heaven* – Direct rule from ‘up there’ ?

Jesus says much about the kingdom of heaven. Especially in Matthew's gospel, it is often how he describes his chief concern. In the other accounts, the phrase is often ‘the kingdom of God’. His descriptions of the kingdom of heaven have formed the basis of many people's thoughts of heaven as “the place that we go to when we die” . . . but was that what he meant?

We have looked at the meaning of **kingdom**, that John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples were all talking about something very real and physical, **the reign of God and his Messiah on this earth**. The rule of God in place of the misrule of mankind is something to which we and the whole of non-human creation are looking forward. See **Romans 8:18-25, Revelation 11:15, 12:10** for the New Testament promise which tells of the fulfilment of the prophecy in **Daniel 7:13-14,22,27**. Even these passages should be enough to change our thinking about what the kingdom of God is intended to be, and there are many more!

But what did the Jews understand when Jesus spoke of ‘heaven’? The Hebrew word is ‘shamayim’, meaning ‘the heaved up things’, and is very definitely plural. For God's definition of what he calls ‘heaven’, see **Genesis 1**! The Greek word is ‘ouranos’, meaning sky or air, but is very often used in the plural, like the Hebrew, meaning ‘the heavens’; what we would call the sky or space. In **Matthew**, whenever Jesus refers to the kingdom of heaven, he actually says ‘**the kingship/reign/rule of the heavens**’, probably rather different from what we are used to thinking about! Even what we call ‘the Lord's prayer’ is actually addressed to “Our Father in the heavens”. Of the 76 (or so) references to ‘heaven’ in **Matthew**, 53 (or so) are actually ‘the heavens’.

So what? Does that make a difference to us? Does it affect our understanding of the message of the New Testament? I believe it does:—

1. It takes heaven out of the realm of fairyland and puts it in direct relation with physical creation.

2. It says that, although even the expanse of the heavens could not **contain** him, God lives there, they are the dimension in which he is at home.

3. It emphasises the point that God's rule is effective everywhere else in the universe except on this one planet, where man's rebellion has upset the proper order of things.

4. It is consistent with the clear statements of the Old Testament prophets, Jesus and the apostles, that the goal is the establishment of the rule of God on earth, not just a collection of 'saved souls' with no particular purpose.

5. It puts the church into focus as God's chosen means to achieve that goal.

So, when John, Jesus and the twelve proclaimed that "the kingdom of heaven is near", the message which was conveyed was that "direct rule from the heavens is coming"! No wonder it caused a stir! When Jesus said "I have not yet gone back up to the Father" (**John 20:17**), he meant just that, and when he ascended into heaven (**Acts 1**), he actually **went up into the sky!**

For the Jews, it seems, there was no problem with God being found in the dimension of 'up there', above the realm of earth, in the heavens. They knew that he was the creator of the heavens and the earth, and therefore that he could not be limited by those dimensions, but that was his 'back yard', the place you might expect to find him. Solomon was very clear about it in **2 Chronicles 6:18**, as he dedicated the temple and the **Psalms** are full of references to the Lord dwelling in the heavens (e.g. **Psalm 11:4**).

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So, if the message of the New Testament is about the coming kingdom of God, the rule of heaven on earth, and not about "believe in Jesus and you'll go to heaven when you die", what

about what **does** happen when we die, always assuming that Jesus doesn't come back first?

Hopefully there is no doubt in any of our minds about the final result. As Paul puts it, “. . . and so we will always be **with the Lord**. So then, encourage one another with these words.” (**1 Thessalonians 4:17&18**). As far as he was concerned, Paul knew that if he stopped living on earth, he would be “**with Christ**, which is a far better thing” (**Philippians 1:23**), but there are several references which might make us think that there will be a bit of a ‘gap’ between our death and being with the Lord when he returns, and various theories have been put forward over the years.

Jesus said to the dying thief, “I promise you that today you will be in Paradise **with me**” (**Luke 23:43**), but it seems clear from other passages that Jesus actually went into the place of the dead and achieved victories over Satan there, before being raised from the dead, spending 40 days on earth with his disciples and **then** going back up into heaven. So what did his words to the thief mean? ‘Paradise’ is not the word for heaven, it means a park or garden, and fits with the Jewish understanding of the place of the dead. Let's not get too hung up about the place! The most important thing for the thief was that Jesus said “Today you will be **with me**”, and this certainly is the emphasis that Paul gives it in **Philippians 1:18-26**. He knows that when he dies, the next thing he will know is the presence of Christ - who cares about greater detail? As he says in **1 Thessalonians 5:9&10**: “God did not choose us to suffer his anger, but to possess salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us in order that we might live together with him, whether we are alive or dead when he comes.”

