

What is the Kingdom?

What does it mean to “enter the kingdom”? Jesus spoke frequently of the need for His *believing followers* to enter the kingdom of heaven. For example, He said,

*For I say to you that unless **your** righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, **you** will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).*

The words “your” and “you” indicate that he is speaking *particularly* to His saved disciples, and not a group of bystanders. As shown in the preceding chapter, Jesus seems to say that “righteousness” (that is, a righteous lifestyle) is a necessary condition for entrance into the kingdom of heaven. However, if a life of good works is necessary for kingdom entrance, an apparent contradiction appears between the faith-alone criterion for final salvation taught elsewhere and in Matthew 5:20. On the one hand, Jesus and Paul maintain that salvation is by faith alone, but here Jesus seems to say that salvation requires works. Jesus has made it clear in Matthew 5:19 that a life of good works is *not* necessary to be in the kingdom. The five attempts to harmonize this tension outlined in the preceding chapter are all inadequate.¹ In order to resolve this difficulty, we first need to explore the answer to the question, “What is the meaning of the phrase ‘enter the kingdom’?”

To answer this, we must consider a number of interrelated issues and parallel passages. To whom, for example, is Jesus speaking? Some argue that it is to the disciples; others believe those addressed are a mixed crowd including those who have not yet put their faith in him.

An equally important question is, “What does Jesus mean by the ‘kingdom of heaven’?” Is this a reference to the future kingdom promised in the Old Testament, or is he referring to a present reality of some sort, such as personal salvation, a present invisible rule from heaven, or in the hearts of believers? The answers to these questions will influence the understanding of what it means to enter it.

Whatever we conclude about His statements in Matthew 5:19-20 must be in harmony with the conclusion of the Sermon in Matthew 7:13 ff. There Jesus teaches that there is both a broad and a narrow way to enter the kingdom. This requires that we decide on the meaning of the broad and narrow ways. We must also explain how the contrast between “life” in 7:14 and “destruction” in 7:13 relates to entering or not entering the kingdom.

What about those who say “Lord, Lord” to Him in 7:21, but who do not enter the kingdom because they have not “*done the will of the Father*”? It seems evident to many that whatever “*enter the kingdom*” means, it likely means the same thing in 7:21 that it does in 5:20. If the entrants in 7:21 cannot enter because they have not “*done the will of the Father*,” does this mean they cannot enter because they have not lived out the ethics of the preceding chapters of the Sermon, or does the “will of the Father” possibly mean “believing in Him” as it does in John 6:40?

How is it possible that those who have done miracles in His Name are not allowed entrance? Jesus says to them, “Depart from me.” Does this refer to eternal separation from God, thus helping us interpret the *destruction* of those who chose the broad way (7:13)? What about parallel passages elsewhere in Matthew, such as the encounter with the rich young ruler, where entering the kingdom, inheriting the kingdom, inheriting eternal life, treasure in Heaven, and obtaining life all seem to be similar or closely related ideas?

Many “entry sayings” in the New Testament must be considered together if one is to arrive at the meaning of “enter the kingdom” and to have a satisfactory explanation of the apparent contradiction between the faith-alone condition for obtaining final salvation and the seeming requirement of works as an addition to it found in many passages in the New Testament. What do these entries say?

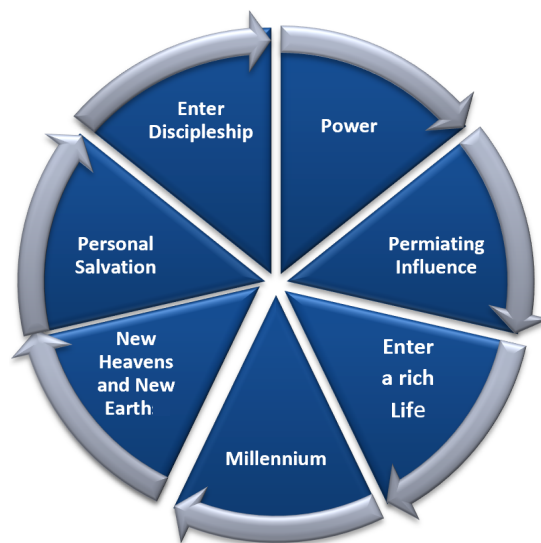
¹ A recent example is Roger Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: A Comparison of Ethical Perspectives*, Monograph series / Society for New Testament Studies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Entry Sayings

The term “entry sayings” refers to these phrases:

- (1) “enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23, 24; 23:13; Mark 9:47; 10:15, 25; Luke 18:17, 24, 25; John 3:5; Acts 14:22);
- (2) “entering into life” (Matthew 18:8, 9; 19:17; Mark 9:43;
- (3) “seeking life” (Luke 17:33; Romans 2:7); and
- (4) “seeking the kingdom” (Matthew 6:33; 13:45; Luke 12:31). These seem to be parallel and explain each other.

