

Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON
TWO

THE KINGDOM OF GOD



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Lesson Two

The Kingdom of God

INTRODUCTION

Anytime you read a complicated story it's easy to become lost in its many details. But one way to avoid this problem is to identify the more important parts of the story and then refer to them over and over. By keeping the main elements in mind, we can see how the details fit together. In many ways, the same kind of thing is true when it comes to understanding the theology of the New Testament. When we start digging into these Scriptures, we discover so many details that it's easy to lose our bearings. So, we need to be careful to identify the main ideas in the New Testament and refer to them over and over.

This is the second lesson in our series, *Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament*, and we've entitled it "The Kingdom of God." In this lesson, we'll point out one of the most prominent teachings of the New Testament: the kingdom of God.

As we'll see, the theme of the kingdom of God is so important in the New Testament that, properly understood, New Testament theology *is* kingdom theology. In other words, everything New Testament authors wrote was, to some extent, devoted to explaining and furthering the kingdom of God.

We'll explore the prominence of the kingdom of God in New Testament theology from two perspectives. First, we'll look at what New Testament authors called the good news, or gospel, of the kingdom. And second, we'll point out how the coming of the kingdom influenced everything they wrote. These two topics will help us see that the doctrine of the kingdom of God upholds every dimension of the New Testament. Let's begin with the good news of the kingdom.

GOOD NEWS

Everyone familiar with the New Testament knows that its theology is very complex. But if there's one New Testament teaching that everyone should try to understand and apply to life, it would have to be the gospel. In fact, many of us would agree that if we don't understand the good news of Christ, then our ability to understand any facet of New Testament theology is severely limited. But this raises a serious question. Why is the gospel, or "good news," so crucial in New Testament theology? Why is it obviously more than just one of many doctrines found in the New Testament? As we're about to see, the gospel is so important in New Testament theology because of its connection with the broader teaching on the kingdom of God. And this doctrine of good news about the kingdom of God shapes every dimension of New Testament theology.

We'll look at the good news of the kingdom in three steps. First, we'll consider the meaning of the good news. Second, we'll explore the basic concept of the kingdom of God. And third, we'll trace the developing significance of this theme in biblical history. Let's begin with the meaning of the good news of God's kingdom.

MEANING

The gospel of the kingdom is a way of speaking about the good news declared for us of the King, the Lord. In particular, as we think about the New Testament declarations about Jesus, this is the announcement that "the king has come." But not only "the king has come," but that the lordship, the kingship of Jesus has been declared, declared on the basis that his death and his resurrection have confirmed his kingship. So, there's a sense in which the good news is a declaration of something that *has happened* already. It has implications for how we live. But the good news is that Jesus has come; he has defeated death rather mysteriously by dying... There is a sense, therefore, God declares to us this good news as already having occurred. There are, however, promises still to be fulfilled in that good news will have implications for eternity.

— Dr. Richard Lints

In Luke 4:43, Jesus summarized the purpose of his ministry in this way:

I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

Although the words “good news” only appear once in Luke 4:43, the concept of the good news is actually indicated twice in this verse. The phrase “good news” comes from the Greek noun *euangelion*, a term that occurs some 76 times in the New Testament. The etymology of *euangelion* indicates that it means something like a “good announcement,” or a “good message.”

But notice that in this verse Jesus also said he “must proclaim the good news.” The Greek verb translated, “proclaim” is *euangelizo*. This term comes from the same family of Greek terms as *euangelion*, and means “to proclaim or to announce good news.” It appears some 54 times in the New Testament. The frequency of these terms points to how important this concept was for New Testament authors.

Many Evangelicals today think of the good news, or gospel, as an explanation of the steps an individual must take to find salvation in Christ. But this wasn't the idea that Jesus had in mind. As much as we should be ready to share how to become followers of Christ, the good news in the Scriptures is about something much more significant. As we'll see, rather than referring to the salvation of any individual or group of people, the *gospel* is the good news of victory for the kingdom of God.

To make sense of this, we need to realize that the authors of the New Testament drew the expression, “proclaim the good news” from the Septuagint, the Greek

translation of the Old Testament. The Septuagint uses the same verb we mentioned earlier, *euangelizo*, some 20 times. This word translated the Hebrew verb *basar*, meaning “to bring or announce *good news*.” But, passages like 1 Samuel 31:9 and 2 Samuel 18:19 indicate that when these words were used in reference to kings and kingdoms, they signified the good news of *victory in battle*. This observation is important because the “good news” in the New Testament is so often associated with victory for God’s kingdom. In effect, in Luke 4:43, when Jesus said:

I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

We may actually translate this statement along these lines:

I must proclaim the good news of [victory for] the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

When the New Testament speaks of the good news of victory for God’s kingdom, it refers to a very special kind of victory, as we’ll see later in this lesson. So, even though it may seem odd at first, we should acknowledge that the basic concept of the good news or gospel in the New Testament is the good news of “[victory for]” the kingdom of God.