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When we have begun to see the security of our own personal salvation and the fact that God's purpose is for us to be with the Lord Jesus all the time, the prospect of Jesus coming into his kingdom, taking possession of it, becomes a very exciting one for

each of us, because we have been made part of God's purpose and have a role to play in it. The familiar passage in **1 Corinthians 15**, where Paul talks about our resurrection and eternal life, hinges around the climax of God's plan for earth, when the kingdom will be established by Jesus and handed back to the Father. (see **1 Corinthians 15:24-28**.) This is certainly more exciting and purposeful than just 'going to heaven when we die'; it will be the establishment of

direct rule from 'up there'-

the rule of heaven on earth!

3. *The Kingdom Foretold – The Promised Prince*

We have seen that when John the Baptist and Jesus started their public ministry, they each started by declaring that “the kingdom of heaven is near”, and that that will have meant something rather different to the Jews of the day than it may have meant to us when we first heard it. The Jews at the time had some very clear and powerful expectations . . . let’s examine them!

First of all, we need to clear up some words! Many of the important words used in connection with the good news of the kingdom of God seem to have lost their meaning; we have already seen how that has happened with ‘kingdom’ and ‘heaven’. Here are some more:

Messiah(Hebrew) = anointed (one) = Christ(Greek)

David = beloved

Starting from **Matthew 3:2** again, we can look back into the Old Testament for many references to the kingdom of God. Perhaps one of the most well-known is in **Daniel 2:31-45**, in which Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream, in which the “God in heaven, who reveals mysteries” shows the king what was going to happen, well into the future. The exciting bit is in **verse 44**, where God promises that he will “establish a kingdom that will never end. it will never be conquered, but will completely destroy all those empires, and then last forever.”

It is in **Daniel 9** that many Bible translations use the title ‘Messiah’ (see **verses 25 & 26**), but the word simply means ‘anointed one’. By the time of Jesus’s ministry, the word was in common use and expectation – just see **John 1:35-51**! Try looking through the Psalms for references to the Lord’s anointed – when Jews read these, they could hear them as references to King David, to kings of Israel/Judah in general, or to the coming anointed one – the Messiah, the Christ. Then take the fact that the name David means beloved; it doesn’t just mean it, it is the word for beloved. See ‘anointed’ in **Psalms 2:2, 18:50, 20:6, 28:8, 84:9, 89:20, 38 & 51, (105:15), 132:10, 132:17** and ‘David’ in some of these and

in some of the passages we shall be looking at, as well as many others. Once you start looking, it starts jumping out at you!

In **Acts 3:24**, Peter explains to the worshippers at the temple that “all the prophets who had a message, including Samuel and those who came after him, also announced what has been happening these days.” To give ourselves some idea of this great heritage of expectation, let’s look at at least one reference from each of the Old Testament prophets from Samuel onwards!

It starts with Samuel’s mother Hannah in **1 Samuel 2:10**. Remember, this is before David or any king in Israel! Then Samuel himself in **1 Samuel 12:22, 13:13-14, 15:28** and **16:1-13**. Compare **1 Samuel 13:14** with **Acts 13:22** and **Psalms 89:20** – Samuel certainly spoke about the kingdom of God! Even King Saul agreed that David was God’s anointed! (**1 Samuel 24:20**)

Nathan the prophet had a clear message for David, who followed it up in personal covenant with the Lord. See **2 Samuel 7**.

Isaiah 9:6-7 & 11:1-10 are the familiar passages which are often quoted. How have we heard and read these for years without seeing that they are speaking more of **kingdom** than anything else?

Isaiah's word that “a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse” is followed up in **Isaiah 53:2** and **Jeremiah 23:5-6**, where it speaks of “a righteous branch, a king who will reign wisely . . . this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness”. (Also in **Jeremiah 33:14-17**.)

