

7 April 2024

THE KINGDOM OF HOPE—AN INTRODUCTION

1. INTRO

- A. We've come a long way in our study of Matthew's Gospel. We've gone from Jesus' birth to the calling of the disciples, and we're midway through a long series of teachings from Jesus to his followers. If you've read through Matthew before, you'll know that the section we're approaching is known as the 'Kingdom' parables.
 - i. Now, Ian introduced us to the idea of parables a few weeks ago. In the ancient world, hypothetical stories were a common way for teachers to get their point across. It's certainly not limited to the New Testament, many religious and non-religious teachers utilized parables to get their points across.
 - ii. But the *Kingdom* parables are a slightly different animal...they've got a particular, unified focus on the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew often puts it. Which might lead us to ask...
- B. The Kingdom of God—what is it?
 - i. It may sound a bit like one of those things we *should* technically be able to define easily, but perhaps not as readily in practice.
 - ii. We've actually already seen Jesus mentioning the idea of the Kingdom of God already quite a few times. In the Kingdom parables, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, and later on Jesus will say that the Kingdom belongs to little children. So, if Matthew's Gospel is anything to go by, we're approaching a definition potentially linked to table sauces and bouncy castles. It's not a particularly precise definition.
 - iii. And, just to be clear, contemporary Christians are often no help either! You'll hear people talking about 'Kingdom work', usually without specifying what they actually mean by it. Some people see 'Kingdom' work as strictly applying to evangelism, sharing the gospel message, whereas others see it as specifically Christian social engagement, or Christian entrepreneurship, or even Christian engagement in politics.
 - iv. I suspect that the levels of difficulty here are partly due to the fact that there isn't any point where one of Jesus' followers bravely raises his or her hand and says 'Excuse me, Jesus, would you mind explaining just what this Kingdom you're talking about actually is?' There isn't a single

verse or parable that lays things out plainly. That would certainly have made my job easier this morning! But that we *don't* have examples of Jesus' first listeners asking about the Kingdom suggests to me that there was some broad understanding of what Jesus was on about. That being the case, we need to seek to understand the Kingdom of God the way any of Jesus' Jewish listeners would have understood it. And that calls for a different sort of teaching from us here at the front.

- v. On that basis, over the next seven weeks, we're taking a break from our verse by verse exploration of Matthew's Gospel and doing something a little different. We're going to work out a definition of what the Kingdom of God is, and explore how we see that theme running across the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Each week will be rooted in a particular passage from the Bible, and a particular period in biblical history, but the aim here is provide a big-picture overview, something to bring all of us up to speed so that we can engage with the rest of Matthew's Gospel in a more informed manner.

1. *One extra point: If any of you are interested in this topic and want to do a bit of wider reading, I've ordered some books that you might find helpful. If you're a bit newer in your faith, or perhaps haven't read much Christian writing, I'd really encourage you to check out Vaughan Roberts' book 'God's Big Picture', which will serve as a nice companion piece to this series of talks. If you've not yet read 'God's Big Picture', Carolyn is going to lead a group through it next month which would be well worth your time.*

2. *If you've already read 'God's Big Picture' and want to go a bit deeper still, I've also ordered some copies of Patrick Schreiner's book called 'The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross'. Schreiner is a professor at Western Seminary in Portland, and I think this book is a really good balance of helpful information without being too nerdy. Our book stall is open to everybody, take what you'd like but please read what you take!*

2. DEFINING 'THE KINGDOM OF GOD'

- A. So then, how are we going to go about defining the Kingdom of God. I took an initial stab at a definition, which I brought to the teaching team and we kicked it around a bit until we came up with the following, which I hope we will eventually be able to remember off the top of our heads: **The Kingdom of God is: God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan,**

and in God's timing. I'll say that again, **The Kingdom of God is: God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan, and in God's timing.** Let's unpack that a bit:

