

## WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT THE KINGDOM - ITS NATURE AND LOCATION

Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

### INTRODUCTION

The earliest reference to the People of God as a kingdom is in Exodus 19 verse 6, where the Lord instructed Moses to tell them, "*You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*" They had previously been in slavery in Egypt, but now they would be a kingdom in their own right. God's intention was for Israel to be a *Theocracy* (ruled by the Lord rather than by a king). However, in the time of the prophet Samuel, the people clamoured for a human king. The Lord granted their request, since He knew they had already rejected His rule in their hearts (1 Sam 8:7) but this was not God's ideal. After centuries of good and bad kings (mostly bad) and the people having lost their kingdom and being taken into exile to Babylon, God spoke about re-establishing a Kingdom under His rule that would last forever (Dan 2:44 & 7:13-14).

Though Jews longed for and prayed for this kingdom to be established, there was no sign of it coming into being. It was while the Jews were again under subjugation to a foreign power (this time the Romans) that a prophet started announcing, "*The kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*" This prophet was John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

Before studying what Jesus said about the Kingdom, we need to know something about the terminology He used. There are two expressions in the Gospels: *The Kingdom of Heaven* and the *Kingdom of God*. With a few exceptions, the Gospel of Matthew uses the former, whereas the other Gospels refer only to the *Kingdom of God*. Most scholars consider the two expressions to be synonymous but recorded by the writers in terms more acceptable to their intended readers – Matthew appealing to Jewish sensitivities about writing 'God' as a name, and the others expressing it in a way more understandable to Gentile readers. Most likely, Jesus Himself used *Kingdom of Heaven*, since He was addressing mostly Jews. (Do not let this confuse you. Just think of either term as the *Kingdom* that Jesus came to bring into being, and move on with the Study. We shall use simply *The Kingdom* on most occasions in this Study.)

**1. The Kingdom is God's Rule in action.** When Jesus was questioned by Pilate, He stressed that His Kingdom was not *of* this world (John 18:36). It is, however, *in* this world (at least for now), as the next Activity will show:

Activity 1: Read Luke 10:9-11, Matthew 12:28 and Luke 17:21. What three words does Jesus use to describe the *location* of the Kingdom?

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It is not difficult to understand a Kingdom that is *not of this world* as nevertheless being *in the world*, when we realise that the Kingdom is, in fact, God's *rule in action*.

God's rule (and therefore His Kingdom) is active in this world in two ways:

- (i) In People's Lives. Subjects of God's Kingdom are those who accept the rule of God – not by force but by free will. Thus it may be said that the nature of the Kingdom is *spiritual* rather than physical. God rules wherever man's spirit responds to God's Spirit – a response of the heart to the love and grace of God. This may be defined as *God's kingly rule*.

It is seen in two lines in the Lord's Prayer that need to be read together: *Your kingdom come* and *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. The second phrase is not an entirely separate request but an expansion of the first – God's kingdom will have come on earth when His will is being done on earth. His kingdom will be present in the lives of those who are obedient to His will.

The Kingdom may also be described as *universal*, since those who are its subjects by obeying God's rule will come from across the world (Matt 8:11).

Jesus most often taught about the Kingdom through parables and illustrations. In the next activity we shall look at three illustrations He used to describe how the Kingdom spreads in the world:

**Activity 2:** Read the following three passages and, in the spaces provided, indicate what processes of the Kingdom's advancement are illustrated.

1. It has small beginning but becomes huge.
2. It spreads unseen.
3. It grows surely but imperceptibly.

(a) Mark 4:26-29 [   ]

(b) Mark 4:30-32 [   ]

(c) Matt 13:33 [   ]

- (ii) In Divine Power Not everyone accepts the rule of God, so not everyone belongs to the Kingdom of God. Those who do not give their allegiance to Christ remain under the rule of Satan, if not directly, then to the world that is under his rule (John 8:44, 14:30 and 16:11). For the time being, then, the Kingdom of God has to exist in the world alongside the Kingdom of Satan.

Jesus confronted the power of Satan when He used His divine power to heal and deliver. In Luke 11 verse 20, Jesus tells those who were criticising His deliverance ministry, "*If I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.*" God's rule is being restored in lives that Satan has afflicted or taken over – God's kingly rule is being worked out in the world.

**Activity 3:** Read Matt 13:24-30. Which of the following best describes the meaning of this parable? The Kingdom of God .....

- (a) will one day come to an end.

- (b) must coexist alongside the kingdoms of the world for a time.
- (c) grows unseen.
- (d) is more powerful than the kingdom of Satan.

The full power of the Kingdom was not seen during Jesus' earthly ministry. This was only the first stage, as it were. Later in this Study we shall see what Jesus told us was still to come.

**2. The Kingdom is Spiritual Life** (*read* Mark 9:43-48). Here Jesus is teaching about the overwhelming priority of eternal life. For emphasis, He gives three vivid illustrations of hindrances that must be put aside to ensure nothing stops us from entering eternal life. Notice that, whereas in the first two examples He refers to entering *life* (in verses 43 and 45), in the third example He refers instead to entering the *Kingdom*.

Again, when a rich young man had asked, "*What good thing shall I do that I may have **eternal life**?*" but refused to part from his dependence on riches, Jesus commented, "*It is hard for a rich man to enter the **kingdom of heaven***" (Compare Matt 19: 16 and 23).

Whatever subtle differences in meaning Bible scholars might draw from this distinction, it is clear that, fundamentally, Jesus is referring to the same thing – to be in the Kingdom is to have Eternal Life: to have Eternal Life is to be in the Kingdom.

The Gospel of John refers to the Kingdom of God on only three occasions, but John does record many other instances where Jesus spoke of *Eternal Life*, or sometimes just *Life*. It is characteristic of John's Gospel to record different aspects of Jesus' life and teaching from those favoured by the other Gospel writers, and it seems that John paid particular attention to those times when Jesus mentioned *Life* rather than the *Kingdom*.

**3. The new Kingdom demands new thinking** (*read* Matt 9:14-17). People can be very set in their ways of thinking. This was certainly the case with the Jews, whose way of life has been governed for generations by the ceremonies, feasts and fasts of the Law of Moses. To them, the freedom of the Gospel, with its reliance on faith instead of ritual, was a concept requiring a radical change of thinking which few managed to accomplish. Jesus used three illustrations to show how a familiar religious system was inadequate to express or contain the Kingdom of God.

- (i) Fasting as a sign of mourning. The coming of the Son of God to dwell among men and to become their Saviour was cause for great joy, not of mourning.
- (ii) Patching old cloth. Once a patched garment is washed, the new material used for the patch will shrink more than the old cloth, which had already shrunk in previous washes, and do more damage than before. The old religious system falls apart once Jesus has fulfilled what the rituals and sacrifices were meant to express.

(iii) Using old wineskins. Wine was kept in animal skins. Over time these skins became brittle and unable to stretch to accommodate the expansion of new wine as it fermented. The meaning is similar to that of the previous illustration of the patched cloth.

The need to think in ways radically different from those with which one has been brought up and has followed for many years can still be a problem in our own generation, especially for adherents of other faiths for whom the Christian Gospel introduces unfamiliar concepts.