Ezekiel 34:23-24 looks forward to **John 10:16** in a clearly Messianic prophecy which is not yet fully fulfilled. Another one still in the future is in **Ezekiel 37:24-28**.

We have already looked at **Daniel 2**. Some of the clearest links to Jesus, especially his ascension and return, are found in **Daniel 7**. Try looking at **verses 9-10, 13-18** and **27**; they link with our inheritance as shown in **Revelation 1:6, 5:10 & 11:15**.

On to **Hosea 3:5** another reference to David the king. In **1:10** and **2:23** are the wonderful words of inclusion and acceptance which Paul quotes in **Romans 9:25-26**.

We are familiar with **Joel 2:28-32**, because Peter quotes it on the day of Pentecost. But look at it in its context of the restoration of the kingdom of God, as found through **2:18-3:21**.

Amos 9:11 - restoration of the fallen kingdom.

Obadiah 15-21 – “and the Lord himself will be King” . . . couldn't be much clearer!

Micah 4:1-8 and **5:2-5** contain familiar passages which you may not have known where to find; again they speak eloquently of the coming kingdom.

Nahum 2:2. In amongst the declaration of God's judgement on Nineveh, here is a beautiful promise of restoration!

Habakkuk 2:1-14. Judgement on the emptiness of man's ambitions, with a glorious promise that echoes **Jeremiah 31:34!**

Zephaniah 3:8-20 . . . Wow, what a vision of release and restoration! “The Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst.”

Haggai 2:6-9, 21-23 – not merely restoration, but even **better than it was before**. Compare with **Hebrews 12:26-29**.

Zechariah 12:6-14. Restoration of the house of David - that's us! Compare **verse 10** with **John 19:37**. See also **2:4 & 10-11, 3:8** (the Branch again!), **8:3, 9:11-17**.

Malachi, the last prophet before the final one, tells of his successor, but even more of the one who will refine his priests like gold treasure (to keep and rely on) and silver coin (to use as currency). **Malachi 3:1-6, 4:1-6**.

Which is where we came in, with the last of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, calling out “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”



All these prophecies (and plenty more) point forward to the time when the reign of God and his Messiah will be established on the earth. These promises gripped the Jews and the early Church. They knew who they meant when they referred to **the anointed one**, and knew that they had been transferred from one kingdom to another. They knew that **all** the promises of God are **YES in him!**

4. The Kingdom Described - What's it (going to be) like?

Jesus had started his ministry by declaring the impending arrival of the kingdom of heaven, not just as a good theological theory but as a solid reality. He considered the kingdom itself to be the message; as far as he was concerned, his purpose was to declare the kingdom of God (**Luke 4:43, Matthew 4:23**). Hardly surprising, then, that some explaining was needed; maybe the disciples asked questions – Jesus certainly gave answers, and many of them are in the parables we have known for years!

An 'Upside-Down' Kingdom. Not a kingdom of rich people wielding power, but of “those who know they are spiritually poor; the kingdom of heaven belongs to them!” (**Matthew 5:3, Luke 6:20**) A kingdom in which “whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all” and where a child is to be received on a level with the king. (**Matthew 19:13-15; 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 9:46-48, 22:24-27; John 13:12-16.**) A kingdom which belongs to those who suffer persecution, not those who inflict it! (**Matthew 5:10**) Not a democracy, but a kingdom, but still not a totalitarian state – what a contradiction of the way the world rulers work !

A Perfect Kingdom. ‘Impossible!’ shouts our experience . . . but the entry qualifications are demanding; see **Matthew 5:19-20**.

A Kingdom of Total Obedience. Not just doing what we are told, or even achieving highly, but following our Father's will because we are getting to know him. (**Matthew 7:21-23**).

A Parable about parables. Before Jesus launches into a great series of ‘parables of the kingdom’, he starts with this one, about the importance of how the word is received. (**Matthew 13:1-23**) This one seems to be a key to the others – see **Mark 4:13, Luke 8:10**.

A Kingdom of Judgment. Many people like to think that it will all be OK and God will accept everyone in the end. However hard

it is to believe or understand, we must face the fact that Jesus taught otherwise! Have a look at **Matthew 13:24-30 & 47-50** and **25:31-46**.