Having seen that the good news of the kingdom means the good news of victory for the kingdom of God, we’re now ready to explore the basic concept of the kingdom of God itself.

KINGDOM OF GOD

The kingdom of God is specifically associated with the gospel at least seven times in the New Testament. We see the expression “the good news of the kingdom,” with only slight variations, in Matthew 4:23; 9:35; and 24:14; in Luke 4:43; 8:1; and 16:16; and in Acts 8:12. This frequency points to the importance of connecting the gospel — or the message of victory — with God’s kingdom. But to understand this, we must first understand what Jesus and his followers meant when they spoke of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is God’s rule over God’s people in God’s place. We see that right at the start of the Bible in Genesis 1 and 2 where God’s people, Adam and Eve, are in a relationship with God, God is the ruler, and they are in God’s place in the Garden of Eden. Then, through sin, that’s messed up, but God reconstitutes his kingdom, first through Abraham and then Abraham’s descendants, and then finally through Moses after the exodus with the nation of Israel. This is God’s rule over God’s people Israel and ultimately in God’s *place*, the land of Canaan. But then we see that trajectory fulfilled even more fully with the coming of Christ, and we see that God rules through Christ as his king, his appointed king. And God’s people consist of Jews and Gentiles, people from all nations and all tribes and languages, but God’s place is the New Jerusalem, our heavenly home,

rather than a geographical location... So, in the New Testament we see that the kingdom of God exists now through the reign of Christ over his people from every tribe, nation and language, scattered throughout the world and not located in one particular place, geographical place, but located in heaven, our spiritual home. But then, the New Testament gives us a glimpse, too, of what the kingdom of God will be like when Jesus returns, and while that kingdom now is somewhat hidden in this world, it will be seen clearly when Christ returns; every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and God will reign perfectly through his king, Christ, over his people who know him and call him Father in a heavenly New Jerusalem.

— Dr. Constantine R. Campbell

Scripture refers to the kingdom of God in two primary ways. On the one side, it often speaks of God's kingdom in terms of God's unwavering sovereignty or his unchanging rule over all of creation. It also refers to his unfolding kingdom and the way God has revealed his kingship throughout human history. Let's look first at his unwavering sovereignty.

Unwavering Sovereignty

Passages like 1 Chronicles 29:11 and 1 Timothy 6:15 speak of the entire creation as God's kingdom because God always has ruled and always will rule over all that he has made. We need to keep in mind that the Scriptures speak of God's sovereignty as taking place on two levels: both in heaven and on earth.

In regard to heaven, Scripture speaks of God's kingship in places like 1 Kings 8:27. In this verse, Solomon made it clear that "the heavens, even the highest heaven," is a created place that "cannot contain [God]." But God still condescends and reveals himself before his creatures there.

Passages like Isaiah 6:1; 2 Chronicles 18:18; Job 1:6; Psalm 82:1; and Daniel 7:9-10; as well as New Testament passages like Luke 22:30; and Revelation 4-6 indicate that heaven is God's palace above the visible world where all kinds of activities take place. As God is enthroned in heaven, he receives reports, hears prayers, deliberates, makes plans, and issues royal decrees. He directs spiritual creatures to do his bidding on earth. On occasion, he even gives specially chosen human beings access to his palace through visions, and commissions them to his service. In his heavenly court he declares guilt and innocence, and sentences spiritual creatures, individual human beings, and nations according to his justice and mercy. But God's heavenly actions don't just direct his kingdom in heaven. He is also sovereign in the lower realms of his creation — on the earth.

Although the Scriptures speak of the kingdom of God as God's unwavering sovereignty in both heaven and earth, when Jesus and New Testament authors referred to the kingdom of God on earth, they had in mind what we've called God's unfolding

kingdom. And it's in this earthly realm that we can see how God reveals his kingdom throughout human history.

Unfolding Kingdom

Now, as we've just said, God has always been in full control of his creation and always will be. But the unfolding kingdom of God refers to a particular way that God reveals, displays, or demonstrates his sovereignty over creation throughout history. So, while Scripture confirms how God revealed his kingship in heaven, biblical authors give most of their attention to explaining how God unfolded his kingship on earth.

In the beginning, God visibly displayed his kingship in the Garden of Eden. He put the first human beings in that sacred garden and commissioned them to extend his visible kingdom throughout the world. They were to fill and subdue the earth as royal and priestly images of God. But Satan led Adam and Eve into a major setback for the kingdom. In response, God cursed his creation and made humanity's task more difficult. He divided humanity into two rival factions: those who served God and those who continued to join Satan's rebellion against God.

This rivalry took many forms throughout biblical history and led to many challenges for God's kingdom. But the Scriptures indicate time and again that in the end God will have victory over all who have opposed him. His image will succeed in filling and having dominion over the earth, and the wonders of God's kingdom will be revealed everywhere. And at that time, God's victory over all rebellion will be so great that every creature will acknowledge him as the King of creation. As the apostle Paul described in Philippians 2:10-11:

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

This glorious vision of the goal of history is the victory that Jesus and his followers announced as, "the good news of the kingdom of God."

Now that we've sketched the basic concept of the good news of the kingdom by looking at both the good news and the kingdom of God, we should turn to the developing significance of this proclamation of victory for God's kingdom.

DEVELOPING SIGNIFICANCE

The good news of victory for the kingdom is so thoroughly woven into the fabric of New Testament theology that it appears explicitly or implicitly everywhere in the New Testament. By the time the New Testament was written, the hope of victory for God's kingdom had developed so much significance that it permeated every dimension of New Testament theology.

There are many ways we could trace the developing significance of the kingdom of God in New Testament theology, but for our purposes we'll look at just two aspects. First we'll consider Israel's failures leading up to the days of the New Testament. And second, we'll investigate Israel's hopes for the kingdom prior to Christ's arrival. Let's think first about Israel's failures.

Israel's Failures

After sin brought creation and the human race under a curse, God chose Abraham and his descendants to fulfill the kingdom commission he had first given to Adam and Eve. God promised to multiply the family of Abraham. And he gave Abraham's descendants the Promised Land as the starting point for spreading God's blessings throughout the world. In the days of Moses and Joshua, God furthered the Israelites' privileges and responsibilities by giving them victory over the Canaanites and over the satanic spirits the Canaanites served. Later on, David, Solomon and a few other kings of Israel and Judah had significant successes in extending God's kingdom to other nations. In fact, at the height of Solomon's reign, Israel was one of the world's most glorious empires.

Despite these privileges, every generation of Abraham's descendants failed God in one way or another. But God showed patience and enabled them to move forward despite their sins. Sadly, once God's people became their own kingdom, with a royal dynasty and a temple in the capital city, Israel's failures became so flagrant that God turned in judgment against them. He called for the evil empires of Assyria and Babylon to conquer Israel in war. These severe defeats finally removed the house of David, decimated the temple, destroyed Jerusalem and sent most Israelites into exile. The Promised Land was left in ruins. And at the end of the Old Testament, the accomplishments of God's kingdom seemed to have all but disappeared. By the time of the New Testament, God's kingdom in Israel had suffered under the tyranny of Gentile nations and the false satanic gods they served for more than 500 years.

Unfortunately, modern Christians are so far removed from these experiences that most of us are unaware of how much the defeat of God's kingdom in the Old Testament impacted on the theology of the New Testament. But, Israel's subjection to Gentile nations weighed heavily on the minds of Jews in the first century, including Jesus' followers. First century Jews wondered, was the exile the end of God's visible kingdom? Was there any hopeful good news for the kingdom of God? This climate led New Testament authors to insist that the kingdom of God had not ended. All was not lost. Jesus of Nazareth had proclaimed the good news that the exile would end. And God's victorious kingdom would be established throughout the world in Christ, in spite of Israel's failures.

Now that we've seen the developing significance of the kingdom through Israel's failures, we're ready to look at Israel's hopes for God's kingdom after the exile.

Israel's Hopes

In the Old Testament, God spoke through his prophets to warn Israel of their impending defeat and exile because of their unfaithfulness. But, in his mercy, he also inspired the prophets to call those in exile to repent in hopes of a great victory. These prophecies were complex, but in general terms, Israel hoped for the time when God would defeat his enemies and deliver his people into the blessings of his glorious, worldwide kingdom.

We can see these hopes many places in Old Testament prophecy, but for the sake of time, we'll consider just two verses from a well-known prophecy in Isaiah 52. First, in Isaiah 52:7 we read:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

This verse is important for us because it explicitly mentions the good news of victory for God's kingdom. It also closely parallels Isaiah 40:9 where Isaiah made a similar statement. The larger contexts of these two passages indicate that the "good news" refers to the unprecedented victory of God's kingdom following the end of Israel's exile. These hopeful predictions permeated the theological reflections of the vast majority of Jews in the first century. And not surprisingly, they also permeate the theology of the New Testament.

The Old Testament narrative as a whole is dominated by the theme of exile. It goes back to the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, and that's just recapitulated in Israel's own history. And so, this sort of depressing turn of events, which looms so large in the Old Testament narrative, naturally calls forth a desire for some hope beyond exile. So, we have plenty of near-term prophecies, particularly in Isaiah, that God will restore his people, but when you tie that back into the creation narrative, you realize that mere restoration to land is never going to be enough to undo the primal damage done in the beginning, or shortly after the beginning... And so, it's quite natural to find in the Old Testament prophets a yearning for near-term deliverance for Israel perhaps at the hand of a particularly gifted king, but also ultimate deliverance from some ultimate kingly representative of God's people.

— Dr. Sean McDonough

A closer look at Isaiah 52:7 highlights four features related to Israel's hopes for the victory of God's kingdom.

First, Isaiah said that messengers would “bring good news” and “bring good tidings” to Zion. Both of these phrases translate the Hebrew verb *basar*, which the Septuagint translates with *euangelizo*. As we saw earlier, this same terminology is used in the New Testament for the good news of victory for God’s kingdom in Christ.