What is the Kingdom?



Before we can know what it means to enter the kingdom, we must first understand what the kingdom is. The diagram above shows the seven ways the Kingdom is described in the New Testament

In this section, we will explore three questions

1. What is the kingdom?
2. How does one enter the Kingdom?
3. When will the Kingdom come?

One would expect a simple answer, since this was the central focus of Jesus’ teaching ministry. But thousands of books, journal articles, and sermons have been produced offering different understandings of this critical concept. After pondering this question for many years and researching the biblical evidence, this writer would like to propose an answer that, while new in some respects, is in fact an eclectic summary of insights from many thinkers throughout the history of the church.

The problem that has confounded Bible students regarding the meaning of this theme is that the phrase “kingdom of God” appears to have different meanings in different contexts. In some places, the kingdom means the restored Davidic theocracy predicted in the Old Testament (Acts 1:6), but in others it is described as the sphere of personal salvation (John 3:16).

The nature of the Kingdom of Heaven is pregnant with meaning. The specific emphasis or aspect of the kingdom is determined by the context in which it is found. In the following discussion, we will address the seven ways the Kingdom of Heaven is defined. These passages tell the reader what is being entered into. There are seven ways the Kingdom of Heaven is defined in the New Testament,

The Millennial Restoration of Davidic Theocracy

As Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem offering the Kingdom to the nation, it is evident that the people understood him to be offering the Messianic kingdom promised to David. They say,

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David;

Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:10)

A primary definition of the kingdom is that it refers to the Messianic Kingdom on earth promised to King David. In the context of first-century Judaism's Messianic expectations, as understood by the hearers of Jesus, the kingdom of God was the future establishment of God's rule over the earth, beginning in the millennium and extending into eternity in the new heavens and the new earth.

What characterized the promised Kingdom in the Old Testament which Jesus offered?

1. Global Peace

*Nation will not lift up sword against nation, **And never again will they train for war.** (Micah 4:3)*

2. Righteous Global Government

There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6–7)

3. Extension of Lifetime

No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, Or an old man who does not live out his days; For the youth will die at the age of one hundred And the one who does not reach the age of one hundred Shall be thought accursed. (Isaiah 65:20)

4. Satan will be Chained

And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years (Rev 20:1–3)

5. Transformation of the Animal World

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;

And a little boy will lead them. And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. (Isaiah 11:6–8)

6. No More Sickness

No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, Or an old man who does not live out his days; For the youth will die at the age of one hundred And the one who does not reach the age of one hundred shall be thought accursed. (Isaiah 65:20)

7. Absolute Ethical Norms Will be Established

For the law will go forth from Zion, And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, And will render decisions for many peoples; (Isaiah 2:2–4)

And all your sons will be taught of the Lord (Isaiah 54:13)

8. Curse on Nature will be lifted

The creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:21)

The New Heavens and the New Earth

At the end of the Great Tribulation, Christ returns to earth.

*Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and **He will reign forever and ever.**"*

*And the twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying "We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because **You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign.** And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged" (Rev 11:15-18a), and "For behold, **I create new heavens and a new earth,** and the former things will not*

be remembered or come into mind” (Isaiah 65:17). “But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13).

A Life of Discipleship

As the children of Israel were preparing to take possession of the Promised Land, the Lord instructed them as follows:

*Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you **may live** and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.*
(Deuteronomy 4:1-2).

What is meant by “live?” Since it is based on good works and obedience to God, it cannot refer to spiritual rebirth. Instead, it refers to **a full enjoyment of life**. Taking possession of the Promised Land was contingent on obedience to the decrees and laws. This suggests that entrance into the promised land is not a good parallel to entering heaven when one dies, as suggested by some interpreters. The Israelites were to make a full commitment to obey the Lord, i.e., they were to become what the New Testament calls disciples.

In some places, the kingdom of God is defined as a righteous way of life (the “narrow gate” and the “narrow way,” Matthew 7:13-14). It is an experience of kingdom life that one can enjoy now. Paul says, “*The kingdom of God is ... righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*” (Romans 14:17). While some interpreters view “righteousness” in this passage as forensic justification, the context clearly defines it as entering into discipleship. This “way of living” is also characterized by “peace” among fellow Christians (Romans 14:19) and by serving Christ in a manner that is well pleasing to God and approved by men (v. 18). It is “walking according to love” (Romans 14:15), that is, it is a *kingdom way of living*. To enter the kingdom is to enter into discipleship.

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus exhorts his followers who are saved to “seek the kingdom.” This is another way of calling them to enter fully committed discipleship and experience kingdom way of living. When Jesus says, “*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you,*” probably, as many have suggested,² the phrase “*and His righteousness*” explains the preceding words “His kingdom.”³

France agrees, “The idea of “seeking God’s kingship” is best understood as ... resolving to **live under God’s direction and control** ... God’s kingship means God’s people living under God’s rule.”⁴ Or, as we have said, they should “seek the kingdom way of life.”

