



GLEANINGS FROM  
THE GOSPELS

# THE KINGDOM OF GOD

*The Essential Message of Jesus*

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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of the kingdom of God is one of several volumes that explore **Gleanings from the Gospels**. The richness of the gospel tradition stands at the heart of Christian teaching and reveals to us in a unique way the truth of God's extravagant love. Each evangelist paints a portrait of Jesus that is unique in some respects and yet, taken together, they reveal a whole that is quite remarkable. The images and teachings found through the four gospels provide every generation with the tools that form disciples. By reflecting on the threads that run through the gospel accounts, we become part of the tapestry that is Christianity.

# *Prologue*

The central message that Jesus proclaimed was the appearance of the kingdom of God in his ministry. In the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus begins his ministry by saying, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Thereafter, everything he says and everything he does proclaims the kingdom of God. Jesus’ mighty deeds, whereby he cures the sick and drives out demons, show that God’s rule is invading human history. Similarly, his teaching deals with the appearance of God’s kingdom.

But what did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? What was he waiting and hoping for? A helpful way to understand what Jesus meant is to read Psalms 93 and 95–99, which proclaim that God is Israel’s king. These and other psalms celebrate God’s rule or kingship over history and creation. For example, “The LORD is king. / The world will surely stand fast, never to be shaken. / He rules the people with fairness” (Ps 96:10). As Creator, God rules over creation; and as the Savior of Israel, God rules over human history.

When Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is making its appearance in his ministry, he is saying that God is reclaiming his rule over creation that has rebelled against God’s rule. The salvation that the kingdom of God brings, then, is cosmic in scope, for in Jesus’ ministry God is restoring the order of creation and history.

As we explore three gospel passages about the kingdom of God, we will reflect on the presence of the kingdom, the mystery of the kingdom, and the universal scope of the kingdom. We will also reflect on how we experience the saving reality of the kingdom of God in our own lives.

# *The Presence of the Kingdom of God*

*Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read Matthew 12:22-30, which describes an event that allows Jesus to proclaim the clear choice for God's kingdom.*

## **Matthew 12:22-30**

**<sup>22</sup>Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute. He cured the mute person so that he could speak and see. <sup>23</sup>All the crowd was astounded, and said, "Could this perhaps be the Son of David?" <sup>24</sup>But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "This man drives out demons only by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons." <sup>25</sup>But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste, and no town or house divided against itself will stand. <sup>26</sup>And if Satan drives out**



Satan, he is divided against himself; how, then, will his kingdom stand? <sup>27</sup>And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore they will be your judges. <sup>28</sup>But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. <sup>29</sup>How can anyone enter a strong man's house and steal his property, unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house. <sup>30</sup>Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

*Following a few moments of quiet reflection on Matthew 12:22-30, review the background information provided in “Setting the Scene.” This context will help to situate the scene in the story line Matthew provides. Occasional questions in the margins are for group sharing or personal reflection or journaling.*

### *Setting the Scene*

The kingdom of God is both a present and a future reality. On the one hand, the kingdom has already made its appearance in the life and ministry of Jesus, as this passage will illustrate. It is not a far distant reality for which we are still waiting and hoping; it is something that we can already experience here and now in the person of Jesus and in the community of believers. On the other hand, as our next passage will show, there is also a future dimension to the kingdom that will be revealed at the end of the ages. Thus, Christians live “between the times” in a creative

The commentary describes the "creative tension" of the kingdom of God as already present but not yet fully realized. How do you experience this "creative tension" in your own life?

tension. The kingdom has *already* made its initial appearance in the person of Jesus Christ, but the fullness of the kingdom has *not yet* made its appearance. It is this tension between *already* and *not yet* that gives purpose and dynamism to our lives as we already experience something of the final salvation for which we wait and hope.

The passage we are considering belongs to a larger section of the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus encounters growing opposition to his ministry (11:1-12:50). Faced with this opposition, Jesus describes his contemporaries as impossible to please because they accused John the Baptist of being an ascetic and him of being a glutton (11:16-19). He then warns the towns of Galilee where he performed most of his mighty deeds because they failed to repent (11:20-24). Next, the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of violating the Sabbath (12:1-8), and they conspire to put him to death because he has healed on the Sabbath (12:9-14). As we come to our passage, there has already been clear opposition to Jesus and his ministry. As

we shall see, neither the people nor their leaders have understood and embraced his message about the kingdom.



*The passage from Matthew 12:22-30 will be considered a few verses at a time in the section below. Continue to use the questions in the margins either for group discussion or personal reflection.*

### *Understanding the Scene Itself*

<sup>22</sup>Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute. He cured the mute person so that he could speak and see. <sup>23</sup>All the crowd was astounded, and said, “Could this perhaps be the Son of David?”

