



*A Ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

The Kingdom of God



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The kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven) is realized in three phases:

I. Present Kingdom – The spiritual kingdom of grace exists now as God rules in the lives of obedient believers. This kingdom was announced and revealed through the prophets and the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. We enter this kingdom when we turn from our sin to serve God through faith in Jesus Christ.

II. Millennial Kingdom of Christ – Jesus will return to earth in power and glory to resurrect the righteous dead, bestow immortality and eternal life upon the resurrected and the living righteous, avenge the saints, and be glorified in them. His earthly reign of one thousand years will be a universal kingdom in which all principalities, powers, and enemies are overcome. At its conclusion, the unrighteous will be resurrected to suffer annihilation at the great white throne judgment.

III. Eternal Kingdom of God – God's eternal kingdom will begin when Jesus Christ, having put all enemies under His feet, turns the kingdom over to the Father. God will dwell with the redeemed in a new heaven and a new earth where no disappointment, defilement, or death can enter and where righteousness and peace will prevail forever.

Introduction

The Bible describes God as filling many roles. We meet Him in the sacred pages as Creator, Sustainer, King, Lawgiver, and Judge of the universe; as Covenant-maker and Redeemer for the elect; and as heavenly Father for those who become the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

In this study we will consider God as King, the sovereign Ruler of all things. Whatever happens in the universe for time and eternity passes first through the Divine counsel. Nothing can escape His knowledge or frustrate His plan. Our God reigns!

He is the King eternal (1 Timothy 1:17), the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings (6:15). He is the Lord of heaven and earth (Acts 17:24) who reigns over all (1 Chronicles 29:11, 12). Eternity is an attribute of God, and we should not be surprised to read that His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom (Exodus 15:18; Psalm 10:16; 29:10; 145:11-13; Jeremiah 10:10).

Among the children of men under the sun, the Lord God omnipotent rules (Revelation 19:6). This suggests a working definition for the *kingdom of God*: the realm where the true God of heaven rules and reigns.

Any kingdom comprises at least three components: 1) a king to rule, 2) subjects over whom the king rules, and 3) a domain, or territory, for his reign. In the case of God's kingdom, He is the king. His subjects include all creatures that submit to Him, but especially the people He has both created and redeemed through grace.

As domain for God's kingdom, we may think first of heaven, where God's subjects are the angels and His will is perfectly done. The prayer Jesus taught expands the domain: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (KJV). The kingdom whose throne is in heaven, then, is established anywhere on earth His will is obeyed.

Throughout this study, we will use the phrase *kingdom of heaven* as a synonym for the *kingdom of God* on earth, just as Scripture does. These two phrases are used interchangeably in the Bible, as the following verses demonstrate.

- Compare Matthew 8:11 ("I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven") with Luke 13:28: "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out."
- Compare Matthew 5:3 ("Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven") with Luke 6:20: "Looking at his disciples, he said, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'"
- Compare Matthew 19:23 and 24: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the

eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Seeking understanding of God’s kingdom and the central role it plays in Scripture, we will consider the topic under the three headings (phases) indicated at the beginning: God’s kingdom in the present, the millennial kingdom to come, and the eternal kingdom of God.

I. God’s Kingdom in the Present

As we have seen, the kingdom of God is an eternal realm. God has always been the King of heaven. Here on earth, His kingdom began with creation and in Eden, where His will was done until Adam and Eve disobeyed. Despite the fall of the human race into sin, God’s sovereignty has continually been revealed in the lives of faithful men and women He has redeemed in every generation: Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, and others.

After the call of Abraham, the patriarchs, and Moses, God’s kingdom became known on earth principally through the nation of Israel (Exodus 19:5, 6; 1 Chronicles 28:5). For the first few hundred years after the nation was born, Israel was a theocracy (i.e., a government by divine right) where God ruled through Moses, Joshua, and even the judges — like Samuel.

Toward the end of Samuel’s days, the people rejected the theocracy and insisted that an earthly king should rule over them instead. In receiving Saul as king, the people were told that they had not rejected

Samuel but God himself as their sovereign Ruler (1 Samuel 8:1-8).

