

The Kingdom and the Church

(A Study on the Kingdom of God)

I. Background for This Lesson

- a. Many of us come from church background, where we were taught many things accurately, but there were gaps in what we were taught.
 - i. Some things we were taught correctly, some things incorrectly.
 - ii. We are taking a fresh look at the Scriptures, re-examining what we believe. This can be an invigorating process, but also is 'the road less travelled' since so many prefer not to wrestle with what they were taught in the past.
 - iii. Perhaps the toughest challenges pertain to things we were taught that are partially correct, but partially incorrect (perhaps over-simplified, or incomplete).
 - iv. Many of us have wanted to check what we have been taught against the historic faith, the faith of the first few generations of Christians after the time of the apostles.
- b. One of the things many of us have had our eyes opened to is the subject of 'the kingdom of God'.
 - i. While preparing to teach an expository lesson on **Colossians**, I did a lot of reflection on the passage in **Colossians 1** that speaks about *the kingdom of God*.
 - ii. The passage of interest was in the introductory/greeting part of the letter, not one of the driving points of Paul's message. Therefore, I thought it better to address this separately from the upcoming expository lesson on **Colossians**.

II. Into the Kingdom of the Son

- a. Read **Colossians 1:9-14**.
- b. Something that especially struck me was this statement:
 - i. "giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be *partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light*. He has delivered us *from the power of darkness* and conveyed us *into the kingdom of the Son of His love*, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." (**Colossians 1:12-14**, NKJV)

- ii. This reminds me of what Jesus said to Paul when he first encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus, as Paul recounted to King Agrippa.
 - 1. Read **Acts 26:14-18**.
 - 2. Jesus had told Paul, “I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them *from darkness to light*, and *from the power of Satan to God*, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.” (**Acts 26:16–18**, NKJV)
- iii. Jesus and Paul present the Christian life as occurring within a war between two opposing kingdoms.
 - 1. We have been delivered out from the power of Satan and the kingdom of darkness.
 - 2. We have come into the kingdom of the Son, the kingdom of light, possessed by the saints.
 - 3. *In the process*, we have received (or are receiving):
 - a. the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ, and
 - b. a wonderful inheritance with the other saints.
- c. As we have discussed many times, the gospel message Jesus preached was ‘*the kingdom of God*’.
 - i. The message was not the one that many hear preached today, namely: “You personally have a problem (which is from sin), and Jesus is the answer to your problem.”
 - ii. Popular presentations of the gospel such as ‘the Romans Road’ and ‘Four Spiritual Laws’ typically *do not even mention* the kingdom of God.
- d. The kingdom of God is a real kingdom, featuring a real king (Jesus), subjects/citizens, and laws.
- e. From the beginning of His ministry to the very end, this is what Jesus preached, and what he instructed His apostles to preach.
 - i. “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching *the gospel of the kingdom*, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people.” (**Matthew 4:23**, NKJV)

- ii. “And this *gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world* as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (**Matthew 24:14**, NKJV)
- iii. “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and *speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.*” (**Acts 1:1–3**, NKJV)
 - 1. Even after Jesus was raised from the dead, he is still speaking to the apostles about *the kingdom of God.*
- f. In the book of **Acts**, we see that the gospel message preached by the apostles was *the kingdom of God.*
 - i. Peter in Jerusalem, on the Day of Pentecost: Peter preached Jesus as the promised king who would sit on the throne of David and reign over the eternal kingdom (**Acts 2:29-36**, pointing back to the prophecies of **2 Samuel 7:12-16**, **1 Chronicles 17:11-14**, **Psalm 89**, and **Psalm 132**).
 - 1. This is a kingdom-focused message.
 - ii. Philip in Samaria: “But when they believed Philip as *he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God* and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.” (**Acts 8:12**, NKJV)
 - iii. Paul in Ephesus: “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone *preaching the kingdom of God*, will see my face no more.” (**Acts 20:25**, NKJV)
 - iv. Paul in Rome: “Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, *preaching the kingdom of God* and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.” (**Acts 28:30–31**, NKJV)

III. What is “The Kingdom of God”?

- a. While we have learned many things about the kingdom, I am still learning more (and correcting some of my misunderstandings along the way).
- b. **Questions:**
 - i. What is the kingdom? (a/k/a the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven)?

