
Jesus Brings the Kingdom of God Near

DARRELL DELANEY

I recently went to a wedding where everyone was waiting with anticipation for the bride to enter. Then we all stood as she entered. The atmosphere shifted; you could feel it. Conversations paused, eyes turned, and suddenly everyone was aware that something special was happening. When Jesus began his ministry with the stunning announcement that the kingdom of God has come near, something special was happening and everyone could feel it. In this episode of *Groundwork*, we explore what it meant for the kingdom to show up in real time through healing, through justice, through welcome. The prophets foretold it; Jesus embodied it; and now we are invited to live it. Stay tuned.

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And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in episode two of our four-part series on the kingdom of God; and God's kingdom...this whole theme...it actually goes through the entirety of scripture. In the first episode, we talked about the Old Testament and New Testament places. Of course, it was nowhere near exhaustive, but it definitely shows that God did not just think this up at the end of the Bible, but it is everywhere; and we are going to talk about in this episode how that kingdom is coming near through Jesus and what he called us to do.

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We often think of Jesus as a teacher...a healer...a miracle worker, and he was all of those things; but from the very beginning, his central message is about the kingdom of God. This is now from Mark 1:14, 15, right

after Jesus' forty days in the wilderness: After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

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So, that short sermon pretty much launches everything in Jesus' ministry. That is the inauguration of the kingdom of God right there. It echoes the Old Testament longings, and it fulfills the promise that the king is here to make things right; and so, in the first episode that we did on this series, we actually went through Isaiah Chapter 9:6 and we talked about how his governance has no end; and this right here, where he speaks this, this is where he fulfills that.

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A lot of the time, we might wonder: What did it mean when Jesus said: The kingdom of God is at hand. The kingdom of God is at hand, since it wasn't a political kingdom, and even today...actually, if you said to a devout Jew today: Jesus is the Messiah...he is the King. They are going to say: Oh, yeah; really? Well, where is his kingdom? Because it is not a location on a map, as we said in the first episode; and not everybody knows that the kingdom is coming. So, I love how Dallas Willard used this great analogy. He talked about how in the early 20th Century we had this thing called: Rural electrification, where we just unspooled miles and miles and miles of black electric wire through the heartland and put them up on power poles; and so, places that never had access to electricity now did. So, Willard said: You could point up to those wires and say something like: Behold; electricity is at hand! But you had to tie into it to have it do you any good; and some people refused to let electricity come into their homes because they thought it would fry them or cause fires. They thought it was dangerous, but eventually they were persuaded by their neighbors: No; it is safe; it is good; it makes life easier; you don't have to wash clothes by hand anymore, and so forth. So, then they hooked up. So, electricity was at hand, but you had to want to tie into it. The kingdom is at hand, but you have to want to tie into it to know that it is there, and how powerful and good it is.

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¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

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Well, there it is, from the prophet Isaiah. Some time ago, Darrell, here on *Groundwork*, we did a series on the Gospel of Luke, and one of the things that we noted that is distinctive about Luke as opposed to Matthew or Mark, and certainly John, is that Jubilee is his big theme, right? This passage, really, from Isaiah is really talking about the year of the Lord's favor, which is the Jubilee year; and as we remember real quickly here, once every 50 years*, Israel was to celebrate the Jubilee; a time which all debts were cancelled. Any foreclosed property that had been forfeited is returned to the people who had it in the first place. So, Jubilee was a year to right all wrongs and to reset the economic clock and so forth; and therefore, it was to be a celebratory year. That is what Jesus is saying, that he has come now, and all of these good things are going to start happening in his ministry: Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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And these debts that people had in the practical relationships with each other. He is extending this metaphor to help them understand that spiritually speaking, he has come to release those from being captive; and what he knows, even when he reads this, is that he is going to be going to a cross to pay for the sins of the world and release them from the captivity of the enemy with a capital E. He knows that; that is a spoiler. So, he is not going to go into that right now. The kind of kingdom that Jesus is bringing is liberation and healing and good news to the poor; and it comes with confrontation; it upends expectations; and it does not being a military revolt of a political campaign, because it is a different kind of a reign.