- i. God's rule—that is, God's ultimate sovereign authority. He's the King.
 - ii. Over God's people—you can't really have a King without subjects. God rules over all of creation, but he has a special relationship with men and women, who are made in his image.
 - iii. In God's creation—the Kingdom of God isn't just a nice idea, a sort of unofficial 'code of conduct' that exists only in our minds, it's inextricably tied to the physical world God created. This is what Sally Lloyd Jones is getting at in the *Jesus Storybook Bible* when she talks about God's creation, people, birds, and flowers alike, each having a song to sing—that 'God made us. He loves us. He is very pleased with us'.¹
 - iv. By God's plan—the idea here is that we're not just bumbling along in a random sea of chance. God has set a plan in motion from the earliest chapters of the Bible. It's a rescue plan, but it's also something bigger—the inauguration of his Kingdom. More on that later.
 - v. In God's timing—if there's one thing that God's people consistently get wrong, both in the Bible and the rest of Christian history, it's our understanding of God's timing. From the Israelite's cries of 'Are we there yet?' in the wilderness, to the expectation of the Messiah, to the contemporary church's obsession with the return of Jesus—usually tied quite tenuously to whatever happened in the middle east that month—we have a history of making mountains out of molehills, and often missing the forest for the trees in the process. God accomplishes things in his timing, not ours.
- B. This morning we're going to look at how we can understand the Kingdom of God as represented in the earliest part of the Bible, in the book of Genesis. And it's at this point that I'm going to invite Ruth to come up and read our passage from Genesis 2.

3. GENESIS 2:4-9; 15-25

⁴This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

¹ Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), p. 235.

⁵ Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, ⁶ but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. ⁷ Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

⁸ Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

¹⁸ The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

¹⁹ Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ The man said,
“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

4. THE KINGDOM & GOD’S CREATION

A. Thanks very much, Ruth. This is perhaps one of the most familiar Bible passages, possibly because most people make it at least part way through

Genesis before scuppering our through the Bible in a year reading plans! There's obviously a lot here that we could talk about: the nature of humanity, the roles that men and women play in creation, how science and religion work together. Those are all interesting and important points, and we're going to have to save all of them for another time because this morning we're focussing on the Kingdom of God. How do we see the Kingdom of God represented here? Let's look at it in light of our definition:

- i. God's **rule**: Let's look at how this passage describes God. A good way to do this is to pick out the verbs that the writer uses. Verse 4 says 'God made', verse 5 says that it's God who sent rain, verse 7 God formed a man, verse 8 God planted a garden, verse 9 God makes things grow, verse 15 God takes the man and puts him to work, verse 16 he commands him, and so on...
 1. *What do we make of this? Well, I think this passage is actively and intentionally trying to portray God as powerfully sovereign. If we were to compare this passage against some of the other creation epics from the same time period, they don't portray the gods with this sort of power and initiative.*
- ii. Moving on, we've got God's rule **over God's people**: Well at the start at least, it's 'person', but we end up with two people by the end of the passage. Verse 4 gives us this really visual, almost tender image of God bringing life from lifeless dirt. Almost like the way a child makes a sculpture out of sand on the beach, God carves out a human man, Adam, and breathes life into him. But that's not all—God doesn't get Adam started and then clock out, he remains engaged with him. He gives him a job tending the garden, he gives him boundaries of what he should and shouldn't do, he puts Adam in charge of tending to his creation, and finally he provides him with a companion, a helper, his wife Eve.
 1. *There's plenty we could say about this passage and its implications for humanity, but what I think we should focus on here is the extent to which God is closely involved with Adam and Eve. And within our framework of God's kingdom, note that the King is deeply concerned with his subjects, on a personal level—on an actual first name basis. God isn't a distant king, he speaks to his people, he provides for them.*
- iii. Let's keep going: God's rule, over God's people, **in God's creation**. Now, on the one hand this is pretty self-evident, we've literally got a host of

verses telling us about how God specifically and intentionally created a space for his people to live his presence and to thrive there.

