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the gospel many people  
have never heard



If I had been asked, fresh out of seminary, “What is the gospel of Jesus?” I would have said, without hesitation, “Jesus died for our sins so that we can go to heaven when we die.” Or if someone had put me on the spot and given me thirty seconds to explain the good news of Christianity to a nonbeliever, I would have answered, “God loves you. But because of your sin, you are separated from God and cannot have a relationship with him. Jesus died for you, and made provision for your sin. Through believing in Jesus you can know and experience God’s love and receive eternal life.”

I still believe this today. The gospel—which literally means “the good news”—of Christianity certainly contains this message. I fully believe that God loves us, that we are separated from God by our sin,

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Have you heard this gospel? Explain how it came across to you, and how you lived as a result of it.

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that the sacrifice of Jesus is the only means of reconciliation, and the necessity of receiving Jesus by faith. I not only believe these things, I believe that they are essential and nonnegotiable. I learned those truths when I was becoming a Christian, and thirty years later I still believe they are true.

What I later discovered was that there is even more good news. In *The Good and Beautiful God*, I wrote about the importance of knowing that we are loved by God (chap. 5), forgiven by God (chap. 7), and raised to new life in Christ (chap. 8). These essential truths have radically changed my life. But I learned that this gospel is incomplete. I came to realize, thanks to some gifted teachers, that the gospel Jesus preached includes even more than being loved, forgiven, reconciled and given a new identity. I failed to know for over ten years of my Christian life that the gospel also includes an invitation to a great adventure, which I have come to know as “living in the kingdom of God.”

To be sure, those other aspects of the good news (loved, forgiven, indwelt) were enough to help me live as a contented Christ-follower. But it was only after I discovered the “gospel of the available kingdom” that my apprenticeship to Jesus really began to make sense. Why did it take so long for me to discover this important aspect of the gospel? The good news about entering heaven when we die has overshadowed the equally good news that we can enter heaven now. The understanding of Jesus preached from many pulpits (even the one I stood in for years) is primarily that of Savior or ethical teacher. To be sure, he is both. But Jesus as rabbi, the one who teaches us how to live in the kingdom of God, is missing.

#### JESUS' NARRATIVE: GETTING HEAVEN INTO US NOW

In the following pages we will examine a lot of New Testament passages to see how prevalent the missing aspect of the gospel is. My aim is to let Jesus be our teacher, our primary narrative-giver.

**Metanoia:** *The kingdom of God is here.* After his temptation in the

wilderness Jesus was ready to begin his public ministry. Directly after his baptism Jesus began to preach:

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17)

Presumably, this was the opening line of a sermon, a summary of his entire message and perhaps his most provocative or memorable point.

Notice also the phrase “from that time Jesus began to proclaim.” This indicates that he preached this message more than once. This proclamation likely was included every time he preached or taught, because we have no indication that he preached anything else. The word *proclaim* was commonly used in Jesus’ day for a herald who offered a very special word from the king. Matthew is telling us that Jesus, the King of the kingdom of heaven, has offered a new edict containing very good news.

Jesus’ good news is summarized in a single sentence, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The Greek word for “repent” is *metanoia*, which means literally, “change your mind.” Most people think *repent* means “shape up”; thus they think Jesus’ proclamation is a *threat*. But it is an invitation. The kingdom of God (or kingdom of the heaven) is an interactive life with God. Jesus is essentially saying, “Change the way you have been thinking—a life of intimacy and interaction with God is now in your midst.” Jesus’ hearers were aware that this was a gracious invitation, an offer so good that when Jesus taught it he often had difficulty escaping the crowds.

This was Jesus’ first and only real sermon point. And because Matthew indicates Jesus proclaimed it every time he spoke, I have come to believe that the kingdom was the primary topic of Jesus’ preaching.

**Not only preaching but teaching.** What was the content of Jesus’ teaching? The kingdom of God. Jesus primarily taught in parables,



and nearly all of his parables were about the kingdom.

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field." (Matthew 13:24)

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed." (Matthew 13:31)

And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." (Luke 13:20-21)

It is much more difficult to find a teaching of Jesus that was *not* about the kingdom than to find one that is.

Jesus continued to teach his disciples about the kingdom of God even after his resurrection:

After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3)

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After looking at the Scripture passages above what stands out to you?

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kingdom of God, and he expected his followers to do the same. In the Gospels, Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God *over one hundred times*. How can we have missed it?

#### WHAT JESUS' FOLLOWERS PREACHED AND TAUGHT

When Jesus sent his disciples to preach, he scripted their sermon to be exactly as his:

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: . . .