Luke says, “*Seek His kingdom,*” which, according to Bock, is commonly understood to mean, “to seek to live in a way that honors God’s presence and rule.”⁵ It does not mean to seek personal salvation. Jesus explains what seeking the kingdom means when He tells His disciples that one must be willing to sell their possessions (Luke 18:24) if they want to “enter the kingdom.” This act is equivalent to laying up treasure in heaven, seeking kingdom priorities—a theme Jesus spoke of elsewhere (Luke 12:31-34).

² “Righteousness” is apparently in apposition to “kingdom,” explaining it further. The use of *kai* in this way is common. Cf. BDAG, 495 (cf. Matthew 21:5; Mark. 5:19; John. 1:16; Romans. 1:5; 13:11; Philippians. 3:7; Ephesians 2:8; e.g., Matthew 8:33, “*they told everything, namely, what had happened to those who were possessed*”). Thus Donald A. Hagner suggests that “and his righteousness,” is practically epexegetical of the preceding phrase” (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word Books, 2002], 166). William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker agree: “These two (kingdom and righteousness) go together. In fact, ‘the kingdom of God is [means, implies] righteousness’ (Romans 14:17), a righteousness both imputed to men and imparted to them, both of legal standing and of ethical conduct” (William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001], 354). As Davies and Allison put it, “Thus to seek the kingdom is to seek righteousness and to seek righteousness is to seek the kingdom” (Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 661]. Luz and Koester state it this way: “The ‘kingdom of the heavens’ is righteousness” (Luz and Koester, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, 130).

³ Hagner, Matthew 1-13, 166. Luz agrees: “The concept is ethicized. Matthew adds to the traditional “seek first [God’s] kingdom”—presumably epexegetically—‘and his righteousness,’ δικαιοσύνη in Matthew being a quality of activity required of people” (U. Luz, “*βασιλεία*,” in EDNT 1:203).

⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*: 271.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 1164. Klappert says, “This ethical understanding of the kingdom is also found in the Apocrypha. Thus, the LXX can identify the *basileia* with the four cardinal virtues (4 Macc. 2:23), and in Wis. 6:20 we read, ‘The desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom.’ ‘To the mind he gave the law; and one who lives subject to this will rule a kingdom that is temperate, just, good, and courageous’ (4 Macc. 2:23, NRSV).” See Klappert, “King, Kingdom,” in NIDNTT, 2:374. I am proposing that in the account of the rich young ruler the phrases “inherit the Kingdom,” “enter into life,” “enter the kingdom” and “treasure in heaven,” while not precisely equal, nevertheless convey similar ideas. See elsewhere in this book, pp. 193 ff.

Herman Ridderbos agrees,

*The kingdom of God and righteousness are spoken of in the form of a hendiadys.⁶ It may be rightly said, therefore, that **sometimes kingdom and ethical righteousness are synonymous concepts in Jesus' preaching.** The one is unthinkable without the other.⁷*

In other words, believers are to seek His kingdom, which is His righteousness. This passage defines the kingdom itself as the way of discipleship. Elsewhere, Jesus teaches that it involves forgiving others (cf. Matthew 18:22-35) and a lifetime of preparation for His return (25:1ff.).

A comparison of the requirements for Kingdom entrance and the requirements for discipleship demonstrate that the call is to believers, not non-believers, to enter in the Kingdom. It is a call to fully committed discipleship.

Requirements for Kingdom Entrance	Requirements for Discipleship
A humble spirit, readiness to sacrifice material goods (Mark 10:23), ⁸ physical well-being (Mark 9:47), ⁹ and family ties (Luke 9:61) ¹⁰	Complete self-sacrifice (Mark 8:34; Luke 14:28-33) involving family ties (Matthew 10:37; Luke 14:26) and even life itself (Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 17:33)
Absolute obedience to God's will (Matthew 5:20; 7:21)	Obedience to Jesus (Matthew 10:38; Mark 8:34; Luke 14:27)
	Persevering loyalty to Jesus in all circumstances (Matthew 10:32-33; Mark 8:38; Luke 12:8 ff.)

The chart above shows the similarities between entering the kingdom and being a disciple. The demands Jesus makes on those who would enter the kingdom and those who would become disciples are practically identical.¹¹ If a person in the Gospels is called a disciple or follower of Christ, it means they are a fully committed believer. Yet not everyone who followed Jesus could be considered a disciple in the full sense of the word, as Jesus intended it. New followers need to be continually challenged to greater degrees of commitment (Matthew 8:18-23).

