

Life of Christ

A study of the life and teachings of Jesus

The Kingdom of Heaven

—by Marc Turnage

What did Jesus mean when He spoke about the Kingdom of Heaven? This phrase appears on His lips more than any other in the Gospels, but unfortunately, it is one of the most misunderstood phrases in the history of Christian interpretation. Today we will explore the question, “What did the Kingdom of Heaven mean in Jesus’ world and for Jesus?” To understand the origins of this phrase, we need to frame the historical and spiritual context of Jesus’ world. Let me take you on a journey.

At the end of the Old Testament period in the early sixth century BC, the kingdom of Judah, along with its capital, Jerusalem, was destroyed and conquered by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar, which brought an end to the kingdom of Judah and the Davidic dynasty.

When the Judeans returned from Babylonian exile in the latter part of the sixth century BC under the Persian king, Cyrus, they went back to the land, but they did not set up a kingship. They lived under the Persian Empire’s control, and that’s where the Old Testament leaves off. In the subsequent years between the Old and New Testaments, the Persian Empire ruled until the Greeks conquered them under Alexander the Great.

Once again, the Jewish people lived under a foreign overlord, and frankly, they’re okay with it, as long as they can worship God. But that changed in the second century BC. Due to a series of events, the Jewish people successfully revolted against the Greek Seleucid Kingdom that ruled over them. For 80 years, from the second to the first century BC, the Jewish people had their own autonomous free state in the land of Israel under the priestly, kingly family known as the Hasmoneans.

That rule came to an end in the middle of the first century BC, when Rome rolled into town and forced the land of Israel and the Jewish people under

its heel. But because of that previous 80 years, the Jewish people now yearned in their hearts for freedom to worship God in the way they wanted. Rome was a pagan empire, and one of the things that we find is that by the time of Jesus' life, the Jewish people agreed on three basic ideas:

- There's only one God, and He's our God. There are no other gods in the universe. Our God is the only God, the Creator of all.
- We are His chosen people. That is established in the book of Exodus with the deliverance from Egypt and the Covenant at Sinai.
- Only when we are free can we truly worship God the way He intends for us to worship Him.

We find this in the hymn sung by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, in Luke 1:74: "To give us deliverance from our enemies, so that we might worship him." This song emerges because of the 80 years of autonomous, independent Jewish reign. But Rome's rule challenges all of those ideas. If there is only one God, and He's our God, how do we explain our subjugation to a pagan foreign Empire? If we are God's chosen people, why are we servants and slaves to pagan foreign authority? We all agree that Roman rule over God's people is illegitimate, so the question then becomes, "How do we achieve redemption?"

Redemption has a political manifestation—get Rome out of here—but it has a spiritual side to it, as well. That is, only when we are free can we worship God. That is the heart of Jewish hopes of redemption.

Two streams of thought emerge as they wrestle with this question. The first says, "It is a sin for us to submit to any authority except God's? Therefore, when confronted by foreign pagan rule, we take up the sword, we spill blood, and we fight, we resist, we rebel."

The second says, "No, the reason we are subject to foreign authority is because of our sin. How do you solve that problem? You repent." This is where we begin to hear the idea that repentance will bring redemption near. This second stream of thought will coin a phrase as an anti-slogan against those who want to take up armed, violent resistance. That phrase is "the Kingdom of Heaven," which appears on Jesus' lips more than any other in the gospels.

Let's talk about the language of that phrase. While our gospels are written originally in Greek, Jesus' original language of speech and teaching would have been Hebrew. In Hebrew, the phrase, "Kingdom of Heaven" looks a little different than how we hear it in English.

When we hear the word "kingdom," we think of castles and knights in shining armor, fair maidens, and dragons. "Kingdom" in Hebrew, however, would be more accurately translated as "rule" or "reign."

The second part of that phrase is the word “heaven.” Heaven does not refer to somewhere in the skies. By the second century BC, Jewish people avoided saying the name of God, so they used other words to speak about Him, one of which is “heaven.” So the “Kingdom of Heaven” is literally “the rule (or reign) of God.” There is no difference between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God in the New Testament. They’re saying the same thing.

Central to the idea of God’s reign in the Bible is the Exodus story. The first time we ever hear God’s reign proclaimed is in Exodus 15. Israel has just passed through the sea, the Egyptians were wiped out, and the people sing, “The Lord reigns forever and ever.” Thus, when we begin to think about God’s reign, it is manifested in His redemption of His people.

Please note an interesting and often-overlooked point about how the Bible, Jesus, and even His contemporaries viewed the Exodus. Freedom from Egyptian bondage was wonderful, and we, as modern readers of Scripture, love the idea of freedom and liberty. And yet, in Leviticus 25, God says that the reason He liberated Israel from Egyptian bondage was to be His servants. In other words, He frees His people to serve, and this is precisely what we find central to the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Where does God rule and reign? Where His people choose to submit to His rule and reign! What differentiates what we find in the gospels and how Jesus uses the term “Kingdom of Heaven” from His Jewish contemporaries is the fact that in His contemporaries’ minds, the kingdom sat passively waiting for you or me to choose to obey God. But because Jesus knows Himself as God’s anointed Messiah, He also knows that, because He has come, His kingdom is no longer waiting for us to act. In fact, it is actively breaking forth. It is advancing; it is growing.

