

## **“God Is Closer Than You Think—The Kingdom”**

Karen Mains writes about a Sunday School teacher who was trying to see if her class understood what she'd been teaching about. So she asked them, “If I sold my house and car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?” The kids all said, “No!” “If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard and washed the window, would that get me into heaven?” All the kids said, “No!” “Well, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my husband, would that get me into heaven?” “No!” “Well, then, how can I get into heaven?” A five-year-old boy shouted, “You gotta be dead!”

As John Ortberg puts it, here's the problem. If you gotta be dead, then the gospel doesn't have much to do with today. And when you look at what Jesus calls his good news, he's not talking about something that happens after you die. He talks about something that happens on this side of the grave. Jesus said it over and over and over again: God has invaded earth and is making his power and presence available to anybody who wants him. Right here. Right now. Jesus said, “The time has come, now God is closer than you think.” We aren't to be simply hanging on until heaven, we're to be ushering heaven into our life today!

That's why every week of this series we've been gaining a fresh understanding about the nearness of God and the powerful relationship we can enjoy with him *now*.

- Week 1 was about his desire to be *with* us.
- Week 2 was all about *our choice* to be with *him*.
- Week 3 we talked about the presence of God's Spirit *within* us.
- Week 4 we learned how his *voice* whispers to us through each day in many ways and how to hear it.
- Week 5 revealed how God is reflected in and through the *people* around us.

And today we are concluding with the overall mission of Jesus: to bring God's presence and power into our lives. God wants the world transformed through Jesus Christ, and it begins with us. God wants his kingdom to be active in our world today.

Jesus taught that we're to pray “your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven*.” Another way of putting it is, “God, make up there come down here.” That's the ultimate way of experiencing God's closeness. We aren't to be simply hanging on until heaven, we're to be ushering heaven into our life today!

But what does Jesus mean when he talks about the kingdom of God? I don't think that most Christ-followers really have any idea. Most of us would not know how to begin to describe the kingdom of God and what it would look like on earth. And there's a good reason why: We can barely imagine it. Even trying to think, “What would this earth look like if God's kingdom were to really come to it?” It boggles the mind.

The good news is, the writers of Scripture spent a lot of time thinking about this. They wrote a lot about it both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. And because spiritual reality is very hard to describe because we're so finite and fallen, they used images to convey what life would be like under God's administration.

So, what if God reigned on this earth? After all, it's really meant to be that way. It's God's great desire and plan and should be our prayer as well. God truly is closer than you think ...

So, let's take a few minutes and look at some of those primary images from Scripture about heaven on earth—about God's kingdom reigning here today—in our world—and in our lives. I want us to think about how these images might be expressed in our day. What would it look like if God's kingdom came, if his will were done on earth as it is in heaven?

The Bible talks about this truth relative to different spheres of human life. First of all, there's ***the sphere of economics and human need***. John writes in Revelation 7:16 that in the day when God's kingdom is fully realized never again will people go hungry. Never again will they thirst. Think about what that would look like—the elimination of hunger. No more pictures of little children with swollen bellies, no scarcity. No mothers trying to scrounge around for enough food so that her baby could survive another day. No more organizations to feed the children. No more need for World Vision or UNICEF or food banks.

But it's not just the end of poverty. Scripture writers foretold the overflow of abundance that would happen in God's kingdom. Amos wrote: **[SLIDE...]** “**The days are coming,**’ declares the LORD, **‘when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will**

**drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills.” (Amos 9:13)** In other words, the one that plows and the one that reaps bump into each other because the earth is so fertile and there’s such abundance. “*New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills.*” That doesn’t mean that there’s literally going to be Chardonnay in the Rockies. It’s an image of abundance, of God’s abundance.

Here’s how that imagery would sound today: We’d say things like, “Every day the stock market will end a little higher than the day before. The bull will dwell on Wall Street forever; the bear will visit it no more. The Federal Reserve will never have to raise interest rates again. Little children in the Sudan will have carpeted bedrooms and private baths and their own automated teller machines in their own bedrooms. The jobless rate will go down to zero and stay there, and everybody will love what they do.” That’s one image of heaven on earth.

Then there’s *the sphere of politics*, which in our history is mostly the story of human conflict. There’s the ongoing strife in the Middle East, North Korea joining the nuclear club, warring in Africa, and the list goes on. Isaiah 2:4 says, [SLIDE...] **“He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).** No more fighting, no more hatred. They won’t have any use for swords so they’ll turn them into farm equipment. One writer putting this in modern terms said, “Intercontinental ballistic missile silos will be converted into training tanks for inner-city kids to learn scuba diving in.” And there will be peace. There will be no such thing as enemies.