In the episode immediately preceding this passage, Matthew summarizes Jesus’ ministry of healing Israel (12:15-16) and applies to him a passage from the prophet Isaiah that portrays Jesus as God’s beloved and humble servant who brings justice to the nations (12:17-21; Isa 42:1-4). Jesus has healed so many that the people bring him a man who is blind and unable to speak because he is possessed by a demon. This man is us! He represents the human condition oppressed by the rule of Satan. Under this oppressive rule, humanity is blind to God’s rule over history and creation; and because it is blind to God’s rule, it is unable to praise and glorify with its lips the one God who rules over history and creation. We are blind and mute; we need to be healed and ushered into God’s kingdom.

Matthew’s description of the healing is brief and without adornment. He simply notes that Jesus cured the man so that he could speak and see. Although there is no mention of Jesus casting

Can you relate to the blind and mute man who was brought to Jesus to be healed? In what ways does blindness and muteness affect your own life as you wait for God’s kingdom in its fullness?

As modern readers, we are not accustomed to language about “kingdoms” and “rule.” How do you understand what it means to be “under God’s rule” (like the man healed by Jesus)? How might we speak about this in more contemporary language?

out the demon, this is precisely what happens. The man can see and speak because he is no longer under the power of Satan; he has been brought into the kingdom of God and is now under God’s rule.

The astounded crowd begins to understand the significance of what Jesus has done and asks if Jesus might be the Son of David, that is, the Messiah. David was the greatest of Israel’s kings, and when his dynasty ended at the time of Israel’s exile in Babylon (sixth century BC), God’s people waited and hoped for a new David who would restore God’s rule over their lives. Because of the power of this healing whereby Jesus overcomes the power of Satan, the crowd asks if he might be this long-awaited Son of David.

**24But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “This man drives out demons only by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons.”**

The Pharisees, however, are already plotting to put Jesus to death because they see him as a

lawbreaker who violates the Sabbath (12:14); they do not agree with what the crowd has said. The Pharisees acknowledge that Jesus has cast out a demon, but they interpret what has occurred in a perverse way: what Jesus has done is not the work of God but the



work of Satan. Jesus, they say, has cast out this demon by the power of Beelzebul (another name for Satan). In their view, Jesus' ministry is a manifestation of the kingdom of evil rather than the kingdom of God. Their opposition to Jesus could not be stronger; they call evil what is good, and they identify God's agent with the "prince of demons."

<sup>25</sup>But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste, and no town or house divided against itself will stand. <sup>26</sup>And if Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself; how, then, will his kingdom stand? <sup>27</sup>And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore, they will be your judges. <sup>28</sup>But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

Matthew notes that even though the Pharisees did not criticize Jesus to his face, he "knew what they were thinking." They have opposed him from the beginning because they refuse to believe his central proclamation that the kingdom of God is making its appearance in his ministry. Their opposition, however, does not surprise Jesus. Those who refuse to believe that the kingdom of God is making its appearance in his ministry cannot understand the significance of his mighty deeds. Jesus is more than a miracle worker; he is God's Messiah who ushers in the kingdom by his powerful deeds of healing and casting out demons.

In this story, the Pharisees do not recognize who Jesus truly is, and so they oppose him. In what ways do we fail to recognize Jesus and the presence of the kingdom of God? Why does this happen, and how can we learn to recognize him?

Jesus' practical argument that "no house divided against itself will stand" has implications for every community. What are some of the sources of division in your family, parish, or community? Describe some possible solutions for healing the divide.

"Exorcism" or "casting out demons" is not something we commonly experience or think about today. Do you believe in the existence of evil? Where do you see or experience it?

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is threefold. First, he lays bare the foolishness of their charge against him. If what they are thinking about him is true, then Satan is working at cross-purposes with himself. He is destroying his own rule over humanity by freeing humanity from its bondage to evil. Satan is destroying his own kingdom, his own house. Why would Satan drive out Satan? Why would Satan free his subjects from his rule and dominion? If the power of Jesus is a manifestation of the power of Satan, then Satan's house is already crumbling. In a phrase made famous by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

In verse 27, Jesus raises another objection against the Pharisees. He is not the only one who casts out demons. There were others in Israel who did the same. Exorcists were not uncommon in the ancient world, and the Pharisees would have readily acknowledged this. But if Jesus casts out demons by the power of Beelzebub, by what power do their own exorcists cast out demons: by the power of God or by the power of Satan? The answer is obvious: every exorcism is a manifestation of God's power, not the power of evil. Satan takes possession and enslaves people; God liberates and releases them from bondage.