1. *But there's actually something even deeper here, that we might miss if we simply read with contemporary, Western eyes. Stephen Dempster, an Old Testament scholar, suggests that part of what it means for Adam and Eve to bear God's image is to take part in kingly activities. Believe it or not, gardening was one of them! Listen to what he writes: 'It is interesting that in the ancient Near East one of the tasks of kings was to be a gardener. Not only were kings to exercise their power by military conquest, but also by farming and cultivation near their palaces.'*² So for ancient readers, God assigning gardening to Adam and Eve wasn't the hobby or chore that it is for us, it was actually giving them responsibility like kings might have.

iv. So far we've seen God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, we've got two more. The next one is **by God's plan**. By God's plan. These verses show us just that, don't they. We see God as a bit of a master architect, creating flora and fauna and indeed entire ecosystems. But there's a bigger plan spinning up here too.

1. *For example, as we read the text, we see that just like Adam wasn't created to be alone, even as a couple they weren't intended to be alone. If we hop back one chapter, in Genesis 1:28 God commands his creation—including the humans bearing his image—to 'be fruitful and increase in number'.*

a. *Now, I want to flag something here briefly. This verse has often been used as a stick to beat people with, and it's accordingly caused a lot of hurt. If you're here this morning and you're single and would love to be a parent, if you're a couple trying to conceive, if you're grieving the loss of a child, I want you to know categorically that 1) We love you and want to support you; and 2) you are not somehow failing to follow God's plan. If you dread being asked by friends or a family member when you intend to start a family, this verse is not intended to add to your burden. This is specific guidance to Adam and Eve at the dawn of human civilization. Their obedience to God literally enables us to be*

² Stephen Dempster, *The Return of the Kingdom: A Biblical Theology of God's Reign* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024), 23.

here today, both physically and spiritually, but we shouldn't see this as something that God expects everyone to fulfil literally. We'll unpack just how Adam and Eve's offspring fit into this plan a little more in just a bit.

- v. Ok, last part of the definition, hopefully you'll remember it by now! God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan, **in God's timing**. In God's timing. There is an inherent purpose to not only *what* God does, but *when* God does it.
 - 1. *We can see this idea at work in various parts of the Bible. The writer of Ecclesiastes says that God 'has made everything beautiful in its time' and that 'He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.'* (Ecclesiastes 3:11) *God absolutely could have snapped his proverbial fingers and established an earth with billions of people on it, perfectly formed and developed, with nobody having to do anything. But he didn't, from the very start he has shown that in making men and women in his image, he is purposefully inviting them to rule and tend to his creation. God plants the garden, it's slow, it's purposeful, it's set up in such a way that the results are not instant. Things take time to grow, populations take time to expand. And this expands further as the bigger picture of the biblical story unfolds: The calling of Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, and the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Israel all happen in God's timing. And ultimately this is a reminder of Jesus' death and resurrection, as the Apostle Paul says multiple times: 'You see, at just the right time, while we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.'* (Romans 5:6)

5. PARADISE LOST?

- A. If you know the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, you already know what happens in Chapter 3. If you don't, the short summary is that there is a tree which God had forbidden his people to eat from, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan, in the form of a serpent, slithers into the Garden and interacts with Eve. He plants seeds of doubt into her mind.
 - i. John Milton, in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, paints a little more emphasis into the scene. In the poem the Serpent gets close to Eve and says 'One fatal tree there stands, of Knowledge called, forbidden them to taste. Knowledge forbidden? Suspicious, reasonless! Why should their lord

envy them that? Can it be a sin to know? Can it be death?’³ And Eve, persuaded by the serpent’s argument, eats from the tree and shares the fruit with Adam as well, and God expels them from the Garden.

