HEAVEN on EARTH

R. ALAN STREETT
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To the members of
The Presidents’ Class
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Acknowledgments

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Discovering the Kingdom

*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*

Matthew 3:2

The concept of the kingdom of God is elusive. From the beginning of Christianity, the greatest minds have been baffled by it. Theologians have equated it variously with heaven, the church, Israel, Christendom, democracy, socialism, communism, an ethical ideal, an inward spiritual experience, Christ’s millennial reign, and the eternal state. No wonder there is so much confusion!

In more recent times, New Testament scholars have taken a renewed interest in the kingdom of God. Their inquiries have advanced our knowledge of the subject, but we have many more avenues to explore and questions to ask and answer.

For more than a decade, learning about the kingdom of God has been my all-consuming passion. In the course of my study, I have spent an inordinate amount of time reading the major scholarly and popular books and journal articles about it. I have enjoyed countless discussions and debates about the kingdom, and I’ve written about it, lectured on it, and taught courses about it. In my opinion, nothing is of more importance than correctly understanding the kingdom. It is the
overarching theme of the entire Bible, a thread that runs throughout it, and the great umbrella under which all other subjects are subsumed.

My goal is to introduce you to the kingdom of God in the hope that you too will become captivated by it. If I succeed, you will never be the same. Are you ready to embark on the adventure of a lifetime?

The journey begins in a garden (Genesis 1–2) and ends in paradise (Revelation 21–22). Along the way, we will meet many interesting characters and discover great treasures. Be forewarned, however—the trip is not for the faint of heart. We will encounter various obstacles, but the road signs are plentiful, and our maps are reliable. If we take our time to navigate carefully, we can reach our destination. If we succeed, our knowledge of the kingdom of God will be crisp and clear. Best of all, we will discover how to tap into the kingdom’s riches and enjoy them here and now.

Why Understanding the Kingdom Is Important

The gospel is essential to Christianity. The apostle Paul called it “the power of God to salvation” (Romans 1:16). But what is the gospel? We know the word means “good news,” but good news about what? And what about the phrase “to salvation”—what does it connote? Does it refer to going to heaven? Escaping hell? Having our sins forgiven? Gaining eternal life? Being declared righteous by faith? Inviting Jesus into our hearts?

These familiar and popular answers do not adequately define either “good news” or “salvation.” They are peripheral at best. At its core, the gospel is about the kingdom of God. The Gospel of Mark opens, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” A few verses later, it is described as “the gospel of the kingdom of God” (verse 14). There are not two gospels. There is only one. The good news of Jesus Christ and the good news of the kingdom are the same. Unfortunately, Jesus is often preached without reference to the kingdom. But apart from the kingdom, there is no gospel, and there is no salvation.

“Wait a second,” you might protest. “When I got saved, I never heard anything about the kingdom of God. I simply asked Jesus to be my Savior!”
I understand your concern. I had a similar experience, but like so many others, I was misguided. During my senior year at the University of Baltimore, a psychology professor shared his testimony with our class, concluding with the words, “You’re a sinner. You need to be saved. Pray and invite Jesus into your heart.”

That night as my head lay on the pillow, I heeded the advice. I said, “Jesus, forgive me of my sins and come into my heart.” I don’t know what I expected—heavenly choirs, shafts of moonbeams, great floods of emotion and tears—but whatever it was, it did not happen. The next night, I repeated the process. During the next three years, I prayed more than a thousand times but with no tangible results. I eventually entered seminary, hoping to find answers to my spiritual unrest. Despite the new environment, I continued following my destructive patterns of life without any ability to change.

I was not angry with God, but I was disappointed and disillusioned. Why had God not answered my prayers? Why did salvation seem to elude me?

I know I am not alone. Maybe you have been there and done that, and you haven’t noticed a significant change either. Possibly you took the four steps found in many salvation booklets, traced the Roman Road to salvation, or repeated the sinner’s prayer but without assurance of salvation or evidence of spiritual growth. Untold thousands have prayed the prayer, walked the aisle, or responded in some way to a gospel invitation without effectual results. Life goes on as before.