Second, we see Isaiah 52:7 quoted in Romans 10:15. Here, Paul indicated that Christian preaching fulfilled Isaiah’s prediction of messengers announcing good news at the end of Israel’s exile.

Third, Isaiah predicted that the good news would be a proclamation of “peace” and “salvation.” In Ephesians 6:15, Paul referred to the Christian “gospel of peace” and in Ephesians 1:13 he mentioned “the gospel of your salvation.”

And fourth, the last line of this verse summarizes the good news when it declares, “Your God reigns!” This message forms the basis of the gospel that Jesus and the New Testament authors repeatedly referred to as “the good news of the kingdom” — or reign — “of God.”

Now that we’ve seen how Isaiah prophesied about the coming of Israel’s hopes in Isaiah 52:7, let’s look at verse 10 of the same chapter. Here, Isaiah predicted the two sides of victory that Israel longed to see. First, he anticipated the defeat of God’s enemies.

The defeat of God’s enemies appears explicitly in the first half of Isaiah 52:10 where Isaiah said:

The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations (Isaiah 52:10).

Here we see that God will “lay bare his holy arm,” meaning his arm of strength in war to defeat his enemies.

Of course, everyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that God defeated enemies many times. So, what made this prediction about God’s victory so special? In this verse, Isaiah predicted that God would defeat his enemies “in the sight of all the nations.” In other words, Isaiah predicted that after Israel’s exile, God will *completely* defeat all of his enemies *everywhere*. He will disempower them, remove them from the earth, and send them to eternal judgment.

Second, the last half of Isaiah 52:10 tells us that God’s victory will also result in the deliverance of God’s people into the blessings of his kingdom. Listen to this part of Isaiah 52:10:

All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:10).

We know that God delivered his people repeatedly in the Old Testament. But in the deliverance that Isaiah predicted here, “*all the ends of the earth*” will see it. Just as the defeat of God’s enemies will be universal, his deliverance will be worldwide and final. In the end, God will deliver his people into his kingdom of joy, love, righteousness, peace, prosperity, and endless delight in his glorious presence.

We'll look more closely at these two aspects of God's victory later in our lesson, but as these verses illustrate, the prophecies of the coming kingdom are seen throughout the Old Testament.

Unfortunately, for over 2,000 years, traditional Christian theology has obscured the prominence of the kingdom in the New Testament. At different times in the history of the church, Christians have rightly emphasized a variety of theological outlooks in response to various issues. But we must always remind ourselves that when the New Testament was written, the defeat of God's kingdom weighed heavily on Jesus' followers. Nothing was more important to them than their belief that God's kingdom would rise to unprecedented victory in Jesus. And for this reason, New Testament theology is cast within the framework of the good news of the kingdom of God.

So far in this lesson on the kingdom of God, we've introduced the prominent theme of the good news of the kingdom in New Testament theology. Now, we should turn to our second main topic: how the coming of the kingdom shaped the theology of the New Testament.

COMING

We've all had times when we believed that certain things were about to happen. But when the time came, what actually occurred was very different from what we'd imagined. In many ways this was true for the authors of the New Testament. The vast majority of Jews living in the first century had firm expectations of how the victory of God's kingdom was going to come. But the early followers of Jesus gradually learned that it was not coming as they had imagined. So, in a variety of ways, New Testament theology was devoted to explaining how the victory of the kingdom was actually going to arrive.

To understand how the coming of the kingdom influenced New Testament theology, we'll touch first on the expectations for the arrival of God's kingdom. Then we'll look at New Testament outlooks on what we'll call the threefold victory of the kingdom. Let's consider first the expectations for the coming kingdom.

EXPECTATIONS

In the first century A.D., all Jews with even a small measure of commitment to their ancestors' faith longed for the victorious kingdom of God to come. They all hoped that God would defeat their enemies and deliver his people into the blessings of his kingdom. This was true for Jesus' followers as well. But there were some striking differences as to how and when they expected God's victorious kingdom to come.

On the one side, when rabbis and other leaders in Israel taught about the coming of the final victory of God's kingdom, they referred to familiar Old Testament terminology like "the last days" and "the day of the Lord." But they also spoke of two great ages of history. Rabbis often referred to the present age of sin, suffering and death

as “this age” — *olam hazeh* in Hebrew — and of the future age of righteousness, love, joy, and peace that would follow the exile as “the age to come” — *olam haba’* in Hebrew.

They taught that “this age” reached its low point in the curse of Israel’s exile from the Promised Land. Of course, God was sovereign over this age, and from time to time he revealed, or demonstrated, his kingship in remarkable ways. But by the first century A.D., God’s people had been oppressed and kept from the blessings of God’s kingdom for hundreds of years. The widespread expectation was that in “the age to come,” the enemies of God would be completely defeated and eliminated from the earth. And the people of God would be delivered forever into the immeasurable blessings of God’s worldwide kingdom.