A Kingdom of Small Beginnings. In **Matthew 13:31-33**, Jesus makes it clear that by far the most important factor is life. A mustard seed may be small, but it contains an irrepressible life which just longs to be as big a tree as possible. Yeast has a different sort of life; it starts even smaller than mustard seed and doesn't grow big, but just spreads and reproduces itself, getting into every corner of the dough. Two powerful pictures of the growth of the Kingdom of God, which will fill the whole earth (**Daniel 2:44** and **Revelation 11:15** and many more we have seen already!)

The Absolute Top Priority. Worth giving up everything else for this, says Jesus in **Matthew 13:44-46**. It doesn't matter whether we found it by accident, like the man who bought the field, or as the result of deliberate painstaking search, like the pearl merchant. He was looking for fine pearls in general, not one special one, but when he found it, he knew its worth! Jesus also makes it clear that it is very hard to enter the kingdom if you have other priorities! (See **Matthew 19:16-30** – there are rewards for right priorities; also **Matthew 6:19-34** and **Luke 12:22-34**)

A Kingdom of Mercy. It is often said that God's grace to us is shown by the fact that we receive what we do not deserve, and his mercy by the fact that we do not receive what we do deserve. He expects us to extend the same mercy which we have received to our 'fellow-servants' – each other! (**Matthew 18:23-35**)

A Kingdom of Generous Rewards. The workers in **Matthew 20:1-16** all received the same wages. That was how the master planned it, and it only looked unfair when they looked at each other, not at their relationship with him. The ones who complained forgot that it was only by his kindness that they had been included in the first place!

Entry by Response. Those at the rough end of society are admitted because of their response to God; the religious people can still get in, if they respond as well! (**Matthew 21:28-46**). In the next chapter, Jesus adds another illustration, combining the need to respond with the danger of other priorities, and adding the **Dependency on God's Provision**. The 'odd man out' at the feast thought his best clothes were good enough, in fact too good to give up to wear the festive clothes provided by the host - he was wrong! (See **Matthew 22:2-14** and **Romans 10:3**)

A Kingdom Coming Suddenly. Half the girls waiting for the bridegroom knew roughly when he was coming, but were not prepared for delay, nor for a lack of warning. They did not expect him to come at such short notice that they would not be able to get themselves ready. They had to go shopping for oil at midnight – no wonder they were too late! (**Matthew 25:1-13, John 9:4**)

A Kingdom of Multiplying Responsibilities. We tend to think just in terms of personal 'talents' and forget that the master entrusted his business to his servants, 'to each one according to his ability.' He didn't overburden the less able nor underestimate fine potential. Each one had something he could cope with, but which he could use to develop his abilities. Result – more opportunities to be trusted! (Read **Matthew 25:14-30** and **Luke 19:12-27.**)

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We have mainly looked at Matthew's account of Jesus's teaching about the coming kingdom . . . there is much to be found if you start following up the parallel passages! All of these insights were given to the disciples and the public on the basis that the kingdom of heaven, God's direct rule on earth, was 'at hand', just about to happen and in fact already starting. Jesus was talking about a very different sort of social order, not at all like either the Jews' own order or the one imposed by the occupying Roman army! It was attractive and liberating, totally different from religious duties

and political intrigue, yet dealing directly with major issues. No wonder that some folk tried to make him king!

Yes, the kingdom was coming soon, in the sense that the rule of the King was about to start. Jesus announced the kingdom, acknowledged that he was the King, but did not actually rule on earth at all, even after his death and resurrection .

The first part of the fulfilment of the kingdom was soon to be unfolded, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the embryo church as proof that “this Jesus, whom you crucified, is the one that God has made Lord and Messiah!” (**Acts 2:36**) The church was born, the King was acknowledged in the heavens, the first foothold of the kingdom was established on earth, and

**“His royal power will continue to grow”
(Isaiah 9:7)**

5. The Kingdom Declared – The news and the impact

We have looked at a lot of the background to the good news of the kingdom of heaven. We have seen something of what 'kingdom' means and begun to understand that 'heaven' and 'the heavens' are one and the same thing. We have looked in some detail at the prophetic promises of the Old Testament which point forward clearly to the rule of the Messiah on earth and show that his people will reign with him. We have listened with the early disciples to Jesus's descriptions and parables of what it will be like when his kingdom is established on this earth; perhaps we have understood more clearly why the religious and political authorities were afraid and jealous of him and why his disciples seem to have been rather unclear about it all, right up to the day he ascended up into 'the heavens'.

