

Week 6: The Kingdom

Author and humorist Ken Davis writes the following story in one of his books:

“John Cassis is one of the nation’s finest speakers. He was one of the inspirational leaders of the Chicago Bears during their glory years, and he often gave short talks to players on game day.

“As John tells it, Mike Ditka was about to deliver a locker room pep talk one day. He looked up and saw defensive tackle William “Refrigerator” Perry. How could he not see him? At 338 pounds the Fridge stood out even in a crowd of pro football players. Ditka gestured to the Fridge. ‘When I get finished,’ he said, ‘I’d like you to close with the Lord’s Prayer.’ Then the coach began his talk.

“Meanwhile, Jim McMahon, the brash and outspoken quarterback, punched John Cassis. ‘Look at Perry,’ McMahon whispered, ‘he doesn’t know the Lord’s Prayer.’ Sure enough, Perry sat with a look of panic on his face, his head in his hands. He was sweating profusely. ‘Everybody knows the Lord’s Prayer,’ said Cassis to McMahon in disbelief.

“After a few minutes of watching the Refrigerator leaking several gallons of sweat, McMahon nudged Cassis again. ‘I’ll bet you 50 bucks Fridge doesn’t know the Lord’s Prayer.’ As Cassis tells the story, he stops to reflect on the absurdity of it all: ‘Here we were sitting in chapel and betting 50 bucks on the Lord’s Prayer.’

“When Coach Ditka finished his pep talk, he asked all the men to remove their caps. Then he nodded at Perry and bowed his head. It was quiet for a few moments before the Fridge spoke in a shaky voice, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord, my soul to keep ...’

“Cassis felt the tap on his shoulder. It was Jim McMahon. ‘Here’s the 50 dollars,’ he whispered. ‘I had no idea Perry knew the Lord’s Prayer.’”

If we aren’t familiar with something, the natural response is to try to cover up what we don’t know with our best guess. Kind of like students taking a test—you can leave it blank or give it your best shot.

That’s the way a majority of Christians live. They figure that being a Christian is about saying a prayer to ask Jesus in your life (so you’re sure to go to heaven), making sure you’re baptized, and then going to church, serving, and trying hard to be obedient to the Bible.

But that falls so short of the life that Jesus offers us. We aren’t to be simply hanging on until heaven, but ushering heaven into our life today!

In our third week I taught that Jesus says that he came so that you would be filled with life—that if someone asked how you’re doing you would say, “I’m living the most complete, filled up, God-centered, peaceful, empowered life you could imagine.”

His exact words were:

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

That’s why every week of this series we’ve been gaining a fresh understanding about the nearness of God and the powerful relationship we can enjoy with him *now*.

- Week 1 was about his desire to be *with* us.
- Week 2 was all about *our choice* to be with *him*.
- Week 3 we talked about the presence of God’s Spirit *within* us.
- Week 4 we learned how his *voice* whispers to us through each day in many ways and how to hear it.
- Week 5 revealed how God is reflected in and through the *people* around us.

And today we are concluding with the overall mission of Jesus: to bring God's presence and power into our lives. God wants the world transformed through Jesus Christ, and it begins with us. God wants his kingdom to be active in our world today.

In fact, in the prayer that Fridge *didn't* pray, Jesus taught that we're to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*" I like the way John Ortberg summarizes it. He says, "God, make up there come down here."

What does Jesus mean when he talks about the kingdom of God?

I'd like you to take thirty seconds, turn to the person next to you, and explain to them as concretely as you can what is the kingdom of heaven.

[PAUSE FOR THIRTY SECONDS]

Let me ask, how easy was that? Was it a walk in the park? Could you do that in your sleep? Or would you say the answer wasn't exactly on the tip of your tongue? Did you find yourself fumbling around a little bit? In my own experience, most Christians do not have a great deal of clarity on what the kingdom of heaven is precisely about. And there's a good reason why.

We can barely imagine it. Even trying to think, "What would this earth look like if God's kingdom were to really come to it?" It boggles the mind. What really is happening in heaven that would be happening on this earth if God's kingdom were to come?

The good news is, the writers of Scripture spent an enormous amount of time reflecting on this. They wrote a lot about it both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. And because spiritual reality is very hard to describe because we're so finite and fallen, they often used images to convey what life would be like under God's administration.

Contemporary leaders do similar things. If someone runs for president, they'll say, "If I win, my administration will get this country moving again." And that's not talking about

physical movement of a country from one location to another. That's an *image* of progress or growth.

So, what if God reigned on this earth? After all, it's really meant to be that way. It's God's great desire and plan and should be our prayer as well. God truly is closer than you think ...