Masson correctly observes that if the demands Jesus makes on those who would enter the kingdom and those who would become disciples are practically identical.¹²

While some consider calls to enter the kingdom as calls to personal salvation, this is unlikely. If entering the kingdom is to enter heaven when one dies, how can this be harmonized with the faith-alone gospel Jesus taught

⁶ A hendiadys is a figure of speech where two words are employed, but only one thing or idea is meant. For example, "God created the heavens and the earth" means "God created the universe."

⁷ Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1962), 286.

⁸ For full discussion of Christ's encounter with the rich young ruler see chapter 24.

⁹ Entering the kingdom in this passage is contrasted with being cast into *Gehenna*. This suggests to many that entering the kingdom, which is the opposite of *Gehenna*, must therefore refer to soteriological entrance into eternal life. However, the Greek word *Gehenna*, translated "hell" is literally, the Valley of Hinnom. It refers to a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. To be cast into the Valley of Hinnom is to have one's life assessed as to its effectiveness for the cause of Christ and finding it has no more value than a pile of garbage. When the salt loses its saltiness, Jesus says it is no longer fit for the "manure" pile (Luke 14:34-35). This is discussed extensively on pp. 301 ff. and chapter 57.

¹⁰ Most commentators understand that being worthy ("fit for") the kingdom and "entering the kingdom" are the same thing. We agree.

However, as the discussion to follow will demonstrate, entering the kingdom refers to entering into a kingdom-way-of-living now, leading to higher honor and worthiness in the future reign of Christ. It is not about gaining life; it is about living it.

¹¹ T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus: Studies of its Form and Content* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 205. Manson concludes, "The inference to be drawn from this comparison would seem to be that, in the mind of Jesus, to become a genuine disciple of his and enter into the Kingdom of God amounted to much the same thing" (Ibid. 120). Of course, Manson is assuming that becoming a "genuine disciple" is what evangelicals would call "getting saved" and involves submission to the Lordship of Christ. His confusion is manifest because earlier he argued strongly that the entry sayings were addressed to those who were already "saved" (Ibid. 120).

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elsewhere?¹³ If works of discipleship are required to “enter the kingdom” and the same works are necessary to become a disciple, then entering the kingdom in those passages seems to be the same thing as becoming a disciple.

Does this therefore teach that personal salvation is dependent upon good works? A common explanation of this difficulty is to assume that since all true Christians persevere (the Reformed doctrine of perseverance), these passages describe the *characteristics of those who enter*, not the *conditions for entrance*. For example, one writer says,

But while Matthew views final judgment in terms of “what one has done” (Matt 16:27), these “works” do not serve as “proofs of accomplishment” but rather as “means of recognition” which “show where the person is rooted.” Judgment is therefore not so much a matter of reward for actions as it is an acknowledgment of the stance which human beings have already taken toward Jesus, the Son of Man who comes to judge.¹⁴

This view presupposes that the Experimental Predestinarian paradigm for understanding the connection between saving faith and a life of works is true. It directly contradicts what Jesus said in Matthew 5:19, where He speaks of those who disobey and teach others to disobey the least of the commandments are nevertheless “in” the kingdom. So one can be in the kingdom and yet be disobedient. It is clear from verse 19 that a “heart righteousness” is not necessary for kingdom entrance in the sense of entering into final salvation. But according to verse 19, it *is* essential for “greatness,” a higher status, in the kingdom.

The best and most straightforward explanation for the works conditions for the “entry sayings” is to distinguish between becoming a Christian and being a disciple. We agree with R.T. France, “To enter the kingdom of heaven does not [*always*] mean to go to a place called heaven ... but to come under God’s rule, to become one of those who recognize his kingship and live by its standards, to be God’s true people.”¹⁵ All disciples are Christians, but not all Christians are disciples. God does not rule in the hearts of all Christians.¹⁶ That is why (in the Gospel of Matthew) Jesus continually calls on believers to take the next step, to become His disciples. Or, as He said to the rich young ruler, “*if you want to be complete*” (Matt. 19:21), obey the commandments.¹⁷

To “enter the kingdom” in this sense is to submit to the kingdom’s rule over one’s life, which leads to the reward of being an heir of the kingdom, i.e., ruling with Christ in the future. Stated in contemporary terms, it refers to a believer making a “lordship decision” (Romans 12:1-2). Most of the entry sayings are addressed to believers who are already saved and relate to sanctification or status, not soteriology.

Regarding the Sermon on the Mount, Baxter is correct, “This ‘insider’s’ discourse [teaching for those who are saved], then, while being delivered in the full hearing of the masses, is anything but entrance-focused [in the sense of personal salvation] in its content. These parallels and the narrative setting would argue against understanding ‘enter’ in an ‘evangelistic’ way.”¹⁸

This is the critical decision facing all who name Christ as their Savior. This is what Paul meant when he said, “*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship*” (Romans 12:1). As Jesus taught in the parable of the narrow gate and the narrow way (Matthew 7:13-14), so Paul is challenging true believers to come under the rule of God in their daily lives.

