



“God’s Kingdom Is Coming”

Matthew 3:1–6; Matthew 3:13–17; Matthew 4:12–17

***God’s kingdom has come,
even as we await its complete fulfillment.***

Throughout this series, we will be walking through Matthew’s gospel. Today, we move from Jesus’ birth to the beginning of his public ministry with the proclamations of John the Baptizer, Jesus’ own baptism, his time in the wilderness, Jesus’ move to Capernaum, and his own kingdom announcement (4:17). I hope you will find a few minutes to read Matthew chapters 3 and 4

in their entirety -- it won’t take long.

But all this needs context, and the gospel writers rarely provide it. Kingdom of God? Kingdom of Heaven? What do they mean? First, when Matthew writes “kingdom of Heaven,” he means exactly the same thing as the rest of the New Testament writers mean when they write “kingdom of God.” Matthew is very sensitive to the Jewish hesitation to utter the word “God” because of the holiness of God’s name. Still today, most Jewish orthodox writers will use “g-d”.

What is meant by “kingdom of God”? Pretty much the same thing as we mean when we speak of the kingdom of France. It is the territory under the sovereign rule of the king of France. So it is with the kingdom of God. It is where God rules. But, you might say, “Hasn’t God always ruled over his creation?” That answer is yes, so when we speak about the arrival of God’s kingdom, we are really speaking of it being seen and embraced, banishing all traces of sin and tragedy and death.

Further, you and I don’t have experience dealing with kings; we live in a constitutional republic governed by executive, legislative, and judicial branches. But the Bible comes from the time of kings, queens, and caesars. So, let’s begin with more on the Jewish expectations around kings and kingdoms.

Longing for a King . . . and a liberator

After the Israelites conquered large portions of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, they settled into a long period of consolidation. The book of Judges tells the story of this very difficult, indeed tragic, period in Israel’s history.

Unlike the peoples around them, the Israelites did not have a human king, for God was their king. They were not to be like all the peoples around them; they would live under the kingship of God. The leadership and administration of the twelve tribes was handled by men and women known as “judges.” Generally, the judges of Israel were chosen from among the heads of the twelve tribes. They had the authority to settle disputes and promote justice. They also provided military leadership.

But this arrangement didn’t last very long. The Israelites began to clamor for a human king of their own, one like other nations had. Though Samuel warned about the dangers of kings, the people insisted. And God, not surprisingly, gave them what they asked for -- a king. The first was Saul, a disappointment who thought he knew better than God, and then eventually his successor, David.

Thus, a thousand years before Jesus, David was king of Israel. David, slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David, Israel’s greatest king, to whom God promised that he would establish the throne of David’s kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). But . . . four hundred years after David’s death, Jerusalem burned. The temple built by David’s son, Solomon, lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant was gone. Tens of thousands of God’s people were in exile, including their king, who was blinded by the Babylonians after being forced to watch the execution of his sons.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Sure, there were pretenders, like the Maccabees, who proved a to be a big disappointed. Then there were the various Herods, who were “kings” only at the pleasure of the Romans. But the people of God knew that they had no true king, no king from the House of David. For centuries, they had traded one oppressor for another. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come. This true king to come, long promised by the prophets, would be the one anointed by God, the mashia in Hebrew, the christos in Greek, the Messiah and Christ in English. This true king would be the one through whom God would usher in his kingdom, at which time all the world would see that the Jews’ confidence in their God had not been misplaced.

By the time of Jesus, the expectations and hopes that God’s king would come were so powerful that many Jews tried to hurry things along. Believing that rebellion against the Romans would bring about God’s kingdom, more than a few Jews

put themselves forward as the long-awaited *mashia*, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, all these would-be messiahs collided with the Romans, who had no tolerance for anyone who might challenge the authority of Caesar. And all these messianic pretenders were eventually executed by the Romans.

Onto this stage, walked an odd man, a prophet, John. He called the Jews to come to the Jordan River to be cleansed of their sins and live a truly righteous life.

