

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN



WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?¹

We read the following in the beginning of John's third chapter:

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the **kingdom of God**. – **John 3:3**

Jesus repeats this in verse five but with a slight difference:

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the **kingdom of God**. – **John 3:5**

First, he cannot **see** (expectation) the kingdom of God if he is not born again. In addition, he cannot **enter** (realisation) the kingdom of God if he is not born of water and the Spirit. Jesus emphasises the concept that the kingdom of God is critically important for man's salvation.

We often read in the New Testament how Jesus' followers asked Him questions, and then received an answer they were not prepared for, or seemingly did not answer their question:

- In John Chapter Three, Nicodemus comes to Jesus to find out more about His earthly mission since, from the perspective of the Jewish leaders, Jesus did not seem like the Messiah, a king in the lineage of David, the One who would overthrow the Roman oppressors. They were expecting a king, a military ruler. Jesus seemed like neither. *He says you must be born again of water and the Spirit.*
- In Matthew Chapter 24, the disciples show Jesus the temple buildings. His response is that it will all come tumbling down. Then they ask Him about the signs of His coming, thinking that He was going to come back (soon) to re-establish the kingdom. The answer they received was the complete opposite of what they expected. *He says they should be careful not to be deceived.*
- In Acts Chapter One 6-8, they ask when He would restore the kingdom of Israel. *He says they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses to all nations.*

To them this is not how a king should act. A king proclaims his name through leadership and the conquest of nations, not through a rebirth, being careful not to be deceived, or by the word of mouth of common people. Jesus' answers led them nowhere, at least as far as their understanding and earthly requirements were concerned.

¹ Permission granted by the author of The Bible: Genesis & Geology: Kingdom of Heaven and Kingdom of God: The Doctrinal Differences, to quote from his original source as shown in the bibliography at the end of the document.

Any person who regularly reads their Bible will have read about the “kingdom of God”, as stated by the apostle John in the text quoted earlier. Most of us as believers today understand that this means to inherit eternal life through salvation in Jesus Christ. Our hope as believers in Jesus Christ’s redemptive work on the cross is that we will enter heaven, God’s domain, either after death or at the time of the rapture, the blessed hope spoken of in Titus 2:13. The kingdom of God for believers is not just this life, but a future eternal life in His presence.

However, in many other parts of the New Testament, other writers used the term “**kingdom of heaven**”. If we just read that we will enter God’s domain, heaven, then why does Jesus not refer to the “kingdom of God”? Are these two terms the same or are they different?

If one looks at many online commentaries, most state that both terms refer to the same thing – that God rules from heaven and if you refer to it as possessives, then the kingdom belongs to God and it belongs in heaven. It is not that simple. If indeed even Jesus liberally referred to both phrases interchangeably, then it is surely confusing. Indeed, we read the following in Matthew’s gospel:

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the **kingdom of heaven**. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the **kingdom of God**. – **Matthew 19:23-24**

This was in reaction to the question of the rich young man about what he should do to have eternal life. The quoted reference was not spoken to the young man, but to the disciples as the young man had already left the scene, disappointed at Jesus’ answer to his questions. Objective observation leads us to assume that the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God must be the same, as both are used in connection with the rich man’s request.

Of course, wealth is the stumbling block. If we can put aside the love for money, then life would be a lot easier. Jesus points out that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven and God. Why would this be? Well, it is simply that when you have money, then there is often little need to trust in the provision of governments or God. We find exactly this attitude in Revelation chapter three:

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; – **Revelation 3:17**

Here Jesus asks John to write to the church of the Laodiceans. They themselves said that they have no need for spiritual matters as they were rich, have goods and lack nothing. Jesus is merely repeating what they already said. This is exactly the condition we see today. It must be pointed out that only Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven”.

The beauty of Matthew 19:23-24 is that Jesus had both kingdoms in mind as reward for the rich man’s obedience (as a Jew) – to enter into a new earthly kingdom (**the kingdom of heaven**) in which He was the earthly ruler, as well as a spiritual kingdom where He was the Godly ruler (**the kingdom of God**). That this will indeed happen future is certain. Once Jesus returns to Earth to set up His earthly millennial reign, He will be the Messiah that Israel has longed for and will be their Saviour. He is also be the Saviour for all believers of all ages, whether they are part of Israel or not.

When we look closer though, using the other references, we realise that the terms are not used interchangeably. The history of the Bible emphasises one aspect that was important for the Jews – that Israel should be a kingdom and that kingdom will have Jerusalem as its capital (Johnson, 1997). Israel's struggles has continued for hundreds of years, with countless wars waged against them, captivity in foreign countries, and Jerusalem destroyed. Throughout its history, Jerusalem has been destroyed twice at least, attacked 52 times, taken over 23 times, and recaptured 44 times (Sawe, 2019).