Kingdom Way of Living

Closely related to entering into discipleship are the challenges in both the OT and the NT which invite believers to enter a rich life with Christ.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

Jesus says,

“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

¹³ L. D. Hurst, “Ethics of Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scott McKnight, and I. Howard. Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 212.

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, Merrill Chapin Tenny, and William White, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 146.

¹⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*: 190. Being an Experimentalist, France believes that all true believers will do this (ibid., 801).

¹⁶ See Chapter 32 for extensive biblical documentation of this point. *

¹⁷ As argued elsewhere, we believe that the rich young ruler was probably a new believer in Christ who wanted to know what the next step would be for him to obtain treasure in heaven. Unfortunately, he finds that it is too demanding. See discussion on pp. 193 ff.

¹⁸ Wayne Baxter, “The Narrative Setting of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Trinity Journal* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 35.

To “enter the kingdom” in Matthew 5:20 means to “live by its standards,” i.e., to enter into the kingdom way of life by submitting to the Lordship of Christ, which leads to greatness in the future reign of the servant kings. This is something that only those who already know Christ can do. We must live like heirs of the future kingdom now. Believers cannot live like this unless one has an internal personal righteousness that surpasses the external legalistic righteousness of the Pharisees. The idea of “greatness” or higher status will be developed in the next chapter.

We agree with Baxter’s conclusion that “Matthew 5:20 does not seem to raise the question of ‘soteriology’ as much as it raises the question of ‘sanctification.’ In other words, it is not so much how to get into the kingdom in the sense of personal salvation that is in view, as much as it is how kingdom-dwellers ought to conduct their lives.”¹⁹

That entering the kingdom often means “to enter into the kingdom way of life,” is confirmed by Acts 19:8-9. In vs. 8 Luke says:

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God.

Then, in the next verse, he explains that “entering the kingdom” is equivalent to entering “the Way.”

But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way.

What is “the Way” (Gr. *to hodos*)?

Most agree that it often refers to a way of life. For example, one of the standard lexicons says that *the way* (Gr *to hodos*) in Acts 19:9 refers to “the whole way of life fr. a moral and spiritual viewpoint.”²⁰ Another lexicon says, “In the NT *ὁδός* primarily refers to the way of life, the manner of life demanded by God.”²¹

Several important observations may be made about this list and the diagram above.²²

A study of all places in the New Testament where the kingdom is mentioned reveals seven aspects of the single kingdom of God: (a) the power of God,²³ (b) a permeating influence throughout the world,²⁴ (c) the messianic new heavens and the new earth,²⁵ (f) the Wedding Feast of the Lamb,²⁶ and finally, (g) the sphere of personal salvation.²⁷

It makes no difference whether the reader agrees with how this writer has categorized the various references in the footnotes above. The seven categories probably encompass all the kingdom references, but which verses fit in which category is certainly debatable and is irrelevant to the general conclusion of this chapter.

Third, even though in a particular passage one aspect of the kingdom may be prominent, it is still acceptable and probable that several other elements may lurk in the background.

Fourth, attempts to impose a single, uniform definition of the kingdom based on one of these aspects are doomed to fail. Yet there is a consistency. The broader category—the kingdom of God, defined as the establishment of God’s rule over the earth, which extends into the future eternity in the new heavens and the new earth—is involved in every mention of the kingdom in the New Testament.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ BDB, 692.

²¹ EDNT, 491.

²² In this diagram the arrows on the rim indicate that all aspects of the kingdom of God are interrelated and flow into one another. The kingdom of God is in the center, the sovereign rule of God over all. His creation is the focus. From that kingdom various manifestations and experiential aspects emerge. This is the proclamation of “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 9:35). That phrase embraces all seven aspects of the kingdom of heaven.

²³ Matthew 12:28; 13:11; Luke 10:9, 11; 11:20. “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). In this instance the rule of God has broken in over the demons. Also, the kingdom is presented as a source of healing power. “Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God is near you’” (Luke 10:9). L. D. Hurst expresses it this way: “The Kingdom Is Present As a Divine Power Breaking in upon the Kingdom of Satan and Overthrowing the Power of Satan in the World.” See Hurst, “Ethics of Jesus,” 212.

²⁴ Matthew 11:12; 13:24, 31, 33, 38, 47; Mark 4:11, 26-29; 8:10; Luke 13:18, 20; Colossians 4:11. See *ibid.* The parables of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32) and the leaven (Matthew 13:33) have often been understood to suggest that the kingdom of heaven is a permeating influence that lifts and elevates human existence. Kingdom work can involve healing (Luke 10:9). This global impact resulting from individual Christians experiencing this kingdom way of life and being salt and light in the world is well documented in the social, political, and scientific advancement of mankind. See Nancy Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994). When Jesus said “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62), He was no doubt referring to the kingdom as a present reality for which one could be useful in doing kingdom work. For an excellent discussion of Christianity’s positive impact on the world see Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001).