A moment of past, present, and future

The prophets of Israel sometimes spoke words of anticipation, looking ahead to the glorious day when God would settle all accounts and put all things right, when all the nations would come streaming to God and live in peace. It is as if the prophets were saying “God will act!” – the future tense. The arrival of God’s Messiah will change the world. God *will* abide with his people as he never had before and all *will* be right.

In this week’s passage from Matthew 3, we come to the present tense. The bursting upon the scene of a man named John, who preached a message of preparation and repentance and enacted this turning around by washing people in the Jordan River, i.e., baptizing them. The Christian proclamation is that the long-awaited Day of the Lord arrived in Jesus, beginning with his birth and God’s profound and humbling incarnation.

John is the prophet who announces that this Day of the Lord is fast upon God’s people and they must ready themselves for it. Centuries before another prophet had written about: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ ” And now John cries out that the time has come. The moment has arrived. What had been future would now be present.

It is difficult for us to grasp just how volatile and violent was the world across which John’s words drifted. But John stood out there in the Jordan, the boundary between civilization and the wilderness. He dressed the part: animal skins, living off locusts and honey. Some even mistook him for Elijah.

Thus, John the baptizer, laying his eyes on Jesus pronounces that he, this modest man from Galilee, is the One, the long-awaited Lamb of God who had come to reconcile the world to God (John 1:29).

But John’s message was one not only of immediacy but of anticipation. For he pronounced that Jesus would baptize not with water, not for mere repentance, but with the Holy Spirit, for rebirth. And this Spirit of God, whom the people of God would come to understand as the third person of the Trinitarian God, would be God present with his people, as God had once been, long before. But for a time, so short a time, God would now walk among his people in the flesh. He would teach and love and heal, calling God’s people to return to the way of God, for it was time for the whole world to be reconciled to God.

The Spirit of Christ is, in the wonderful words of Gordon Fee, “the evidence of the presence of the future.” Not only was the arrival of the Christ a fulfillment of God’s promises made to Abraham, Jesus was also the present-future, the one through whom God’s wondrous future came rushing to meet the present day. Another way to say this is simply to proclaim that Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God; i.e. God’s wondrous future.

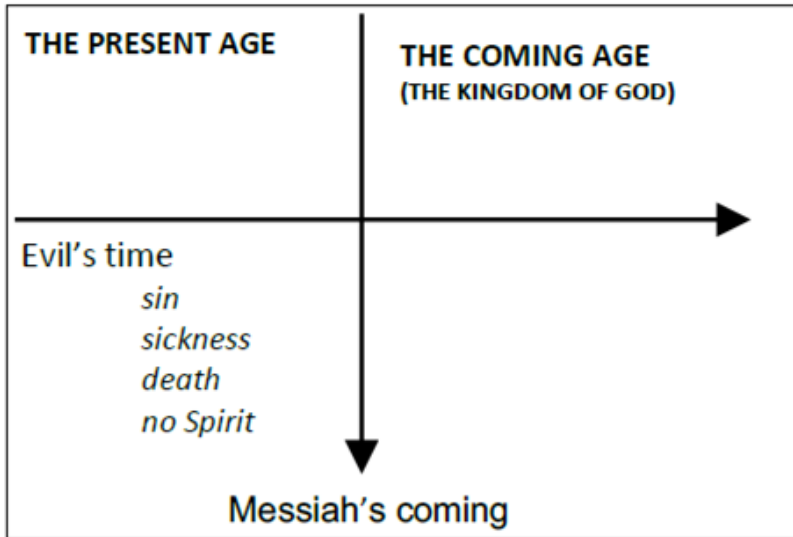
The kingdom arrives

In God’s kingdom, the brokenhearted are healed, captives are set free, those who mourn are comforted – all this is truly Good News to the oppressed. In God’s kingdom, swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:5). The blind see, the deaf hear, and the mute speak (Isaiah 35:5-7). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke long and clearly about the coming of God’s kingdom. In his teachings and actions, Jesus taught and showed people what God’s kingdom is really like. He healed the sick, he made the blind see – all that is wrong with this world will be healed. Jesus hung around with the outcasts of Jewish society to demonstrate that everyone is welcome in the people of God. He showed people that God’s kingdom was not just a promised future but also a present reality. As Jesus says in Matthew 4:17, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Indeed!