So, what happened next? We know that, six weeks later, 120 of these confused followers were suddenly transformed by the arrival of the Father's promised gift, the Holy Spirit, and within minutes were out telling people about Jesus, God's Messiah. We have probably looked enviously at those days recorded in **Acts** and wished that we could see the same sort of impact on our world as the early church saw on theirs.

What message did they proclaim? Was it like the message we would perhaps label as 'the gospel' today? The Holy Spirit was certainly at work through what they said and did, but what was the content, what information did they pass on?

In **Acts 2:14-36**, Peter gives his famous speech on the day of Pentecost. We might argue with the content of his message if we were there listening. We might have suggested that he said more about what Jesus had done in his death on the cross, forgiveness through a personal response to God's love expressed to us at Calvary. What does Peter do? He declares **the kingdom of God!**

v.17-21. He quotes **Joel 2:28-32**, a passage which we have already seen is about the coming kingdom.

v.22-24. Just the very basic facts about Jesus, so that they know who he is talking about and that he was executed and had risen from death.

v.25-28. Quoting King David's prophetic **Psalm 16** about God's 'faithful servant' who will not be allowed 'to rot in the grave'.

v.29-32. Showing clearly that David was talking about the coming Messiah, not about himself, and that Jesus was proved to be the Messiah by his resurrection. He even refers back to God's messianic promise to David in **2 Samuel 7:12**.

v.33-36. He links Jesus's ascension to the right hand of the Father (and the resulting pouring-out of the Holy Spirit) with **Psalm 16** again and quotes **Psalm 110:1**, a passage which Jesus had already clearly shown to refer to the Messiah ! (See **Matthew 22:41-46**.)

Reaction follows! It is only then (**v. 37 onwards**) that Peter goes into detail about personal response and obedience to the message. Result: the largest group conversion recorded in the New Testament and the birth of the Church !

On into **Acts 3:11-26**, the next occasion on which there is an opportunity to share the good news of the kingdom of God. Yes, there is the message of repentance and forgiveness, but again the emphasis is on who Jesus **is**, rather than on what he has done. The titles applied to him in **v.13-15, 18, 20, 22 & 26** are very definitely Messianic and prophetic, linking closely with the "times of spiritual strength" and the "time . . . for all things to be made new", which are promised in these verses. What was Peter talking about?

Acts 4:8-12. A second opportunity from the same event, the healing of the lame man! Again the phrase "Jesus Christ of Nazareth" is used. Think about the meaning this would have had! **v.11** quotes **Psalm 118**, which Jesus also quoted in **Matthew 21:42-44**, a Messianic passage which we have already seen.

Does the word 'save' in **v.12** begin to have a fresh meaning? What good news are they declaring?

A little mini-message in **Acts 5:29-32**, but it had a strong effect on the listeners – why?

Stephen's defence in **Acts 7** is hardly a gospel message, but it emphasises God's dealings with his people over their history and his determination to have their obedience.

Acts 8:12. Philip's message has a clear theme and again, in **v.32-35**, he passes on the good news. **Isaiah 53** is perhaps one of the clearest Old Testament statements that the Messiah would suffer and die, not a popular idea with Jews then or now !

The Holy Spirit seems to interrupt Peter in **Acts 10:34-48**, but he certainly had a message to work with! Once again, he shows the actual real-life Jesus to be the one whom God has appointed judge of the living and the dead.

Paul's first *recorded* gospel presentation is in **Acts 13:16-41**. He concentrates on the historic promises to Israel and King David (e.g. **2 Samuel 7**), shows how Jesus fulfils them and urges his listeners to take hold of the promise made to their ancestors. What was that?

See **Acts 17:1-3 & 7** for a summary of Paul's message and its effect. When he speaks in Athens (**Acts 17:22-31**) his message is perhaps introductory rather than complete. He doesn't even mention Jesus by name but refers to him as "a man whom he (God) has chosen" and through whom "he will judge the whole world". Messianic titles? Referring to the kingdom of God?

Now that we have more background to the weight of meaning of the title Christ or Messiah, even passing references such as **Acts 18:5** take on more meaning !