The kingdom of God took a turn at this point, but God's plan can never be thwarted, and His kingdom did not cease. The second Israelite king, David, was more nearly a godlike monarch than his predecessor Saul. God promised David that his throne would be established forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16), that he would never lack a son to rule God's people (Psalm 89:3, 4, 27-37; Jeremiah 33:15-26).

In these promises is the assurance that God's kingdom is a permanent institution among men. Although the line of kings from David's loins was interrupted after four hundred years when Judah was taken to Babylon (Ezekiel 21:25-27), still God's promise remained intact, leaping past the exile to Jesus Christ, Son of the Highest and the son of David, who became heir to the kingdom throne (Isaiah 9:6, 7; Luke 1:32, 33).

When Jesus Christ, David's greater son, came preaching and teaching, He capitalized on the theme of God's kingdom. "Repent," He exhorted the crowds that attended His early ministry, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17, NKJV).

Similarly, Mark 1:14, 15 reports how our Lord introduced His kingdom message: "Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel'" (NKJV). Note here that the message of the kingdom is called "the gospel," and heaven's kingdom is realized in the human

family as people believe Christ and repent of their sins.

The core of Jesus' message in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) confirms that the kingdom of God indeed came to those who heard, believed, and followed Christ. The proof of its royal presence was seen in the defeat that Jesus consistently inflicted upon the opposition. Satan's kingdom of poverty, blindness, captivity, brokenness, oppression, and even death had been invaded by the coming of the Son of Man. Men and women were continually set free by Him to follow the Lord in liberty of life — body, soul, and spirit. In the person and work of Christ, God's kingdom had come and was victorious: The promises were being fulfilled!

The reality of God's kingdom in human history, then, was confirmed and highlighted as it came near in the person and ministry of the Lord Jesus. In the next paragraphs, we review the evidence for this reality by citing texts that say it in a few words:

Jesus said: "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28, NKJV). He told the chief priests and elders of Judaism who were daily refusing His message and ministry, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (21:43). So the kingdom of God was not only present at the time of Jesus but also nearing a change of citizenry.

On another occasion, the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom would come, and He replied, "The kingdom of

God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20, 21, NKJV).

Taking our cue from this saying in Luke, we often refer to the present phase of God's kingdom as the spiritual kingdom, or the kingdom of grace. Its three components are easy enough to identify: God is the King, disciples of Christ are its subjects, and the domain in which it exists is the hearts and lives of the redeemed who follow Jesus.

Our God reigns! The kingdom of God on which Jesus focused His message is already present in a real sense. Leadership of this kingdom was taken from Israel's priesthood and given to the apostles of Jesus and Christian servants of God. This phase of God's kingdom still exists in the Christian church, where millions of people give their allegiance to God through Jesus Christ.

In affirming the reality of the present kingdom among and within the people of Christ, we recognize that, in another sense, the kingdom of God is yet to come. This truth also is seen in the teachings of Christ and His apostles. Hear it in Jesus' words to the crowd ("I say to you that many will come from the east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven," Matthew 8:11) and to the disciples at the Last Supper ("For I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes," Luke 22:18).

These sayings of Jesus suggest that the ultimate kingdom of God had not yet come in its full and final form but was anticipated at some unknown point in the future. Jesus

Christ was not then physically ruling and reigning over all the earth, nor will He do so until His return.

The remainder of the New Testament supports the concept we have seen in the Gospels: God's kingdom is already here in the hearts and lives of Christians, but it is not yet here in its glorious, universal manifestation.

II. Millennial Kingdom of Christ

It is true that Christians enjoy God's rule and reign in their lives today, freeing us from Satan's regime now and enabling us to experience many of the blessings promised to those who love Him in the present. It is also true that not all the benefits promised are yet realized by believers and will not be until the next phase of His kingdom is inaugurated at Jesus' return. This future phase is the millennial kingdom, the time of Christ's reign of peace on earth.

This marvelous age to come will be introduced by Christ's return and the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:21-23ff; 2 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 19:11—20:6). In this great day of the Lord, those who belong to Jesus, whether dead or alive, will be changed from mortal to immortal and will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17) before descending with Him as He returns to begin the millennial reign on earth (Zechariah 14:1ff; Acts 1:10-12).