Isaiah 11:6 and following says, [SLIDE...] **“The wolf will live with the lamb.... The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain” (Isaiah 11:6).** John Ortberg’s translation of that is that the dog will make peace with the rabbit, and the cat will be no more!

Next is the *sphere of security*. Scripture writers say in the kingdom of God there will be no more fear. John puts it like this in Revelation 21: [SLIDE...] **“On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there” (Revelation 21:25).** Now in biblical times, of course, there wasn’t electricity. Night was a time of darkness, a time of vulnerability, a time when crimes were committed, a time of fear. The city gates would be shut to protect the city’s inhabitants from marauders and intruders. But the Bible says that in the kingdom of God, those days will be over. No more locked doors; no gated communities; no security systems; no combinations. You will never lose your keys because there won’t be any keys! Cops will pull people over only to commend them for their civility and courtesy to other drivers. Squad cars will still pull in to doughnut shops, but doughnuts now will be loaded with protein, and the South Beach Diet will recommend that they be eaten at every meal.

Another sphere the kingdom of God will redeem is *the sphere of family life*. Luke 1:17 says that Jesus will “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.” No more separations, no more divorce, no more affairs, no abuse, no neglect, no unloved or unwanted child. Members of a household will stay up late at night thinking of ways to serve each other. Children will insist that their little brother get the larger piece of cake. People will turn on Jerry Springer to watch shows with titles like, “My Spouse Secretly Loves Me Twice as Much as I Thought He Did.”

And then the most beautiful words of all about the kingdom, from Revelation 21:3–4, *the sphere of God’s presence*: [SLIDE...] **“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’” (Revelation 21:3–4)**

Think about those words. God will wipe every tear from their eyes. No more death or mourning or crying or pain. Anybody want to live in a world like that? No more Kleenex; no more funeral homes. We will turn caskets into toy chests. Hearsees will be converted to sports utility vehicles with names like “Eternal

Voyager” and “Jeep Grand Resurrection.” And there will be counselors, but you’ll just go to them when you’re so full of gratitude and joy that you’re willing to pay somebody to listen to you right now.

And every day you will be home with God, never separated by sin. According to Ezekiel, God promises, “I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.” No more stony hearts; no more cold hearts; no more stubborn hearts. You’ll never say something that you’ll regret later. You’ll never do anything to be ashamed of. You’ll never do anything to feel guilty about. When you see somebody else’s success or beauty or wealth, it won’t even occur to you to be envious, but you’ll rejoice as if you had these things yourself.

Every tribe and people and nation will gather like brothers and sisters around the throne, and you who listen to my voice right now, you who sit in these chairs, you think about this: you will see the living God. No more doubt, no more questions, no more wondering “why?” You will see and look into the very face of God, and he will be your God. And your every thought will be a prayer, and your every prayer will be a conversation with God. And God himself will wipe every tear from your eye, and then he’ll remove the tear ducts, and he’ll simply point his finger and sadness and sorrow will be banished. There will be joy inexpressible.

That’s what it would look like if God’s kingdom were to come to earth. And for you to understand about it and want it is a very important thing. But if you’re like me, a part of you wonders, “Can this really be? Is it possible that this earth can be redeemed? Will the day ever come when God’s will is done fully? Is this real or is it just wishful thinking?”

Well, you need to know Jesus’ whole message was about the reality of this kingdom. That was his *whole* message. That’s his gospel. When Mark summarizes the gospel that Jesus proclaimed in Mark 1:14–15, he puts it like this: **[SLIDE...]“After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14–15)**

When Jesus says the kingdom of God is near, he’s not saying it’s getting kind of close. He’s saying it’s available now. Jesus brought it with him in his flesh and blood and released it to the world in his Holy Spirit. Then he says to the people of his day, and to you and me, that it’s *now possible* for human beings to live in the presence and power of God. Not only did Jesus come brining the kingdom of God, but he told his followers to devote their lives to this project.

Sometimes people pray the Star Trek prayer to Scottie: “Beam me up.” A lot of people think our job is to get my afterlife destination taken care of, then tread water till we all get ejected and God comes back and torches this place. But Jesus never told anybody to pray, “Get me out of here so I can go up there.” He never taught that. His prayer, his teaching was, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” In other words, “Make up there come down here.” Make things down here run the way they do up there. God is closer than you think, live out that reality here. The kingdom is where people shamelessly adore and love God and are freed from sin so they never stop doing just the kinds of things that God wants. That’s the kingdom.

We start by praying, “Make up there, come down here.” We start with our body, our mind, our appetites. One of my regular prayers is simply, “Lord, be the Lord over my appetites.” Then it spreads to the office, our family, our neighborhood, our church, our country.