- ii. Did it come already (for example, on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2**), or are we still waiting for it to come?
- iii. Is the kingdom of God the same thing as the church?
- iv. Are Christians already in the kingdom of God, or is this something that we are waiting for, that will happen in the future?
- v. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said their prayer should include the request, “May your kingdom come.” (**Matthew 6:10, Luke 11:2**)
 - 1. What does that mean?
 - 2. Are we still supposed to be praying for the “coming of the kingdom”?
- c. There are many aspects of the kingdom of God. Trying to understand what the kingdom is calls to mind the famous parable from India about the blind men and the elephant.
 - i. The parable: A group of blind men surround an elephant on all sides; and try to discern what this great beast is like.
 - 1. One man, touching the side of the elephant, says, “It is like a wall”.
 - 2. Another man, grasping the animal’s trunk, remarks, “No, it is like a snake”.
 - 3. The third man, who feels around one of the legs of the animal, concludes, “No, it is like a tree trunk”.
 - 4. The fourth blind man, stationed at the back end of the animal, grabs it by the tail and replies, “No, you are all wrong. It is like a rope.”
 - ii. Moral of the story: each of the observers focused on *only one feature* of the creature they were examining, and therefore missed other important aspects (and came to the wrong conclusion).
 - 1. Perhaps we can do better, by figuratively ‘moving around the elephant’ to get a more complete picture!
- d. Many of us who came from a ‘Church of Christ’ background were taught a study called “The Coming of the Kingdom” before we were baptized. That presentation was incomplete, focusing on only a few aspects of the kingdom.

- i. Through that collection of Scriptures, the message I was taught years ago regarding the kingdom of God included:
 1. The kingdom of God = the church
 2. The kingdom has already come. It came when the church was established on the Day of Pentecost, in **Acts 2**.
 3. “Seek first the kingdom” means that we, as Christians, need to make church our top priority.
- e. Why were we taught those things?
 - i. This was a popular teaching in the Churches of Christ we were in, I think for several reasons.
 1. Historically, I strongly suspect this teaching was emphasized to inoculate members against ‘Premillennialism’ (the belief that Christ would reign on the earth for 1,000 years).
 - a. The Churches of Christ in modern times have been predominantly “amillennial” (not believing that there will be a literal reign of Christ on the earth for 1,000 years, sometime in the future).
 2. The church’s leadership focused Christians/disciples on **Acts 2**, the Day of Pentecost, and what Peter preached in **Acts 2:38** regarding conversion.
 - a. **John 3:3-5** was also used to teach on baptism, that a person must be “born again of water and the Spirit” to enter the kingdom.
 3. Jesus’ admonition that his followers “seek first the kingdom” (**Matthew 6:33**) was equated with being fully involved in the church.
 - a. Practically speaking, we were taught that this included attending all the “meetings of the body”, since we were taught that ‘the kingdom’ = ‘the church’.
 - f. Paul’s statement in **Colossians 1:12-14** was used to support the idea that we Christians are *already in* the kingdom of God. (Therefore, this verse was used to support the idea that ‘the kingdom’ and ‘the church’ were equivalent to each other).
 - i. “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love,” (**Colossians 1:13**, NKJV)

- ii. Paul indicates that the Christians are *already in* the kingdom.
- iii. **Recommended Exercise:**
 - 1. Look at all the passages in the New Testament that refer to “the kingdom” and put them into one of three buckets:
 - a. **Bucket No. 1:** Fits with the idea that the kingdom is the church, and that Christians can be a part of the kingdom now.
 - b. **Bucket No. 2:** Does not fit with the idea that the kingdom is the church; but instead, points to something that will come in the future.
 - i. In other words, if you tried to substitute the word “church” for “kingdom”, it would make no sense!
 - c. **Bucket No. 3:** Unclear (the passage in question could be used to support *either* of the first two understandings).
 - 2. In my opinion, the **Colossians 1:13** passage clearly would fit into “Bucket No. 1” (the kingdom is the church). In fact, this may be the strongest passage in the Bible to support that idea.
- iv. However, there are other passages that *do not* fit into Bucket No. 1. In fact, they seem to fit the *second bucket* (referring to a kingdom that has not yet come) rather well. For example:
 - 1. In **Matthew 25**, Jesus gives three parables about the kingdom of God. All three are focused on the Second Coming. From the third one, the famous story of the Sheep and the Goats. On the Day of Judgment, according to Jesus:
 - a. “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, *inherit the kingdom* prepared for you from the foundation of the world:’” (**Matthew 25:34**, NKJV)
 - b. **Question:** Does this reference to ‘the kingdom’ refer to something that has already come, or to something that we are still waiting for (that will come on the Day of Judgement)?