Jesus understands His unique role at the center of the movement, known as those who submit to God’s rule and reign. But understand that the focus is not just about Jesus at the center; it’s also about His followers doing the Word of God. We find this expressed in Luke 11:27-28:

“As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”

This woman’s blessing may seem strange to us, but when we understand Jesus’ contemporary culture, this is actually a blessing for the Messiah. In other words, she just said, “You are the agent of God’s redemption.” To put it into our language, she just walked the aisle.

Then how does Jesus respond to her? He doesn’t deny that He is God’s Messiah, but He does give her a witty reply, saying, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” When we read the words

of Jesus, we often miss certain allusions that He makes. You see, His original audience would have committed at least the five books of Moses to memory, if not the entire Old Testament. So a teacher is going to allude to a word or a collection of words. And here, we find Jesus using the terms “to hear” and “to keep.”

The first time we find these two phrases joined together in the Bible is in Genesis 26. There God reaffirms with Isaac, Abraham’s son, the covenant God had made with Abraham. He says, “The reason I made this covenant with Abraham and am now making this covenant with you, which included the land, is because Abraham heard My voice and kept My commandments.” This covenant was contingent upon Abraham’s obedience.

The second time the connection between these two phrases, “to hear” and “to keep,” appears is in Exodus 19, where Israel stands at the foot of Mount Sinai and becomes God’s chosen people. At that moment, God says, “If you will hear My voice and keep My commandments, you will be to Me a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”

So, when this individual confronts Him, proclaiming Him as the Messiah, Jesus doesn’t deny that; but He also doesn’t allow her to fixate on a cult of His personality. Instead, He points to her and says, “You want redemption to come? It will come when the people of God hear the Word of God and keep it.”

***“Blessed rather
are those who
hear the word of
God and obey it.”
—Luke 11:28***

Jesus sees His movement as active, marked by those who hear and keep the Word of God. It’s growing, starting like yeast that leavens dough; it’s spreading like a mustard seed that breaks forth and fills a field. And Jesus points to the miracles and exorcisms as evidence of the breaking forth of God’s reign through Him, His message, and His ministry, saying in essence, “See these and understand your need to repent; because remember, repentance brings redemption.”

When we understand how Jesus uses the phrase “the Kingdom of Heaven,” and then we reread the Gospels, we find much more depth and meaning to His words. His movement was to be marked by those who daily submitted to God’s rule and reign. How do we submit to God’s rule and reign? We obey Him.

I want to challenge you this week: every morning when you wake up, verbally articulate your desire to love God today with all your heart, soul, and strength, and to submit to His rule and reign. Remember that the message of the Bible is, “Who is King? God is King! He gets to make the rules; we get to follow Him.” It’s a straightforward relationship.

I want to share with you a rather personal story related to this. It starts from the realization that in Jesus' day, the reciting every day of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is one. You will love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and strength," was viewed as accepting upon yourself God's rule and reign.

A few years ago, my oldest son, a basketball player, received a scholarship to attend one of the top boys' prep basketball programs in the U.S. at a school just outside Orlando, Florida. At 15, my son was leaving home. I thought I would have more time with him! His daily schedule was such that he didn't have a lot of time for Bible reading and study, and his weekends did not provide availability for him to attend church. So, hoping I could give him something, I said, "Lucas, here's what you do. Every night when your head hits the pillow before you fall asleep, I want you to recite Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and then pray the Lord's Prayer."

***Hear, O Israel, the Lord our
God, the Lord is One.***

I walked him through both of those passages of Scripture and explained them to him. Then I said, "In the morning, when you wake up before your feet hit the floor, I want you to do the same thing. Son, here's the deal. If you take care of the wanting to, God will take care of getting you there. He will keep you driving between the white lines. There will be days, son, that you step up to the plate and strike out every time. There will also be days you're going to go four for four, but if every night and every morning you reaffirm your commitment to submit your will to God's rule and reign, He will keep you, and He will keep moving you forward."

When my son came home for the summer after that year of school, he had only missed one day of doing that. And, he had grown more spiritually in that year than at any other time in his life.

Do we daily make the conscious choice to submit our will to God's rule and reign? That's what it means to be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, so I challenge you to commit to submitting to God's rule and reign in your life every morning when you wake up.

I want to challenge you to do one more thing. Each night, as you're getting ready for bed, do it again. We may not bat a thousand every day, but as we affirm our commitment to submit to God's rule and reign in our life every morning and every night, I cannot wait to see what He's going to do in our lives, in our families, in our jobs, and in our communities.

Question Is there any area of your life that you have consistently refused to submit to the lordship of Jesus?

Prayer Starter Jesus, I repent. Please forgive me for those areas where I have not submitted to You. I don't want to be rebellious to You. I want to change. I believe that real freedom will come in my life as I choose to submit to Your rule and reign from the heart. So I choose to do that, and I receive your power and strength to walk in Your way today.

Family Chat Picture yourself standing under an umbrella, protected from a storm. When you move out from under it, you walk out from under its protection. It's the same in your life. When you obey God, your parents, and your teachers, you are staying under protection. Ask God to help you have a heart that wants to obey the first time you are asked to do something.

Take Action Every morning this week when you wake up, choose to verbally articulate your desire to love God today with all your heart, soul, and strength, to submit to His rule and reign. Pray through Deuteronomy 6:4-9 every morning when you wake up and every night before you fall asleep.

Challenge Meet with your life group and talk through both the questions you've answered this week and the challenges you have faced (or are still facing!) as you follow Jesus. Be honest about what's worked for you, as well as areas where you may have missed the mark.