Apparently the message had not changed. From his opening sermon to his hillside teaching to his postresurrection discourses, the subject is the same. Jesus preached and taught about the

"As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." (Matthew 10:5-8)

It's the same sermon message Jesus proclaimed. This should tell us something.

What about the apostle Paul? Did he teach about the kingdom of God?

He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. (Acts 19:8)

He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28:30-31)

For "two whole years"—his final two years on earth—Paul preached nothing but the kingdom of God.

And in Paul's letters he uses the phrase "kingdom of God" or its equivalent fourteen times. For example:

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Romans 14:17)

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14)

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Why are we unaware that Paul taught about the kingdom?

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The kingdom is not something only Jesus preached and taught; his followers taught it as well.

#### HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT THE KINGDOM?

After discovering that the central message of Jesus, his disciples and the apostle Paul was the kingdom of God, I wondered why I had



never heard much about this before. I discovered I was not alone. Dallas Willard recounts the following:

At the 1974 Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization, Michael Green asked rhetorically, "How much have you heard here about the Kingdom of God?" His answer was, "Not much. It is not our language. But it was Jesus' primary concern." . . . Peter Wagner . . . adds, "I cannot help wondering out loud why I haven't heard more about it in the thirty years I have been a Christian. I certainly read about it enough in the Bible. . . . But I honestly cannot remember any pastor whose ministry I have been under actually preaching a sermon on the Kingdom of God. As I rummage through my own sermon barrel, I now realize that I myself have never preached a sermon on it. Where has the Kingdom been?"

I was relieved after reading this. Michael Green, a leading expert in the area of evangelism, and Peter Wagner, the founder of the church-growth movement, were in the same situation as I was.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great British preacher, noticed the same problem in his country:

It is indeed very surprising that at the end of the twentieth century, men and women should still be all wrong about what the Gospel is; wrong about its foundation, wrong about its central message. . . . And yet, that is the very position by which we are confronted at the present time.

With as much biblical scholarship as we have available today, it is shocking to me that we have not heard more about the kingdom. If this is indeed the central message of the gospel, we simply cannot be wrong about it.

How did things get this way? I discovered that a powerful false narrative forced people to completely neglect the kingdom of God.

#### FALSE NARRATIVE: THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS FUTURE

No serious biblical scholar would deny that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. However, many scholars conclude that Jesus was not talking about our present world but rather *an epoch in history that has not yet begun*. Obviously, the world as we know it is not running under the authority of God.

For example, Bible scholar John Bright says,

The New Testament church . . . was confident that the victory of all the dark powers of the old aeon had been won in Christ, so much so that the Kingdom of God could be spoken of as a present thing. Yet it was all too painfully aware that the Kingdom remained an unconsummated thing of the future which had yet to come in its power. In tension between the two the New Testament church lived and waited.

Because Jesus did not establish a *complete* reign over all people and governments, Bright and others have concluded that the kingdom of God is "an unconsummated thing of the future."

While "the Kingdom of God *could be* spoken of as a present thing," in actual practice most seminary professors choose to put the emphasis on the future aspect of the kingdom of God, so much so that nothing much is taught about the present aspect of the kingdom. By labeling the kingdom as an eschatological (end times) reality that will come at the return of Christ, its role and value for our present lives is negated. This is a very big reason the kingdom of God seems to have been lost to most Christians.

There is no doubt that the kingdom of God has not been fully established. No nation, no state and no person lives in complete accord with the kingdom of God. My own heart and life is an example of that. I have moments when I strive and even succeed in living obediently to God and actually practice the principles of the kingdom. But I have just as many moments when I run the "kingdom of Jim" and



choose to disobey the teachings of Jesus. Thus I pray, every day, “Thy kingdom come.”

But this in no way means that the kingdom of God has not come or is not a present reality, or that it came in Jesus and left when he ascended. *The kingdom of God is a present reality that will be fully consummated in the future.* It is here and is as real and powerful as it will ever be. Everything Jesus said about the kingdom is true in our lives. Yes, one day it will be the governing power over the entire universe, but for now it is intended to be the governing power over you and me.

Jesus never said, “My kingdom teachings—especially all of those parables—are not applicable to you. They are about a future time when I come back in victory.” While he did teach about the kingdom coming in its fullness, he primarily taught about the kingdom in the present tense. He not only taught about it, he ministered by its power. And by its power Jesus’ disciples changed the world, not only in the first century, but in every century since.

#### WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS GOOD NEWS?

Just about everyone I know would like to have special powers. That is why we like superheroes who can leap buildings, stop speeding bullets or become invisible. Jesus tells us that those who live in alliance with him in the kingdom of God are endowed with a great deal of power—power to do good. It is demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus: “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness” (Matthew 9:35).