In biblical literature and also in discussion about the Bible, we sometimes find or encounter the terms “this age” and “the age to come.” What is meant by these terms is the following: “This age” is the age, the period, the era, in which human beings live, the age since the Fall. It is life in a fallen world. “The age to come,” as expected by the Old Testament prophets, was a time where God would reconstitute paradise in some sense; there would be a new heavens and a new earth, and the human heart of stone would be removed, and we all would perfectly follow and do the will of God. There would be no violence among human beings; there would be no violence even in the animal kingdom.

— Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel

In the first century, different Jewish sects had different outlooks on what had to happen before history would transition from "this age" to "the age to come." But most parties agreed that the transition from this age of defeat to the age of God’s victorious kingdom would occur through a catastrophic war. They believed the Messiah, the heir of David’s throne, would lead the angels of heaven and God’s faithful people to victory over God’s human and spiritual enemies.

The belief that God would defeat not only human enemies, but also spiritual enemies was supported throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. For instance, in Exodus 12:12 God spoke of defeating not only the Egyptians, but the gods of the Egyptians as well. In 1 Samuel 5:1-12 God made war with the Philistines, and also defeated their false god, Dagon. This is why Isaiah 21:9 coupled the defeat of Babylon with the destruction of Babylon’s gods.

Old Testament passages like Haggai 2:6-9; Zechariah 9–12 and Ezekiel 38–39 were interpreted in Jewish apocalyptic literature as prophecies about the great cosmic war in which the Messiah would lead the armies of God in victory over the nations and the evil spirits who ruled over them. In this way, the Messiah would defeat all of God’s enemies and would deliver all of God’s people into his glorious, worldwide kingdom.

On the other side, as widespread as these Jewish outlooks were, Jesus’ followers began to anticipate the arrival of victory for God’s kingdom differently. Like the majority of their contemporaries, New Testament authors believed that history divided into two

great ages. And they agreed that the Messiah would defeat God's human and spiritual enemies and deliver God's redeemed people from "this age" into the blessings of "the age to come." But Jesus' followers came to believe that the transition from this age to the age to come would happen in ways that were contrary to what most Jews in their day believed.

In the first place, unlike most Jews, New Testament authors believed that *Jesus* was the promised Messiah, the chosen son of David, who would bring the final worldwide victory for God's kingdom. And this commitment to Jesus as the Messiah deeply shaped everything they wrote in the New Testament.

We can see this devotion to Jesus' messianic kingship in the royal titles that the New Testament gives him. For example, the New Testament refers to Jesus with the royal title "Christ" some 529 times. The Greek word *Christos* translates the Old Testament Hebrew term *Meshiach* from which we derive our term Messiah. Originally, these terms meant simply, "anointed one." In Old Testament times, prophets, priests and kings were specially anointed offices in Israel. But by the time of the New Testament, "the Anointed One," or "the Messiah," was almost synonymous with the great King of David's house that would bring about the transition to the age to come.

A second royal title attributed to Jesus in the New Testament is "Son of God." This expression, or some variation of it like "the Son" or "the Son of the Most High," appears some 118 times in the New Testament. This terminology indicated that Jesus was the rightful King of Israel. Listen to John 1:49 where Nathanael said to Jesus:

You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel (John 1:49).

And as Peter put it in Matthew 16:16 when he confessed his faith in Jesus:

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16).

This expression was similar to a third royal designation for Jesus: "son of David." We see this in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke at least 20 times in reference to Jesus as the rightful, God-ordained heir of David's throne.

For example, in Luke 1:32-33, the angel Gabriel said to Mary at the Annunciation:

[Jesus] will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end (Luke 1:32-33).

Here Gabriel spoke of Jesus with the royal title "Son of the Most High." He then explained that Jesus will sit on "the throne of his father David." Luke recorded that Jesus "will reign ... forever [and] his kingdom will never end." As the Son of the Most High, Jesus is the one who will bring about the final, never-ending victory of the kingdom of God.

All of these passages point to a crucial teaching in New Testament theology: Jesus is the Messiah who will bring the kingdom of God to the earth in all of its fullness.

In the second place, Jesus' early followers believed that he would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come in ways that they and others had not expected.

Listen to the way Jesus revealed this change of expectations for God's kingdom in Matthew 13:31-32:

He told [the crowd] ... "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32).

In this parable, Jesus taught that God's victorious kingdom would begin as something small, "like a mustard seed," grow for a period of time, and *then* reach its final culmination.

Modern theologians often call Jesus' outlook on the coming of God's messianic kingdom "inaugurated eschatology." This phrase refers to the idea that the work of the Messiah has already been manifested on earth, but the *final* victory is still to come. They also speak of it as the "already, but not yet." In other words, the victory of God's kingdom has come *already*, but *not yet* in its fullness. This outlook on the victory of God's coming kingdom offers countless insights into the theology of the New Testament.

