

The Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is God's kingly or sovereign rule, encompassing both the realm over which rule is exerted (see Matt. 4:8; 24:7; Mark 6:23; Luke 4:5; Rev. 16:10) and the exercise of authority to reign (see Luke 19:12; Rev. 17:12,17-18). The concept of the Kingdom is significant in the nation of Israel, the proclamation of the gospel, and the presence of the church. The idea carries through both the Old and New Testaments.

The Kingdom in the Old Testament

God rules sovereignly over all of His works as King. He desires His rule to be acknowledged in a bond or relationship of love, loyalty, spirit, and trust. Not surprisingly, then, one of the central themes of the Old Testament is kingdom through covenant.

This theme is revealed on the first page of Scripture, when God creates humans in His own image. According to the grammar of the original text, ruling over the creatures in Genesis 1:26b is a result of creating humans in the divine image. The fact that humankind is male and female prepares us for the command to be fruitful, and the fact that humankind is the divine image prepares us for the command to rule over the creatures.

The fact that humankind is male and female in itself has nothing to do with the divine image. Instead, we should understand the divine image according to the background of the ancient Near East, where erecting the king's statue was the equivalent of proclaiming his domination over the area in which the statue was erected. Accordingly, humans are set in the midst of creation as God's statue. They are evidence that God is the Lord of creation. Human beings exert their rule not in arbitrary despotism but as responsible agents, as God's stewards. Their rule and his duty to rule are not autonomous; they are copies. Hence the concept of the kingdom of God is found on the first page of the Bible. Adam began to rule the world under God by naming everything created on the earth, just as God ruled by naming everything created in the heavens.

Careful attention must be paid to the language of the promises given to Abraham in Genesis 12 that are later incorporated into the covenant made in Genesis 15. The first promise God gave to Abram was that He would make him a great nation (see 12:2). The last promise was that in Abram all of the clans or families of the earth would be blessed (see 12:3). God spoke of Abram as becoming a great nation in three ways.

1. The term *nation* emphasizes a people as a political entity defined by cultural, ethnic, geographical, or social factors.
2. In Genesis 12:3 the nations of the world are not called nations but clans or families. The term *family* emphasizes a people with no real political structure and in which no system of final governmental headship or rule operates.

3. The background of Genesis 12 is chapter 11. There we have the history of Babel, in which we see a complete confidence and naive optimism about human achievement and effort. Humans were at the center of their world, and they could achieve anything. This philosophy came under divine judgment. By contrast, Genesis 12 presents us with a political structure brought into being by God, with God at the center and God as the governmental head and rule of that system. In other words, we have the kingdom of God brought into being by the promises to and covenant with Abram (see Heb. 11:8-10).

When Abram's family became a nation, God initiated with them the Sinai covenant, or law of Moses, as a means for the people to be rightly related to God, to one another as God's true humanity, and to the creation as His stewards. Therefore, the covenant was the means for establishing God's kingdom. The Book of Judges proves that although each person did what was right in his own eyes (see 17:6), nonetheless the Lord ruled over His people as King. Later God raised up a king after His own heart and made a special covenant with David. The Davidic covenant was God's king seeking to bring the people of God and indeed all of the nations under this rule made explicit in the covenant (see 2 Sam. 7:19). Thus, the king was the mediator of the covenant and the means of extending God's rule.

When the people failed to abide by the covenant, God sent prophets and wise men to call the people back to the covenant, the terms of His rule. Zephaniah, for example, based his warnings on the covenant as found in Deuteronomy (see Zeph. 1:2 and Deut. 32:22; Zeph. 1:3 and Deut. 28:21; Zeph. 1:4-6 and Deut. 28:45; Zeph. 1:8-13 and Deut. 28:45; Zeph. 1:13 and Deut. 28:30,39; Zeph. 1:15 and Deut. 28:53,55,57). Zephaniah 2:11 sums up the prophet's theme of kingdom through covenant: "The nations on every shore will worship him, every one in its own land."

