

# The Kingdom of God

by Harris Franklin Rall

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*The Kingdom of God is God's rule in the world, a new world without evil and oppression, where God's will is done, and it is both inner and spiritual, and social in its meaning and consequence.*

**Scripture:** Daniel 2:44, Matthew 5:3, Matthew 7:15, Matthew 13:44, Matthew 25:31, Mark 2:9, Mark 4:26, Mark 10:35, Luke 17:20

**Topics:** "Kingdom Of God", "Christian Discipleship"

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## Description

Harris Franklin Rall delves into the concept of the Kingdom of God as portrayed in the Gospels, emphasizing the imminent arrival of the expected Kingdom that both John and Jesus proclaimed. While the Jewish belief in the Kingdom centered around God's rule leading to Israel's triumph, Jesus introduced a different perspective, focusing on the reign of righteousness, peace, and goodwill under a loving and compassionate God. Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is a precious gift, offering forgiveness, eternal life, and the ultimate fulfillment of seeing God. He highlighted the importance of obedience and service to others as essential aspects of entering and living in the Kingdom, challenging his followers to embody the spirit of righteousness and love.

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## Transcript

"The kingdom of God" is a phrase that meets us throughout the Gospels. As we have seen, John began with this message and Jesus made it his own. Both declared that the expected Kingdom was near at hand. The same thought was in the minds of all the people. They were ready to ask of John as of Jesus, "Is he the Messiah who will bring in the Kingdom?" Jesus' deeds of healing stirred their expectation: "Perhaps this is he." And when, at last, he entered Jerusalem the multitude was ready to shout, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord: Blessed is the kingdom that cometh, the kingdom of our father David" (Mark II. 9, 10). The people were especially interested at this time. Rome's rule was becoming intolerable. The deliverance must be near at hand.

The thought of the Kingdom was an essential part of Jewish belief. It sprang from their faith in God. It really meant the kingship of God, God's rule. The earth was the Lord's. If there was evil in it, if his people were oppressed, that could only be for a time. The day must come when he would overthrow every power and rule himself. "And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed. And the kingdom... shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High" (Dan 2:44; 7:27). Here was the heart of their hope--the rule of God meant for them the rule of Israel. God would

overthrow her enemies and set Israel upon the throne.

Jesus too believed that the rule of God was coming in the earth, that there would be a new world without evil and oppression and wrong. He proclaimed the good news that this rule was near at hand. And yet the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching had a different meaning. Nothing is said about Rome, nothing of the overthrow of Israel's enemies and her triumphant rule. What he has to say does not concern men as Jews, but men as men. He even bids them render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's. He declares that many shall come from the east and the west and sit down in the Kingdom while Jews themselves are cast out. The real difference lay in the different thought of God. If the Kingdom means the rule of God, then it is the nature of God that decides what that rule shall be. For the Jews Jehovah was King of Israel and his kingship meant Israel's rule. For Jesus the King was Father, holy and loving, and Father of all men. The rule of such a God could not mean armies and thrones; it must mean the reign of righteousness and peace and good will which Jesus set forth as the heart of God.

For Jesus the kingdom of God was, first of all, a gift, the highest good that man could desire. It is like the treasure which the man found in the field, for whose sake he sold all that he had that he might buy the field. It is like the pearl to gain which the merchant parted with all that he possessed (Matt 13:44-46). Having this, everything else would be added to a man (Matt 6:33). At its highest this treasure means to see God (Matt 5:8). For that reason the first gift of God's rule is forgiveness by which we are admitted to God's fellowship (Luke 1:77, 24:47). Elsewhere Jesus uses the word "life," or the term "eternal life," as meaning the same as the Kingdom, as will be seen by comparing Mark 10:17, 30 with 10:23 and Matt 7:14 with 7:21. For Jesus the rule of God was the great hope of men; it meant the overcoming of all evil, the coming of all good. For that reason the message is called gospel, "good news." Matt 11:25-30, one of the most beautiful passages in the Gospels, breathes this spirit of joy, while at the same time its closing verses suggest some of the blessings of the Kingdom.

But the coming rule of God meant also a challenge and a test. Who were the men who could meet such a God? The test that Jesus puts is a very simple one. It is the test of obedience springing from a true life within. The test of the tree is the fruit. "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but, he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 7:15-23). Only such a life would stand in that day (Matt 7:24-27). In another passage Jesus tells more particularly what this obedience means, that it is the service of our fellow men in their need, no matter who they are (Matt 25:31-46). Such obedience is not simply a preparation for the Kingdom; it is of the essence of the Kingdom, for the rule of God means the righteousness of man: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Here the sharp difference between Jesus and the people stands out. The Jews were luxuriating in imagining all the joys and delights of the future age of the Kingdom. Jesus was summoning his disciples to earnestness and watchfulness. This message of watchfulness is given us in two striking parables, that of the ten virgins and that of the master and the servants (Matt 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-46).