In my case, salvation didn’t take hold because my professor, although well intentioned, had a defective grasp of the gospel. He presented a truncated gospel that had little resemblance to the good news that Jesus and the apostles preached. Therefore it lacked the power to save. No wonder I was confused!

A faulty understanding of the gospel is the first pothole that stands in the way of our quest for the kingdom. To overcome this obstacle, let’s turn to the Scriptures for a correct definition of the gospel.

A New Paradigm

As a professor of evangelism, I must provide my students with
a clear and precise definition of the gospel. Unless we comprehend the true nature of the gospel, how can we expect to communicate it effectively?

If the goal of the gospel is simply to get people into heaven, as many believe, what is its relevance to daily life? Most people who hear the gospel will not die for years, so they will have little incentive to respond immediately. If the gospel has little or no relevance for the here and now, the logic for evangelism is weakened. It would be like me trying to sell you a front-row seat to a New York Yankees game for a date yet to be determined by the ball club sometime between now and 2080! You would not be likely to purchase a ticket. It may be a good deal, but where’s the urgency? Waiting would seem to be more prudent.

Professor William Abraham explains that there must be a logic for evangelism. The gospel must have relevance for the present and not only for the distant future. According to New Testament accounts, the imminent arrival of God’s kingdom (and not the promise of going to heaven) was the thrust of Jesus’s gospel sermons. It provided the rationale for evangelism. The words “gospel” and “kingdom” are so interconnected that the New Testament writers use the umbrella terms “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” 20 times to describe the good news of salvation.

When the message that Jesus and the apostles preached is compared to most contemporary gospel messages, the difference is like night and day. In many ways, the messages are complete opposites of each other. One emphasizes a future salvation, but the other invites people to enter the kingdom of God now. According to one, you have to wait to experience the blessings of the kingdom, but according to the other, the benefits of the kingdom are available for you to enjoy this moment while you are alive and well on planet earth.

A discovery of the kingdom of God and its relevance for today will revolutionize your life! Join me for a short jaunt through the New Testament. Get ready to be surprised by what lies ahead—the kingdom of God will leap off each page. By the end of this chapter, you are likely to be asking yourself, “How have I missed this all these years?”
John the Baptist and the Kingdom

According to the four Gospel writers, Jesus’s public ministry began with the appearance of John the Baptist, who called the Jews to turn away from their self-centered ways and toward the God of their forefathers. John’s message was simple and direct: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2).

I have long been able to quote this verse from memory, but I had not pondered its meaning until just a few years ago. Have you ever considered what this verse meant to John’s first-century audience?

First, John called on his audience to do something—“Repent!” They were to obey this command then and there without delay. The message was relevant for them.

Second, John gave them a reason for this action—“for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He did not say, “The kingdom is 2000 years away,” or “The kingdom is being delayed indefinitely.” Yet many popular Bible teachers and commentaries hold that the kingdom is entirely in the future. If that were the case, John missed the mark by a country mile, and his message had no application for his audience.

What do you think? Was John correct about the kingdom, or was he misguided? I will stick with the first option. John called the people on the banks of the Jordan to repent in order to prepare for the kingdom’s soon arrival.

Third, John saw no need to explain the phrase “kingdom of heaven” because Palestinian Jews of his day were already familiar with the term. They had long anticipated and eagerly awaited the appearance of a deliverer sent by God to defeat Israel’s enemies and usher in a golden age of universal peace, over which God would rule. Although the Jews had countless theories about how this would occur, they all understood the general scheme. In whatever manner it happened, John’s hearers needed to ready themselves lest they miss out on the kingdom.

Fourth, the words “at hand” mean the kingdom was near in time and in space. Both ideas are important. Many Jews believed in the imminent arrival of the kingdom (time) and that its advent would occur in their homeland (space). Even our English word “kingdom”
conveys these two concepts. A kingdom consists of a king and a domain. The people of God understood John to mean that God’s rule was “at hand” in both senses.