For more than two years, Paul talked with the people in Ephesus and surrounding areas "holding discussions with them and trying

to convince them about the kingdom of God.” This is, by now, Paul the experienced evangelist, teacher and apostle. What does he talk about? The kingdom ! (**Acts 19:8-10**). When he says goodbye to the Ephesian elders in **Acts 20**, he underlines what he has done (**v.25**).

In both his defence to Felix the governor in **Acts 24** and to Agrippa in **Acts 26**, Paul continues to emphasise that what he is preaching “is the very same thing which the prophets and Moses said was going to happen, that the **Messiah** must suffer and be the first one to rise from death, to announce the light of salvation to the Jews and to the Gentiles”.

As Luke’s account draws to a close in **Acts 28**, we see Paul under military guard in Rome, still explaining, preaching and trying to convince people about Jesus and the Kingdom of God (**v.23 & 31**).

This was the message which had turned the world upside down. God can use it to do the same again !

6: The Church and the Kingdom – Government in training ?

So, what is the Church here for? What does our Father want to accomplish with us all? Has it got anything to do with the Kingdom of God? We have seen clear statements of our future role in God's government in the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, but how will we ever be able to fulfil that sort of expectation? Will it all happen "in the twinkling of an eye" when Jesus returns?

First of all, we need to see what God has **already done** with us. We can begin to see the reality of his kingdom before "the glorious freedom of the children of God" is fully revealed. In **Colossians 1:13**, Paul tells us that we have been "rescued from the power (literally "authority") of darkness and brought safe into the kingdom of his dear Son, by whom we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven." Our Father has done even more than transfer us into the rule of Jesus; he has united us with him, so that our lives are joined to his! (See **1 Corinthians 1:30** and many more!)

But is Paul content with seeing many people forgiven and transferred? **NO !** In **Colossians 1:24-29**, we see that he is happy to go through suffering in order to "bring each one into God's presence as a mature individual in union with Christ." If being brought into the kingdom of God now, with a view to taking part in the future revealing of that kingdom, was all that mattered, why is Paul so determined to see maturity? In **Galatians 4:19**, he is in real agony to see Christ "shaped" in the groups of believers he is writing to. He aches to see both personal and corporate maturity. In the passage in **Colossians 1**, the emphasis is on the individual. In **Ephesians 4:13-16**, he makes it clear that the full measure of that maturity is only possible in the context of a body of believers functioning properly together.

How? How can God take a bunch of former rebels and transform them to look like his Son? How can he make them fit to share in the kingdom and the inheritance which has been reserved for him? We are not just talking about the grace of God in redeeming us and dealing with the guilt of sin; this is about the continuing

grace of God in making us more and more like Jesus, actually transforming our real practical lives so that they take on the shape of Jesus and we begin to be like him.

This is really awesome stuff ! We are talking about a process that actually happens, by which the living God works on ordinary human lives to make them more and more like Jesus, sharing his nature and characteristics!

Let's start at the end of this process, the bit we are perhaps more used to thinking about. **1 John 3:2** states that, although what we will be is not exactly clear, we know that "we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is." In other words, when Jesus "appears", the process will be completed and we shall be transformed.

But this passage also hints at how the process works now. Look at **2 Corinthians 3:18**. Do you see the common thread? **1 Corinthians 13** has a similar theme and so does **Ephesians 1:17-19**. We grow more like Jesus by revelation, not by effort, nor by just accumulating facts about him. Jesus himself said that the Holy Spirit would have a vital role in this process – **John 16:14** and other verses in **John chs. 14 & 16**. Revelation means literally "removing the veil", and one of the most common reactions seems to be "Oh, I see!" when light dawns on something we think we have known for ages! Sadly, Christianity for many people is just dead information, with no vital force. John the Baptist knew the truth when he said that no one could have anything unless God gives it to him (**John 3:27**) and Jesus was equally blunt in **John 6:63**.

All of this is designed to make us more like Jesus, but it does not just "drop" on us out of the blue and solve all our problems. When God gives us revelation, it certainly does sort out our understanding, enabling our mind to be useful to our spirit, so that we can begin to think along the same lines as our Father. (If you doubt this possibility, look at **1 Corinthians 2**.) But understanding

on its own is not enough, it needs to be proved, worked out in practice.