One of the biggest questions related to the kingdom of God when Jesus announces the kingdom of God is, is it a present reality? Has it come in his words and deeds, or is it still a future entity? Well, scholars talk about the "inaugurated kingdom of God." The "inaugurated" means that it is both present and future. Jesus announces the kingdom. The kingdom is arriving through his words and deeds, especially through his death on the cross and his resurrection. So, the kingdom is inaugurated, but it's not yet consummated. When it's fully consummated, it will fully come to earth, we'll receive our glorified bodies, we'll enter into an eternal relationship with God. So, we live in the present day between the times, between the inauguration of the kingdom, its consummation. We still live in these bodies; we still live in this fallen world, yet the kingdom has come because Christ is reigning at the right hand of the Father. He's also reigning in our hearts. And so the kingdom has come, it's "already," but it is still future. It is "not yet" as well.

— Dr. Mark L. Strauss

On the whole, it helps to think of the New Testament outlook on the coming of God's kingdom as a threefold victory. First, in the inauguration, God initiated the victory of the kingdom through Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, and through the foundational ministries of his first century apostles and prophets. After this, in the continuation, Jesus advanced the victory of God's kingdom from his throne in heaven. And Jesus will continue to further the kingdom throughout the history of the church. And

finally, Jesus will bring the consummation of the kingdom when he returns in glory. This is the final victory of God's kingdom when all evil will be destroyed and God's glorious kingdom will extend everywhere in the world.

As New Testament authors devoted themselves to explaining different sorts of theological matters, they did so in large part in terms of these three stages of Jesus' messianic work.

As we've seen, the coming of the kingdom changed the expectations of Jesus' followers in the first century. Now, let's look at the vital place the threefold victory of God's kingdom held in New Testament theology.

THREEFOLD VICTORY

The fact that the victory of God's kingdom comes in the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of Jesus' messianic work raised all kinds of questions in the early church. What had Jesus already accomplished? What would he accomplish in church history? What would he do at his return? These kinds of questions were so important in the first century that they deeply shaped the theology of the New Testament. New Testament authors drew upon the fact that the defeat of God's enemies and the deliverance of God's people had begun in Christ's first advent. These events would continue throughout church history, and would finally reach completion in Christ's second victorious coming.

Time will only allow us to point to some of the ways this threefold victory shaped New Testament theology, but it will help to look in two directions. First, we'll note how the New Testament explains the defeat of God's enemies in the three stages of the kingdom. Then, we'll examine New Testament teachings on the deliverance of God's people in all three stages as well. Let's look first at the defeat of God's enemies.

Defeat

Unbelieving Jews held that the Messiah would defeat both human and spiritual enemies of God. New Testament authors believed this as well. But they also understood that Jesus would do this in ways that were appropriate for each stage of his kingdom.

New Testament theology emphasizes that Jesus' strategy was twofold in the inauguration of the kingdom. On one side, he inflicted the judgment of God on God's spiritual enemies. Throughout his ministry, Jesus disempowered evil spirits by casting them out of their positions of power. But on the other side, he extended the mercy of God to God's human enemies. To be sure, Christ's mercy toward people led to many blessings for them, but it also furthered the defeat of evil spirits by robbing them of their human servants.

In Matthew 12:28-29, Jesus himself explained this strategy when he said:

If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you... how can anyone enter a strong man's house and

carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house (Matthew 12:28-29).

Jesus came and bound up demons, or “tie[d] up the strong man,” in order to “rob his house.” In other words, Jesus drove demons out and freed those who were under the demons’ control.

We can also see this twofold strategy in places like John 12:31-32 where Jesus said:

Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:31-32).

Once again, in the inauguration of the kingdom, Jesus directly attacked evil spirits, or “the prince of this world,” Satan. He drove him out and disempowered him. But along with this aggression against Satan, Jesus offered salvation to humanity.

Sometimes people wonder, how can this view of *Christus Victor*, the victorious Christ, be consistent or related to the idea of Christ as the one who died for our sins, a substitutionary atonement? ... In John’s gospel, the third time Jesus speaks of the Son of Man being lifted up as the serpent was lifted in the wilderness — it’s in John 12 — he connects that lifting up specifically with the statement, “now will the ruler of this world be cast down.” So, Jesus takes the place of the cursed serpent, he goes to death to destroy death from within. So, his first act as *Christus Victor* is to destroy death from within by being lifted up on the cross.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The defeat of God’s spiritual enemies was so important to Christ’s inaugural work that in passages like Hebrews 2:14-15, New Testament authors wrote about Christ’s atoning death on the cross in terms of this same twofold strategy. They made it clear that, through his death, Jesus broke the power Satan had over human beings. And by making atonement for the sins of humanity, Jesus set people free who had been slaves to sin and death.

These ideas appear clearly in Colossians 2:15 where the apostle Paul wrote:

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

Demonic powers and authorities lost their positions of prominence when Jesus set his people free from the dominion of sin by dying on the cross.