**Jesus and the Kingdom**

When John the Baptist was arrested and killed, “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’” (Mark 1:14-15). Immediately we notice that John and Jesus proclaimed the same message—the good news of the kingdom. But Jesus added a new twist by announcing, “The time is fulfilled.” The kingdom was no longer merely close by. Time was up. This intensified the kingdom message.

We might compare John’s and Jesus’s messages of the kingdom to an announcement of a pregnancy. A woman desires a child but seems unable to get pregnant. One day, she receives word that her life is about to change—she is expecting! This news brings great joy and expectation. Still, she must wait nine months for the baby’s arrival. In the meantime, she prepares herself in anticipation of the blessed event.

Then one day, she suddenly feels a twinge of pain. Labor begins—the time is *at hand*. As everyone waits with baited breath, the hour arrives and the baby is born—the time is *fulfilled*. A new day has dawned for everyone. The married couple become parents, and their parents become grandparents.

In like manner, the Old Testament prophets spoke of the arrival of the kingdom. Israel was pregnant with expectation. As the countdown begins, the years and months turn into weeks and days. Measured expectation is transformed into anxious anticipation. With the onset of labor, John the Baptist declares, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” His message foreshadows Jesus’s announcement—“The time is fulfilled.” The kingdom is birthed in the person and ministry of Jesus.

In Luke’s version, Jesus makes this announcement in a synagogue in Capernaum, near his hometown of Nazareth. After reading from the scroll of Isaiah, which speaks of the promised kingdom, Jesus concludes by saying, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). This verse offers more clues as to the manner of the kingdom’s arrival.
We first notice the words, “This Scripture is fulfilled.” Jesus is referring to the inspired words of Isaiah’s prophecy about the kingdom coming to earth.

Second, we are given the specific time of its fulfillment—today, not tomorrow or next year or in two millennia!

Finally, we are given a geographic indicator of the kingdom’s start—“in your hearing.” Right there in the midst of the synagogue crowd.

When we put the pieces together, we see that the kingdom arrived with Jesus as he launched his public ministry. The kingdom of God was no longer a future hope, but a present reality. As missionary strategist Lesslie Newbigin so insightfully remarked, “It now had a name and a face—the name and face of the man from Nazareth.” The waiting period was over, and God was in a climactic way initiating his work of salvation on earth.

Luke tells us that Jesus went on to perform many miracles (which pointed to the inbreaking of the kingdom). But when the crowds requested that he remain among them, he declined by saying, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent” (Luke 4:40-43). Jesus had a singular message. He was a herald of the kingdom. This is evidenced by Luke’s further comment that Jesus went throughout all of Galilee, “preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God” (Luke 8:1).

Jesus advised the apostles not to follow their faithless neighbors who worried about life’s daily needs, but instead to “seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you…for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:22-32).

Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom far and wide to every kind of person, including Nicodemus (John 3:3-5), a rich young ruler (Luke 18:24-25), a wise scribe (Mark 12:34), and a convicted thief (Luke 23:42-43). He used parables (Matthew 13), beatitudes (Matthew 5), and object lessons (Mark 14:25) to teach about the kingdom.

The First Disciples and the Kingdom

As an itinerant teacher, Jesus traveled with a group of disciples who assisted in his mission. He often sent them out on preaching assignments of their own, instructing them to “preach the kingdom of God”
(Luke 9:2). The narrative reveals that they followed orders: “So they departed and went through the towns, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere” (verse 6). Luke equates preaching the kingdom with preaching the gospel. The kingdom is the essence of the gospel message.

In Mark’s account of the same event, we learn that the apostles also “preached that people should repent” (Mark 6:12), which is the same response Jesus expected from his hearers. The disciples called on their listeners to reorient their lives toward God and his kingdom. The good news of the kingdom was relevant, germane, and applicable to their first-century audience.