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By the way, the fact that things will not always go so well with Jesus—and it happens even in this passage—at first, their eyes are fixed on him in the synagogue and he reads this. Then we read: Well, everybody spoke well of him, but then some people said: Hey, isn't this just Joseph the carpenter's son? Who does he think he is? At the end of that, Jesus says some things that upset them enough that they try to throw him off a cliff, but Jesus gives them the slip, of course. But if we needed a reminder that the kingdom that Jesus is bringing is not always going to be popular, even in this very passage in Luke 4, reminds us of that. But it is interesting, you know, it is one thing to have Isaiah say the Spirit of the Lord is on me. He has anointed me; but to hear Jesus take those words on his lips, you realize that Jesus is the one whom is doing all of these things, and that is really quite stunning.

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Segment 2

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SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Darrell, we just saw that Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom had arrived. It began coming...it was at hand in his very person; and we just looked at Luke 4 and the very first sermon, if you will, or at least the very first passage we read that Jesus ever read in the synagogue from the prophecy of Isaiah declaring kind of the year of Jubilee; but now, once Jesus gets going and calls his disciples, they get in on the act as well.

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DARRELL DELANEY

So, when Jesus sends out his disciples, he does not just give them words, he gives them a mission that reflects the ministry that you are talking about, Scott. In Matthew 10, he makes it clear. He says: ⁷“As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; [and you] freely give.”

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So, there it is: The kingdom of heaven has come near. How do you know? Because people get healed, the dead get raised, lepers get cleansed, demons get driven out, and so forth. I like the phrase there in Matthew 10:7: As you go...you know...

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So, what we see, Darrell, is that it is not just a message. The kingdom is a way of life. The kingdom has come near and the evidence is in what happens when the kingdom breaks into real lives. We said in the first episode of this series here on *Groundwork*, Darrell, another line from Dallas Willard: The kingdom is whenever and wherever King Jesus is calling the shots. In your life, in my life, whenever that happens, we are in the presence of the kingdom. It has come near; it has begun breaking into this world.

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Yes; and it is really going on in real time and in real lives. We get a vivid picture of that in Matthew 8 and 9, of how that looks. So, it says: ^(8:1)When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. ²A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” ³Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.

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So, the untouchable people that everybody thought were unclean, the kingdom can embrace these people, and Jesus is not afraid, he is not going to flinch, and he is not going to avoid the actual moment, but he actually leans into it to heal and restore this man; and he does not care what people think about it, which is beautiful because that is what the kingdom shows. The untouchable people can be touched.

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Yes, exactly; and what happens in the action sections? We see what was taught and acted. So, we are going to get to the Beatitudes in the next part of this program. So, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught what the kingdom of God looks like, and then in Matthew 8, we begin to see that in action: Here is what the kingdom looks like on the ground. Here is what I was just teaching you about in the Sermon on the Mount; this is what it looks like.

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So, physical barriers are not an issue for the kingdom of God; racial and class barriers are not an issue with the kingdom of God, because we have a centurion...a Roman soldier...who represents the Empire, comes to Jesus and asks for help, and this person has a faith that astounds Jesus. In Matthew Chapter 8:10, it says: When Jesus heard this, (the faith that the man has) he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹³[Then Jesus said to the centurion,] "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment.

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Of course, the context is the centurion has a servant who was sick. He says: Hey, I need you, Jesus, to speak a word and this person will be healed. You don't have to come to my house. I know how authority works. I am a man under authority; and he says: That kind of faith is what the kingdom of God is all about, and that is an astounding moment; and Jesus made sure that we didn't miss it.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and I think we don't appreciate it as much as the people on the ground at the time would have. How loathsome Roman centurions were; they were the enemy. They would shake people down; they took bribes. So, for Jesus, you said, you know, the kingdom crosses borders. This is a bigger border crossing than what we appreciate today because of who that centurion represented; but Jesus doesn't bring just healing, he brings hope. So, in Matthew 9 we see it again and again: the bleeding woman who touches the hem of his robe and is instantly healed; two blind men call out for mercy and Jesus opens their eyes; a mute man speaks again; the dead are raised. Each miracle is more than just compassion, Darrell. It is a sign that the kingdom is crashing into the broken systems of this world.

