

10 The Kingdom of God - What others believe

There was a view of the kingdom of God which was popular in Victorian times: the 19th century had been an era of scientific advance, when people believed that learning would gradually improve everything until the world was a perfect place. Medicine would rid the earth of all diseases, improved agriculture would provide plenty of food for everyone, and education would lead people to behave sensibly so that wars would cease. The theory of evolution provided support for this idea with its concept of improved species progressively triumphing over inferior ones.

So the idea became widely accepted that the kingdom of God would arise gradually in the earth. It was thought that although Christianity began in a small way, its influence would spread throughout the world and would become stronger and stronger until all the earth would become 'The kingdom of God'. This belief was supported by an interpretation of some passages of Scripture which is still held today in some (but not all) parts of the established church.

Two examples

Look at Matthew 13:31-32

'The interpretation of the parable lies almost on the surface. Here again the sower is the Son of Man; but the seed in this case is not so much the 'word' as the Christian society, the Church, which forms, so to speak, the firstfruits of the word. As it then was, even as it was on the day of Pentecost, it was even smaller than any sect or party in Palestine or Greece or Italy. It was sown in God's field of the world, but it was to grow till it became greater than any sect or school, a tree among the trees of the forest, a kingdom among other kingdoms (comp. the imagery of Ezekiel 31:3; Daniel 4:10), a great organised society; and the 'birds of the air' (no longer, as before, the emblems of evil) - i.e. the systems of thought, institutions, and the like, of other races - were to find refuge under its protection. History has witnessed many fulfilments of the prophecy implied in the parable, and those who believe that the life of Christendom is an abiding life will look for yet more.'

(from A Bible Commentary for English Readers, edited by C J Ellicott, D.D., Bishop of Gloucester)

When you think about the state of the world, of human nature, and of the Christian churches, does this seem likely to be a correct understanding of the passage?

Now look at Luke 17:20-21

This is another passage which may seem to support this understanding. It is not immediately clear, from these verses alone, whether the phrase 'within you' means 'in your souls', as in the quotation below, or whether it was referring to the presence of the Lord Jesus among the people.

'The Kingdom of God never comes by watching for it. Man cannot say, 'Look, here it is', or 'there it is', for the Kingdom of God is inside you.'

from 'The Gospels translated into Modern English' by J. B. Phillips

However, the Greek word for 'inside' occurs in only one other place in the New Testament:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Matthew 23:25-26 (NIV)

This passage effectively rules out the understanding that the kingdom of God is an inner experience. Although Jesus was speaking of the inside of people - their human nature - he was speaking to the Pharisees again, as in the passage in Luke 17. It is very unlikely that he would have meant that the kingdom of God was in a place ‘full of greed and self-indulgence’.

God’s kingdom coming in the future to save a doomed world



Read Matthew 24:21-31

What do you learn from this passage about the sort of world into which the Lord Jesus will return?

It is clear from Daniel 2:44 that there is a specific future time in which God will establish his kingdom, which will overcome the kingdoms of the world, and Christ will rule on the earth.

“In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever.

The kingdom of God - being prepared now

There is another aspect of this subject that we should not ignore, however. There are many passages in the New Testament (we have already looked at Luke 17:20-21) where it is clear that the ‘kingdom’ is used of Christ himself. When God’s power was wielded in the earth, and used to overcome the powers of evil, it could be said that the kingdom of God was near.



Look, for example, at Luke 11:17-20; 10:8-12

Similarly, when people turn to God they are, in a sense, citizens of his kingdom now. They obey his commandments and seek to serve him.

Now read Colossians 1:12-13; Philippians 3:17-21. What do these passages teach us about the connection between our life now, and the coming kingdom when Christ returns?

What others believe about what happens when we die

The teachings of many churches are unclear, partly because they have always welcomed members with varying views, regarding the desire to worship together as more important than unanimity on points of detail, and partly because their position has changed with time; they may still officially hold a doctrine which few members now believe.

For instance, while Anglicans officially accept the Apostles and Nicene Creeds which teach the Second Coming of Jesus, many members, clergymen and bishops no longer hold it to be literal truth. Most evangelical Christians accept the second coming but may have difficulty reconciling it with the belief that you go to heaven when you die.

Jehovah's Witnesses hold that there will be a spiritual resurrection for the 144,000 to heavenly existence, but that during the millennium there will be a general resurrection to renewed human life on earth.

Catholics believe that when an adult dies the soul goes to heaven, hell or purgatory.

Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they "see him as he is," face to face. ... This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity - this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed - is called "**heaven.**" Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.

The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of **hell** and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name **Purgatory** to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire.

Text taken from The Catechism of The Catholic Church, Second Edition, clauses 1023-1035

Mormons, believe, like Catholics, that their leader can be inspired to speak the word of God. The following comes from the web site 'What Mormons believe'.

We believe, as do other Christians, that Christ died and three days later was resurrected. He overcame death and because He rose again, all mankind is freed from the bondage of death. Regardless of age, race, gender, religious beliefs, good actions or bad actions, everyone will be reunited with their bodies at the time of the resurrection, after Christ's second coming.

But what happens in the meanwhile? Before becoming resurrected beings our spirits dwell in the spirit world. Those who accepted the gospel of Christ during their mortal lives will be in spirit paradise and those who did not, either due to ignorance or rejection, will be in spirit prison. There will be opportunities for those in spirit prison to accept the gospel of Christ as missionary work continues in the spirit world. It is here, in the spirit world, that Christ spent those three days while His body lay in the tomb.

www.whatdomormonsbelieve.com

Think of some Bible passages that you could use to try to help a Mormon or a Catholic to understand what really happens when you die.

Some difficult verses

Think about these verses and try to work out for yourself what they mean. If you get stuck, talk about it together or look at the notes written underneath.

Does 'the kingdom of heaven' mean that it will be in heaven?

Look at Matthew 5:12; Colossians 1:5; 1 Peter 1:4; 1 Peter 5:4. Put these passages together and it is clear that the reward in heaven is brought to believers on earth, and not vice versa. See Revelation 22:12 - "...I come quickly and my reward is with me..."

Matthew 10:28 Have we got souls?

Both soul and body can be destroyed in Gehenna - therefore the soul can be killed and is not immortal. Soul (Greek 'psyche') is translated 'life' in Matthew 16:25. Man can kill the body, but eternal life is in the hands of God.

Genesis 35:18 (AV) Did Rachel have a soul?

Soul (Hebrew 'nephesh') is often translated 'life' - i.e. her life was leaving her. NIV has 'breathed her last'.

Luke 23:43 Today in paradise?

The thief asked Jesus to remember him when he came in his kingdom. He was asking to be included in a future kingdom. The position of the comma is crucial to the meaning, but the punctuation is not in the Greek text. The comma can legitimately be positioned to give the reading "...I say unto you today, thou shalt be with me in paradise." This reading makes better sense since if the thief were to be with Jesus later that day, it would not be in heaven. When Jesus rose from the dead 3 days later, he said that he still had not ascended to his Father. Paradise is mentioned only 3 times in the Bible and is not identified with heaven. In Revelation 2:7, the tree of life grows there.

Acts 7:59: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'

Verse 60 says that Stephen fell asleep, not that his soul left his body to remain awake elsewhere. John 11:11-14; 24-25 shows that this is unconscious sleep awaiting resurrection. The spirit is the life, temporarily suspended but hid with Christ (Colossians 3:3-4) to be re-activated on Christ's return.

John 14:2 In my Father's house

The temple at Jerusalem represented the house of God. The New Testament goes on to speak of believers as a spiritual temple, again with room for all - see Ephesians 2:19-22, for instance. John 14:3 says "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again...that where I am there ye may be also". Jesus will return to be with his followers on earth, not in heaven.

Luke 16:19-31 Is this a picture of heaven and hell?

The parable is not about souls or spirits but bodies with eyes, fingers and tongues, which have to be carried by angels and which are confined by the physical barrier of a great gulf. Like the Old Testament parable of the trees speaking to one another, this need not be taken literally. The rich man in hell was able to see and speak to those in Abraham's bosom!

1 Thessalonians 5:23 - spirit and soul and body?

If these words are taken literally, we would have two immortal components - a spirit as well as a soul. We can however understand the words to mean 'mind' and 'life' and 'body'. All are needed for effective operation of the person. Thus the expression means the whole person.

A lot of the Bible is easy to understand, so why are some things so hard?