

Act Four: The Christ

I. INTRODUCTION

The Storyline

The biblical story begins by introducing the setting, main characters, and initial plot. In the first act of the biblical narrative, the reader learns that...

Through the act of creation, God establishes his kingdom over all things and appoints human beings to rule on his behalf as his image bearers, to fill the earth and develop his creation into a glorious civilization.

Like most every other story, the biblical narrative quickly runs into the conflict that needs to be overcome. The introduction of this conflict makes up the second act of the biblical story.

Tragically, human beings rebel against God as they seek to rule God's creation their own way, resulting in the curse of evil and death upon the world, which infects every aspect of God's good creation.

As the conflict of any story creates more tension, a path is laid out that sets the plot up to reach its climax. Act three of the biblical narrative does exactly this.

God remains committed to his creation by initiating a covenant with Israel to undo the world's curse by being a blessing to all nations thereby reestablishing his kingdom, but Israel is continually unfaithful to the covenant.

Eventually the central conflict of a story reaches its breaking point and so the storyline arrives at its peak. This is called the climax, and it occurs in the biblical narrative with the person and work of the Christ, Israel's king.

In faithfulness to his covenant with Israel, God sends his Son as their Messiah to inaugurate and make possible the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The Place of Act Four in the Bible

The story of Jesus is properly understood when viewed as the climax of the entire biblical narrative, which means it makes sense only in the context of creation, the curse, and, in particular, the covenant with Israel. In the Bible, this key portion of the story is called the gospel, and it is told from four different perspectives. There are not four gospels, but rather four accounts of the one gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each account from its own unique perspective tells the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of the story of Israel.

II. ACT FOUR: THE CHRIST

Waiting for the Kingdom

As a result of Israel's continual unfaithfulness to God's covenant, the Old Testament ends with Israel living in a state of exile, even though some Jews had returned to the land. For over 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, Israel is enslaved to pagan nations as they wait for God to one day intervene. Even a brief run at Jewish independence under the Maccabees leads to corruption and eventual defeat.

Promises of the Kingdom. During this time, Israel clings to the promise that one day God will judge evil, renew his covenant with Israel, and restore creation itself. This hope is even narrowed to the belief that God himself would return to Zion to reestablish his worldwide reign. These are the promises of the kingdom, and they are featured prominently in many of the Old Testament prophets, particularly in Isaiah.

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” —Jeremiah 31:31

Is it too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept? I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth. —Isaiah 49:6

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” —Isaiah 52:7

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.

—Isaiah 65:17–25

Proposals for the Kingdom. While there is wide agreement during the time of Christ that one day, through a renewed Israel, God would reestablish his kingdom on earth, many different visions were held as to how Israel should live to hasten that day.

- The **Pharisees** called for cultural and religious separation by strict obedience to Torah. When the time came, God would vindicate those who had separated themselves out in this way and use them to overthrow the Roman Empire.
- The **Sadducees** called for compromise with pagan authorities because they did not believe in a coming kingdom. Therefore, they attempted to keep the peace with Rome and make the best of the current situation.
- The **zealots** called for immediate military action. They believed Israel was oppressed because they were passive and cowardly. Instead of waiting for God, they were convinced God was waiting on Israel to rise up and rebel.
- The **Essenes** called for complete withdrawal from society to wait for the Day of the Lord. Their radical and alternative community would one day incite God to use them to conquer the pagan rulers through a violent uprising.

The Arrival of the Kingdom

According to Jesus, the good news is that the kingdom of God is arriving in and through him. But Jesus does more than simply make this announcement; he demonstrates this claim with power and invites others to join his kingdom movement.

Announcing the Kingdom. Jesus speaks more like a politician on the campaign trail than a teacher on a lecture circuit. He travels from village to village issuing a public announcement: “The kingdom of God is at hand.” Such a declaration is clearly heard by his audience in light of Old Testament promises: “The long-awaited reign of Israel’s God is finally now beginning.”

“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.” —Mark 1:15

“I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” —Luke 4:23

Demonstrating the Kingdom. Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom’s arrival is accompanied with powerful signs and wonders that demonstrate that validity of his message. Jesus never performs miracles simply to impress; they point to the coming of God’s kingdom.

*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness.”
—Matthew 9:35*

*When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”
—Matthew 11:2–5*

“But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” —Matthew 12:28

Invitation to the Kingdom. Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom’s arrival comes with an invitation to be a part of his kingdom movement. His invitation is simple: “repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). These two commands are two sides of the same coin that is Jesus’ most popular summons: “follow me.”