Although the prophets sought to bring the people back to the covenant, the Sinai covenant (the law of Moses) failed to achieve the goal of establishing God's kingdom because it did not and, in fact, could not guarantee the obedience of the people of God. Hence the prophets began to speak of a new covenant (see Jer. 31) in which God's rule would be guaranteed by an obedient people. As the failure of the Davidic line of kings became evident in history, the hope for a future king came more and more to the fore, along with the promise of a new covenant through which God's kingship would be acknowledged in the hearts of His people in a new creation—new humanity in a new heavens and a new earth.

The Old Testament ends (in the Hebrew canon) with Chronicles, a book that focuses on good kings as the ideal of the future Messiah in whom Yahweh would be truly Lord over His people and over all His creation. So the last words of the Old Testament call for a temple builder from among the people to make this hope a reality—likely the Messiah Himself (see 2 Chron. 36:23).

The Kingdom in the New Testament

In the New Testament the fullest revelation of God's divine rule is in the person of Jesus Christ. His birth was heralded as the birth of a king (see Luke 1:32-33). The ministry of John the Baptist prepared for the coming of God's kingdom (see Matt. 3:2). The crucifixion was perceived as the death of a king (see Mark 15:26-32).

Jesus preached that God's kingdom was at hand (see Matt. 11:12). His miracles, preaching, forgiving sins, and resurrection are an invasion of God's sovereign rule in this dark, evil age. God's kingdom was manifested in the church. Jesus commissioned the making of disciples on the basis of His kingly authority (see Matt. 28:18-20). Peter's sermon at Pentecost underscored that a descendent of David would occupy David's throne forever, a promise fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ (see Acts 2:30-32). Believers are transferred from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God (see Col. 1:13).

God's kingdom may be understood in terms of reign or realm. Reign conveys the fact that God exerts His divine authority over His subjects/kingdom. Realm suggests location, and God's realm is universal. God's reign extends over all things. He is universally sovereign over the nations; humankind; the angels; the dominion of darkness and its inhabitants; and even the cosmos, individual believers, and the church.

In the Old Testament the kingdom of God encompassed the past, present, and future. The kingdom of God had implications in the theocratic state. The kingdom of God is already present but not yet fully completed, both a present and future reality. The kingdom was inaugurated in the incarnation, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God's kingdom blessings are in some measure possessed now. People presently find and enter God's kingdom. God is now manifesting His authoritative rule in the lives of His people. God's kingdom, however, awaits its complete realization. His people still endure sufferings and tribulations. When the kingdom is fully consummated, hardships will cease. Kingdom citizens currently dwell alongside inhabitants of the kingdom of darkness. God will eventually dispel all darkness. The final inheritance of the citizens of God's kingdom is yet to be fully realized. The resurrection body for life in the eschatological kingdom is a blessing that awaits culmination.

The purpose of God's kingdom is salvation, expressed in the redemption of fallen persons. The reign of Christ instituted the destruction of all evil powers hostile to the will of God. Satan, the god of this age, along with his demonic horde, seeks to hold the hearts of individuals captive in darkness. Christ has defeated Satan and the powers of darkness and delivers believers. Although Satan still is active in this present darkness, his ultimate conquest and destruction are ensured through Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. Sinners enter Christ's kingdom through regeneration.

Many of Jesus' parables emphasize the mysterious nature of God's kingdom. For example, an insignificant mustard seed will grow a tree, as God's kingdom will grow far beyond its inception (see Matt. 13:31-32). The kingdom of God is like seed scattered on the ground. Some seed will fall on good soil, take root, and grow. Other seed, however, will fall on hard, rocky ground and will not grow. Likewise, the kingdom will take root in the hearts of some

but will be rejected and unfruitful in others (see Matt. 13:3-8). As wheat and tares grow side by side, indistinguishable from each other, the sons of the kingdom of God and the sons of the kingdom of darkness also grow together in the world until ultimately separated by God (see Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43).

Although closely related, the kingdom and the church are distinct. George Eldon Ladd identified four elements in the relationship of the kingdom of God to the church:

1. The kingdom of God creates the church.
2. God's redemptive rule is manifested over and through the church.
3. The church is a custodian of the kingdom.
4. The church witnesses to God's divine rule.

The kingdom of God is the work of God, not produced by human ingenuity. God brought it into the world through Christ, and it presently works through the church. The church preaches the kingdom of God and anticipates its eventual consummation.

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