- i. **Answer:** It seems clear that in this passage, the kingdom is being referred to as *something that will come in the future*, on the Last Day.
 2. “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire—” (**Mark 9:47**, NKJV)
 3. Also, Paul told Timothy: “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead *at His appearing and His kingdom...*” (**2 Timothy 4:1**, NKJV)
 - a. Here we see that Paul, who wrote **Colossians 1**, uses the kingdom *in a future sense* as well, associating it with the Second Coming of Jesus.
- v. Now, to make things even more interesting, consider the following:
 1. When Jesus tells the story of the vineyard owner who leases his vineyard to wicked tenants (who end up killing his messengers and ultimately killing his son), he concludes:
 - a. Read **Matthew 21:33-46**.
 - i. Jesus is addressing this parable to the Jews, speaking it *against the Jewish leaders*.
 - b. “‘Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?’ They said to Him, ‘He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes”?’ “Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.”’ (**Matthew 21:40-43**, NKJV)
 - i. In this parable, the vineyard is the kingdom of God. It is ‘leased’ to the Jews, but after they persecuted the prophets and killed the Son, the vineyard (the kingdom) will be given to others.

- ii. **Question:** If I were to say, “I am going to take \$10 away from ‘Joe’ and give it to ‘Harry’”, what would that tell you about Joe?
 - 1. **Answer:** This would tell you that at the time the statement was made, *Joe had the \$10!*
- iii. Similarly, Jesus’ statement in this parable indicates that *the Jews had the kingdom of God*, but it would be taken away from them and given to others!
- iv. Therefore, the kingdom of God can be understood:
 - 1. In the sense of the *past*, before the time of Christ (in Israel);
 - 2. In the sense of the *present* (the church); and
 - 3. In the sense of the *future* (yet to come, after the Day of Judgement).
- c. This story reminds me of the parable of the cultivated olive tree that Paul uses in **Romans 11:16-24**.
 - i. We Christians (including mostly Gentiles), through faith have been grafted into the cultivated olive tree that was there long before: *the kingdom of God*.
 - ii. However, the unbelieving Jews, who rejected Christ, have been broken off from it.
- d. Consider also what Gabriel said to Mary in **Luke 1:31-33**, echoed by Peter on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2:30**.
 - i. Jesus was destined to *sit on the throne of his father David*, to reign over the House of Jacob forever, over the eternal kingdom.
- g. Some Conclusions Regarding the Kingdom of God.
 - i. The church is part of God’s kingdom, and we are part of that now, as Paul clearly states in **Colossians 1**. HOWEVER...

- ii. In one sense, it was here before the time of Christ, under the Jews. They were a part of God's kingdom. However, those who did not believe and follow the Christ were cast out.
 1. Jesus now sits on the throne of David, as ruler over the eternal kingdom.
- iii. In another sense, as Jesus taught in **Matthew 25**, there is more to come regarding the kingdom of God. He said that the righteous ones who are found faithful to his teaching will be told, upon His return,
 1. "Come, you blessed of My Father, *inherit the kingdom* prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in;" (**Matthew 25:34-35**, NKJV)
- iv. Some of Jesus' parables present the kingdom as something that will transform over time.
 1. In the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, in **Matthew 13**:
 - a. Read **Matthew 13:24-30** and **Matthew 13:36-43**.
 - b. The wheat is sown, the tares are then sown among the wheat, and they grow together in the field.
 - c. At the harvest, the angels separate the wheat from the tares "at the end of the age".
 - i. The wheat is gathered into the barn.
 - ii. The tares are cast into the furnace of fire.
 - d. "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will *gather out of His kingdom* all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. *Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.* He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (**Matthew 13:41-43**, NKJV)
 - i. **Question:** Will there be lawless people in the kingdom of God?
 - ii. **Answer:** Yes, for a time; but they will be cast out of the kingdom at the end of the age.

2. In the Parable of the Dragnet, we see the same thing regarding the transformation of the kingdom (existing now, but being transformed on the Day of Judgment).
 - a. Read **Matthew 13:47-50**.
 - b. The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet.
 - i. It gathers in the good, of all kinds. However, some bad get in there, as well.
 - ii. The bad will be sorted out from among the righteous at the end of the age, by the angels.
3. In the teaching of Jesus, we see discussion of the kingdom of God that could be represented by three phases, over time.
 - a. **Phase 1:** This is the kingdom under the Jews, under the old covenant, before the death and resurrection of Jesus.
 - b. **Phase 2:** This is the church, after the resurrection of Jesus, a time when the kingdom on earth will be represented by the church. The kingdom will be imperfect during this phase; along with the righteous, it will have some lawless people in it.
 - c. **Phase 3:** This is after the Day of Judgment, at which time the wicked will be removed the kingdom. The kingdom will then be like a radiant bride.
 - i. In the book of Revelation (**Revelation 2-3**), we see strong and weak churches. There are some faithful people; there are others who are wicked, like Jezebel. After judgement, however, the church is purified, the wicked people are purged out. What remains is a pure church, described in **Revelation 21** as a radiant bride.

IV. Take-Aways from This

- a. The current study is intended to open our minds to see more aspects of the kingdom.
 - i. This is just a start, to encourage you to dig deeper on your own, to learn much more about the kingdom of God.
- b. Never forget that the focus of Jesus' preaching, and the message of the apostles in the beginning, was the kingdom of God.

