

# What is the Kingdom of God?

By [David Kroll](#)

**M**any within the Christian community limit their perspective of the Kingdom of God to looking at it only in terms of it being a future event. It is believed that the Kingdom will be established at a future return of Christ. Its seat of government will be headquartered in Jerusalem where Christ will rule from a rebuilt temple, along with the resurrected saints. In embracing this view, the focus is on the Kingdom as an event that will put an end to sinful living and force people to live in compliance with God's law.

A careful consideration of the scriptures that discuss the Kingdom of God, which is also referred to as the Kingdom of Heaven, will show that the Kingdom is something that was expected to begin to occur at the time Christ walked on this earth. The scriptures show the Kingdom to involve how we live our lives in the here and now. As we study the scriptures that relate to the Kingdom, we will see the Kingdom is all about how we relate to God and our fellow man. We will see from the scriptures that the Kingdom is a spiritual dynamic.

Let's take a fresh look at the scriptures that relate to the Kingdom and let's see if we can get a better handle on what the Kingdom is all about.

The key to understanding the scriptures, as is true of anything we read, is to read the statements of its writers in context. Who is being addressed and what meaning would it have for those being addressed. In most cases when Christ and the apostles addressed the people of their time, it was with the intention of conveying meaning to them. That is the purpose of communication.

When John the Baptist appeared in the Judean desert and began his ministry, what did John preach? **"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near."** (Matt. 3:2) After John was put in prison and Christ began His ministry, what did Christ preach? **"The time has come, He said. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news."** (Mark 1:15).

There are two Greek words, *engus* and *engizo*, which appear 73 times in the NT narrative and are translated as near or at hand. In Matthew 21:1, the word is used to describe being close to Jerusalem. In Matthew 26:18 this word is used to show that the crucifixion was about to take place. In Matthew 26:45 the same Greek word is used to show the immediacy of Christ's betrayal. In John 7:2 the word is used to show the nearness of the Feast of Tabernacles which Christ planned to attend. Over and over again in the NT, where we see these two Greek words used, we see by context these words simply relate to something about to take place soon.

Therefore, there is no contextual or linguistic reason to believe that these words mean something else when found in association with statements about the timing of the Kingdom. Every Greek Lexicon I checked showed these words to mean something close at hand.

Both John and Christ said that the Kingdom of God was near. Christ said that the time had come. Both John and Christ admonished those who they were addressing to repent in relation to the Kingdom being near. If the Kingdom was only to be something to appear thousands of years into the future, the admonition to repent because the Kingdom was imminent would have made no sense at all. They were being asked to repent in relation to the Kingdom being near.

In **Matthew 10:5-7**, Christ instructs His disciples to go to the lost sheep of Israel and preach this message: **“The Kingdom of heaven is near.”** If you would have been living 2000 years ago as one of the lost sheep of Israel, and someone comes to your town and begins telling you about the kingdom of heaven being at hand, you would not have concluded that this Kingdom was not really at hand but way off in the future.

It’s interesting to note at this point that the Jews of Christ’s time were looking for a physical kingdom to appear in their time and deliver them from their Roman oppressors. They were familiar with the writings of Daniel and other of the prophets and according to their calculations the Kingdom of God was right around the corner. Their understanding of the Kingdom was not, however, what Christ was bringing to the table. Just like many Christians today, the Jews were looking for a physical Kingdom to bring order, peace and justice to an oppressed world. Yet when Christ appeared before Pilate, what did He say?

**John 18:36:36:** Jesus said, **"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."**

The Greek for world is kosmos. Kosmos has broad application in the Greek language with the common thread being that the word refers to the physical realm. Christ was essentially saying that His Kingdom was not of this physical realm. Was Christ saying that His Kingdom does not apply to the physical realm? Is Christ here possibly speaking of the Kingdom as a spiritual dynamic?

We must realize that the good news of the Kingdom was a focal point of Christ’s message. Christ gave more than a dozen parables explaining the nature of the Kingdom. Apostle Paul was constantly teaching about the Kingdom. A variety of writings from the first century that did not become Biblical scripture, also attest to this fact. It is therefore imperative that we understand what the Kingdom is. If the Kingdom is not part of the physical realm, what realm is it part of. Was Christ looking at the Kingdom as being part of a future physical realm when he made His statement to Pilate? Was Christ saying that the Kingdom is non physical?