So, in this message I want to look at some of those primary images from Scripture about heaven on earth—about God's kingdom reigning here today—in our world—and in our lives.

I want us to think about how these images might be expressed in our day. What would it look like if God's kingdom came, if his will were done on earth as it is in heaven?

The Bible talks about this truth relative to different spheres of human life. First of all, there's *the sphere of economics and human need*. John writes in Revelation 7:16 that in the day when God's kingdom is fully realized never again will people hunger. Never again will they thirst.

Think about what that would look like—the elimination of hunger. No more pictures of little children with swollen bellies, no scarcity. No mothers trying to scrounge around for enough food so that her baby could survive another day. No more organizations to feed the children. No more need for World Vision or UNICEF or food banks.

But it's not just the end of poverty. Scripture writers foretold the overflow of abundance that would occur in God's kingdom. Amos wrote:

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills.’” (Amos 9:13)

Now that was written in a semi-desert context. Middle Easterners would reap and then have to wait a long time for the rains to come again because the ground wasn't very fertile. Yet Amos uses imagery to talk about what the earth would be like if it were redeemed from the curse that came with Adam and Eve's sin. The one that plows and the one that reaps bump into each other because there's such abundance.

"New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills." That doesn't mean that there's literally going to be Chardonnay in the Rockies. It's an image of abundance, of God's abundance.

Here's how that imagery would sound today: We'd say things like, "Every day the stock market will end a little higher than the day before."

"The bull will dwell on Wall Street forever; the bear will visit it no more. Alan Greenspan will never have to raise interest rates again. Little children in the Sudan will have carpeted bedrooms and private baths and their own automated teller machines in their own bedrooms. The jobless rate will go down to zero and stay there, and everybody will love what they do."

Then there's *the sphere of politics*, which in our history is mostly the story of human conflict. There's the ongoing strife in the Middle East, disputes across borders in Asia, warring in Africa, and the list goes on.

Isaiah 2:4 says, "He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples." Just think about these words: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore"—no more fighting, no more hatred.

They won't have any use for swords so they'll turn them into farm equipment. One writer putting this in modern terms said, "Intercontinental ballistic missile silos will be converted into training tanks for inner-city kids to learn scuba diving in." And there will be peace. There will no such thing as enemies.

Isaiah 11:6 and following says, "The wolf will live with the lamb.... The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain."

Translation: the dog will make peace with the rabbit, and the cat will be no more!

Then there's the *sphere of true beauty*. The apostle John says in his vision in the book of Revelation that the street of the great city—the street of the city of God, God's community—is paved with pure gold. And the city is surrounded by twelve gates, each made of a single pearl.

In other words, the kingdom of God will be a place where the human hunger for beauty is finally satisfied. No more pollution, no more rundown inner-city buildings marred by graffiti and broken windows. No more concrete ghettos or barrios.

The creative genius that God has placed in people made in his image—the image of the Creator—would blossom and flourish, and every day will be a masterpiece—just beauty. The drawings little children give to their parents to hang on the refrigerator would each be a work of art the likes of Michelangelo, Van Gogh, or Picasso. Actually, they already look like something by Picasso, but then they will look like Michelangelo or Van Gogh!

When teenage girls in that city look at magazine covers and then look in the mirror, they would think to themselves, "I look just right." Because society would have learned to see and celebrate the beauty that God sees when he looks at human beings made in his image, every one

of them. Whatever their shape or size or color, they would all look in the mirror and say, “I look just right.”

God doesn’t want this to be something that happens off in the future—but today. In your life—his kingdom in your world.

Next is the *sphere of security*. Scripture writers say in the kingdom of God there will be no more fear. John puts it like this in Revelation 21: “*On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.*”

Now in biblical times, of course, there wasn’t electricity. Night was a time of darkness, a time of vulnerability, a time when crimes were committed, a time of fear. The city gates would be shut to protect the city’s inhabitants from marauders and intruders.

But the Bible says that in the kingdom of God, those days will be over. No more locked doors; no gated communities; no security systems; no combinations. You will never lose your keys because there won’t be any keys. Cops will pull people over only to commend them for their civility and courtesy to other drivers.

Squad cars will still pull in to doughnut shops, but doughnuts now will be loaded with protein, and the South Beach Diet will recommend that they be eaten at every meal.

Another sphere the kingdom of God will redeem is *the sphere of family life*. Luke 1:17 says that Jesus will “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.” No more separations, no more divorce, no more affairs, no abuse, no neglect, no unloved or unwanted child.

Members of a household will stay up late at night thinking of ways to serve each other. Children will insist that their little brother get the larger piece of cake. People will turn on Jerry Springer to watch shows with titles like, “My Spouse Secretly Loves Me Twice as Much as I Thought He Did.”