- Jesus’ call to **repent** entailed more than simply turning from personal sin; at the heart of his challenge is a plea to abandon one’s agenda for bringing about the kingdom.
- Jesus’ call to **believe** the good news is the flipside of his call to repent: embrace Jesus’ agenda of self-sacrifice and non-retaliation as the means of bringing God’s kingdom to earth.

The Kingdom and the Cross

If the four accounts of the one gospel are all about the arrival of God's kingdom, then why do they end with a cross? What does the cross have to do with the kingdom, and vice versa? The tendency of some Christians is to prioritize one over the other, but the four accounts of the one gospel won't allow it. Instead, they each labor to make the point that the kingdom and the cross go together: the cross is central to the kingdom vision Jesus enacts, and the kingdom is central to the meaning of the cross.

The Kingdom Is the Context for the Cross. The cross only makes sense within the history of Israel and their hope that God would return as king and restore the entire world through Israel and their faithfulness to the covenant. It's that *kingdom* history that Jesus enters into, that makes sense of his ministry and message, and that therefore makes sense of the cross.

The Cross Is the Means to the Kingdom. While Jesus' death appears to be the defeat of God at the hand of evil, it paradoxically becomes the climactic victory of the kingdom of God. As the central act of God in all of human history, the cross effectively defeats evil and provides an escape from sin's power so that God's kingdom would begin to be unleashed through God's people. This is what Israel missed, and this is what informed Jesus' kingdom agenda.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me... All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

—Psalm 22:1a, 27–28

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity... For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. —Isaiah 53:3a; 54:10

The Kingdom and New Creation

As the kingdom of God is tightly woven into the story of Israel, so the story of Israel is tightly woven into the story of creation. That means that the kingdom has always been about the rule of God exercised through his image bearers over all creation. Therefore, the cross, as vital as it is to God's story with its defeat of sin and death, cannot be the end. It is not the destination; new creation is. The resurrection of Jesus indicates that God's renewal of creation has already broken into the present. New creation has begun now. God is reigning over all creation through his ascended Son Jesus who gives his Spirit to his people to be agents of new creation (Luke 24:13–35).

*“When Jesus rose again
God's whole new creation emerged from the tomb,
introducing a world full of new potential and possibility.”*

N. T. Wright
Simply Christian

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORY

The Scope of Salvation

According to the biblical narrative, the work of Jesus takes on a fuller meaning than the simple assertion that “Jesus died for me.” God acts to accomplish the salvation of the entire world. Individuals can indeed share in this great redemptive act, but it cannot be limited to personal salvation. God defeats evil and sin through the work of Jesus so that his kingdom will ultimately be established over all his creation.

The Kingdom as Tangible

Israel was not wrong to expect a tangible kingdom on earth; they were wrong to expect that God’s kingdom would come through violent means. Jesus does not redefine the kingdom as a mere spiritual reality, but as the world as it is supposed to be under God’s rule. The kingdom is not about going to heaven when one dies; it’s about heaven coming down to earth, as Jesus’ prayer makes clear, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10).

The Kingdom as Already and Not Yet

Jesus has inaugurated the kingdom of God. This means, that in a real sense, the kingdom is already here wherever the will of God is done. However, in another sense, the kingdom awaits future consummation since there are many things that happen in today’s world that are not God’s will. Followers of Christ today live in this tension, in the overlapping of this present age and the age to come.

The Way to the Kingdom

Since the kingdom has not yet arrived in its fullest, those who follow Christ are called to carry on this task. They are to seek first the kingdom of God (Matt 6:33). This is accomplished by following the way of Jesus, adopting his agenda for bringing God’s kingdom to earth. This agenda, though seen in its fullest in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), can be summed up in this challenge, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). The church’s task to seek the kingdom is accomplished by embracing the way of the cross.

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In the shadow of pagan oppression and competing agendas to usher God’s long-awaited reign to earth, a young man from Nazareth announces to Israel that he’s the one through whom the kingdom of God is arriving. He demonstrates the validity of his message with miracles and invites people to join his kingdom movement. The kingdom of God then comes in the most unexpected way: not through a violent revolution, but through self-sacrifice at the hands of evil itself. Jesus gives his life on the cross to defeat the sin and evil of this world, and then God raises him from the dead as the first fruit of his renewed creation. The kingdom has finally arrived, but not yet completely; it still needs to be implemented in every aspect of God’s creation by followers of Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit.