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**If the Kingdom is Here, Why is the World in such a Mess?  
Romans 14:17**

I don't know how all of you feel in the wake of the events that have transpired in our country these past few weeks. And no, I'm not talking solely about the death of George Floyd and the resultant protests in our streets. I'm also including in this the pandemic that has proven so devastating in so many ways for so many people.

So, I will only speak for myself when I say that I find it easy at times to identify with the perplexity of John the Baptist back in the first century. You may recall that after his extremely short public ministry, John was arrested and thrown in prison. Not long thereafter he was beheaded. Almost immediately after being arrested, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him a question.

*"Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me'" (Matt. 11:2-6).*

It's obvious that John had expectations that Jesus wasn't meeting. There are times in our lives today, such as these past few months, when I also wonder: "Jesus, are you really the promised Messiah? If so, why doesn't the presence of your kingdom put an end to racism and violence and global pandemics and rampant unemployment?" So, let me ask you again: Do you find yourself wondering the same thing? It's ok if you don't, but I have to be honest and say, I do.

In saying this I don't want you to think that I have any doubts about who Jesus is. But there are times when I wonder why the presence of his kingdom does not eradicate opposition and evil and violence and immorality. As I said, this was a problem for John the Baptist and also for many, perhaps even most, Jewish men and women in the first century. Let me explain.

Try to envision yourself as a first-century Jew anxiously and expectantly awaiting the in-breaking and inauguration of the kingdom of God. You are well-versed in the OT. You know the covenant God made with Abraham. You know the promises made to David. You trust in the goodness and sovereignty of God and have no doubts about his faithfulness to the covenant promises. Yet you live in the land of Israel that suffers from Roman occupation and domination.

So there you are, in prison, having been arrested by Herod. You've devoted your life to proclaiming the need for repentance and preparing one's heart for the coming Messiah and the presence of the kingdom. As one day gives way to another, then one week to another, your mind turns again and again to a question that weighs increasingly heavy on your heart. ***"What will the kingdom of God look like when it comes?"***

Imagine that you have a cellmate who one day asks you that very question. My sense is that your answer would sound something like this:

*"When the kingdom of God finally comes, all the people of Israel will be regathered into the land. The division of the kingdom into north and south, between Israel and Judah, will be healed, as the people are*

reunited. God will restore to us dominion in the land that he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God will manifest his great power and bring about a visible conquest of all his enemies and especially the overthrow of Roman tyranny. He will finally and forever establish the royal throne on which the Messiah, a descendant of David, will sit and rule in power and glory. We, the people of Israel, will experience the consummation of all the blessings and promises of the covenant, including: peace, the rule of justice, political supremacy, military victory, economic prosperity, agricultural abundance, salvation for every child of Abraham, and above all else, the presence of the King himself living and dwelling and ruling among us, his people.”

This, simply put, was the concept of the kingdom in the mind of every Jew of John’s day, both religious leaders and average men and women.

No one disputes the fact that the focus of Christ’s ministry was the announcement of *the coming of the kingdom of God*: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15; see also Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 4:23; 10:7; Luke 4:43; 10:9). But, as far as the Jewish people were concerned, as long as Pilate was still in power in Judea, the kingdom has not come. If the pagans were not defeated and driven from the promised land, the kingdom has not come. Until such time as we are set free from the oppression of our enemies, the kingdom has not come.

For the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, like John, the coming kingdom of God would be a matter of *national liberation and the military defeat of the pagan oppressors*. This frame of thought and deep-seated expectation likely contributed greatly to the bewilderment and confusion and even frustration that he felt as he languished in Herod’s prison.

In his response to John’s disciples, Jesus was claiming that the fulfillment of the OT hope with its attendant blessings was in fact *present* in his person and ministry. “It is here because I am here,” declared Jesus! The fulfillment, however, was not taking place along anticipated lines, hence John’s perplexity. The unexpected element was that fulfillment *was* occurring in Jesus, *but without the eschatological consummation*. The OT prophetic hope of the coming Messianic kingdom of God as promised to Israel *is being fulfilled* in the person and ministry of Jesus, *but not consummated*.