And then the most beautiful words of all about the kingdom, from Revelation 21:3–4, *the sphere of God's presence*:

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

Think about these words, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.”

Anybody want to live in a world like that? No more Kleenex; no more funeral homes. We will turn caskets into toy chests. Hearsees will be converted to sports utility vehicles with names like “Eternal Voyager” and “Jeep Grand Resurrection.” And there will be counselors, but you’ll just go to them when you’re so full of gratitude and joy that you’re willing to pay somebody to listen to you right now.

And every day you will be home with God, never separated by sin. According to Ezekiel, God promises, “I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.” No more stony hearts; no more cold hearts; no more stubborn hearts. You’ll never say something that you’ll regret later. You’ll never do anything to be ashamed of. You’ll never do anything to feel guilty about.

When you see somebody else’s success or beauty or wealth, it won’t even occur to you to be envious, but only to rejoice as if you had these things yourself. Every tribe and tongue and people and nation will gather like brothers and sisters around the throne, and you who listen to my voice right now, you who sit in these chairs, you think about this: you will see the living God. No more doubt, no more questions, no more wondering “why?”

You will see and look into the very face of God, and he will be your God. And your every thought will be a prayer, and your every prayer will be a conversation with God. And God himself will wipe every tear from your eye, and then he'll remove the tear ducts, and he'll simply point his finger and sadness and sorrow will be banished.

There will joy inexpressible. The prophet Isaiah says, "The trees of the field will clap their hands." And God will bring all of his creation to its full redemptive potential. And neither human beings nor the earth will be under the curse anymore. We have been under that curse for a long, long time. Cursed was the ground. Cursed was the man. Cursed was the woman. But no more.

That's what it would look like if God's kingdom were to come to earth. And for you to understand about it and want it is a very important thing.

But if you're like me, a part of you wonders, "Can this really be? Is it possible that this earth can be redeemed? Will the day ever come when God's will is done fully? Is this real or is it just wishful thinking?"

Well, you need to know Jesus' whole message was about the reality of this kingdom. That was his *whole* message. That's his gospel. When Mark summarizes the gospel that Jesus proclaimed in Mark 1:14–15, he is summarizing this very fact:

"After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'"

When Jesus says the kingdom of God is near, he's not saying it's getting kind of close. He's saying it's now available. In human history, one life has already been lived on this earth—in the flesh—in which God's will had unhindered sway. That life was Jesus. Jesus bore in

his own person, in his flesh and blood, the reality of the kingdom of God. Everyone who saw him saw a life lived in the reality of God, a life in which whatever God desired was chosen.

Then he says to the people of his day, and to you and me, that it's *now possible*. See, this is the gospel. It is *now possible* for human beings to live in the presence and power of God.

You can do this right now, and it's the greatest offer you will ever have. And if you want it more than anything else—which any sane person would—then Jesus says, “Just follow me, just be my fully devoted follower, and you will learn from me how to live in my Father’s kingdom.”

Jesus cast the ultimate, most compelling vision that the human race has ever heard. And when men and women heard it and understood it, they devoted their hearts to it, they sacrificed their possessions for it, they sacrificed their careers for it, they sacrificed their homes for it, they lived for it, and they died for it. And they did it with joy. They did it laughing and weeping and dancing, unable to believe their good fortune—that the kingdom of God was open to them.

That was Jesus’ life and that was his teaching. And I’ll tell you something else. The primary significance of Jesus’ miracles was to authenticate the presence of God’s kingdom on earth, so that people would know that the kingdom was now a reality.

For example, Jesus is talking about the fact that he had driven out demons and some people said that he was doing it by an evil power. He demonstrated that that was not the case, and he says in Matthew 12:28, “But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

And the kingdom of God is already available for ordinary fallen human beings like you and me to live, and one day it will come in all its fullness. God is closer than you think.

Now here's the big question: How will this happen? How will the kingdom come? How will this fallen earth get set straight? People have been trying to do it on human power for a long time. Revolutions come and revolutions go. Governments get overthrown, but still people go on hating each other. Wars still break out. The human heart is still stone.

Sometimes people think if we're just clever enough about economic growth, a rising tide will lift all boats. It hasn't yet. Sometimes people think it's a political deal. Oddly enough, sometimes even in the church people think this. "Let's just get our guy elected." So far the kingdom has not arrived on Air Force One, and it won't happen in the future either.

So how will the kingdom come to earth? Amazingly enough, it starts with prayer. We begin by praying, "Your kingdom come." Make up there come down here.

