

# THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE KINGDOM OF THE HEAVENS

## The Kingdom of God

There is a perennial interest in the question, What is the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the heavens? In many instances there seems to be no distinction at all. In Matthew 19:23, 24 we read of both kingdoms in connection with the rich man who clung to his possessions. Their general identity is recognized again and again when the “kingdom” is spoken of without any word to tell us which one is referred to. Parallel passages abound in the gospels where Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of the heavens” and the other evangelists use “kingdom of God.”

The former phrase occurs only in Matthew’s account. But Matthew also uses the phrase “kingdom of God.” These cases are of special interest, therefore, in helping us to an understanding of the distinction between the two expressions.

“The kingdom of God” occurs as follows in Matthew. The three most ancient manuscripts omit it in Matthew 6:33.

**Now if I am casting out demons by the spirit of God, consequently you have a foretaste of the kingdom of God. (12:28)**

**... for the rich to be entering into the kingdom of God. (19:24)**

**. . . the tribute collectors and the prostitutes are preceding you into the kingdom of God. (21:31)**

**. . . the kingdom of God will be taken away from you. (21:43)**

If we can discover some element in these passages foreign to the rest, which makes it repugnant to our spiritual apprehension if we substitute “heavens” for “God,” then we will be able to enjoy the light and blessing which He has intended by using two phrases rather than one only.

The basic thought of the “kingdom of the heavens” is found in Daniel 2:44, where we read: “In their days, that is, of these kings, the Eloah of the heavens will set up a kingdom that for the eons shall not come to harm. His kingdom shall not be left to another people. It will pulverize and terminate all these kingdoms, and it shall be confirmed for the eons.” It will not be restricted by treaties with other nations, nor will it be subject to the powers of darkness.

This passage, combined with a close reading of all later references to this kingdom, show us plainly that it is confined to the earth. Its limits do not extend beyond this planet. Besides this it belongs to a people. It is the sovereignty of one people or nation over other nations, such as was the case with Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece, which once had world-wide sway. It is a future kingdom which is not yet set up. In contrast to this, the kingdom of God was already in exercise in heaven, though not on earth, as our Lord taught His disciples: “Let Thy will come to pass, as in heaven, on earth also” (Matt.6:10).

# The Kingdom of the Heavens

The kingdom of God, while it will include the earth, is not confined to it, but embraces the universe, except such parts as are in rebellion against Him. The kingdom of the heavens has no place outside the earth. The former is a present reality in heaven, but neither are yet established on earth. The kingdom of God is the sovereignty of a Divine Person. The kingdom of the heavens is a kingdom which, indeed, finds all its authority in Him, yet is delegated to a people. "And the kingdom and the jurisdiction and the majesty of the kingdom under the entire heavens will be granted to the people of the saints of the supremacies. Their kingdom is an eonian kingdom, and all other authorities shall serve and hearken to them." The twelve apostles shall be seated on twelve thrones, judging (i.e., ruling) the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt.19:28). Others shall have authority, some over five cities, some over ten. This authority is referred to when he tells them to teach or disciple all the nations (Matt.28:19).

An example may help to impress what we have been seeking to set forth. What, we will ask, was the difference between the kingdom of King George and the kingdom of Great Britain? The king's dominion extended over England and all its dependencies. In England he was the king; in India he was the emperor. But there is a sense in which every Englishman who voted in the home country had a hand in the government of India. So, too, a place in the kingdom of the heavens, includes a place of authority over the other nations.

The earthly kingdom has no jurisdiction over demons. So the fact that He cast them out was a sign that the kingdom of God had come upon them (Matt.12:28). The case of the rich man (Matt.19:24) is true of both kingdoms, but entrance is even more difficult in respect to God's personal rule. The tax gatherers and harlots will have nothing but judgment in the kingdom of the heavens. The tax gatherers were traitors to that kingdom. But the self-righteous Pharisees, who had a great deal to say about their own fitness for the divine presence—they had even less right than those whom they despised. And this shows another characteristic distinction, arising from the fact that one kingdom involves subjection to God Himself where no deception is possible, while the other has to do with authority vested in human hands. The kingdom of God will have no such history as the kingdom of the heavens. In the latter there will be feigned subjection, which will break out into rebellion when Satan is loosed from his chains. Loyalty to God Himself has a personal element similar to loyalty to a sovereign, which is much more than the subjection of a dependent realm.

Our last quotation deals with the fruits of the vineyard. There is no question here of the relation of Israel to the other nations. In subjection to God they would have furnished Him with the wine which cheers both God and man (Judges 9:13). So it is not the kingdom of the heavens which is taken from them, but the kingdom of God. This will be given to a nation which will bring forth its fruits. It will be taken from the apostates and given to the faithful and spiritual.

The two kingdoms, then, contain much in common and are often equivalents. But they always keep their own coloring and one phrase can never be used where God in His excellent wisdom has been pleased to place the other.

The kingdom of God is very seldom mentioned in the epistles, stress being laid upon its character. It is never, however, spoken of as a present reality upon the earth. It is spoken of as future (1 Cor.6:9, 10; 15:50; Gal.5:21; Eph. 5:5; 1 Thess.2:12; 2 Thess.1:5; 2 Tim.4:1,18). It is associated with the Circumcision (Col.4:11).

# **The Kingdom of the Father**

The “kingdom of the Father” is another phrase which contains a precious truth in advance of either of the ones we are considering. If the kingdom of the heavens expresses the relation of dependencies to another people and the kingdom of God the personal loyalty to a sovereign, then the Father’s kingdom expresses the position of the King’s children. This filial relationship promises no political prestige, but speaks rather of provision and character, which his fatherhood implies. He is the Father of the righteous (Matt.13:43). He it is who is petitioned for bread and forgiveness (Matt.6:10), and He will provide the wine in the coming kingdom (Matt.26:29). Its full and perfect expression awaits the consummation, when the Son gives up the kingdom to God, even the Father (1 Cor.15:24). It is a kingdom in name only, for all sovereignty and authority and power are unnecessary and unknown.

# **The Kingdom of the Son**

There is one kingdom, however, which is in power at the present time. This is the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Col.1:13). The authority of darkness, with spiritual forces of wickedness, who are the real sovereigns in this somber scene (Eph.6:12), is strictly a spiritual kingdom. It does not displace the sovereignties of this world at all. So also is the Son’s kingdom. It is a strictly spiritual sovereignty. We were once subjects of the domains of darkness. Now we are subjects of the kingdom of the Son of His love. All the while, however, we are still subject to the human governments under which we live. We are not loosed from them. We are exhorted to be subject to rulers as to God’s ministers (Rom.13:6).

Some day the kingdom of God’s Son will find expression on earth. That will be after this old earth has been replaced by a new one. Then God will dwell with all mankind and all will be willing, worshiping subjects of His beloved Son. So perfect will this reign be that the time will come when all sovereignty and authority and power will be abrogated and the Son Himself will become subject to the Father (1 Cor.15:27).

Just as the early ministry of Paul was the spiritual counterpart of the millennial reign, in which he acted as a priest in the evangel of God (Rom.15:16), so the present kingdom is a spiritual foretaste of the succeeding kingdom of the Son, which follows it, in the eon of the eon (Heb.1:8). We have not the powers of the coming eon, but the affectionate perfection which characterizes the rule of God’s Beloved.

So long as sin and insubordination hold sway, there can be no happiness apart from government. But when, at length, all is perfect, when sin is gone, and not the least breath stirs contrary to His wish, what need for government? The “kingdom” will exist only in name, giving place to the Father’s Guiding Hand.

Then, when government itself is gone, will we learn the real lesson it was meant to teach: that His will alone is good-good for His glory and for our welfare. And when this is acknowledged by every heart then will God indeed be All in all.

## **A.E.K.**

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