²⁵ Revelation 11:15

²⁶ Matthew 8:10-13; Mark 14:25; Luke 13:22-30; 14:16-24; 22:29-30

²⁷ John 3:5; Matthew 13:19, 24 (a “field” of evangelistic effort), 47; Mark 9:47; Colossians 1:13.

Fifth, and most important, in each place where entering the kingdom of God is mentioned, the call is always to those *who have already entered it in the sense of personal salvation*.

What then do the entry sayings mean? When Jesus invites **His believing followers** to enter the kingdom of heaven, He is obviously not inviting them to accept the gospel and be saved. They are already saved. Instead, this invitation to enter the kingdom involves a call to experience life richly; to enter a kingdom way of living (discipleship) by seeking the kingdom way of life; and to enter into a higher status in the future reign of the servant kings.

The entry sayings have been understood to mean that when one enters the kingdom of heaven in the present, he is entering a spiritual kingdom (the so-called “already” part). If the kingdom of God is future, how is it possible to enter it now? To enter the Kingdom now means to enter into fully committed discipleship; to enter into the power of the kingdom; to enter into the rich life of the kingdom; or to enter into salvation. In his discussion with the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-26), Jesus equates “entering the kingdom” with the phrase “enter life” (Gr *eiserchomai tēn zōēn*, Matthew 19:17, 23). This word, unlike its English counterpart, usually means “to experience” or “to enter into an event or state, to come to enjoy something.” For example, “to enter life crippled” (Mark 9:43) is best understood as “to experience life crippled.” What is “life”?

Jesus’ puzzling saying in Matthew 5:30 begins to make sense when “enter” is understood in this way. “*And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off, and throw it away; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell [Gr Gehenna, the valley of Hinnom].*” This passage is directed to his “disciples” (Matthew 5:1-2). Those invited to “enter into life” are already born again. Similarly, in Matthew 18:8, where this saying is repeated, it is clearly stated that those addressed are disciples, “*at that time his disciples came to him*” (Matthew 18:1). Since no one will enter eternal life in heaven with a hand cut off, it may be best to translate as the Louw-Nida lexicon does, “It is better for you to experience (true) life [enter the kingdom] with one hand than to keep two hands and end up in Gehenna [The Valley of Hinnom].” These born-again people are being called to a kingdom-style way of living through committed discipleship. After all, the Kingdom is an experience (Romans 14:17). As will be explained in Chapters 54-57 below, Gehenna refers to a shameful death and has nothing to do with final damnation. The idea that kingdom entrance is not always entrance into the restored Davidic theocracy or personal salvation but also includes entering into a rich experience of God, appears in many places in the New Testament.

The Power of God

Another meaning of “Kingdom of Heaven” in the New Testament is that it seems to refer to God’s power. For example, Jesus says, “*If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, the kingdom of God has come upon you*” (Matthew 12:28).

Initial Salvation

A central passage on entering the kingdom is in Jesus’ interview with Nicodemus.

Jesus answered and said to him,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see (εἶδον, “experience,” BDAG, 279), the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3-5).

This aspect of the future kingdom, spiritual re-birth, is available now because of the installation of the New Covenant and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The Permeating Influence of the Kingdom

Because of Israel’s rejection of the Kingdom offer, Jesus taught that a mystery form of the Kingdom will be in place until He returns to establish the Kingdom at his Second Coming.

Jesus answered them, “*To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted*” (Matthew 13:11, NASB). What are these mysteries? This term refers to truths about the Kingdom which were not revealed in the Old Testament.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30), the tares (weeds) that are sowed by the farmer are those who reject the kingdom offer. The wheat are true believers. Believers and unbelievers will both grow in numbers during this era.

The next parable of the mustard seed (Mt. 13:31-32) compares the Kingdom to the smallest of seeds but will grow in size and be the largest of all. This probably refers to the incredible expansion of Christianity from a small group of eleven men, to an estimated 2.5 billion who identify as Christians today.

In the parable of the leaven, Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to leaven. We learn that the kingdom in the present age will have a permeating influence for good throughout the world. It will be like leaven, which permeates the dough until it becomes bread (Matthew 13:33). Just as a small bit of yeast can impact a large amount of dough, the impact of Christianity would have a large influence for good throughout the world.

How To Enter the Kingdom Way of Life

How one enters the kingdom depends on the meaning of the kingdom in the context. If the kingdom in a particular context refers the sphere of personal salvation, then, of course the way of entry is believing in Christ for the forgiveness of sin.

However, there are contexts where entry refers to entry into a way of life and the passage is addressed to believers, not unbelievers who need salvation

Entering into the Kingdom is seen in the famous saying about the narrow way.