Is the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching something purely inner and spiritual, or is it something outer, a new society? Undoubtedly it is the inner and spiritual upon which Jesus lays stress. It means eternal life, as we have seen. It works in hidden manner like the leaven, and grows inconspicuously like the mustard seed (Matt 13:31-33). And what Jesus says about the people who enter the Kingdom or to whom it belongs, points the same way; it is the inner spirit that is decisive. To enter the Kingdom one must have the spirit of a child (Matt 18:3). It is hard for the rich to enter, for they are apt to be proud and contented (Mark 10:23). In beautiful yet searching manner the Beatitudes set forth this inner spirit of the Kingdom, whose blessings belong to the poor in spirit, the meek, the pure in heart, and those that hunger for its

righteousness (Matt 5:3-12). When the Pharisees asked him when the Kingdom would come, he answered: "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say. Lo, here! or There! for lo, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20, 21). They were thinking of a political state; for Jesus the Kingdom was, first of all, the rule of God in men's hearts. It is true that the Jews spoke of repentance and obedience to the law as necessary before the Kingdom could come. When Jesus speaks of obedience and mercy, however, he is not speaking simply of the condition upon which men may obtain the Kingdom; these are for him the spirit and essence of the Kingdom itself.

Yet while the Kingdom is, first of all, something inner and spiritual, it is social in its meaning and consequence. Jesus was neither political dreamer nor social reformer, but his teaching of the Kingdom has tremendous social meaning. Three points make this clear. (1) The Kingdom means God's rule in all the life of men. God is already in his world, but when the Kingdom comes, there will be no life not ruled by him. That means for us his rule in government and industry. That means no war, no oppression in state, no injustice in industry. The Kingdom begins in men's hearts, but it does not end until the spirit of God rules in every institution and relation of life. (2) The spirit of the Kingdom is essentially social. It must always be working out in the life of men. The love and service of others is the real test of God's kingship with men (Matt 25:31-46). In his Kingdom the first is to be the last, the servant (Mark 9:35). "Whosoever would become great among you, shall be your minister; and whosoever would be first among you, shall be servant of all" (Mark 10:35-45). The fruit of this spirit has been the noble history of missions and philanthropies, the modern movements of reform and social service, and the modern passion for social justice. (3) The Kingdom involved a community, a brotherhood.

Jesus thought of the men of the Kingdom not as subjects but as sons, and sonship means brotherhood. The spirit of the Kingdom must bring the members of the Kingdom together. The first circle of Jesus' disciples was the promise of what was to come. The church as a fellowship was the inevitable expression of the Kingdom. The end could only be what Paul foresaw, the breaking down of the divisions and enmities that had separated men in classes and nations, and the final bringing together of all men into one brotherhood, the family of God.

Was the Kingdom in the future with Jesus, or was it already present? It seems certain that Jesus thought that the Kingdom was in the future, although very near. That is the meaning of the word, "The kingdom of God is at hand." It is at the door. "There are some here of them that stand by," he said, "who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1). On the other hand, it seems just as clear that Jesus thought that the beginnings of the Kingdom were already present. The rule of God meant the overthrow of evil in the world and the reign of God in men's lives. That he saw already taking place. He saw the sons of the Kingdom present (Matt 17:26), the sons of the bridechamber (Mark 2:19). He saw publicans and harlots going into the kingdom of God (Matt 21:31). He pointed John's disciples to what was already taking place (Matt 11:2-6). And he discerned it especially in his healings. He had entered the house of the strong man and had bound the powers of evil; he had seen Satan fallen as lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18). It was God's rule even now displacing the rule of evil. "If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you" (Matt 12:22-29).

These were, indeed, only small beginnings. On every side the power of evil still lay, while the Kingdom itself was coming quietly and almost unnoticed. There are three parables of the Kingdom that Jesus seems to have spoken primarily to hearten his disciples who might be discouraged by these facts. They are those of the wheat and tares, the mustard seed, and the leaven (Matt 13:24-33). The seed which they were scattering was growing slowly and there were tares, but it was growing surely, and grain and weed

would be made manifest some day. The Kingdom was only a mustard seed now; it would be a tree by and by. Now it was like hidden leaven, but it would permeate the whole lump after a while. Above all, they were to remember this, that it was theirs simply to scatter the seed; the fruitage came from a power not their own. "The earth beareth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear" (Mark 4:26-29).

These two convictions apparently lay side by side in the mind of Jesus: first, that the Kingdom was already here wherever God's will was being done and sinners were turning to him and evil was being overthrown; second, that in its fullness and power it should come some time in the near future. The important element in Jesus' teaching is not this thought of the exact time of the coming; he himself said that no one knew the day or the hour except his Father in heaven (Mark 13:28-32). It lay, rather, in three great truths: (1) there shall be a new earth in which the rule of God shall prevail in all the world; (2) this rule, or kingdom, will be ethical and spiritual, not an outer political reign, but an inner spirit of righteousness and love; (3) this rule will show itself in the way in which men live together, in all the relations and institutions of life; and its final manifestation will be a family, or community, of brothers upon the earth.

#### Directions for Reading and Study

Parables of the Kingdom: Matt 13:24-52; 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-46; Mark 4:26, 29. Other passages: Matt 11:25-30; 7:15-27; 5:3-12; 11:2-6; 12:22-29; Mark 13:28-32.

Read the following parables and state what thought concerning the Kingdom each of these conveys: the hidden treasure and the pearl (Matt 13:44-46); the net and the fishes (Matt 13:47-50); the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24-30); the virgins (Matt 25:1-13); the watchful servants (Luke 12:35-46); the mustard seed (Matt 13:31, 32); the leaven (Matt 13:33); the earth bearing fruit (Mark 4:26, 29).

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