- ii. And some of you here might be thinking that the serpent’s questions make a good bit of sense! After all, what is wrong with the knowledge of good and evil? Isn’t that a good thing?
 1. *Well, yes, knowing right from wrong is a good thing...it’s also something that Adam and Eve already had! Part of the difficulty of this passage is the trickiness of unpacking ancient Hebrew terms. The word for ‘knowledge’ here is ya’da, which in it’s loosest sense does mean ‘to know’. Many Old Testament scholars agree that the best way of understanding the term ‘knowledge’ in Genesis 3 is that of **determination**. The historian John Dickson has a helpful line here, he writes: ‘This is the tree of the determination of good and evil. It is not that God does not want Adam to know the difference between good and evil; that wouldn’t make sense of the narrative, in any case, since God’s command not to eat from this particular tree presupposes that Adam was able to comprehend that it would be wrong to go against God’s wishes. The real point seems to be that God does not want Adam to imagine that he is free to choose what is good and what is evil. That prerogative belongs to God alone.’⁴*
 - a. *This is a temptation for all of us, isn’t it? Fighting vigorously for the right to determine what we think is good and bad? The entire concept of a ‘victimless crime’ seems tailor made for this.*
- iii. Adam and Eve, in trying to determine good and evil on their own terms, tried to usurp an authority that belongs to God alone. They rejected the law and boundaries of the Kingdom of God and tried to establish a Kingdom of their own terms. And the results were disastrous. We only need to look at the following chapters to see a continual cycle of people trying to determine good and evil for themselves—Cain’s murder of Abel, the cities around Noah before the flood, the behaviour of Noah’s children *after* the flood, the tower of Babel—literally trying to build up a city to reach to the heavens on the merits of our own greatness!

³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV.

⁴ John Dickson, *A Doubter’s Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), p. 39.

6. A GLIMMER OF HOPE

A. You might be thinking at this stage, well this is all a bit of a downer! But, in the short time we've got left, I want to point out something from Genesis 3. In verse 15, we have a brief moment where God is cursing the serpent for his role in the deception of Adam and Eve. God says 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.'

i. As a boy, I initially thought this was a sort of Indiana Jones-like thing that explained why people don't like snakes. But of course there's more to it. You see, Adam and Eve's disobedience didn't thwart the establishment of God's Kingdom. Even though they're expelled from the Kingdom, God still rules, and he is still going about his plans, and he's actually going to use Adam and Eve's descendants to bring them to fruition. This isn't game over. It's actually just beginning.

1. *It is this offspring of the woman, Jesus, who will ultimately crush the serpent's head. We've already seen glimpses of this in Matthew's Gospel. Early on, when Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he passes the test where Adam and Eve failed. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus undermines Satan and releases people from his grip. And in the cross, which we've just celebrated, Satan is dealt a mortal blow.*

2. *And what's more, the cross work of Christ doesn't just bring about a restoration to what Adam and Eve had in Eden, it brings us into a union with Christ. What God's building, and our ultimate destination, is a new heaven and earth, where we will not only be citizens but rulers alongside Christ. But more on that later...*

B. We'll see, in the next six weeks, just how much God was committed to bringing about his Kingdom here on earth. But what's really interesting is that he doesn't just snap his fingers and change everything, he uses people to bring it about, and he does it in his timing. People just like us, in places just like Edinburgh. And things don't always go the way we'd imagine, but God works in and through quite frankly at times a bunch of losers to bring his Kingdom about. And the good news is that he still does today!

i. A few thoughts as I wrap up: For many of us in the room, we have the privilege of knowing that we are part of God's kingdom. This doesn't mean we're off the hook though. It would be easy to look at examples in the Bible where God's people get it wrong and assume that we're not capable of making the same mistakes. Have you ever sat back though and

asked yourself 'In what areas am I trying to undermine God's rule and set up my own little kingdom?' If there is an area of your life that you don't particularly want God involved in, then there's a good chance you're trying to undermine his rule. Following Jesus means living as a citizen of God's Kingdom, and following its laws, which Matt will unpack a bit more next time.

- ii. And finally, if you're here this morning and you wouldn't say you're a follower of Jesus, I want to invite you to reflect as well. I want to ask you to reflect on the sort of God who identifies himself as a gardener, a cultivator, a grand designer. A God who is intimately concerned with his creation, and who demonstrates a profound love for that creation time and time again. I hope you'll stick with us as we unpack the idea of the Kingdom of God, but mostly I hope that you'll get to know this King better.
- iii. Let's take half a minute to reflect on these questions, and then Ellyn and the band will come back up and lead us in a song that really captures this story of redemption.