- i. We need to restore teaching the message of the kingdom, which is the true gospel, the one Jesus wanted to have preached to the whole world.
- ii. Jesus described the kingdom as “a mystery” (**Mark 4:11**), so we should not be surprised if it takes some effort on our part to sort these things out!
- c. Understand that we are in a kingdom that is locked in battle against another, opposing kingdom. Evangelism, seeking and saving the lost, is like a jail break liberating captives from their slavery.
 - i. A good figurative representation of this is the Israelites who suffered under slavery in Egypt, who were led through the water to escape the enslaving kingdom, after the Passover Lamb was slain.
 - 1. Paul equates the Red Sea crossing to Christian baptism, which the Red Sea crossing foreshadowed. (**1 Corinthians 10:2**)
 - ii. We are called to rescue people out of Satan’s kingdom of darkness, and bring them into the kingdom of light, the kingdom of the Son of God.
 - 1. “... For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might *destroy the works of the devil.*” (**1 John 3:8**, NKJV)
 - iii. As Jesus said, those who sin are *slaves to sin*. (**John 8:34**)
 - iv. Let us see Satan and those with him as our *real* opponents.
 - 1. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places...” (**Ephesians 6:12–13**, NKJV)
- d. The kingdom of God is a continuation of the work God has been doing from at least as far back as David; perhaps back to Abraham.
 - i. The kingdom was taken from the Jews and is given to those who believe in and follow Jesus.
 - ii. The church is an important part of the kingdom. However, there is an important future aspect that we are waiting for, that Jesus spoke about in **Matthew 25**.
- e. There are phases of the kingdom.

- i. We Christians are in the kingdom of God now; but there is more to come, as well. We need to be ready for that!
- ii. We should not be surprised if we see wicked people in the church.
 1. Jesus told us beforehand that this would be the case.
 2. Also, we see it in the New Testament churches in **Acts**, in the letters (for example in **1 Corinthians**) and in what Jesus says to the seven churches of Asia Minor in **Revelation 2-3**.
 3. This is not an excuse for church leaders to neglect church discipline. The church needs to be a disciplined church, where those involved in serious sin are admonished and, (if they do not repent) expelled, as Paul explains in **1 Corinthians 5**.
 4. However, even in a disciplined church where serious sins are addressed, it will be impossible for human leaders to identify the sin in their churches.
 - a. Some will be hard to observe outwardly. For example, consider the church in Ephesus which had “left its first love” (**Revelation 2:4**) or the church in Laodicea, which had become “lukewarm” (**Revelation 3:16**).
 - b. Those who call Jesus “Lord” but ignore the needs of their poorer brothers and sisters will not make it either, as Jesus explained in the story of the sheep and goats in **Matthew 25**.
- f. In closing, here are quotes from two early Christian writers who commented on the same aspect of the kingdom: there would be some wicked people in the church, who would be cast out the end. Therefore, it will not be possible for the church to be perfect in this age.
 - i. From Origen, a Christian teacher from Alexandria, Egypt, writing c. 245 AD:
 1. “... we say that he who desires that, before the end of the age, and before the coming of the angels to remove the wicked from among the righteous, there should be no evil persons ‘of every kind’ in the net, seems not to have understood the Scripture, and to desire the impossible.
 2. “Therefore, let us not be surprised if, before the removing of the wicked from among the righteous by the angels who are sent forth for this purpose, we see our gatherings also filled

with wicked persons. Let us hope that those who will be cast into the furnace of fire may not be greater in number than the righteous!”

- a. (Source: Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, book 10, chapter 13; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 9, p. 421)
- ii. From Cyprian, bishop of the church in Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 250 AD:
 1. “For although there seem to be tares in the Church, yet neither our faith nor our charity ought to be hindered, so that because we see that there are tares in the Church we ourselves should withdraw from the Church: we ought only to labor that we may be wheat, that when the wheat shall begin to be gathered into the Lord’s barns, we may receive fruit for our labor and work.
 2. “The apostle in his epistle says, ‘In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth, and some to honor and some to dishonor.’ Let us strive, dearest brethren, and labor as much as we possibly can, that we may be vessels of gold or silver. But to the Lord alone it is granted to break the vessels of earth, to whom also is given the rod of iron.
 3. “The servant cannot be greater than his lord, nor may any one claim to himself what the Father has given to the Son alone, so as to think that he can take the fan for winnowing and purging the threshing floor; or can separate by human judgment all the tares from the wheat. That is a proud obstinacy and a sacrilegious presumption which a depraved madness assumes to itself.”
 - a. (Source: Cyprian, *The Epistles*, Epistle 50; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 327)