



# Introduction

## The Kingdom of God

### THE FUTURE BREAKS IN

The message of so much popular Christianity is “Believe in Jesus, and get saved so you can go to heaven when you die.” In this book and the two that will follow it, we will propose that Jesus’ message is much better summed up with this idea: “The Kingdom of God is here. Let your life be transformed and live heaven’s way right now on earth *and* in the age to come.”

This book is for every person who believes it is crucial to seriously follow Jesus. It will be disturbing to anyone who is comfortable with cultural Christianity. This book is for leaders who want their churches to be shaped by the message of Jesus, even if that means radical changes. It will likely be an irritant to those who hold to historic evangelical positions that may bear little resemblance to the Sermon on the Mount.

This book is for seekers who still suspect that there is something about Jesus that traditional religion may have

missed. It will not be helpful to those wanting to shape their own spirituality in their own way on their own terms. Ultimately, this is for all those who are open to a whole new paradigm for living out God's will.

The Gospel of Mark tells us:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14–15)

*The main theme of Jesus' preaching was "the Kingdom of God."* On this, scholars, whether liberal or conservative, all seem to agree. The phrase occurs more than a hundred times in the four Gospels, and that includes the references to the "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew, which refers to the same thing but is worded differently.<sup>1</sup>

To say that the Kingdom of God was Jesus' main theme is to say that it should get the attention of all those who are serious about following him. And yet the concept has been plagued by misunderstandings. As we study more carefully Jesus' message in its Jewish context, we will see it was greatly misunderstood by the people of his day.

For roughly 250 years after Jesus, the church seemed to have a strong grip on the kingdom principles that Jesus taught. However, when we consider how the Roman Emperor Constantine turned his affections to the Christian faith, we may have questions about where his heart was, but we cannot doubt that his life and actions dramatically changed Christian thinking and

practice. In his quest to become emperor reigning over the world's greatest kingdom, Constantine had to defeat another who was seeking the same goal. Of course, we don't mean he had to win an election but that his army had to win a bloody conflict. On the eve of a great battle at the Milvian Bridge, the future emperor, who had been exposed to Christianity by his mother, looked up to the sun and believed that he saw a cross of light above it, and with it the words "by this conquer." Constantine commanded his troops to adorn their shields with a Christian symbol (the letters Chi and Rho), and thereafter won the battle. He became one of the first of millions who would say their prayers in Jesus' name and go kill for a kingdom. How ironic that the sign he spoke of referred to one who told his disciples not to fight, and then laid down his life for his enemies. The new emperor ushered in a sea change in the understanding of the Kingdom that led to a distortion of its meaning that still profoundly affects millions of average believers.<sup>2</sup>

We are joining a chorus of other writers and teachers who are saying that it is time for us to throw off these distortions and listen afresh to Jesus' message. It will be our aim in this series to show that the concept of the Kingdom of God is central to Christian discipleship and an umbrella under which many key Christian ideas make sense and find their place. If there is anything we should pray to understand clearly, it is what Jesus meant when he talked about the Kingdom.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that when we begin to see our relationship with God through an understanding of the Kingdom, we will shift to a whole new paradigm for thinking about what it means to follow Jesus. Furthermore,

we do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that a whole-hearted embrace of Jesus' gospel of the Kingdom could revolutionize our churches—bringing about a drastic change in spiritual culture even among those who are already serious about discipleship. But there are several other things we want to say by way of introduction.

*1. One does not have to understand all we present to be in the Kingdom of God and to be living what we will call the kingdom life.* Some will find that they have spoken about the Kingdom of God in wrong ways or have not understood some key concepts. Thankfully one need not have a master's degree in kingdom theology to be living in God's Kingdom. As we will see, Jesus said it was hidden from the wise and learned but revealed to little children. Anyone who has biblically responded to the gospel of Jesus and seeks to live his or her life under the Lordship of Jesus is a citizen of the Kingdom. That being said, it is always to our advantage to understand more fully and more correctly a biblical idea, and that is particularly true with such a crucial one as the Kingdom of God. The more accurately we understand God's plan, the better we are able to live it.

*2. You may not immediately embrace every conclusion we have come to and, of course, that is not a problem.* As we introduce what might be some new ways of thinking, we hope you will neither impulsively jump on board nor defensively react. What we are encouraging is that you have the heart found in the Bereans in Acts 17 and keep studying to see if these things are true. We do not think

for a moment that we have our arms around the imposing idea of the Kingdom, and we are suspicious of anyone who thinks they do. We continue to learn, which means we must be open to changing our own minds. Of course, we always must be ready to bring our traditions and our feelings (both powerful influences) and lay them at the feet of Jesus. The gospel of the Kingdom will challenge them both in ways we may not yet have realized. There are some deep-rooted, but unbiblical, Christian reflexes that we often have to overcome.<sup>3</sup> We will need a radical openness to new understandings if we are to be the good soil that Jesus spoke of in one of his kingdom parables. We would hope that you read this volume more than once. You are probably like us, and miss a lot of things the first time through a book.