The Jews of our Lord’s day, in keeping with what they read in their inspired writings, expected the *consummation* of the kingdom, the complete and final overthrow of Israel’s political enemies and the ushering in of the age of blessed peace and prosperity in the land. Our Lord, however, came with the message that *before* the kingdom would come in its eschatological consummation it *has already come* in his own person and work in spirit and power.

Thus the kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God, or his sovereign lordship, dynamically active to establish his rule among men. *There are two decisive and dramatic moments in the manifestation of this kingdom: first, as it is fulfilled within history in the first coming of the Son, whereby Satan was defeated and men and women receive the forgiveness of sins and are brought into the experience of the blessings of God’s reign; and second, as it will be consummated at the close of history in the second coming of the Son, when he will finally and forever destroy his enemies, deliver his people and all of creation from evil, and establish his eternal rule in the New Heavens and New Earth.*

There is, therefore, a dual manifestation of the kingdom of God corresponding in kind to the two comings of Christ himself. He *first* appeared in obscurity and humility, to suffer and die for the vindication of God’s righteousness and the salvation of his people. He will yet appear a *second* time in visible power and greatness to deliver the earth from the curse of sin, to glorify his people, and to establish his sovereign rule forever in the consummated splendor of the New Heavens and New Earth.

This doesn't mean that God only became King when Jesus first appeared 2,000 years ago. His power, sovereignty, dominion, and rule are eternal.

- “The Lord is king forever and ever” (Psalm 10:16).
- “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever” (Psalm 29:10).
- “The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19).
- “But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King” (Jeremiah 10:10).
- “for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation” (Daniel 4:34).

God has always been King and always will be. God's kingdom has always been present and always will be. However, in the coming of Jesus Christ, God chose to act in an extraordinary fashion, making the presence and power of the kingdom more visible, more tangible, more readily seen and sensed. That God is always ruling and reigning does not mean he always and in every age manifests that rule in the same way or to the same degree so that men might always see it as it is.

So what then is the kingdom? And why should we not be discouraged that all evil and violent behavior is not immediately eradicated from the earth? Let me first explain what the kingdom is not.

### ***What the kingdom of God is NOT***

It is **not** a geographical realm with clearly defined boundaries, such as those that separate the U.S.A. from Canada and Mexico. The kingdom, therefore, is **not** to be identified with any one nation or political body. Contrary to what some of you might believe, the United States of America is not the kingdom of God!

The kingdom of God is **not** the place called heaven, at least not now! The kingdom is **not** the Church. The Church is the people through which the dynamic reign of God's presence and power is manifest. The kingdom is **not** a place, but a power. It is **not** a static, lifeless thing, but a dynamic and living reign. The kingdom of God is **not** an issue of land, but of Lordship!

The kingdom is **not yet** deliverance from political oppression (but it will be, when Christ returns).

The kingdom is **not yet** renewal of the creation (but it will be, when Christ returns).

The kingdom is **not yet** material prosperity (but it will be, when Christ returns).

Of course, we should strive in the power of the Spirit and the grace of God to help people come out from under political oppression. We should strive for justice to prevail in every arena of our society. We should rejoice in whatever material prosperity God has given. But these things will never come in fullness until Jesus returns. And we should never think that his kingdom is absent or ineffective when adverse conditions seem to prevail.

### ***What the kingdom of God IS***

I'm going to keep this as simple and straightforward as possible by simply directing your attention to seven biblical texts that clearly identify what the kingdom of God truly is and therefore what we may expect to experience in this present age before Christ returns to bring all things to consummation.

***(1) The Kingdom of God is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to bring us forgiveness and salvation through the work of Jesus Christ.***

We see this in numerous texts, the most explicit being in Colossians 1:13-14.

“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14).

The word Paul uses in v. 13, translated “domain” (ESV), is the standard Greek word for “authority,” which indicates an active power or energy that Satan exerts over those who are his. His dominion or kingdom rule is characterized by darkness: intellectual, moral, and spiritual. No matter how high one's IQ, no matter how expansive one's financial portfolio, apart from Christ you are under the authority of Satan and subject to the power of darkness. No matter how musically gifted you may be, no matter how athletically endowed and honored, apart from Christ you lie in the power of the evil one.

But God has “delivered” from Satan's tyranny those who believe in Jesus and has placed them under the loving and kind authority of his Son. To be “transferred” (ESV) suggests the notion of being uprooted from one kingdom and transplanted into another.

Our citizenship has shifted from the domain of darkness, which is Paul's way of referring to the kingdom of Satan, to the domain or kingdom of Christ. It is as we enter into that kingdom and under the sovereign sway of the King that we receive forgiveness of sins and redemption. No amount of civil unrest or racial hostility or economic devastation can subdue or conquer the power of the grace of God to save us. Where people are being saved and brought into forgiveness is where the kingdom is.

***(2) The Kingdom of God is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to bring physical healing to our bodies.***

There are numerous texts that assert this truth, such as Luke 10.

“Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:8-9).

Don't dismiss this as if it were intended only for the 12 apostles. Luke 10 describes the commissioning and empowering of 72 ordinary, non-apostolic, anonymous followers of Jesus. The power and authority experienced by the 72 is a foreshadowing of the power and authority that are ours today. And remember this: Healing is not simply a sign of the kingdom but is *the very substance of it*. The ministry of healing is not simply *evidence* that the kingdom has come. Healing is the *essence* of the kingdom. It is that of which the kingdom consists. How do we know the kingdom has come? Healing!

“And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (Matt. 4:23; cf. 9:35).

We see this same emphasis all throughout Acts. In other words, such miracles are not merely examples of the kingdom; they *are* the kingdom in operation.

***(3) The Kingdom of God is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to bring restoration to our minds. The kingdom is present whenever we experience mental and emotional healing.***

One example of this is in Mark 5 and the story of the man who was severely demonized, who lived in caves and repeatedly gashed himself with sharp stones and could not be restrained. When the power of the kingdom was released into his life, we are told in Mark 5:15 that the people saw him “sitting there, clothed and in his right mind.” The Kingdom of God is the power of the Spirit to change our thinking, to bring renewal of our minds, our worldview, to deliver us from ungodly and false beliefs.

***(4) The Kingdom of God is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to drive out demons and set people free.***

Jesus himself made this crystal clear. In Matthew 12 we read of how Jesus ministered to a demonized man who was blind and mute. When the Pharisees saw it, they accused him of performing this miracle by the power of Satan. Jesus responded to them by saying,

“But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28).

The phrase “has come upon” you means it has arrived; not that it is impending or potentially coming or worse still that it is a strictly future phenomenon. The kingdom is now here precisely because the King and the manifestation of his power through the Holy Spirit are here. In fact, Jesus doesn’t say that the essence of the kingdom is that *he* is present, although that is certainly true. No, he said that the sign or proof that the kingdom is present is the work of the *Holy Spirit* in bringing healing and freedom.

The apostle Paul reaffirmed this in his defense before King Agrippa. There he recounts his own conversion experience on the road to Damascus:

“But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:16-18).

Where is the kingdom present and how might we know? We see it and experience it when people turn from bondage and slavery to the power of Satan and enter into the freedom and joy of the power of God.

***(5) The Kingdom of God is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to grant us innumerable spiritual blessings such as righteousness and peace and joy.***

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

This “righteousness” is both the righteousness of Jesus that is imputed or reckoned to us when we trust him for salvation *and* the righteousness that is seen in our daily existence as the Spirit empowers us to live in accordance with the revelation of God in Scripture. When you find yourself delighting in the commandments of Scripture and others growing in conformity to Jesus, you can truly say: There is the kingdom of God!

This “peace” is both the peace that we have “*with*” God and the peace “*of*” God. In other words, we have peace with God in the sense that all hostility has been removed; the war between us and our Creator is over; we now live in harmony with him, never again to feel the slightest tinge of fear that we might be condemned. But we also have the peace “of” God, that is to say, the very peace that exists in God’s life is now in us. In spite of the chaos and violence and hatred that swirls all around us in the world, we can live in the blessing of God’s peace. We can experience it and feel it and enjoy it. This is what Paul meant in Philippians 4.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7).