By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the Jewish leaders were tired of yet another occupation by a foreign army, the Romans, and were ready to receive a military leader that would rid them of their oppressors and reinstate the kingdom by force. What they read in the prophetic scriptures, and what Jesus represented when He started his ministry, was not at all what they were looking for, hence their ultimate rejection of their Messiah. This was not to say that Jesus did not come to usher in a new dispensation for Israel. He did, but at the same time He wanted to rid them of something more: sin. His message firstly was salvation and thereafter correcting the oppression His people had to endure for so long. The Jews' reaction to His message of salvation of the soul first was in stark contrast to their zealous mentality of upholding the law above all else (Johnson, 1997).

Jesus' Jewish audience kept insisting on an earthly kingdom:

When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time **restore again the kingdom to Israel**? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. – **Acts 1:6-8**

Again, their desire for the restoration of the earthly kingdom is in contrast with His desire for them – that the Holy Spirit will allow them to be His witnesses all over the world. In His response He did not say that there would not be a literal earthly kingdom, but that it was not for them to know the details, but only for the Father. However, what was a clear fact is that they would be witnesses, not at some unknown time in the future, but very shortly, once the Holy Spirit had empowered them. This was going to be very soon, and today we are still equal receivers of the Holy Spirit's outpouring.

The correct understanding of the unique position of the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God is of critical importance for the teaching of sound doctrine. Today, we have a multitude of preachers who see the two as one simply because they could not bother to properly study Bible doctrine. Much of their interpretation is not based on what God says in His Word, but what they think of the Word of God.

The restoration of the kingdom of Israel is in fact the **kingdom of heaven** and it is made clear in this reference:

And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, **the kingdom of God is within you.** – **Luke 17:20-21**

If the kingdom of God is within you, it can hardly be representative of an outward, earthly kingdom. Your rebirth is proof that you belong to the **kingdom of God**, as Jesus told Nicodemus. This kingdom is not visible – indeed, we are required to be like salt. Salt is not seen once it has been added to food. It dissolves, but the effect remains. When used to preserve meat, the meat may be covered by the salt, but once the meat is ready to eat, the salt is wiped off. Again, the salt is not to be seen, but only its preserving effect is felt. This is how the believer should be. We are here to preserve those around us before the end comes and chaos erupts. As Jesus points out, the kingdom of God cannot be seen.

Later on He would have to defend himself again:

Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but **now** is my kingdom not from hence. – **John 18:36**

Here Jesus clearly states that his kingdom is not of this world, in other words at the time He said it, **no earthly kingdom was implied at that stage**, but this does not mean that it was not implied at some future date. He says that if His kingdom was of this world, then there would be servants who would fight to protect it – an earthly kingdom with king and troops that support him.

There is a lot of detail in the Bible and it is meant to be interpreted, not just skimmed over or avoided. In the verse above, there is hidden an absolute gem, a small detail, contained in one word: **now**. The text reads:

but **now** is my kingdom not from hence. – **John 18:36**

For Bible translators today, it is easy to simply remove a word, phrase, or even an entire verse when it does not fit their view of the Bible. In many translations, the word “now” has been removed. When the word “now” is left alone in its original position and meaning, then the text retains its meaning and reveals two kingdoms – one is the kingdom of God which the believer is part of, and the other is the intended future kingdom of heaven, or the literal kingdom that Jesus will be the king of, over Israel, for 1000 years. The word “now” implies that (at that time) the kingdom of heaven would not be established, in other words His reign over Israel as king. Instead, it belongs to the future.

To reinforce the concept, you do not need any servants to fight for the kingdom of God. As a believer, you already have Jesus as Saviour on your side. You are already more than a conqueror (Romans 8:37). On the other hand, a literal, earthly kingdom needs to be constantly defended. Jesus says in John 18:36 that if He was already the king of a literal kingdom, then his servants would protect Him against the Jews. Of course, Jesus already knows that His future **earthly** kingdom, called the **kingdom of heaven**, will not have to be defended as He will have ultimate authority over this kingdom as well as any other surrounding countries. If we read Revelation 19:11-21, the sudden command with which He takes over the armies supporting the antichrist, is striking:

11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.
12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.

13 And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

14 And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.

15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

17 And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God;

18 That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great.

19 And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

20 And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

21 And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh. –

Revelation 19:11-21

With such a violent destruction of the enemy, there will be little chance that anyone would dare stand up against the conqueror in future. When we read on, we see that first, Satan is bound for 1000 years. John's vision continues with the 1000-year reign of Christ as the Messiah and King, **for Israel**, that He was foreseen to be by the Old Testament prophets. The kingdom of God was established a long time ago. Now the **kingdom of heaven** is proclaimed, and Israel lives under the protection of her King.