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And Jesus is actually showing, just like you said, he taught it and now he is demonstrating it, so that people know...okay, this is what we are looking for. The kingdom of God can actually bring healing to disease; the kingdom of God can actually cast demons out of a person; that is how it is. What I like to add, Scott, is the fact that we often pray the Lord's Prayer: Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. There is not sickness or illness or any of that going on in his kingdom; and so, he is breaking into the broken systems of this world to restore back to what it should be...what life should be like...and this is what Jesus is showing.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

That kind of kingdom talk is all over the place in what we call the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John's gospel, you hardly ever read the word *kingdom*. It is different with John 3:3, where Jesus is talking to Nicodemus: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." But what you do get in John is what is sometimes called a *realized eschatology*, where the kingdom of God in John's theology is just above our heads and it keeps poking its way into our world; and that is why John 2-11 is called the *Book of Signs*. It is from the changing of water to wine all the way to the raising of Lazarus. John calls those miracles *signs* because they are like arrows that point to the presence of the kingdom. Oh, the kingdom is just above us, and Jesus turns water into wine: BOOM! That is an arrow of the kingdom, poking right through reality. He raises Lazarus from the dead: BOOM! That is an arrow. The kingdom is in your midst. So, that is how John does it.

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I love how John does it, because he is basically like a news reporter who is saying: I am not trying to argue with anybody. I am explaining to you and reporting to you what has happened so that you might believe that he is the Son of God and who he says he is; and Jesus himself embodies that kingdom, and we are called to do that same thing when we are called to act in love and extend mercy and include the marginalized, and restore dignity. We are called to live that kingdom mission that Jesus sent his disciples on, because that is what we want to be.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; as we just said a little while ago in this program, the kingdom is a lifestyle, right? The kingdom shows up when Jesus is calling the shots as our king; and we see that all over the place. It has not fully come yet. Not every lame person walks, not every person who dies gets raised like Lazarus did, and even Lazarus died again. So, it is not everywhere yet, but when we see signs of it, it gives us hope...it gives us hope.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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Well, in the final segment, let's explore a little bit more how being in the kingdom challenges us to live differently today. So, stay tuned.

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Segment 3

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DARRELL DELANEY

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SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we just said, Darrell, that, particularly in John's gospel, when those miracles happened, they were signs...arrows pointing to the reality of the kingdom crashing into our world; but it is not just miracles that we look for. They are great if you see them, but it is also our lifestyle, and it is something we live. Sometimes, when somebody refers to somebody hitting a baseball really long, they will say: He hit that ball from here to kingdom come! Well, that makes it sound like kingdom come is a future reality, but the kingdom is already here. It is our present reality, not one only in the future.

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So, you went temporal on that with the time, with present and future; and I am going to with geographically. Some people think it is far from us...

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In the distance somewhere, down by the horizon somewhere. Actually, when Jesus says the kingdom of God has come near, he is literally bringing it into our here and now, every day calling us to live and serve and proclaim the kingdom of God in our lifestyles. So, that is what he is calling us to do.

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We said just a few moments ago that in Matthew's gospel there are blocks of teaching followed by blocks of action stories and miracles; and the first big block of teaching is the Sermon on the Mount, which we have done a series on here on *Groundwork: Matthew 5-7*; but Jesus begins with what you could kind of call a kingdom manifesto...a vision of a radically different life in what we call the Beatitudes...Matthew 5:

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Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said: ³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. ⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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DARRELL DELANEY

Well, I love how Jesus is redefining what *blessed* is here in these passages; because if you ask any of these people if they felt blessed, they probably would tell you no. If you look at how society might look at these people, they might pity them, they might have sympathy, but they would not certainly call them blessed. So, Jesus is redefining, by the kingdom of God, what this new relationship looks like, and it is not just a nice set of traits, but God is actually flipping the script here. He is showing the ones that the world looks over, leaves out: the poor, the oppressed, they are the ones who are blessed. So, it is really interesting how Jesus does that.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

The ones that we would call *losers*, they are the ones who are going to be shown mercy. They will see God; they will be children of God; they will inherit the earth and all of those things. Those who are sorrowful for now will be comforted and will laugh later, and so forth. So, it is describing a kingdom unlike any kingdom here on this earth; but it is not just about private life. So, right after the Beatitudes, Jesus calls us to make the kingdom visible.