Let’s look at a profound statement made by Christ in answer to a question presented to him about the Kingdom.

**Luke 17:20-21:** **Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."**

The Greek word translated “careful observation” appears only this once in the NT. The Greek lexicons define it as something that can be watched or observed with the eyes in a visible manner.

The Greek translated “within you” is felt by some to be better translated “among you.” Among you is not the common meaning as shown in various Greek lexicons. Every translation I looked at has “within you.” This word is used only one other time in the NT and that is in Matthew. 23:26 where Christ told the Pharisees to, “First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will be clean.” The Greek word translated “inside” is the same word translated “within” in the above quote.

It is sometimes explained that Christ was referring to Himself as the king of the Kingdom being present with them and therefore among them. But Christ was obviously visible to the Pharisees and he is here answering their question as to when the Kingdom will appear by saying it does not come

visibly. What does Christ mean by this statement? Is Christ again indicating that the Kingdom is a spiritual phenomenon? Let's take a look at how Christ defines the Kingdom.

Matthew 21: 28- 32: "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' "I will not, he answered, but later he changed his mind and went." Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Entering the Kingdom is associated with practicing the way of righteousness. The tax collectors and prostitutes are seen as repenting and pursuing righteousness and in so doing, they are entering the Kingdom. The religious leaders are seen as not repenting and therefore failing to enter the Kingdom.

Christ views first century repentant sinners as entering the Kingdom then and there. The phrase "are entering" is in the present active indicative tense in the Greek language. This signifies that it is something happening at the time. The time spoken of was two thousand years ago. People were entering the Kingdom two thousand years ago by repenting and turning to righteousness. What did John the Baptist and Christ preach? "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand."

Scripture identifies the Kingdom as the way of righteousness.

Romans 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"

Matthew 6:33: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

We see the way of righteousness and entering the Kingdom as synonymous. Being in the Kingdom is all about how we behave. It is all about our conduct, our attitude, our way of living. It is all about being born again.

John 3:1-10: Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

In some Christian fellowships this passage is used to support the theological position that being born of the spirit is talking about becoming a spirit being in order to enter the Kingdom of God. The

term spirit being, however, is not mentioned or discussed in this passage. What is discussed is being born of the spirit and it is discussed in reference to the experience being like the wind. Now the wind is invisible, isn't it? Being born of the spirit is an invisible experience. You don't see God's spirit in you from the standpoint that you can see it, touch it or in some way observe it. And others don't see God's spirit in you in that respect either but if God's spirit is in you, others will see the effects of that spirit in your behavior, no different than people see the effects of wind even though the wind itself is invisible. God's spirit is not physical. It is spirit and therefore physically invisible. That's why Christ compared it to the invisible wind.

So what about the Kingdom? Is it a physical or a spiritual entity? Do we enter it physically or do we enter it spiritually. Christ told the Pharisees that the Kingdom does not come visibly. You can't physically see it. Christ told Nicodemus that you must be born of the spirit to enter the Kingdom. Christ compared being born of the spirit to the non visible wind. Paul, in writing to the Corinthian church, said in I Corinthians 15 that flesh and blood can't enter the Kingdom. Yet this same Paul told the Colossians that they were in the Kingdom.

**Colossians 1:13-14: For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

If flesh and blood cannot enter the Kingdom, how could these flesh and blood Colossians be brought into the Kingdom? The answer to that question involves our understanding of the relationship between being born again and entering the Kingdom of God. Christ made it very plain to Nicodemus that in order to enter the Kingdom, you must be born again and that being born again is a non physical, spiritual experience. It's an experience that involves the imperishable.

**1 Peter 1:23: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."**

What is that imperishable seed that we are born of?

**John 3:9: No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.**

Having God's seed within us relates to having God's spirit residing in us. Having God's spirit is what facilitates our spiritual rebirth. Being born of God is associated with being born of the spirit, as Christ pointed out to Nicodemus. Being born of the spirit, which is the same as being born of God, is what enables us to refrain from sin. Refraining from sin leads to righteous behavior. Righteous behavior is what the Kingdom of God is all about. So you can see how being born again, the way of righteousness and being in the Kingdom are closely tied together.