This is the hard bit! Jesus was perfect through all of his earthly life; he knew who he was and why he was here; but he still had to learn obedience – how? Through what he suffered (**Hebrews 5:7-10**). In this passage, it seems clear that the suffering is not so much the actual agony of crucifixion so much as the sort of suffering Jesus experienced in Gethsemane, having to put into practice what he had known for years, taking the next practical step to fit in with the “revelation” which he already had.

Our suffering seems linked with our inheritance of the kingdom. In **Romans 8:18-25**, Paul compares present suffering with “the glorious freedom of the children of God” and says that they are not fit to be put next to each other. But look at **v.17** - a very close link!

The first chapter of **2 Corinthians** shows us a different Paul to the one we often think of, seemingly so strong and confident and able to move in the Spirit. Here we see the workings of God to make a man of God, and it is not painless! He says that he shares in Christ's sufferings in order to be able to help. His secret is in **v.9**. The result is the man and his effect on the world at that time. See more of it in **2 Corinthians 3:5, 4:7-18, 6:3-10, 7:2-7, 12:7-10**. A weak man, a man with limitations, but a man strong with God's strength because of that weakness.

So what does all this have to with the kingdom of God? We have already seen that Paul sees suffering as a vehicle by which he can present believers mature in Christ (**Colossians 1:24-29**). The prize of “continuing to endure” is to rule with him (**2 Timothy 2:12**). Testing is to be expected, but it is linked with glory (**1 Peter 4:12-13**).

Our Father is determined to have a people who are like his Son, who share in his inheritance. He has chosen us to be like Jesus, and to be conformed (literally, “have the same shape”) to his

image, just like him. (**See Romans 8:29 & 30** and **Ephesians 1:3-14.**) He will spare no effort, but he will not force us. **Romans 12:1-2** speaks of that same metamorphosis, but it still depends on our response, the obedience of faith.

The results should be becoming visible in our lives. When the Corinthians preferred to sue each other rather than seek wisdom from among the local believers, Paul reminded them that their inheritance was to judge angels, and asked how they dared to go to court! (**1 Corinthians 6:1-11**). One of the great excitements of both Paul's and John's lives was to see growth in those they had helped. See **1 Thessalonians 1:2-10, 2:13-20** and **3 John 4** for examples. Peter is very clear about it in **2 Peter 1:1-11**, where he talks about the need for growth.

The Church is Christ's bride. She needs to get ready for her husband, so that when he comes, the "last Adam" will be able to say:

“At last, here is one of my own kind – bone taken from my bone, and flesh from my flesh.”

7. The Kingdom, the Bride and the City

– *The end of the beginning?*

So we come to the end of these studies and turn to see how it all works out in the future. We need perhaps to remind ourselves that this is not just another “fairy story”, where everything works out fine and the main characters “live happily ever after”. **This is reality** and we will do well to remember it.

“This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head. All things are done according to God’s plan and decision; and God chose us to be his own people in union with Christ because of his own purpose, based on what he had decided from the very beginning.” (Ephesians 1:10 & 11)

The book of Revelation is not the easiest to understand but the last two chapters are eloquent in describing the results of the process of God's great plan, the realisation of this purpose!

First of all, in **Revelation 21:1**, John saw “a new heaven and a new earth”. We have thought quite a lot about the fact that the Kingdom of God is to be realised on this earth, and here we are looking at a new one! Don't worry! The main thing is that the Kingdom of God is going to be a very real, physical thing; otherwise earth would not even be in the picture!

Then John sees “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed (lit. “adorned”) to meet her husband.” (**verse 2**) Look at some more references about the Bride:- **Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7, 2 Corinthians 11:2**, as well as verses from **9** to the end of this same chapter. It is clear that “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” is another name for the Church and that she has a responsibility to make herself ready for this great day, when she will enter into a totally new phase of her relationship with her “fiancé”, as he becomes her husband. The imagery is strong; who would think of the engagement itself as the main point of a

couple becoming engaged? What is the purpose of a courtship if no marriage is in view? We tend to think that Revelation speaks of the “last times”, and that is true as far as it goes. Perhaps, though, as Winston Churchill said, “this is not the end, not even the beginning of the end, but perhaps the end of the beginning”. Certainly **verses 3-7** (and the rest of Revelation!) look forwards, not backwards. Not much detail, but an exciting prospect!