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

This is not an invitation to personal salvation. It is a call to believers, specifically the Twelve disciples, to enter into the way of life that the Lord has been explaining to them in the preceding chapters of the Sermon on the Mount discipleship.

We will reserve a full discussion of this parable for later (see Chapter 21). Obviously, the phrase “enter the narrow way” explains how to “*enter the kingdom*” in the sense of fully obedient discipleship. Within the context of the Sermon on the Mount, the way entered is the way of living Jesus has been teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in the previous chapters (Matthew 5-7). The alternative outcome of destruction is not eternal separation from God but spiritual ruin in this life and loss honor and opportunities to rule with Christ in the life to come.

We will discuss passage in more detail in the following two chapters (Chapters 20-21).

When Will the Kingdom Come?

Surprisingly, Jesus, in the first century frequently said that the Kingdom of Heaven was near.

*“So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is **near**. (Gr. ἐγγύς - Luke 21:31)*

*And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is **at hand**.’ (Gr. ἐγγύς - Matthew 10:7)*

*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is **at hand**.” (Gr. ἐγγύς - Matthew 3:2)*

*From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is **at hand**.” (Gr. ἐγγύς - Matthew 4:17)*

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is **at hand**; repent and believe in the gospel. (Gr. ἐγγύς - Mark 1:15)*

The Greek word for “at hand” and “near” are the same.

The problem is that Jesus said the Messianic Kingdom was near, but it did not appear. Therefore, was Jesus wrong? The fact that Israel rejected Christ’s offer suggests that had they accepted the offer when he said it was “near,” He meant **that if they accept it**, the kingdom would have been established in the first century. It is obvious that the Davidic Kingdom was “near” in the **sense of contingency**.

Because Jesus said the Kingdom is near but has not appeared for over 2,000 years, some believe that the future reign of the Messiah must not be defined as the Davidic Theocracy; otherwise Jesus was in error. Instead, some define the Kingdom as a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of men. Therefore, the Kingdom has already begun with the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. It has “already” been inaugurated in a spiritual form, but the final form is “not yet.”

However, it is difficult to accept this in view of the Nazi holocaust and the terrible wars and degeneration of culture in the twentieth century. Wouldn’t this suggest that Christ’s current reign over the world is relatively weak? None of the characteristics of the Kingdom of Heaven described above such as global peace and a global world government have been present during the inter-advent age.

There are passages such as Hebrews 1:13 and 2:8, which tell us that when He establishes the predicted kingdom, all things will be in subjection to him. That is not the case now. The idea that the world we see today marks the beginning of the golden day when King Jesus sits on the Davidic Throne is implausible. To suggest that his future reign has begun, i.e., it is “already,” is to imply that God’s glorious kingdom is a trivial and thwarted influence in the current world, which is sliding toward catastrophe. This interpretation of “already” makes a mockery of the Old Testament promises.

How is it possible that we are in the kingdom now, since Jesus and John the Baptist told us that global judgment would precede the arrival of the kingdom? Jesus said that before the kingdom, “*There will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will*” (Matthew 24:21). The Olivet Discourse details the events of this global catastrophe that will precede the coming of the Son of Man and the establishment of His Kingdom (Matthew 24:15-28). Jesus says that “*after the tribulation of those days*” the Son of Man will come and then he will establish His Kingdom and “*sit upon His glorious throne*” (Matthew 25:31). He is not presently upon His glorious throne. Therefore, we are not in the Kingdom promised in the Old Testament and confirmed in New.

When we turn to the book of Acts, the kingdom has still not yet been inaugurated; it is still not “already.” After forty days of post-resurrection teaching on the kingdom of God, the apostles ask Jesus, “*Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). He responds, “*It is not for you to know the times or epochs*” (v. 7). Then in Acts 3, Peter re-offers the kingdom to Israel, saying, “*Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, so that **times of refreshing** may come from the presence of the Lord*” (Acts 3:19). There was a condition that must be fulfilled if the kingdom was to come; the nation must repent. It is not “already” here. We are not in the Kingdom today.

Peter echoes the teaching of his Lord, who similarly gave that condition, saying, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near*” (Matthew 4:17). The word “near” does not mean “here”! As discussed above, the future Davidic Theocracy (Acts 1:6) was “near” *in the sense of contingency*. If Israel repented and embraced Jesus as her messiah, the kingdom that was “near” would have become “here.” Since the kingdom will not come until Israel repents and since Israel has not repented, the kingdom has not come, and we are not in an “already” form of a future kingdom now.

One day, the “Israel of God (Gal 6:16),” that is, the believing Jewish remnant of the last days, will repent, and the kingdom will be established (Romans 11:25-28). In the meantime, the kingdom has been “taken away” from that evil and adulterous first generation (Matthew 21:43). In a future era, the kingdom will be given to another “nation” (Gr *ethnos*). The context requires that the believing Jewish nation of the last days, not the Gentiles or the church, is in view.²⁸

Clayton Sullivan has challenged the “already but not yet” view, arguing that when scholars use the term “already-not yet,” it acts as a bait-and-switch. They use the word “kingdom” in the same phrase to mean two different things, which is a language mistake called a shift in referents.