In this light, it should be no surprise that in Ephesians 4:8, the resurrection and ascension of Christ is described as a plundering of Satan’s human servants:

When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people (Ephesians 4:8).

As this passage indicates, when men and women come to faith in Christ, it's as if Christ takes them as plunder from the kingdom of Satan.

This strategy for the defeat of God's spiritual opponents also appears in the inaugural work of Christ's apostles in the book of Acts. Following Jesus' example, the apostles repeatedly cast out demons as they preached the gospel in Gentile nations and dispossessed Satan of many human servants.

Not surprisingly, when we consider the continuation of Christ's kingdom throughout church history, we find that followers of Christ are to pursue the strategy that Jesus used in the inauguration. Rather than gaining victory over God's *human* enemies, we should focus our attention on the evil spirits who oppose the ways of God.

Although many modern Christians fail to realize it, New Testament kingdom theology frequently reminds us that the church of Jesus is not at war with people, but with Satan and other evil spirits. And it's our responsibility to contend with these spiritual enemies of God.

This is why, in passages like Ephesians 6:11-12, the New Testament interprets our difficulties and struggles as conflicts with evil spirits. Here we read:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:11-12).

Much of the time modern Christians think of the struggles of their lives as conflict with mere human beings. But here we see that the conflict facing the church is actually with "the devil," "rulers," "authorities," "the powers of this dark world" and "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." And by putting on the full armor of God we are able to disempower these spiritual beings that oppose the kingdom of God.

This passage is not unusual in its emphasis on spiritual warfare as a dimension of Christ's kingdom throughout Christian history. The constant conflict we experience with Satan and other evil spirits can also be found in a number of other passages like Ephesians 4:27; 1 Timothy 3:7; 2 Timothy 2:26; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8; 1 John 3:8; and Jude 9. But at the same time, as we read in 2 Corinthians 5:20, we must also extend the mercy of God to his human enemies.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Following Paul's example, as "Christ's ambassadors," representatives of God's kingdom, we continue to defeat God's *spiritual* enemies by seeking reconciliation between God and his *human* enemies.

New Testament theology also associates the defeat of God's enemies with the consummation of Christ's kingdom. It's important to note, however, that a dramatic change occurs in Jesus' strategy at the consummation. When Christ returns, he will no longer extend mercy to God's human enemies. Instead, Christ will lead in battle against God's spiritual *and* human enemies to bring about their utter defeat, their elimination from the earth, and their eternal judgment.

Listen to the way Revelation 19:13-15 describes the defeat of God's human enemies at the consummation:

His name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him ... Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations (Revelation 19:13-15).

In a similar way, Revelation 20:10 depicts Christ's glorious return as the time of final judgment against evil spirits and Satan:

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever (Revelation 20:10).

Of course, we've only briefly summarized these matters. But we can see from these examples that New Testament authors felt it was necessary to clarify this facet of the kingdom's victory time and again. They stressed the priority of aggression against evil spirits and emphasized kindness toward God's human enemies during both the inauguration and continuation of the kingdom. But they also pointed out that, in the end, when Christ returns, both human and spiritual enemies will come under the eternal judgment of God. These emphases confirm that the defeat of God's enemies is a crucial feature of New Testament kingdom theology.

The kingdom has started, it is here, but it is still wending its way, forging its way until the consummation. So, in what ways, then, the question asks, is Jesus already victorious over his enemies? Well, first of all, the most crucial victory is in the cross itself so that he defeats Satan... In that sense, the crucial battle has been fought and won. And that's why, for example, in Revelation 12, the saints respond to the accuser of the brethren, they overcome him by the blood of the Lamb. They overcome Satan — described metaphorically in Revelation 12 — they overcome him by the blood of the Lamb. And, so, that battle has already been won. But, like Hitler toward the end of World War II, when he could see that the war was over, he didn't quit. He was filled with fury because he knew his time was short. That's what is said of Satan. So, Satan is more virulent now, and every time the gospel advances, more people are converted, righteousness is established in individual lives, in the local church, in any sort of subculture, that is already an ongoing defeat of Satan and

of all those who love darkness. And the ultimate trajectory toward the ultimate victory is when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, and he will reign forever... The point is that the trajectory has been set in place so that, as Philippians 2 puts it, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, and the fundamental victory has been won. That's still got to be worked out in some respects. It's being worked out in the lives of many who do joyfully, by the power of the Spirit, bend the knee. But everyone will bend the knee on the last day.

— Dr. D. A. Carson

Now that we've seen how the threefold victory of God's kingdom includes the defeat of God's enemies, we should point out how the deliverance of God's people also plays a major role in New Testament theology.

Deliverance

If there's one facet of the inauguration of the kingdom that stands out to most readers, it's the deliverance of God's people into the blessings of the kingdom. For instance, one of the main reasons the Gospels focus so much attention on Jesus' miracles is because these miracles represented the blessings of the kingdom that Jesus brought to earth. Jesus' miracles were temporary foretastes of kingdom blessings that God's people would enjoy forever in the age to come. Beyond this, Jesus' attention to social justice for the poor, the needy, and those who suffered at the hands of others also represented important blessings of the kingdom.