The Church is the Bride and she is also the Holy City, replacing the old historic Jerusalem as the place where God dwelt in his temple. **Verses 9-21** show us the sheer quality of the materials and workmanship. **Verses 22-26** show us that we will not need a temple, nor any artificial light there. Do Paul’s and Peter’s letters make more sense now, when they refer to “being built together” and “living stones”? (**Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:4-10**). References by John and Paul to “living in the light” and “the kingdom of light” seem to be more significant in the face of this picture in Revelation. (**1 John 1:5-2:11, Colossians 1:11-14**)

How can we, human beings whose lives have been joined to the Lord Jesus Christ, be a bride, a house, a body, a city, and still retain our individuality? These are pictures, attempts to convey in words what God showed John, Peter and Paul. In **chapter 22** we see that the city has inhabitants, the servants of the Lamb, who have the right to eat from the tree of life which stands by the river flowing down the street (**Revelation 2:8 & 22:14**). So, as well as being the city, bride, body and temple, we are also the inhabitants and, provided we **are** overcomers, have that right! An amazing reversal of the disaster of Eden!

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they chose to have knowledge rather than life. As a result, they were denied access to the tree of life – if they **had** eaten from it, the outcome would have been horrific! (See **Genesis 3:22-24**) Here in the City of God, the knowledge of good and evil, of right and wrong, is no longer relevant. **Chapters 21:3-4 & 22:3** make this clear. What Adam and Eve forfeited, the life which is sourced in God, is fully given to the Church here. The question is no longer “is this right

or wrong?” But “is this of God or not?” Here is the ultimate fulfilment of what Paul writes about in **2 Corinthians 5:14-17** and Jesus **lived** in **John 5:19**. It is certainly no overstatement for God to say “...the old things have disappeared ... And now I make all things new!” If we are learning now to live by the spirit and not by natural knowledge, we are learning to live in the life of this new kingdom. (See **Galatians 5:24 & 25**)

Closely linked with the tree of life is the river of the water of life – the tree grows on its banks! Look back to **Psalms 46:4-7, 36:7-9** and **Ezekiel 47:1-12**, then to **John 4:13-14 & 7:37-39**. It is probably not possible for us to “sew it all up” and understand exactly what the river of life represents. Is it simply a picture of the Holy Spirit? Perhaps it is safe to say that it is the source in God from which all life springs, the source of gladness in the City, of life and light, of refreshing and purifying. Its source is “the throne of God and of the Lamb” and those who thirst are promised to drink from it (**Revelation 7:17-18, 21:6-7**). Again, this is a promise to overcomers, like those in the letters to the seven churches of Asia in **Revelation 2 & 3**.

Our responses? Look at John’s! First of all, he gets it wrong – how encouraging! He worships the messenger and is reminded that the important thing is to “obey the words in this book” and worship God alone. Then he is told not to keep the words to himself but to share them, “because the time is near when all this will happen”. **Chapter 22:11** seems to show that a time is coming when people will not be able to change their ways – so much depends on being in right relationship with God **now** !

Verses 14 & 15 remind us of the sharp division between those in and out. The difference is doing your washing regularly! Not a flippant point, but a very serious one. Think about it in the light of **ch.7:13-17** and **19:7-8**.

Response? United! No room for discord here! “*I am coming soon*” says Jesus. The Spirit says “Come!”, the Bride says “Come!”; how can we say anything else? The word translated

“soon” actually means “with speed”. In other words, at very short notice! And **still** the offer is open: *“Come, whoever is thirsty; accept the water of life as a gift, whoever wants it.”*

Yes, this is reality, not some fanciful dream. Jesus declared it, the rule of God from the heavens; the prophets foretold the time when the promised anointed one would come to rule. This totally “upside-down” kingdom where the greatest one is servant of all, this message which turned the known world itself upside-down, has reached us and included us in God’s great design to sum everything up in his Son, giving us an inheritance with him!

“Let us be thankful, then, because we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken.” (Hebrews 12:28)

These studies were originally produced as notes to accompany weekly meetings of a small “Growth Group” of Christians who wanted to share and grow together. There are many gaps which were filled in by our discussions, so please do not expect “complete” coverage of the subjects.

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