Notice the connection: he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom and then demonstrated its power by healing people. When he cast out demons, it too was a manifestation of the power of the kingdom: “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Matthew 12:28). The kingdom was here and now and available, which Jesus demonstrated through his supernatural acts.

Lest we assume that the power of the kingdom was only available to Jesus, Luke 10:17-18 shows that Jesus expected his disciples to utilize the power of the kingdom in their own work and ministry: “The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.’”

The kingdom of God exhibits the greatest power in the universe. Sickness and storms can be brought under its power. Demons are subject to a single word uttered from the kingdom. Paul stated it clearly: “The kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power” (1 Corinthians 4:20). So when Jesus invites us to be with him in order to become like him, he assumes that we will experience the same authority and power that he has.

#### HOW DO WE ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

In three places Jesus tells us what we must do to enter the kingdom of God:

I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. (Mark 10:15)

Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. (John 3:5)

The first stipulation for entering the kingdom seems daunting: our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, who were very religious people and highly respected for their piety. How can my righteousness possibly exceed theirs?

Jesus was very critical of the scribes and Pharisees because their righteousness was primarily exterior. They focused on outer actions



(hand washing, sabbath rules) and not on the inner condition of their heart. The righteousness we need to enter the kingdom is humility, purity of heart and a desire to work on those aspects of our soul that are most important, such as integrity, gentleness, respect and mercy.

The Pharisees kept their outer life, which people could see, clean, but their inner life was filthy (Matthew 23:25-26). To enter the kingdom, we must work on our inner life. This is the aim of this book. In future chapters we will address issues such as anger, lust, lying and judging others. In order to live in the kingdom we must address these issues in our life. When we do, our righteousness begins to exceed that of the Pharisees.

To enter the kingdom of God, the second requirement is to become as a child. Jesus was fond of the attitudes and character of children. Pointing to a child in his midst, he quipped, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). Children are innocent, trusting and have little self-consciousness. They do not naturally judge others or hate people. Those are learned activities. Love comes naturally to children. Of course, children convey more than innocence and love and trust; they can be petty and selfish and fearful. But children do *not need to be in control*. They have very little authority or power, and live each day in dependence and trust, receiving everything as a gift. And this, I believe, is what Jesus is advocating.

Being childlike does not save us, nor is it meritorious in itself. One can be childlike and be very far from the kingdom. Jesus is telling us that in order to enter the kingdom we need to have the trusting disposition of a child in order to experience the fullness of the kingdom. If we insist on maintaining our power and our control, we cannot enter the kingdom. The kingdom requires submission.

The third prerequisite to enter the kingdom is to be "born of water and Spirit." This is not a reference to water baptism. "Born of water" was formerly used to describe the birth, because infants live

in the water of their mother's womb before being born. Every living person has been born of water. "Born of the Spirit" describes a second birth, which puzzled Nicodemus, who asked Jesus how it is possible to be born a second time (John 3:9). Jesus explains, "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6).

When I came into this world I was born "of the flesh" and "of water." But when I surrendered my life to Jesus, I was "born of the Spirit." How did that happen? The Holy Spirit had been leading me to Jesus for some time, and when I relinquished control of my life, the Spirit then infused my entire being with new life and new capacities. My love for God and my ability to understand the Bible increased. A few years later I was baptized by water, a sacrament that symbolizes that new birth.

Not everyone enters the kingdom the way I did. In fact, most Christians grow up in the church and are Christ-followers as long as they can remember; they cannot point to a moment when they were born again. Some may feel as if their experience is inferior, but in reality it is far better to have walked a whole life with Jesus. Either way, living the Christian life is learning how to be led by the Spirit: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Romans 8:14).

What is it like to be so led? Jesus says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). *Wind* and *spirit* are the same word in Greek. Jesus is saying that those who are led by the Spirit are not under a set of laws and rules. We are indwelt by a person far greater than a set of regulations. In order to enter the kingdom we must surrender our lives to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

#### THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Jesus' primary message was the availability, presence and power of



the kingdom of God, which is the central teaching of the New Testament. The power of the church rests in the kingdom of God. The good news is that we are invited into this life with God. We enter the kingdom through surrender, humility, trust and a willingness to begin working on our hearts in order to become the kind of person God

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After reading this chapter, describe your feelings about this new view of the kingdom of God.

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desires us to be. God is creating an all-inclusive community of persons whose hearts and character are shaped by Jesus. This can happen only in the kingdom of God. Fortunately, all of us are invited, regardless of our past.