Jesus invited some who responded positively to the gospel to join his preaching band, and he encouraged others to minister in their own communities. To an unnamed disciple in the latter category, Jesus commands, “You go and preach the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57-60). This shows that Jesus had only one message he wished to get across.

As his fame spread and his ministry grew, Jesus sent out 70 more followers to cities, instructing them, “Heal the sick there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” He also told them that if their message was rejected they should say to the townspeople, “The very dust of your city which clings to us we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near you” (Luke 10:1,9-11). Judgment was to be pronounced because the people scorned the good news of the kingdom’s arrival. They refused to repent, so they will perish.

On another occasion, when Jesus’s accusers charge him with using black arts and magic to perform exorcisms, he counters, “If I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20).

Do you see a pattern emerging? Every preacher mentioned in the four Gospels focused on the kingdom. It is the one constant, the central theme of the gospel message.

Prior to the ministry of John the Baptist, the kingdom existed only as a hope. John turned it into a living expectation. This can be seen in Jesus’s words to the Pharisees: “The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached” (Luke 16:16).
The coming of John the Baptist brought a paradigm shift. The Old Testament law and prophets provided God’s people with a moral guide. When the nation continually failed to abide by these ethical standards, God announced the coming of a future deliverer who would usher in the reign of God and invite penitents to come under his rule. The Baptist was the first to preach the nearness of the kingdom and to identify Jesus as this promised messianic ruler. But John was not the last. Others picked up the torch.

**The Early Church and the Kingdom**

Our journey continues as we step out of the four Gospels and into the book of Acts. In this exciting book, which spans the period between AD 30 and AD 64, Luke describes the early believers, apostles and lay people alike, spreading the kingdom message to the ends of the Roman Empire. He mentions that after Jesus was crucified and resurrected but before he ascended to heaven, he spent 40 days with his apostles, “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Stop and think about that for a moment. Jesus could have spoken about anything, but he chose to speak about one thing only—the kingdom. Thus, he ended his earthly ministry the same way he began it—declaring the gospel of the kingdom!

Have you ever wondered what Jesus actually said about the kingdom of God during those six weeks? To find out, you can read about his postresurrection appearances. Check out the Great Commission, for instance, and you will find Jesus saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). This is one example of Jesus “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” How so?

First, Jesus claims to possess authority over the entire creation. As Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), theologian and prime minister of the Netherlands, famously said, “There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus does not cry out: ‘This is mine!’” Second,
his reach extends beyond heaven to earth. This means Jesus has authority over Caesar and client kings, so he is the King over all other kings. Those claiming to be kings are obligated to bow before him. Third, authority is given to him. He rules on God’s behalf.

Fourth, he calls upon his followers to make disciples of all the nations. The significance of this command must not be understated. For the early Christians, obedience to the Great Commission involved nothing less than going to nations that Rome had conquered and claimed as its own and calling on the people to switch their allegiance from Caesar to Christ. Such an effort was considered treasonous. The kingdoms of Christ and Caesar were on a collision course. The new disciples were required to pledge their loyalty to a foreign King in a public baptism in the name of a God who was foreign to Rome. This could mean the death penalty, especially if the new converts were Roman citizens or served in a governmental capacity.

So this is what it means for Jesus to speak of “the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). When you read other post-resurrection accounts, ask yourself what else Jesus had to say about the kingdom.

As Jesus stood on the mount before his ascension to heaven, he promised his followers that he would one day return to earth. But until then they should be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts is the account of their heroic efforts to complete that commission. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find them preaching about the kingdom. From start to finish, the book of Acts chronicles their evangelistic exploits. For instance, we find Peter on the Day of Pentecost declaring that God raised up and exalted Jesus “to sit on his throne,” a kingly position of authority (2:30-32). We later follow Philip, the lay evangelist, as he travels to Samaria and preaches “the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 8:12).

At Thessalonica, the apostle Paul and his team are charged with sedition for teaching and acting “contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus” (17:7). Two chapters later Paul moves into Asia Minor and speaks boldly in the synagogues “concerning the things of the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). In his farewell address to
the Ephesian elders, he reminds them that he had spent three full years in their city testifying “to the gospel of the grace of God,” which he describes as “preaching the kingdom of God” (Acts 20:24-25).

From there Paul goes to Jerusalem, where he is arrested for preaching the gospel. He is eventually taken to Rome, where he is placed under house arrest, awaiting trial. Although fettered to a soldier, he uses his visitation privileges as opportunities to proclaim the gospel. “Many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God” (Acts 28:23). A few verses later, the book of Acts closes with these words of summary: “Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Acts 28:30-31). Thus, the book of Acts closes in the same way it opens. The kingdom of God serves as bookends.

In Paul’s magnum opus on the nature of salvation, he asks the believers in Rome several questions:

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!” (Romans 10:14-15).

The quote about preaching the gospel and bringing glad tidings comes from the book of Isaiah, where the content of the gospel is revealed as “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7). For the apostle Paul, the gospel is about the reign of God and particularly about his reign over earth through Jesus Christ.

Look at the Record

Without a doubt, the good news of the kingdom is the central theme of all first-century evangelistic preaching. The list of preachers includes John the Baptist, Jesus, the 12 apostles, an unnamed disciple, 70 disciples, Peter, Philip, and Paul.
When we consider the amount of time the founding church leaders spent teaching and preaching about the kingdom, shouldn’t we expect the same from our evangelists and pastors? Where is the gospel of the kingdom being preached today? I am not referring to the future reign of Christ, as important as that is, but the kingdom of God as a present reality. If Jesus and the apostles walked the earth today, would they even recognize the gospel message heralded from most pulpits?

**Gospel Counterfeits**

Product counterfeiting is illegal. Dishonest manufacturers and distributors cheat people out of tens of billions of dollars a year. Every day unsuspecting customers buy electronics, athletic clothes, watches, and a myriad of other items that carry the brand or logo of a reputable company, only to discover later the disappointing merchandise was a knockoff. A counterfeit Rolex might look like the real McCoy at first glance, but it doesn’t work like a Rolex. I know!

A group of my students gave me one when I left my job as a professor to become a pastor. They said they wanted to demonstrate how much they loved and appreciated me. When I opened the box to see a beautiful gold Rolex, I was overwhelmed. As I began to thank them profusely, they nodded, smiled sheepishly, and said they hoped I would remember them whenever I checked the time of day. The fake Rolex stopped working in less than 24 hours! P.T. Barnum would have said I was the victim of humbug.

But counterfeiting the gospel is not a laughing matter. It is so serious, in fact, that the apostle Paul excoriates the Galatians for “turning away…to a different gospel.” He then pronounces judgment on those perverting the gospel: “If we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:6-8). We might expect a cult to endorse a false gospel, but we should not expect our churches and trusted parachurch organizations to distort the gospel.

Christians rarely set out to twist the gospel. But they often preach a gospel that is shaped more by tradition and culture than by the Scriptures.
I must add a caveat. This book is not intended to be a diatribe against any Christian group or minister. I have nothing but the highest regard for all who answer God’s call to ministry and sacrificially devote their time and energy to the cause of Christ. Rather, I am demonstrating that the gospel is about the kingdom as defined by Jesus. Because it is good news in the fullest sense of the term, it has relevance for us here and now on earth. Salvation, as we shall see in the next few chapters, is less about heaven and more about wholeness of life. From start to finish the good news is about how God’s people of every generation can enjoy kingdom benefits and blessing while they are still alive, not only after they die and go to heaven.

If Jesus came to bring abundant life (John 10:10), why don’t we experience it? I hope you will know the answer by the end of the book. More importantly, you will know how to apply the principles of the kingdom to your daily life and tap into a wealth of divine resources.