To grasp the purpose and content of the coming golden Sabbath for the earth and its inhabitants, we will survey several scrip-

tures in both Testaments. While only one of these mentions one thousand years as the length of this age to come, each of them points to a time of peace and righteousness promised to all God's people on earth, but never yet experienced.

Several of the psalms support millennialism, envisioning the blessed reign of a Messianic king over God's people and all the nations. Psalms 2 and 72 are the best examples of this.

The promise of an earthly, glorious Messianic kingdom also resounds through the Hebrew prophets. Four familiar passages in Isaiah, for example, picture an ideal, earthy future for God's people prior to the final consummation. These are 1) Isaiah 2:2-4, where the promise is that the Lord's word will go from Jerusalem to teach all nations during a time of unprecedented peace; 2) Isaiah 9:6, 7, which introduces the promised divine Son who is to govern peacefully from David's throne; 3) Isaiah 11:1-9, where a Branch from Jesse (i.e., David) will judge and rule the earth in righteousness so extensive that even wild animals become harmless; and 4) Isaiah 65:17-25, which foretells that Jerusalem will become a source of unprecedented joy in a new earth where all peoples will celebrate the fruit of their labors without fear.

The same ideal future for God's people echoes through the other prophets. See, for example, Jeremiah 23:5, 6; 33:14-18; Daniel 2:44; Micah 4:1-8; and Zechariah 14:3-9.

This string of texts forms the backbone for our understanding that the present spiritual kingdom of God will someday be

transformed into a benevolent dictatorship at Christ's return from heaven. Under His reign, righteousness will finally cover the whole earth as the waters now cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14).

The millennial ideas of a golden age flow on into and through the New Testament in such texts as Matthew 25:31ff; Luke 1:32, 33, 68-79; 1 Corinthians 15:23-28; and Revelation 19:11-16 — to mention only a few.

Jesus and His apostles understood there will be a time of restoration and restitution on earth after Christ's return. In Acts 3:20, 21 Apostle Peter says that God will send Jesus to earth, though He is now in heaven "until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (NKJV).

What does Peter have in mind here about the great restoration? No specifics are offered in this verse, but he would surely be thinking of God's promises through the prophets of a bright future for God's people here on the earth, to bring them to an experience of liberty and peace in the house of David's seed — the Messiah. Thus, many of those ancient prophecies from Isaiah and other prophets will find their literal fulfillment in the millennial kingdom of the coming Christ!

In Matthew 19:28 Jesus describes the time of His coming like this: "Assuredly I say to you that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (NKJV). Note the elements of this

prophecy that harmonize with other verses listed or quoted above: Jesus coming to sit on His throne to judge the peoples, including Israel. This is the millennial kingdom.

The coming of Jesus will usher in a new era of the kingdom of heaven to last one thousand years. In this coming kingdom, Christ will be King of kings and Lord of lords. By this heavenly intervention, the meek will gain possession of their inheritance: the earth. This wonderful age to come was seen in John's vision:

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Revelation 5:9, 10).

Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years (20:6).

These texts well describe the future millennial reign of King Jesus here on planet Earth. Jesus will reign visibly on David's throne over the restoration and renewal of the earth when He returns. Although it will begin with victory over, and subjection of, the carnal kingdoms of the earth, God's kingdom will usher in a time of peace and joy, an atmosphere in which the meek will be perfectly at home.

How long will it last? The only Bible pas-

sage to specify the length of Christ's coming kingdom on earth is Revelation 20:1-7, where a one thousand-year reign is mentioned six times (vv. 2-7). The nature of the one thousand-year reign, according to this primary source, may be summed up as the binding of Satan (vv. 1-3), judgment (v. 4a), and the reign of the righteous as kings and priests with Christ on the earth (vv. 4b, 6).

After verse 6 in Revelation 20, the scene moves to the millennium's finale and postlude: Satan is loosed; the nations gather against Christ's kingdom and are destroyed; then comes the last resurrection and great white throne judgment with final rewards to the righteous and destruction of the wicked. Though these nine verses (7-15) describe a great climax to the millennium, they do not add much to our understanding of the one thousand years themselves.

One further New Testament text, 1 Corinthians 15:23-28, goes beyond any other to fill in the millennial outline of Revelation 20 and to confirm that a period of time must intervene between Christ's second advent and the final consummation of God's kingdom in eternity. Read it carefully:

23 - "But each one in his own order:

Christ the first-fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (NKJV).

