

What is the Bible's message?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a eight-part series

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Mark 1:14–15 (NRSV)

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Matthew 12:27–28 (NRSV)

²⁷If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁸But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

Luke 9:26–27 (NRSV)

²⁶Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. ²⁷But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

The Bible's message? The Kingdom of God has arrived!

This week, we begin an eight-week series drawn from the new book by Bishop Scott Jones and Rev. Arthur Jones, *Scripture and the Wesleyan Way: A Bible Study on Real Christianity*. I urge you to pick up a copy of the book and read along as we go through this series, chapter by chapter. As the Joneses put it, in the book “you will discover a Wesleyan approach to the Bible and the Christian life . . . using Wesley’s own words.”

These weekly Bible studies will examine key ideas and passages from the book chapters and the sermons we’ll be preaching. In addition, in my 11am Sunday class in Smith Worship Center, I’ll be teaching an eight-week series focused on the Bible, how we got it, how we can become better readers of Scripture, how important biblical “dots” connect, and more. It will be suitable for those who have never opened a Bible and those who have read the Bible their whole life.

The Kingdom of God

We begin by considering the Bible’s over-arching message, which can be summed up quickly. God made this good world. We humans wrecked it in our rebellion against God. And ever since, God has been about the work of putting things right. And a world put right is what we mean by the phrase the “kingdom of God,” i.e., the place where God reigns. Thus, it should come as no surprise that when Jesus arrives on the scene to put things right, he spoke time and again of the “kingdom of God.” The phrase “kingdom of God” or its equivalent “kingdom of heaven”¹ occurs 85 times in the gospels alone. NT scholars who refer to Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet announcing the arrival of God’s kingdom get it right. Take a look at the passage from Mark above; these are Jesus’ first words in the gospels and they are words of proclamation. The time has arrived, the kingdom is near – so make yourself ready!

It might surprise you to learn that the phrase “kingdom of God” is not found in the Old Testament.² However, though the particular phrase isn’t used, the concept of God as King and his reign over creation permeates the Hebrew Bible. The Israelites were not to have a human king like all their neighbors, God was to be their king. Eventually

¹ Matthew refers to God’s kingdom as the “kingdom of heaven” because he is particularly sensitive to Jewish reluctance to use God’s name or even the word “God.” So he uses “kingdom of heaven” instead. Even now, many Jewish Orthodox writers will use only “G-d.”

² Sometimes I will refer to the Old Testament as the Hebrew Bible, as a reminder that the Old Testament in our Bibles is the Bible that Jesus read. They are the Holy Scriptures of the Jewish people. The Jewish Bible is organized differently from our Old Testament – but they are exactly the same writings.

though, God's people demanded, and got, a king like everyone else had. And we know how that worked out. By Jesus' day, the zealous rebels against Rome would have had bumper stickers that read "No King But God!"

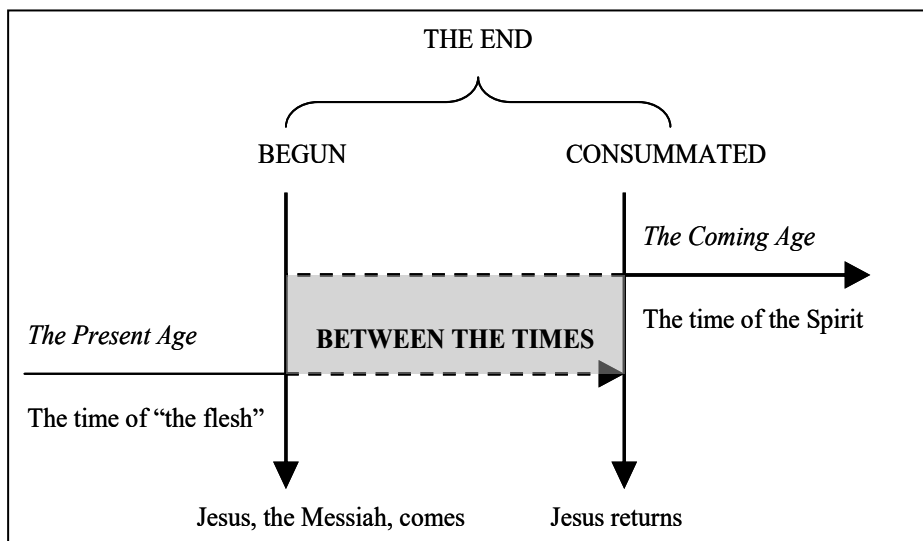
A present reality?

When you read through the 85 instances of "kingdom of God" in the gospels, you can't escape the conclusion that the kingdom was arriving in and through Jesus. Whether we think of the kingdom as arriving in Jesus or its arrival being imminent, the conclusion is the same: God was bringing his great salvation project to its climax and nothing would ever be the same.

But if you read through the "kingdom of God" phrases closely, you'll find a few that seem to speak of the kingdom as a someday-thing, such as the verse from Luke 9 above. This makes more sense to us than the idea that the kingdom of God arrived in Jesus, for we know quite well that the world remains marred by sin and death. Thus, we usually speak of God's kingdom as something for which we are still waiting and, thus, lose sight of its present reality.

If we are to affirm the whole of Scripture, we are led to two truths: the kingdom of God has arrived *already & not yet*, it is both a *present & coming* reality. Over the last 150 years scholars have debated the competing truths vigorously, but now, as Kreitzer writes: "A general consensus has been reached, namely that the primary message of Jesus himself was one of an inaugurated kingdom, one which had already begun in his own life and ministry but which was awaiting consummation in the future."³ But holding the *already* and the *not yet* together in our minds and hearts is difficult, so let's step through it.

Jesus had been resurrected, so yes, he was the Messiah. And thus, 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"⁴ when God's kingdom



The Christians' new perspective: already/not yet

had come *already*, but *not yet*. When Paul writes 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,

³ Larry J. Kreitzer, "Kingdom of God/Christ," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 524.

⁴ The accompanying figure is adapted from one in Gordon Fee's, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*.

so are we. Yes, they awaited Jesus' return, but they still knew that Jesus' resurrection meant that everything had changed.

We are empowered by God's Spirit to live the life of the future, of God's consummated 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). St. Andrew 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 awhile 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.*

So there you have it. God's kingdom has arrived and our lives are to be shaped by that truth, even as we await Jesus' return and the glorious consummation of the kingdom.

Daily Bible Readings

More on the kingdom of God

Monday, Matthew 5:1-11 The beatitudes

Tuesday, Matthew 6:9-13 The Lord's prayer

Wednesday, Matthew 13:44-50 What is the kingdom like?

Thursday, Mark 10:13-16 Are we ready to receive the kingdom as would a child?

Friday, John 3:1-10 The kingdom and being born again.

Saturday, Acts 28:30-31 Paul proclaims the kingdom of God under Caesar's nose.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Daniel.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning January 13: *Embracing the Bible: an introduction to Scripture*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy