



The Kingdom of God

PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING



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BY J. MARK TERRY

TEACHING CONCERNING the kingdom of God can be found throughout the New Testament. Indeed, from Matthew to Revelation, the New Testament writers mention the kingdom again and again. Jesus often spoke of the kingdom. For example, when beginning His preaching in Galilee, Jesus declared, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).¹ Sometimes, Jesus called it the “kingdom of God,” and other times, “the kingdom of heaven.” The terms mean the same thing; Jesus used them interchangeably.² In many of His parables, Jesus taught about the kingdom. For example, Jesus said, “the kingdom of heaven is

Left and below: A mustard seed and a field of mustard plants in the springtime. Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed, which a man sowed in his field (Matt 13:31).

Right: From Lachish, Israel, scepters made of hippopotamus tusk, each has a pomegranate tip; dated to the 14th–13th centuries BC.

like a mustard seed” (Matt. 13:31). Likewise, the apostle Paul often referred to the kingdom of God in his letters. Paul wanted all of the new believers in his churches to understand this important doctrine. His writings have added much to our understanding of the kingdom of God.

Nature of God’s Kingdom

The word “kingdom” is the English translation of the Greek word, *basileia*, which refers to kingship, the rule of a king. This word points toward God’s sovereignty. In human affairs it refers to a territory that a king ruled, like King Herod’s kingdom. When referring to God, “kingdom” speaks, however, of God’s sovereign rule, His rule over the physical universe and the spiritual realm. Of course, in His kingdom God rules over the lives of people who choose to submit to His loving rule.³

Every kingdom must have a king, and the New Testament exalts Jesus Christ, the King. The apostle Paul explained this emphatically, “Then comes the end, when he [Jesus] hands over the kingdom to God

the Father, when he abolishes all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he puts all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be abolished is death” (1 Cor. 15:24-26). Paul was teaching about Christ’s reign as the messianic King. During His reign Christ will defeat all of God’s enemies, the last of which will be death. When King Jesus has vanquished all enemies, He will hand the kingdom over to His Father.⁴ Paul referred to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and he also proclaimed that Jesus rules the kingdom of God.

Citizens of God’s Kingdom

A king must have subjects, and a kingdom must have citizens. Who are the citizens in God’s kingdom? In 1 Corinthians 6:9-20, the apostle Paul explained who can become a citizen of God’s kingdom and who cannot. Interestingly, Paul began by listing those who cannot gain citizenship. In verses 9 and 10, he lists those whom God will exclude: the unrighteous, sexually immoral,



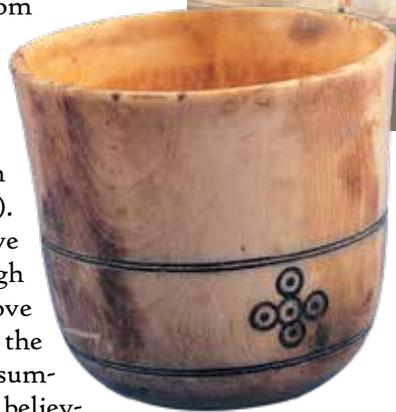
SCYPTERS: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ ISRAEL MUSEUM/ JERUSALEM (13/9/1747)

MUSTARD PLANTS: ISTOCK PHOTO

idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, abusers, and swindlers. Paul does not mean a person must be perfect in order to inherit the kingdom. Rather, a believer “may fall into these sins and be forgiven, as was David [who committed adultery]; but no Christian would *practice* such sins (1 John 3:1-10).”⁵

Paul then explained who can inherit the kingdom of God. These blessed citizens formerly engaged in the sins listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; however, the Lord has forgiven and transformed them. Paul declared, “And some of you used to be like this. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11). This verse means these citizens believed in Jesus Christ; He washed away their sins, declared them righteous, and began making them like Himself—a process called “sanctification.” In other passages the apostle explained that these blessed citizens were rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to God’s kingdom (Col. 1:13). Paul also stated that the citizens of God’s kingdom will endure suffering and persecution faithfully (2 Thess. 1:5). By continuing to serve the Lord, even though persecuted, they prove they are worthy of the kingdom of God. In summary, “the actions of believers should be worthy of those who belong to the kingdom.”⁶

Paul’s teaching applies to believers of every age. Thus kingdom citizens today should fulfill their duties. They should demonstrate loyalty to their King. They



Left: Coptic wine cup, ivory, which would have been used in a Lord’s Supper service. Most likely each worshiper drank from the same cup, which was refilled for each

person. The cup dates from the 7th–9th centuries AD.

Above: The Mamertine prison, where Paul was imprisoned at one time. The prison

itself is beneath the church of Giuseppe dei Falegname in modern Rome. The lower chamber was probably initially a cistern and dated to the 6th cent. BC.