24 - "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power" (NKJV).

25 - "For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet" (NKJV).

26 - "The last enemy that will be de-

stroyed is death” (NKJV).

27 – “For ‘He has put all things under His feet.’ But when He says ‘all things are put under Him,’ it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted” (NKJV).

28 – “Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all” (NKJV).

Notice that . . .

- verse 23 mentions the return of Christ, when the righteous dead will be raised.
- verse 24a says, “Then comes the end.” But wait: The words that follow make plain that these four words do *not* mean that the kingdom’s final fulfillment comes immediately at Christ’s return. On the contrary, verses 24b-27 explain that Jesus can deliver the restored earthly kingdom to His Father *only after He has put down all opposing authorities*. Many enemies of righteousness and peace must first be defeated.
- verse 26 says that the last enemy Christ will destroy is death. This corresponds with Revelation 20:12-15.
- verse 28 confirms that it is only when all things (including death) are subjected to Christ’s peaceful rule that Christ will then deliver up the kingdom to His Father so that God may become everything to everybody. Here, finally, is the perfect ending that will last forever.

Although the length of Christ’s interven-

ing rule goes unstated in 1 Corinthians 15, the sequence of events in this passage agree nicely with the one thousand-year reign of Revelation 20.

Combining the texts that foretell Christ's millennial kingdom of peace, we conclude that redeemed persons will be transformed to immortality at Christ's return, to rule and reign with Him for one thousand years. During that time, Jesus will rule all nations with a rod of iron, and many of the unredeemed will evidently live on to be taught God's truth from Zion during this age.

Because the only passage specifying the one thousand-year length of Christ's coming reign upon the earth is in the book of Revelation (20:1-6), some have seen this period as symbolic rather than a literal kingdom or length of time. This has given rise to various millennial views like a-millennialism, the belief that the one thousand years corresponds with Christ's present spiritual reign from heaven in the hearts of His people. A second variant view, known as post-millennialism, teaches that the Lord's return will happen only *after* a lengthy period in this age during which the gospel message will result in a virtual Christianizing of the earth.

By contrast, the Church of God (Seventh Day) holds a premillennial view of Revelation 20. We understand that the millennium is a literal age that begins when Christ returns to earth (Revelation 19:11-21) and the righteous dead are raised (1 Corinthians 15:20-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Excursus on the rapture, location of the millennium, and final fate of the wicked

One Bible passage in particular teaches that the living and resurrected saints will be “caught up” from the earth at Jesus’ return to meet the Lord as He comes with all His holy angels. The text is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17.

Readers will note that nothing is said here about a “secret” catching away of the church but rather a noisy “shout . . . voice of an archangel, and . . . trumpet of God” (NKJV), as the righteous dead are raised and the righteous living join them to welcome their returning Lord in the air.

So where will the saints be taken from that glorious occasion? Is this meeting in the air the start of a trip into heaven, or is there another plan for the Lord and His church? Many theories have been advanced:

1. The righteous proceed directly to heaven with Jesus to reign with Him forever there.
2. The righteous proceed for a few years to a place of safety from the Great Tribulation, then return with Christ to the earth.
3. Having met Christ in the air, the righteous proceed with Him to heaven for only a thousand years.
4. Having been caught up to meet Christ in the air, the righteous return with Him to the Mount of Olives to partici-

pate in subduing the nations drawn up in battle against Jerusalem.

Of these explanations, we understand the last to be the correct one, inasmuch as it combines the teachings of Acts 1:9-12; Zechariah 14:1-9; and Isaiah 2:1-4, considered earlier. We reject the popular rapture notion that Jesus comes secretly "for" the church and takes her to heaven prior to His public coming "with" the church.

For further evidence that we may expect God's eternal kingdom to include many pleasant and familiar elements of our earthly existence, the reader may consult these texts: Psalm 37:11, 22, 29, 34; Isaiah 45:18; Matthew 5:5; 1 Corinthians 15:35-54; and Revelation 5:10. The song around God's throne in the last mentioned verse confirms that this will happen here, not in heaven.