But if the kingdom of God was ushered in by Jesus, why is there still sin and death in the world?

Jesus came talking about fulfillment of the Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God’s kingdom. In God’s kingdom there are no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, some did. In the years immediately after Jesus’ resurrection, these followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy and suffering were still present in the world. Using Figure 1 as a guide, it’s as if

the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! To the average Jew, the answer was simple – Jesus wasn't really the Messiah, hence the world still awaited the coming of the Kingdom of God.



Already/Not yet

But Jesus' disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God's anointed had indeed come. Thus, the problem was not with Jesus but with the Jewish perspective depicted in Figure 1. In the writings of the New Testament, we see a new perspective emerging, as depicted in Figure 2.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come -- but not yet in all its fullness! The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah's coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived "between times" when God's kingdom had come already, but not yet. I really can't overemphasize how important to our reading of the NT is our understanding of this "already/not yet" perspective. When Paul writes

Figure 1. Jewish expectations in Jesus' day (figures from Fee's *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

that Christians are the ones on whom the "ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11), he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . . and, truly, so are we!

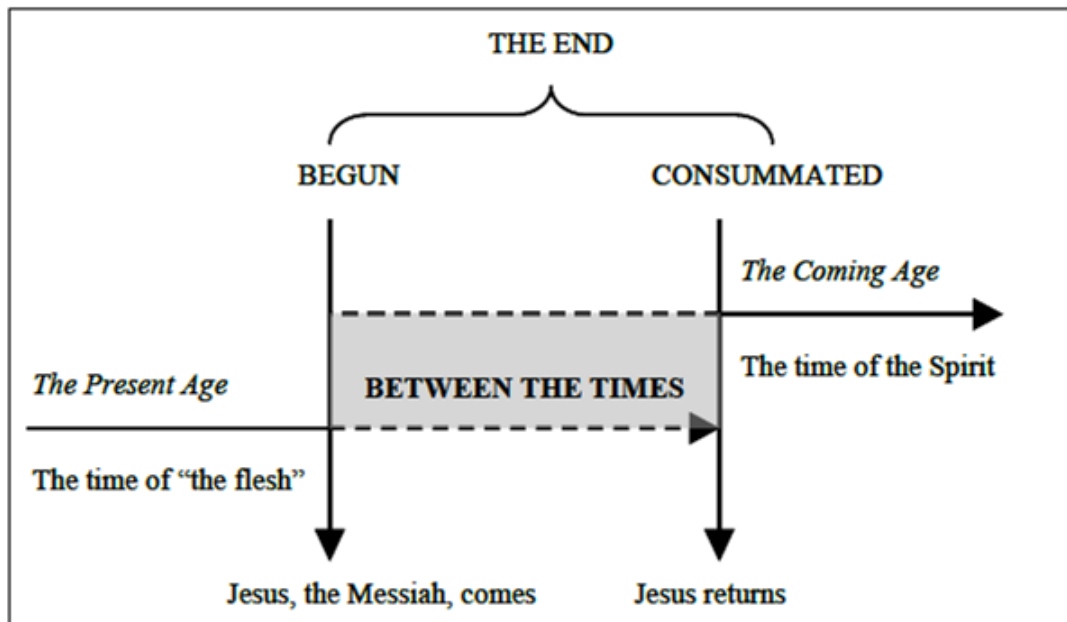


Figure 2. The Christians' new perspective: already/not yet

As Gordon Fee writes, we are empowered by God's Spirit to live the life of the future, of God's kingdom, in the present age. We are to be, in Paul's phrase, "ambassadors for Christ," carrying God's message of reconciliation and hope to the world, in what we do and say every day. We are new creations not just for our own sakes but for the sake of all the world. Paul understood that in his journeys he was crisscrossing the Mediterranean founding colonies of a new human race, a people born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3). First UMC is just such a colony. It can be hard for us to think of ourselves this way . . . but that is the nature of transformation. It may take the butterfly a while to comprehend its own rebirth. We may not always feel like new creations. We certainly don't always act like new creations. But we are. *This is the real world.*