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Matthew 5, continuing here: ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

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When I graduated from college, I went to Kuyper College, and they gave us these little lamps like this. And that verse is on the lamp. It is an inscription to remind us that the training that we got...the blessing that God has given us...we are designed to let that light shine. That was our role, to become kingdom citizens and embody what that means. It means we shine our lights in the dark. We are not ashamed of it; we don't hide it; and we don't gloat, but we allow God to use us when we are the ones who are showing compassion to the poor and we are grieving with those who grieve; and we walk in humility and not pride. These are ways that we can let our light shine; and Jesus makes sure that we don't forget these things.

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And when we did that *Groundwork* series on the Sermon on the Mount, we noted this then, too: This light image comes right also after the salt image: (verse 13) You are the salt of the earth. So, Jesus does not say you are going to *become* the light of the world. Jesus is not saying work hard to see if you can achieve being light. No; you *are* the light of the world. In the indicative there: You *are*...like it is a fact...

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DARRELL DELANEY

Be who you are.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; be who you are; and don't try to hide it. If you just let it go, you are already now the light of the world. The kingdom of God...also called the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's gospel, by the way, but the kingdom is light in a dark world and we are bearers of that light.

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DARRELL DELANEY

So also, Jesus is not going to quit with that teaching. He continues on when he teaches them in Matthew 6 how to pray, and we alluded to this earlier. It says: ⁹“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

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So, it is not just a request to escape the challenges of the world or to move away from it, but it is actually...we want to see the world being transformed by the kingdom of God that is already established up in heaven. We want to see it on earth here, and it comes through his people so that we can live out those heavenly values of justice, peace and mercy. They shape our lives and then we shape the lives of those around us.

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This most famous of all prayers. I think we sometimes misunderstand this part of the prayer, Darrell. So, we think: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name; your kingdom come... Okay, that is in the future. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven... Yes, we want God’s will to be done here on earth... No; both of those things go together...

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Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Just skip over the “your will be done,” thing and just recognize that both are present realities. Your kingdom come...now...on earth as it is in heaven. So obviously, thinking about the kingdom coming, that is not looking to a future escape from the world, like we are going to get raptured out of this, or something. It is to transform the world now to look more like the kingdom.

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DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, thinking about the kingdom in real time, I like how you brought that out, making sure that we know it is here and now; not somewhere down in the distant future. Now, Jesus makes this clear in Luke 17, when he reminds them. He says: ²⁰Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, ²¹nor will people

say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."

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Exactly; we are going to pick up Luke 17 in the next program in this series as well because it is such a very, very important verse. It is among us. We cannot build the kingdom. Sometimes ministers, you know: Let's go forth and build the kingdom! We cannot build the kingdom...only God...only Jesus can build the kingdom; but we can display the kingdom to our neighbors. That also will require, Darrell, that we will have to see the world through kingdom eyes, and that means we cannot ignore injustice. We have to confront it with grace. We cannot hoard our resources. We have to share them with joy. We should not despair in the dark times. We cling to the hope that the king is present and is still at work.

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DARRELL DELANEY

I love how you said we don't build the kingdom. I mean, if we are honest, it has already been built, and Jesus is showing people: Hey, the kingdom of God is near; it is right here; and we as kingdom citizens...if we live this way...we understand there is a tension between already and not yet. I mean, a lot of people notice this, that there are some good things happening, but then, it is not here fully. And so, the kingdom has come near in Jesus, but we still live in the tension of that. If you think of like a Venn diagram, where they both overlap each other, you can see it inbreaking, but it is not fully yet. That is where we lean into what is already breaking through. How we live is very important.

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