You see, it’s important to know that God doesn’t make himself close, reveal himself to us, just to make us happy, to keep us from being lonely. He also comes to us so that we can in turn be conduits of his presence to other people. He invites us to join him in making things down here the way they are up there.

The most dangerous, exciting, life-altering prayer a human being can pray might just be, “God, make up there come down here.”

You start by asking yourself this question: “Where do I want to see God’s presence and power break into my world? Where would I specifically, especially, like God to use me to make things down here run the way they do up there?”

That makes me think of the Salvage Yard, our off-site ministry downtown. A few weeks ago after worship down there on Sunday night, I told Ben, the ministry leader down there, “Ben, this really is the Salvage Yard.” As I preached that night I looked out into the faces of recovering addicts and not-so-recovering addicts. Young people estranged from their families, couples struggling to keep it together, folks trying to make ends

meet, and folks that pretty much have it together, but are looking for answers. That ministry is touching lives. God, through Ben and lots of volunteers as the Salvage Yard is making up there come down here.

I had a Christian business owner downtown ask me, “Honestly Aaron, honestly, do you really think that place makes a difference?” I said, “You bet! Without a doubt! I see it, and I know that I only see the tip of the iceberg.”

It almost sounds too simple to believe, but if you want to experience the closeness of God—if you want to know the fullness of life that Jesus offers, a life with him—then pray. First, pray that the kingdom will come in my life and in your life. “God, your kingdom come, your will be done just starting right here, starting in this tiny, little piece of the kingdom, right here, this body.” And that may mean facing some difficulties, it will almost certainly mean coming out of your comfort zone. It may even mean that you have to face some suffering.

It also means, “God, may I become the kind of person who does your will from my heart. May your kingdom come to earth in my life. May I be a kingdom bearer. Not just a kingdom pray-er, that too, but also a kingdom bearer in my life.” “God, I choose to be with you. I want to know the fullness of your Spirit working in me. I want to hear and respond to the gentle whisper of your voice each day. I want to see you revealed in and through the people around me. I want up there to come down here in my life. I want to be close to you.”

So think, where do you experience a passion, a holy discontent about things down here not running the way they are up there? Is it when you look at people who suffer from poverty or illiteracy or abuse in families? Maybe your heart breaks when you have contact with people who have deep emotional hurts or kids who have no homes or marriages that are falling apart. If you have a holy discontent about something like that all that’s necessary is a single intent: “Lord, where do you want to use me to help things down here run the way they do up there?”

Now let me ask you: What would it mean for the kingdom to come, for God’s will to be done in your life? Where you work? What would it mean for God’s will to be done in your life relationally? Maybe it means sacrifice. Maybe you’re here today, and you’re in a relationship, and you know it is not honoring to God. You know that relationship is not God’s will, and it ought to stop. And the truth is, you have not been willing to stop it.

So today is character time. The closeness of God sometimes begins with his gentle voice of conviction—asking you to clear out the idols and weeds in your life that are keeping you from experiencing his kingdom’s power and fullness. I’m asking you today to pray to God, “All right, God, your will be done in my life, in this relationship. Your will be done, not mine, with my children, my marriage, my friendships, my career. Your will be done. And may I bring the reality of your kingdom into my relationships. God, make me a kingdom kind of servant and a kingdom kind of encourager and a kingdom kind of confronter and a kingdom kind of friend.”

I’m going to ask you, what would it mean financially for you to pray, “God, your kingdom come, your will be done in my financial life”? Maybe it will involve very serious sacrifice. I don’t know. “Your kingdom come, your will be done through the resources you’ve given me.”

It can happen. Every time you’re in conflict with somebody and want to hurt them or gossip about them, or avoid them, but instead you go to them to work out reconciliation and forgiveness—The kingdom is breaking into this world.

Every time you have a chunk of money and decide to give sacrificially to Christ’s body, to the poor, hungry, homeless—The kingdom is breaking into this world.

Every time someone has an addiction and wants to partner with God so much that they’re willing to stop hiding, acknowledge the truth, and get help from a loving community—The kingdom is breaking into the world.

Every time a workaholic parent decides to stop idolizing their job, rearranges their life to begin to love and care for the little children entrusted to them—The kingdom is breaking into the world.

Every time you love, every time you include someone who's lonely, every time you encourage somebody who's defeated, every time you challenge somebody who's wandering off the path, every time you serve the under-resourced—It's a sign that the kingdom is once more breaking into the world.

It doesn't matter if your life seems messy to you. It doesn't matter if you don't fully understand how the kingdom works. Jesus came and began planted the seed of that kingdom on earth and now he uses you and me to see it grow. God is closer than you think. Let's pray...

Let's close with each of us taking a minute to pray, in our own words, "God, make up there come down here." Listen to this song. It's called, "Be Near."

And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

*I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Senior Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian church, for his resources for this message.*