Based on the everlasting mercy of God and the many texts that speak of the final fate of the wicked as "perishing," "death," and "destruction," we reject the common view that the wicked will suffer the torments of hellfire for all eternity. Rather, we believe they will be annihilated and become as if they had never been (Obadiah 16b; John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Malachi 4:1-3; Matthew 10:28b).

III. Eternal Kingdom of God

With the fulfillment of all that's previewed in Revelation 20 and its correlative texts, the millennial era of God's kingdom will have been completed. All the dead will have been raised and the unbelieving

judged at the great white throne. The wicked will have been destroyed in the lake of fire, along with the Devil and hell — the grave. Sin and death will have forever been destroyed.

With the culmination of these events, the faithful redeemed will be ushered into the final and everlasting era of the kingdom, during which God's people dwell with Him — and He with them — in the heavenly Jerusalem forever! This is the new heavens and new earth wherein dwells only righteousness (2 Peter 3:13), described in the Bible's last two chapters, Revelation 21 and 22. To paint a complete picture of what God has in eternal store for those who love Him is not possible because it hasn't yet entered into our hearts and minds (1 Corinthians 2:9). The Spirit has provided a few insights into eternity through the Word (v. 10), however, so we turn to the final chapters of Revelation for our preliminary glimpses:

- The Holy City descends from heaven as the ultimate residence for both God and man, now in perfect covenant relationship (Revelation 21:1-7).
- The city, a perfect cube more than a thousand miles on each edge, is composed of the most precious and beautiful materials; both Hebrew and Christian components are included in the construction (vv. 10-21).
- The best of human honor and earthly achievement will be incorporated into the city (vv. 24, 26), while sorrow and pain, sin and death will be forever excluded (vv. 4, 8, 27; 22:15).

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- The glory of God, the light of the Lamb, and the river of life provide all that's needed for perfect healing and wholeness — world without end (21:22, 23; 22:1-5).

Other texts that apparently refer to this heavenly city are Psalm 46:4; Isaiah 25:8; 65:17; 66:22; Daniel 12:3; Matthew 13:43; John 14:2; Hebrews 11:10, 16; and 2 Peter 3:13. In other verses it is described as “eternal life,” “eternal glory,” or “the glory that shall be revealed.”

For many Christians, this great time and place of eternal peace and perfection is known simply as heaven. This word, used alone, is more the Bible's designation for God's current realm than for the domain He and His people will someday inhabit together.

From the widespread belief about heaven, one might suppose that going there would be a prominent biblical theme. It is not. Surprisingly to many, the Bible says little about people going away to God's heaven, either when they die or at any other time. Few verses, if any, support this popular notion. The term *kingdom of heaven* is an equivalent phrase for *kingdom of God*. It speaks of the character and Ruler of the kingdom much more than its location.

Where, then, will the eternal inheritance of the saints be? The Bible's message focuses not on the theory of us going there but on the fact that God came here in the person of His Son and that He will come again to complete the redemption of all things — His entire creation — for all eter-

nity (Ephesians 1:10). This is the promised new heavens and the new earth. This is the New Jerusalem that will come down from God, *out of heaven* (Revelation 21:1, 10).

Common, generic belief holds that Christians at least, if not every good person, die and go directly to heaven. Careful examination of the Scriptures, however, suggests another truth: The great eternity God has in store for His people — those who entrust themselves to the redemption in Christ — is better described as the *kingdom of God*. It is not entered at death but at the resurrection of the dead, when Jesus returns. Its ultimate expression will be experienced at the end of the millennial reign of Christ on earth, as the Holy City of Revelation 21 and 22 descends from heaven. Then we will truly enjoy the new heavens and the new earth, forever!

Conclusion

While the kingdom of God may be analyzed in terms of its progressive unfolding through the ages (as we have done in this study), it is important to see it also in terms of its unity. Indeed, there is only one kingdom, one King, and one people of God over whom He reigns forever.

We enter the kingdom of God when we turn to Him in faith, repentance, and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ until death (or at Christ's return). We will continue in His one kingdom when we are resurrected from the dead and given immortality (or are changed to immortality in a moment at His return). Then we will rule and reign with

Him for one thousand years. When the millennial age ends, the one kingdom of God will continue in its eternal state of perfect joy and peace with God and the Lamb in the heavenly city, New Jerusalem.

The Lord God omnipotent reigns!



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