The miracles and social justice of Jesus and his apostles and prophets were extraordinary blessings. But the greatest blessing in the inauguration of God's kingdom was the gift of eternal salvation that Christ gave to all who believed in him.

This is why in Colossians 1:13-14 Paul described receiving salvation in Christ as deliverance from one kingdom to another.

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 (Colossians 1:13-14).

The theme of deliverance into kingdom blessings also helps us understand why the New Testament emphasizes the Holy Spirit's work so much. By the end of the apostolic ministry, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Christ's followers was the one blessing of the world to come that was granted to every believer. As we read in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22:

He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

This passage closely parallels Ephesians 1:14. Both passages indicate that the Holy Spirit is Christ's "seal of ownership on us." He is "a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." In other words, the Holy Spirit, the power of God in our lives today, is the first installment of the grand inheritance that followers of Christ will receive when Christ returns in glory.

The New Testament also addresses the deliverance of God's people during the continuation of Christ's kingdom. In the ongoing life of the church, New Testament authors encouraged Christ's followers to remember how God had delivered them *already* into the blessings of his kingdom. New Testament theology emphasizes that, not only has God saved us from judgment for our sins, but God also continues to grant the gift of the Holy Spirit to his church. For example, listen to 1 Corinthians 4:20:

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power (1 Corinthians 4:20).

Here, as in many other places, the "power" Paul had in mind was the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God is the wondrous reality of God's blessings for his people that we experience day after day. He sanctifies us, produces his fruit in our lives, fills us with joy, and strengthens us with his power against our enemies. Despite the fact that many branches of Christ's church today de-emphasize the Holy Spirit's role in believers' lives, he is our greatest blessing during the continuation of Christ's kingdom.

New Testament theology also encourages followers of Christ who live during the continuation of his kingdom, to keep their hopes fixed on even greater blessings in the kingdom to come.

Hebrews 12:28 calls for followers of Christ to remain faithful in light of the blessings of the kingdom still ahead:

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe (Hebrews 12:28).

And in James 2:5 we read:

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? (James 2:5).

James called on the church to stop showing favoritism to the rich because it is not the wealthy who receive the kingdom. Rather, those who are "rich in faith" and "those who love him" will "inherit the kingdom he promised."

Jesus delivered his people into kingdom blessings when he inaugurated the kingdom. And his kingdom blessings have continued in the life of the church throughout history. But Scripture teaches that the complete deliverance of God's people into the blessings of God's kingdom won't be accomplished until the final consummation of the

kingdom. In the consummation, God's people will fully experience all the promised blessings of the kingdom. As we read in Revelation 11:15:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 11:15).

When Christ returns, the kingdom of the world will be completely replaced with the victorious kingdom of God.

And listen to Revelation 5:9-10 where the heavenly creatures sing in praise of Christ:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth (Revelation 5:9-10).

In the consummation, God's people will be delivered to become "a kingdom [of] priests," and "they will reign on the earth."

When we think about Jesus coming again and winning his final victory, we don't want to think simply in terms of Jesus overwhelming his enemies by what the French would call *force majeure*, just raw exercise of power. In Revelation it talks about the sword coming out of Jesus' mouth, and that is surely the sword of the Word, the sword of justice, that final judgment is as much about exposure as anything else. And likewise for the saints, particularly in the New Testament context, vindication is one of the chief themes. They've gone on believing in Jesus and gone on turning the other cheek and loving your enemies and doing all these other things while the world says this is complete foolishness. So, at the judgment, all things are made clear, all things become transparent; the truth will out, and that will be good news for the saints and bad news for the wicked whose wickedness consists precisely in resisting Jesus and his message.

— Dr. Sean McDonough

As we can see, New Testament authors drew attention to the defeat of God's enemies and the deliverance of his people into kingdom blessings at every stage of Jesus' messianic work. While these elements may seem disconnected at first, they are joined together and emphasized in New Testament theology because they represent a crucial theme: the arrival of victory for the kingdom of God in Christ.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've looked at the importance of the kingdom of God in New Testament theology. Rather than being a minor or marginal teaching of the New Testament, God's kingdom shapes the very heart of what New Testament authors taught. We've explored how this was true with the good news of the kingdom. And we've also seen how New Testament theology focused on the coming of the kingdom in the inauguration, continuation and consummation of Christ's kingdom.

As we've seen, it's no exaggeration to say that New Testament faith is all about the kingdom of God. New Testament theology stresses the good news of victory for the kingdom of God and how this victory has come, is coming, and will come in the three stages of Christ's kingdom. These basic kingdom concepts represent some of the most important themes of the New Testament. Keeping them in mind will greatly enhance our understanding of New Testament theology. And we'll find new significance in the teachings of the New Testament. Without question, the theme of the kingdom of God in Christ undergirds every facet of New Testament theology.