Paul also refers in Romans 14 to “joy” in the Holy Spirit. Of course, the righteousness and peace are no less the work of the Spirit in our hearts. But here Paul focuses on the joy that the Spirit awakens in us as evidence that the kingdom of God is present and powerfully at work. This is the joy that Peter describes as “inexpressible and filled

with glory” (1 Peter 1:8).

Where is the kingdom of God? It is anywhere that the people of God experience the blessings of righteousness and peace and joy through the power of the Holy Spirit.

***(6) The Kingdom of God is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in creating and shaping a spiritual community of Christian men and women who live in harmony and love.***

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 1:5b-6).

Did you hear that? You aren’t simply *in* the kingdom. You are more than merely a citizen of the kingdom. You, together with other Christians, *are* the kingdom! And this means that we are also “priests to his God and Father.” In other words, “Your calling is to draw near to God with the burdens of people, and to draw near to people with the blessings of God. That’s what it means to be a priest” (John Piper).

When God’s kingdom comes and exerts its power and presence through King Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit there comes into being a new family, a new identity, a new community, a new people: the Church (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 9:31)! Where is the kingdom, you ask? It is where interpersonal relationships are renewed and reconciliation is experienced; it is where the Spirit overcomes loneliness and isolation and brings acceptance and love.

***(7) The Kingdom of God is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit that brings us into intimate knowledge of and relationship with the King, Jesus!***

This is what Paul prayed for in Ephesians 3, that you would

“be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph. 3:16-17).

Unlike earthly kingdoms, the kingdom of God cannot be understood or even thought to exist without the presence of the King. The U.S. can exist and even thrive without a President, even as England can exist and thrive without a monarchy. But the kingdom of God is the presence and powerful Lordship of the person of the King himself: Jesus!

But how in the world could anyone in their right mind consider Jesus to be a King who is ushering in a Kingdom? He has no army. He has no political position or power. He has no police force. When he was on the earth he had virtually no money. He had a pathetic following of a few dozen men and women who were even less impressive than he was. He didn’t fight against Roman imperialism but against greed and envy and lust and materialism and hatred and disease and demons.

And we must never think that simply because Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father and is no longer physically present on earth that the kingdom left with him. No. Jesus promised that notwithstanding his physical absence he would be “with” us “always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). He is with us primarily in the person of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God’s promise and pledge that he will be with us at all times and that the promised consummation of the kingdom at the end of time will truly come.

The kingdom, then, is where the King is, as seen in the powerful, saving, demon-defeating, miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom is wherever pardon is proclaimed and received by faith and the people of God are gathered as a redeemed community. It is where God is acknowledged, where his subjects are saved, where his enemies are vanquished, where his ways are obeyed, and where Jesus is enjoyed. There we see the presence and

power of the kingdom.

*Conclusion:  
The “Already” and “Not Yet”*

One reason why some believers struggle to make sense of our current conditions is their failure to understand the distinction in Scripture between what is referred to as “the already” and “the not yet.” A good example can be found in what John said in his first epistle: “Beloved, we are God’s children **now**, and what we will be has **not yet** appeared; but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Here John gives expression to a tension, of sorts, between what is already true of us as God’s children and what is not true of us, but will be. Our status as God’s children is a present and permanent reality. Nothing can change that. On the other hand, we are not yet all that we shall be. There is yet to come the consummation of our experience as God’s children when Christ returns. We are truly the children of God but there is an experiential dimension of that relationship that will come to fruition only when Christ returns.

So, yes, the kingdom of God is **already** here (Col. 1:13), but it is **not yet** consummated in its fullness (1 Cor. 6:9). We are **already** reigning with Christ (Eph. 2:4-6), but in the age to come it will take on an entirely new and complete dimension (Rev. 5:9-10). We have eternal life **now**, but we have **not yet** entered into the full experience of all that entails. The new creation is **already** here (2 Cor. 5:17) but it has **not yet** come in the form of the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21-22). We **already** have the fullness of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, but Paul also speaks of this experience as merely the first fruits or down payment or pledge of what is yet to come. And the list could go on seemingly without end.

So, Christian man, Christian woman, whether young or old, don’t despair, don’t waver, don’t yield to the lie of the enemy that because times are chaotic that Christ isn’t King. He is. And through the power of the Holy Spirit we experience that sovereign rule and reign of King Jesus in countless ways.