Verse 28 is the climax of Jesus' argument, and it reveals what is happening in his ministry. If Jesus casts out demons by the power of God's Spirit, *then the kingdom of God has come upon all who experience his ministry*. Jesus' exorcisms and healings are not just miracles. They are

**Although sickness is not a result of sin, it is an indication that there is something awry, something that is not yet whole in God's good creation.**

mighty deeds that point to something—the kingdom of God. When Jesus cures the sick, he is pushing back the boundaries of Satan's rule. When he casts out demons, he is pushing back the boundaries of Satan's rule. Jesus is engaged in a cosmic battle between the kingdom of God and the power of evil. He is not merely restoring the sight and speech of a man; he is invading and destroying Satan's kingdom by pushing back its boundaries to make room for God's rule. This is why the kingdom of God is already present in Jesus' ministry.

Sickness has a profound meaning in our lives. It reminds us of our mortality; it makes us aware of our human weakness. Although sickness is not a result of sin, it is an indication that there is something awry, something that is not yet whole in God's good creation. This is why Jesus' ministry to the sick and our ministry to the sick are so important. Sickness is an indication that creation is still frustrated by the existence of evil. It is an indication of our profound need for God's grace and the fullness of God's kingdom.

**Have you experienced a serious illness or the illness of a loved one? How did you understand this illness in the context of your faith?**

**“<sup>29</sup>How can anyone enter a strong man’s house and steal his property, unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.”**

The second step in Jesus’ explanation to the Pharisees about his ministry is a revelation of why he is able to expel demons: he is stronger than Satan. Jesus is the one who has already bound him and plundered his house. Satan has been defeated because the kingdom has made its appearance in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus is the stronger one because he is the holy one of God, the Son of God. Having already bound Satan in his great struggle with Satan in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11), Jesus continues to bind him and plunder his house each time he heals or casts out demons.



Have you ever been “at a crossroads” where you had to choose for or against Jesus? What were the circumstances, and how did your choice affect your life or the lives of others?

**“<sup>30</sup>Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”**

Third, Jesus explains that this dramatic healing places us at a crossroads where we must decide what direction we will take. Will we join with Jesus in gathering others into the kingdom of God, or will we align ourselves with those who are scattering God’s people because they refuse to embrace the kingdom of God? We are confronted with a decision for or against Jesus, for or against the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is more than an idea or theological concept. It is a dynamic reality that involves us in a great struggle between good and evil, God and Satan. To enter the kingdom is to enter the realm of God's rule that has *already begun* in Jesus Christ. To willfully refuse to recognize the kingdom is to remain under the rule and bondage of a cosmic power and a force opposed to all that is good.

Yes, the kingdom of God has come upon us. It is already here and present in the person and ministry of Jesus, continuing on in the ministry of the church, the community of believers. And so we are continually called to align ourselves with it, gathering others in, so that we may experience the healing and wholeness of God's reign.

What are the signs in your life that the kingdom of God is "upon you"? How do you "gather others" into this saving reality?

### *Praying the Word / Sacred Reading*

*Psalm 23 is a gentle rendering of life in God's kingdom. To be a part of this kingdom is not to be a submissive vassal or even a dutiful citizen. Rather, to intentionally live within the reign of God is to be set free, to be loved and protected, to be—in the words of the psalmist—restored. Pray this psalm with a full awareness of the dignity and peace that come with experiencing the kingdom of God, where our King is not a tyrant but a shepherd.*

The LORD is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I lack.  
In green pastures he makes me lie down;  
to still waters he leads me;  
he restores my soul.

He guides me along right paths  
for the sake of his name.  
Even though I walk through the valley of  
the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff comfort me.

You set a table before me  
in front of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Indeed, goodness and mercy will pursue me  
all the days of my life;  
I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
for endless days. (Ps 23:1-6)

### *Living the Word*

*We may not think of ourselves as engaged in a “cosmic struggle between good and evil” as we await the fullness of God’s kingdom, and yet we all join with Jesus in “pushing back the boundaries” of evil in our world.*

*How can you share in Jesus’ healing ministry, which is a definitive sign of the in-breaking of God’s kingdom?*

*Here are some ideas:*

- *Visit someone in a hospital or nursing home.*
- *Visit a family member or fellow parishioner who rarely leaves their home due to illness or age.*

- *Spend time with a friend or family member struggling with mental illness.*
- *Renew your compassion for a loved one struggling with chronic pain or depression.*
- *Listen to those in your life who wish to share their pain with you. Listen without rushing and without distraction. Be a quiet, healing presence just by being with them.*
- *Commit to praying daily for someone in your life who struggles with physical or mental illness. Share your prayer commitment with him or her as a sign of your companionship in their time of illness.*