We find Christ making a very interesting observation in Matthew 11:11-15:

**Matthew 11:11-15: "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears let him hear.**

The Kingdom of God began to be established in the first century and continues to advance to this very day. In Matthew 13:33, Christ likened the Kingdom to yeast that gradually works its way through dough until the entire dough is permeated.

Matthew 23:13: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut (present active imperative) the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying (present middle participle) to.”

How could the religious leaders shut the kingdom in men's faces and not enter themselves? Because of their unrighteous behavior. Their unwillingness to except the message Christ was preaching.

Mark 12:28-34: “One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one" answered Jesus, "is this: `Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: `Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God”

Again we see the Kingdom of God associated with the way of righteousness as defined by the law of love. Christ told the teacher he was close to the Kingdom when he expressed the understanding that to love God and man is what life is all about.

Like that of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, the ministry of Paul was focused on the Kingdom. When Paul was taken as a prisoner to Rome, he was allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him. While in Rome he initially addressed the Jewish leadership. What did he declare to them?

Acts 28:23: They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.

The scriptures that follow indicate that many of the Jews rejected Paul's teaching about the Kingdom. The Jews had a paradigm about the Kingdom that they just could not let go. First century Judaism saw the promised Messiah as a conquering military leader who would restore the Davidic Kingdom to Israel and wipe out the Romans. They viewed the Kingdom as replacing Roman rule with their rule.

The Messiah that Paul was preaching was a crucified savior who taught a Kingdom that involved loving your enemies and doing good to them that hate you. A spiritual Kingdom versus a physical Kingdom. Christ did not fit the paradigm of the Messiah the Jews were expecting.

Additional evidence for this is found in Acts 19:8. Here we find Paul in Ephesus and while there he “entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.” Again we find that teaching about the Kingdom of God was the focal point of Paul's ministry. What was the response? Verse nine: “But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.”

Here again we see a resistance to Paul's preaching about the Kingdom of God. Why this reaction

to what Paul was preaching? What was Paul teaching about the Kingdom of God that brought such a negative response? Paul was preaching the Kingdom of God as a way of life. He was teaching the Kingdom as an ethical system, something that was being referred to in the first century as “the Way.” “The Way” involved repentance and forgiveness through the crucified and resurrected Christ and the pursuit of righteous living.

As explained above, the Jews expected the Messiah to be a conquering military leader that would oust the Romans and reestablish the glories of the Davidic Kingdom. It is obvious from the reaction Paul received that he was not preaching this kind of Messiah or this kind of Kingdom. This is why his message was largely rejected by the Jewish community of the first century.

In Acts 20, we see Paul saying his goodbyes to the Ephesian Church elders. In verse 21 he tells them: “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. In verse 25 he says: “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.” Here again we see a synergism between repentance and faith in Christ and the preaching of the Kingdom.

Paul clearly shows that repentance and faith in Christ is what the Kingdom is all about. Repentance is all about a changed way of behaving before God and man. Faith in Christ is all about having our sins forgiven when we fall short of righteous behavior. Paul made it very clear the Kingdom of God relates to our conduct.

**I Corinthians 6:9-11: Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**

**Galatians 5:19-23: The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.**

Remember what Paul said to the Roman church: **Romans 14:17: “For the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** Paul is saying the same thing to the Corinthian and Galatian Church. The Kingdom of God is living a spirit filled way of life. It involves righteous living. It involves having been born of the spirit and therefore having the power to live pleasingly before God. It involves having our sins forgiven and being reconciled to God. Therefore the Kingdom is a present reality for the born again Christian.

I know there are statements made by Christ and the apostles in the first century that look forward in time to the establishment of the Kingdom. The question that must be asked and scripturally answered is this: How far forward in time was this to be. This question is answered in the series “When Does Christ Return?”

It should be evident, however, from the scriptures we have reviewed in this essay, that the Kingdom is a present reality for those who accept its message. This message includes salvation through the sacrifice of Christ and the pursuit of righteous living. The Kingdom life involves a total commitment and response to the will of God involving the two great commandments, love toward God and love toward man.