3. *We should not be afraid.* We say this because in the months when we were first engaged in deeper study of kingdom concepts, and shared a few of the insights with others, we sometimes heard expressions of fear. At times we were asked “Where is all this going?” Our answer, then, as well as now: We honestly don’t know. We just want to go there if it means more fully being under God’s rule and reign. To the best of our ability we are not going to call for one thing that we cannot find Jesus calling for. Some of what Jesus calls for *is* on the scary side. It is safe to say that the more deeply we go into kingdom teaching and living, the more we will become aliens and strangers in this world. That can give us pause. Perhaps what we should say is, “Don’t let fear control you.” Jesus is not going to beckon us to go some place without fulfilling his promise that he will be with us always.

4. *We should act on what we become convinced of.* The more we practice kingdom teaching, the more we will understand it. One of our concerns is that some people might read this and see it as argument for changing a doctrinal position and treat it just as an intellectual exercise. If there is anything that is clear about Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom, it is that it must be lived. And so to whatever extent you understand it, put that understanding into practice as soon as possible. Whatever you do, do something.

5. *The more involvement you can have in talking through these ideas with others the better.* As we will see, kingdom teaching was never meant to be practiced individually but in community. The very nature of the Kingdom requires this. To be reading, studying, questioning and concluding with others who are committed to encouraging the kingdom life represents the absolute best way. This book was born in an environment in which we were studying with others, talking, emailing and praying about what we were learning. We cannot imagine where we would be with this message were it not for the fellowship of people in our congregation with whom we have been able to share our journey.

6. *All through this study, we must keep a clear view of God's grace.* As we will see, the Kingdom itself comes as an act of God's grace. We enter the Kingdom as a result of God's grace. Jesus' gospel of the Kingdom and Paul's gospel of God's grace are the very same gospel. We will be transformed within the Kingdom because God continues

to give grace to the poor in spirit and to the humble. We do not bring the Kingdom by our efforts, and we do not live the kingdom life by depending on our own moral power and human resources. To use the thought of Jesus in Matthew 6, we will live in a new way because of “the much more of the heavenly Father.”

The kingdom message is a call to a new way of living that shows loyalty to another king, but it is made possible only because of the extravagant generosity of that king. If at some point the “good news of the Kingdom” does not sound like good news to us, it will likely be because we are focusing on some hard thing kingdom people are called to do and not focusing on the abundance of grace that God gives to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

We likely will be asked why we are releasing this as three shorter volumes rather than one larger one. The answer is simple. We want as quickly as possible to encourage more Christians and churches to give thought to kingdom teaching and begin some serious discussion. Given our own limitations, getting all our material into print in one volume would simply take much longer. We are eager to share with you some of the most exciting, stimulating and challenging truths that we have found in our more than seventy-five combined years of seeking Jesus and studying his word.

In this volume we will look at the way the Kingdom was envisioned and anticipated during the Old Testament period and the clues that especially the prophets give us to its nature. Then we will turn to the heart of the book: Jesus’

preaching of the good news of the Kingdom. While for us there are still mysteries of the Kingdom, we want to focus on what we can know about the Kingdom as Jesus announced it and proclaimed it. We will find there is quite a lot. After seeing that the Kingdom is here in Jesus, we will look at how it is to be lived in this world now by the church. A final chapter will examine the completed nature of the Kingdom that is yet to come in the form of a new heaven and a new earth, and how we are to faithfully wait for it.

In the projected *Volume Two: The Sermon and the Life*, which we mention being conscious of James 4:13ff and the tentative nature of man's plan, it is our goal to look at the Sermon on the Mount, which probably should be viewed as the Sermon on the Kingdom. As we will say later in this book, there is no section of Jesus' teaching that gives us a better look at kingdom life—a life, by the way, that he expects those who acknowledge him to live.

In *Volume Three: Aliens, Strangers and a Light to the Nations*," we will, God willing, more deeply delve into some of the issues raised in the first two volumes and even some new ones that some of our readers of the first two volumes will send our way.

We end this introduction with a prayer we will return to several times.

*Our Father who is in heaven,  
Let your name be revered.  
Let your kingdom come.  
Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

## Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Share or write down a brief statement describing what the idea of the Kingdom of God means to you.
2. How would you say the idea of the Kingdom has affected your thinking and the way you live?
3. Prior to reading this introduction, what would you have said was the main theme of Jesus' teaching?
4. What strikes you about the experience of Constantine before the battle at Milvian Bridge?
5. Read Matthew 16:16-23. How might Peter and Constantine have had the same misunderstanding about the nature of the Kingdom of God?
6. Some mistakenly think Jesus' message of the Kingdom and Paul's message of grace go in different directions and have little in common. Why is it essential to see grace clearly as you listen to the message of the Kingdom?
7. How open are you to new ideas? When is the last time you studied something carefully and changed your mind? Why might you resist some new perspectives on the message of the Kingdom?
8. What will help you make the decision to be open to new ways of thinking?

*NOTE: We include discussion questions at the end of each chapter, but they are also available on the web with permission to print and copy. (kingdombooks-vol1.blogspot.com)*