The “not yet” referent defines the kingdom as the Golden Age. The “already” referent views the kingdom as a source and power including healings, exorcisms of demons, and new life in Christ. Clearly, new life in Christ isn’t the same as the Golden Age. Sullivan says,

On the one hand, they look us in the eye and declare, “the kingdom was present in Jesus’ exorcisms.” While still looking us in the eye and mesmerizing us with discussions about how *basileia* (kingdom) is to be understood in terms of *malkuth* [Aramaic for “reign”], they go one step further and affirm, “And by the way, this kingdom we have told you was present, is also future.” But in this future claim, they abandon their bait’s reference to the kingdom (a curative power) and switch to an entirely different referent (the Golden Age).²⁹

God’s blessing to fulfill the Covenant oath to establish Israel’s global kingdom was always contingent on their obedience. He made this clear from the beginning in His word to Israel through Moses:

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your ancestors (Deuteronomy 7:12).

In the account of the fig tree in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says that Israel was not careful to follow His laws. Israel would not repent.

²⁸ Israel is often referred to as a “nation” (cf. Acts 10:22; John 11:48, 50).

²⁹ Clayton Sullivan, *Rethinking Realized Eschatology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 47.

Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening (Mark 11:13-14).

The prophets had often used the failure of the fig tree to produce figs as a symbol of judgment on the nation (Isa 34:4; Jer 29:17; Hos 2:12; 9:10; Joel 1:7; Mic 7:1).³⁰ In a scathing denunciation of Judah, Jeremiah announces a judgment when he says,

"There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither" (8:13).

When Jesus says, *"May no one ever eat fruit from you again!"* this is obviously not a childish and unfair condemnation of an innocent fig tree! The fig tree is a symbol for the nation of Israel, which would reject Jesus. Just as that fig tree would never produce fruit, Jesus says the nation that will reject him, i.e., they will never produce fruit. Thus, the kingdom of heaven was "near" in the sense of contingency. It was "near" but would only appear if the fig tree (the Nation) sprouted figs, that is, if Israel would bear fruit and accept Him as the Messiah.

Summary

The "entry sayings" in the Gospels have been fodder for much theological discussion. What does it mean to "enter the kingdom"? What did Jesus mean when He spoke about the kingdom of heaven? In this chapter, we concluded that the background to the entry sayings lies in Old Testament ideas about entering the land, entering the temple precincts, and the renewal ceremony at Shechem. In each case, believers are the subject. This paves the way for the concept that many of the entry sayings in the New Testament are addressed to believers as well. This is substantiated by contextual indicators surrounding the various entry sayings.

The message about the kingdom of God, to which believers are called to enter, is multifaceted. It has seven aspects: the restored Davidic theocracy (millennium), the power of God, the new heavens and the new earth, the experience of discipleship and kingdom life, entering a rich life, spiritual rebirth, and a permeating influence that has uplifted the plight of mankind for centuries. Which aspect, or aspects, are in view depends on the context.

On several occasions in the above discussion, we have connected kingdom entrance with "greatness." The connection between becoming great in the kingdom and entering the kingdom needs more discussion. This is the subject of the next chapter.

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

If one considers only Acts 1:6, they might rightly conclude that the message of the kingdom of God primarily refers to the restored Davidic theocracy. However, that is only one part of the kingdom's message. The kingdom of God foretold in the Old Testament was broader than the Davidic kingdom alone. That particular aspect was offered to Israel, rejected, and has been postponed. It is not currently in effect, but will be when Christ returns. Still, other facets of the Old Testament hope are clearly active today.

When Jesus "preached the kingdom of God," or "proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom," it is generally best to assume, unless the context suggests otherwise, that more than just the restoration of the kingdom to Israel is being referred to (see Luke 9:60, 62; Acts 1:3; 8:12; Hebrews 1:8). Certainly, a significant aspect of the kingdom of heaven predicted in the Old Testament was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a new and distinctive way. Joel announced that the kingdom would be a time when the Spirit would be poured out on all people (Joel 2:28-29). Peter said that this aspect of the kingdom was fulfilled (at least in part) at Pentecost (Acts 2:17). Through Ezekiel, God promised that in the millennial kingdom He would put His Spirit in them and cause them to "walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36:27). While this will ultimately be fulfilled in the future, Jesus made it clear that the promise of the Spirit's indwelling, a distinctive feature of the kingdom of heaven, is available in this age to all who believe (John 14:17).

³⁰ James R. Edwards, [*The Gospel According to Mark*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 340.