The kingdom is where people shamelessly adore and love God and are freed from sin so they never cease doing just the kinds of things that God wants. That's the kingdom.

John Ortberg describes how a number of years ago he spent a few weeks in Ethiopia. Outside the capital of Addis Abbaba was a woman who had begun to follow Christ in fairly old age. By the time John met her, she was quite elderly, blind, and desperately poor. She was illiterate, but she could pray.

She had two books in her house. One was a Bible in English and the other was a Bible in Amharic, the national language in Ethiopia. And people would travel sometimes for hours on foot just to go to that woman's house to read the Bible to her and hear her pray. This poverty-stricken, blind, illiterate woman would pray, "Your kingdom come."

Now, here's what I think Jesus is saying. From an eternal perspective, the sincere prayer of a blind, illiterate, peasant woman asking for the kingdom of God to come truly will have had a greater impact on the final outcome of all of human history than all the maneuverings of Caesar,

Napoleon, and a thousand other giants who grabbed for power, but never bent the knee to pray this one prayer.

Ten billion years from now it will be a blind, illiterate, peasant woman from Ethiopia who made history.

If you want to experience the closeness of God—if you want to know the fullness of life that Jesus offers, a life with him—then pray.

First, pray that the kingdom will come in my life and in your life. “God, your kingdom come, your will be done just starting right here, starting in this tiny, little piece of the kingdom, right here, this body.” Now, don’t glide too quickly over that. That was the hardest prayer Jesus ever prayed.

In the garden of Gethsemane, the night before he was crucified, Jesus said to his Father, “Take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.”

Now you pray: “Your will be done on earth—in my life.” And realize that part of what that means is, “I’m ready to suffer, God, whatever I need to. I’m ready to endure whatever I need to.” Even in the suffering, we can experience the nearness and care of God.

It also means, “God, may I become the kind of person who does your will from my heart. May your kingdom come to earth in my life. May I be a kingdom bearer. Not just a kingdom pray-er, that too, but also a kingdom bearer in my life.”

“God, I choose to be with you. I want to know the fullness of your Spirit working in me. I want to hear and respond to the gentle whisper of your voice each day. I want to see you revealed in and through the people around me. I want up there to come down here in my life. I want to be close to you.”

Now let me ask you: What would it mean for the kingdom to come, for God's will to be done in your life? Where you work? What would it mean for God's will to be done in your life relationally? Maybe it means sacrifice. Maybe you're here today, and you're in a relationship, and you know it is not honoring to God. You know that relationship is not God's will, and it ought to stop. And the truth is, you have not been willing to stop it.

So today is character time. The closeness of God sometimes begins with his gentle voice of conviction—asking you to clear out the idols and weeds in your life that are keeping you from experiencing his kingdom's power and fullness.

I'm asking you today to pray to God, "All right, God, your will be done in my life, in this relationship. Your will be done, not mine, with my children, my marriage, my friendships, my career. Your will be done. And may I bring the reality of your kingdom into my relationships. God, make me a kingdom kind of servant and a kingdom kind of encourager and a kingdom kind of confronter and a kingdom kind of friend."

I'm going to ask you, what would it mean financially for you to pray, "God, your kingdom come, your will be done in my financial life"? Maybe it will involve very serious sacrifice. I don't know. "Your kingdom come, your will be done through the resources you've given me."

I want to tell you, friends, there is power in that prayer.

You need to know that the God who desires to be with you, the God who is so much closer than you think, is the God who is looking at you right now and his heart wells up with love.

It doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't matter if you fall, if you fail, if you stumble, if you achieve great things or you don't achieve apparently great things at all. You are chosen of God. You are declared holy by God. You are the beloved of God.

I'll give you a little parable about this, and with this, we close. This is from a book I just love called *The Whisper Test*, written by Mary Anne Berg.

"I grew up knowing I was different," she writes, "and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate. When I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked, a little girl with misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth and garbled speech." That's how she learned to think of herself.

"When schoolmates asked, 'What happened to your lip?' I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

"There was, however, a teacher in the second grade who we all adored, Mrs. Leonard. She was short, round, happy, a sparkling lady. Annually we had a hearing test. Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn.

"I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper and we would have to repeat it back—things like 'the sky is blue' or 'do you have new shoes.'"

"I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said in her whisper, 'I wish you were my little girl.'"

And the little girl who thought of herself as a reject and a loser, as someone outside, as unacceptable, found out somebody wanted her, and it changed her life.

And so it is in the kingdom of God. And so it is that on the cross God whispered to the human race, "I wish you belonged to me." And when you made the choice to belong to him, you began the journey of learning that God's kingdom is here ... and he truly is closer than you think.