Why did Jesus not simply take up His throne as ruler of Israel when He spent some 33 years on Earth? There are two reasons, the one supporting the other:

- It was already foretold Old Testament prophecy, notably in Daniel; and
- The mentality of the Jewish leaders and their inability to recognise the Messiah from their own scriptures.

Let us look at Daniel's vision and the angel's explanation:

25 Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.

26 And after threescore and two weeks shall **Messiah be cut off**, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. – **Daniel 9:25-26**

Time and space make it impossible to give a full exposé of the entire vision, but the main point is this: Messiah was cut off, killed by the Jews, when He was destined to rule over Israel. Of course, the crucifixion has a much deeper purpose, the salvation of mankind. The result though, was that Israel was put aside. Paul describes this very well:

What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded (According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day. – **Romans 11:7-8**

Luke pens the same words uttered by Paul:

For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. – **Acts 28:27**

Because of their unbelief, the promised Messiah came, and they did not recognise Him. They killed Him and to this day, they have been blinded and deafened. When Messiah returns after the tribulation and when Jerusalem is in ruins and the final invasion looms (Revelation 19:11-21), then their eyes and ears will be opened. They will recognise their Messiah, who this time appears as a conquering King! At this time their **kingdom of heaven** will become reality. Why call it the kingdom of **heaven**? Well, Messiah the King returns for His people, from heaven!

The apostle Paul points out that for a period of time, a blindness has come upon Israel, and they will not see the truth while the church age plays out. Once the church age has been completed, and all Christian believers are taken out of the way, then, because of the suffering Israel will go through, their eyes will be opened, and they will be saved when their Messiah delivers them:

For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: – **Romans 11:25-26**

Daniel's vision of the future

Did Daniel see the interim period between the crucifixion and the Second Coming of Jesus? This is a topic that requires a message of its own, but to simplify the matter, note this:

1. The angel tells Daniel (Daniel 9:24) that a period of “seventy weeks” (490 years) was planned to accomplish the things that were necessary to establish Messiah’s kingdom on earth (called the **kingdom of heaven**):
 - a. To finish the transgression;
 - b. To make an end of sins;
 - c. To make reconciliation for iniquity;
 - d. To bring everlasting righteousness;
 - e. To seal up vision and prophecy; and

- f. To anoint the Most Holy.
- 2. The angel then describes that from the time the command to restore and build Jerusalem, until Messiah the Prince, would be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks (in total, 69 weeks or 483 years).
- 3. After the 69 weeks, Messiah is “cut off” (verse 26), with nothing for Himself (the proposed reign on Earth did not take place).
- 4. Note that after the word “Himself” there is no full stop, but a semi-colon. This is immediately followed by “And the people of the prince (lowercase p) who is to come...”.
- 5. The description of what this prince and his people will do, carries on until the end of verse 27.
- 6. Daniel sees the entire vision, including what this prince will do (which is the 70th week), but he does not see the period between week 69 (when Messiah was cut off) and week 70 (when the antichrist will reign, **before** the coming of Messiah to take His rightful place as King of Kings, and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:11-21).
- 7. This hidden period that Daniel does not see, is the period after the crucifixion that has continued for more than 2000 years and is still continuing as we write this. The final week (seven years) is the tribulation period which completes the 70 weeks (490 years), and only after that, Messiah will return.

Daniel never saw the interim period, the church age or dispensation of grace, simply because this was not meant for him. The angel expressly said that seventy weeks are determined for **your people** (the Jews and Israel) and this was in preparation for the establishment of the **kingdom of heaven**. That there would be a prophetic gap of some 2000 years and more, did not apply to the prophet.

Although the Second Coming of the Messiah has not yet occurred, we see the signs that Israel is preparing for that day, even if they themselves do not understand it. Many are returning to Israel from their diaspora all over the world; there are plans to rebuild the temple (so that the antichrist can desecrate it, according to the prophecy of Daniel, and also referred to by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:2-4); and politically, the plans are put in place for what must still occur – the Abraham Accord, which is the formation of a one-world religion; and increased cooperation between Israel and the Arab world. These things are all in God’s plan for Israel.

At the end of the day it is easy, but very wrong, for the Church not to be concerned with what is happening to Israel at the moment. The Church is not a replacement for Israel, as some preach, but a separate entity that fills the prophetic gap. Instead, we should be praying for Israel every day that their eyes may be opened, souls saved and won for the kingdom of God and if nothing else, that they be given special protection by God to handle what is going to come over them when the Church has been removed and the lawless one takes over. When the Church has been removed, to fully experience the **kingdom of God** for the first time, Israel is being prepared for their **kingdom of heaven**.

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