

Kingdom Questions

The Kingdom of God Part 1

Understanding God's Cosmic Agenda

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In the person of His Son, God manifested His heavenly Lordship on Earth, and by this event the Kingdom of God entered history in an unprecedented way.

What is the Kingdom of God?

The Kingdom of God, also called the Kingdom of Heaven, is essentially the rule that God exercises over His subjects, whether men or angels (cf. Matthew 4.17 and Mark 1.15). Men and women who willingly embrace His rule thereby enjoy righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14.17).

Does the Kingdom of God then antedate Christ's advent?

Certainly! Since creation, the kingdom has existed in every place and time where creatures have bowed the knee to their Creator. However, this does not negate the Kingdom's unique appearance in the person of Messiah. In one of the most dramatic scenes of Matthew's gospel (Matthew 12.22-28), Jesus disconcerted the Pharisees by declaring: "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." In the person of His Son, God manifested His heavenly Lordship on Earth, and by this event the Kingdom of God entered history in an unprecedented way.

This was the significance of John the Baptist's announcements, and Christ's also, that people should "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3.2). They called people to prepare themselves, because a uniquely favorable opportunity had opened for them to enter the kingdom: the opportunity to enter under the authoritative guidance of Messiah Himself. The free dental clinic we provided in Mexico one year illustrates the dynamics of such a special opportunity. Normally, the people of the town

where we ministered did not have access to dental care. They were either too poor, or they would have to travel to the capital to find the professional help they needed. For four days our dentist provided a unique opportunity for them to obtain this service, and they energetically pressed their way into position to receive his care. The word had gotten out: "Round up the children, a free dental clinic is near!" Likewise, in first-century Judea, the people did not normally have Messiah Himself in town to lead them by the hand into the Kingdom of Heaven. The seekers of the Kingdom had been losing their way trying to follow the circuitous route mapped out by the Pharisees. Those who believed John's announcement, however, recognized their opportunity and energetically "forced" their way into the Kingdom of Heaven by making certain that they got to hear Messiah's preaching (Luke 16.16).

Then why pray for the Kingdom to come?

The kingdom's existence since creation, and its climactic arrival in Christ does not negate its future manifestation in the Millennium (Daniel 7.21,22; Revelation 20.4), nor yet the present phenomenon of the Kingdom's expansion. Daniel prophesied that Messiah's Kingdom, symbolized by a rock in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, would appear during the time of Rome's dominion and then grow into a huge mountain that would finally fill the whole earth (Daniel 2.31-45; 7.13,14). Jesus, in his turn, compared the Kingdom to a mustard seed that grows into the largest of garden plants, and to yeast that when mixed into a large amount of dough will

finally permeate it completely (Matthew 13.31-33). When we follow Christ's instructions to pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are asking God to expand His rule in our hearts and in our world now, today, and to continue increasing it toward eventual fullness in the Millennium.

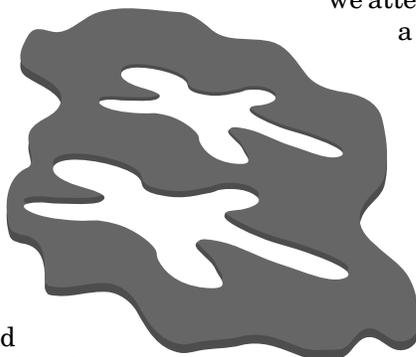
How does the Kingdom come?

"The Kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,'" because Christ's Kingdom is not of this world, and it conquers territory in such a way as to expand into our midst before we realize it. Unlike earthly governments that claim lands by military force or economic domination, the Kingdom of God advances by spiritual victories that are often subtle, and at first invisible (Luke 17.20,21; John 18.36). The Kingdom of God comes into our world more fully every time another unbeliever comes to faith, and every time a believer yields himself more fully to the Lord's will. "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work," according to 1 John 3.8, and every time Christ's subjects knock out a part of Satan's kingdom, the Kingdom of God fills the void.

I explained it to my daughters this way: I had Leslie mix up and roll out some gingerbread cookie dough, and had Elise find different sized cookie cutters. When the dark brown dough lay rolled out on our light-colored counter top, I explained the analogy. The dark dough represents Satan's kingdom—Satan usurped authority over mankind in Eden, and still rules over much of it as the "prince of this world," spreading darkness everywhere (John 12.31). The light counter top represents the rest of the universe where God's rule shines unpolluted. The cookie cutters are God's servants. When a small cookie cutter cuts out a circle of the dark dough, the light counter top shines through. Likewise, when a believer, through prayer, evangelism or other means, delivers someone from the devil's clutches, some of Satan's author-

ity is cut away, and the Kingdom of God shines into the vacancy. Believers are cookie cutters in Christ's hand to cut holes in Satan's kingdom and expand the Kingdom of God. Believers with mature and consistent character are bigger cookie cutters. Christian families who work together for Christ without rebellion and antagonism in their midst are bigger cookie cutters still.

These concepts thrill me, except for the fact that when we talk about two kingdoms in opposition, we are talking about war. Paul taught that "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14.22), and those hardships are the hardships of combat. As of 1989, the World Evangelization Research Centre reported that the worldwide number of Christian martyrs per year had risen to 325,800 (see David Barret's article "Martyrdom" in *On Being*, September, 1989). That is one Christian dying "in a situation of witness as a result of human hostility" every 100 seconds. On an average, more than 100 Christians die for their faith while



we attend church for 3 hours on a Sunday morning. One would hope that recent collapse of communism in eastern Europe would alleviate persecution in those quarters, but "martyrs have been enumerated in 180 countries of the world," and researchers see a trend toward increased persecution, to the tune of

500,000 martyrs per year, as we reach the end of our century. We must sit up in our recliners and recognize the reality of the escalating warfare we're in! When Paul uses military terminology to describe the Christian life in Ephesians 6, he is not using a clever analogy—he is describing reality.

Will believers usher in the millennium?

While believers advance the Kingdom of God, no glory accrues to them. Any victories we win will be accomplished by the power of "God who works in [us] to will

and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2.13). Though the church will preach the gospel of the Kingdom "in the whole world as a testimony to all nations," and expand Christ's reign to a certain point, the last battle will not be won until the heavens part and the King of Kings rides forth, striking with the sword of his mouth (Revelation 19.11-21). Like Joab of old, the church will step aside for the King to finish the war and receive the glory for it (2 Samuel 12.26-30). Then every knee will finally bow to the One born a king in Bethlehem and the Kingdom of God will be the only kingdom.

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we ask God to expand His rule in our hearts and in our world now, today, and to continue increasing it toward eventual fullness in the Millennium.