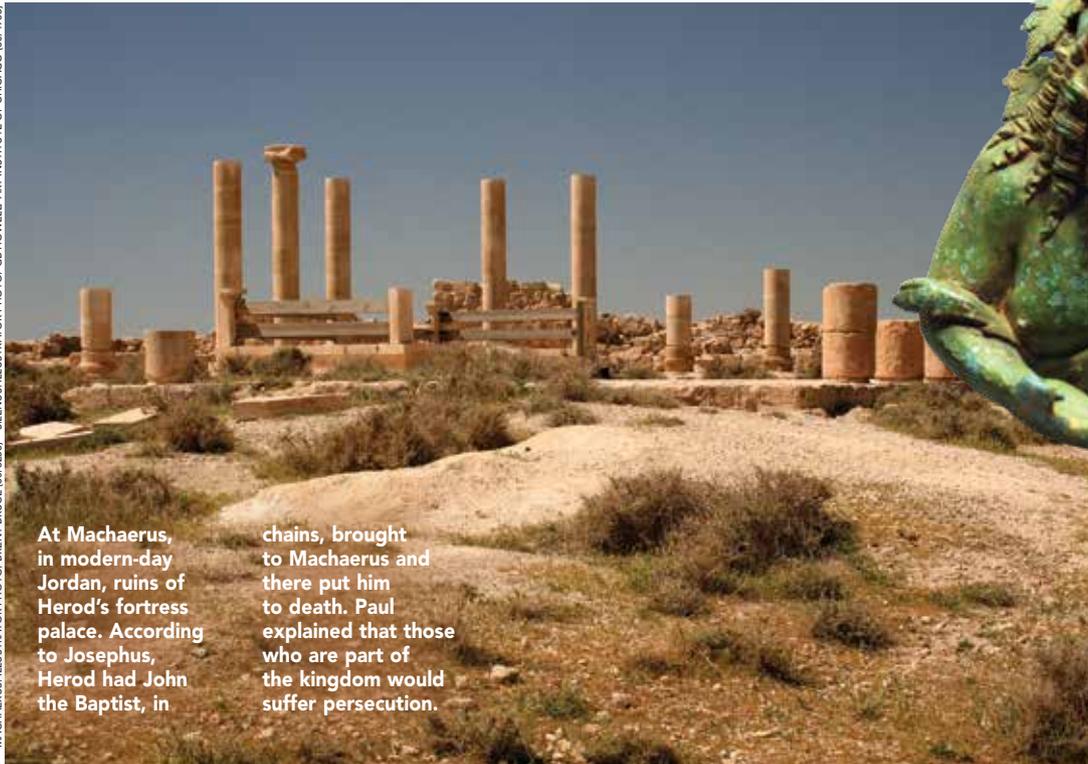
should praise and honor Him. They should obey His commandments, and they should expand His kingdom. One way to expand God’s kingdom is to invite others to join the kingdom and accept Jesus as Savior, Lord, and King.

Establishing God’s Kingdom

When will God’s kingdom be established? That is the question Jesus’ disciples raised just before His ascension into heaven. They asked, “Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?”

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At Machaerus, in modern-day Jordan, ruins of Herod's fortress palace. According to Josephus, Herod had John the Baptist, in

chains, brought to Machaerus and there put him to death. Paul explained that those who are part of the kingdom would suffer persecution.



Above: A bronze bust of Silenus, the often-inebriated companion of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine. The bust likely decorated a piece of furniture; 1st cent. AD. Drunkards are excluded from the kingdom of God.

(Acts 1:6). The disciples were asking about an earthly kingdom. Believers have repeated that question countless times through the centuries since.

The New Testament speaks of the kingdom of God as both a present reality and future hope. Many Bible teachers have explained that God's kingdom is *already* and *not yet*. Why do they say that? Both John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2) and Jesus (4:17) preached that the kingdom had arrived. Jesus inaugurated it. Yet, Jesus spoke of the kingdom as a future hope. For example, during the last supper Jesus told His disciples, "I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (26:29). So, how can Christians understand this? Herschel Hobbs explained it this way:

So, in truth, the kingdom may be seen as having come when

the king appeared; it is coming in the sense of being established in believers' hearts; it will come in final consummation at the Lord's return. Jesus taught that the kingdom is here. He taught His disciples to pray for the kingdom to come, and that at the end of the age the king will come in great power and glory.⁷

Celebrating God's Kingdom

Every year at Christmas, performances of Handel's Messiah thrill our hearts and bless our souls. When the cord sounds for the "The Hallelujah Chorus," every person in the audience stands. Tradition claims that standing began in 1743 with England's King George II. For believers, though, standing can be a way to honor the King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ. The audience listens as the choir sings the triumphant words from Revelation 11:15: "The kingdom of the world has become

the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever." As the anthem of praise builds, the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses echo each other, singing "hallelujah" again and again, in a rising tide of jubilant praise. Even so, all believers should join in singing praise to the King—"He will reign forever and ever, hallelujah." 🕯

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
2. William W. Stevens, *Doctrines of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 286.
3. Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1996), 84.
4. George Eldon Ladd, "Kingdom of God," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 29.
5. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Wise: 1 Corinthians* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010). WORDsearch, chap. 5; emphasis added.
6. Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2014), 149.
7. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 85.

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