

GOD'S *UNSHAKABLE* KINGDOM

Darrow L. Miller | Bob Moffitt | Scott D. Allen



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God's Unshakable Kingdom

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Kingdom Lifestyle Bible Studies

God's Remarkable Plan for the Nations

God's Unshakable Kingdom

The Worldview of the Kingdom of God

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Contents

Foreword 6

About This Study 8

INTRODUCTION:

The Grand Vision 11

SESSION 1:

What Is the Kingdom of God? 15

SESSION 2:

The Comprehensive Plan 27

SESSION 3:

A Right-Side-Up View 41

SESSION 4:

Doing Kingdom Math 55

SESSION 5:

The Definition of Greatness 67

SESSION 6:

Come One, Come All 81

SESSION 7:

Advancing the Kingdom 95

SESSION 8:

The Unshakable Kingdom 109

Endnotes 121

Leader's Guide 123

Study Notes 126

Foreword

Greetings from a fellow pilgrim! I am so pleased that you are beginning this Bible study. My passion is to see people growing in their relationships with King Jesus and his kingdom. I pray that this book and learning process will be such a blessing to you.

This Kingdom Lifestyle series is based on the analogy of a tree. The Bible often uses the metaphor of a tree to describe the Christian life. For example, in Romans 11:16 we read, “If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.” So it is with our lives. To have abundant fruit, we need a strong trunk. To have a strong trunk, we need good roots. And all of that is dependent on rich soil. Like many profound truths, this concept is actually quite simple.

I am not only excited about the rich content of this series; I am also excited about the method. I am convinced that people learn best in small groups and by putting what they learn into practice. We were not created to grow alone.

This particular study, *God’s Unshakable Kingdom*, is about God’s big agenda to redeem and restore everything that has been distorted through sin and rebellion. As the apostle Paul reminds us in Colossians 1:20, God’s plan is “to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” When Jesus taught his disciples (and you and me) to pray, he asked us to pray for the fulfillment of this very thing: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Your life has been swept up in God’s grand design. God has a plan for your life that extends far beyond paying the penalty for your sins and securing a place for you in heaven. He has saved you for the purpose of using you in the advancement of his kingdom on earth. You have been blessed to be a blessing. You have been saved to do the good works that God prepared in advance for you to do (Eph. 2:10). Your life is strategic to God. And if this is so, what could be more important than gaining a deeper understanding of the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke so much

about while he ministered on earth? That is exactly what this study sets out to do. As you work through the pages that follow, I pray that your mind will be expanded and your life transformed as you labor in his strength to advance his kingdom to the darkest corners of your community, your nation, and the world.

May grace and joy abound in your life.

Serving the King and the kingdom together,
—Randy Hoag
President, Food for the Hungry International

About This Study

In this study you'll learn about the kingdom of God and your role in advancing it. You can study by yourself or with a small group. There are eight sessions in this study.

Theme of Each Session

Session 1. The kingdom of God is defined by examining three questions: what is a kingdom, what is the will of God, and where is God's will to be done?

Session 2. We examine the comprehensive scope of God's kingdom, Christ the King as Lord of all, and his blood shed on the cross to redeem all things (Col. 1:19–20).

Session 3. We examine the “right-side-up” value system of God's kingdom. After Adam and Eve fell into sin, God's original intentions for creation were turned upside down. However, with the coming of his kingdom, his perfect order is being reestablished.

Session 4. We explore the amazing fact that God delights in multiplying the strength of those who are weak, poor, and uneducated to advance his kingdom and reveal his glory.

Session 5. We learn that a core value in God's kingdom is sacrificial service. In the kingdom of God, greatness is not defined by status, position, or power but through humble obedience and loving service.

Session 6. We learn that God's kingdom is open to everyone. Before the throne of Christ, people from every ethnic group, gender, and class are coequals. There are no inferior people in God's kingdom.

Session 7. We discover that God's kingdom advances from the inside out. It begins within human hearts and minds, through the spiritual regeneration of individuals. From there it works its way outward through the family, church, and community until its impact is felt throughout the world.

Session 8. We examine how the kingdom of God and Satan's kingdom of darkness exist side by side. Both are advancing. However, the author

of Hebrews says that some day there will be a terrible “shaking.” After it ends, Satan’s kingdom will lie in ruins and only the true kingdom will remain (Heb. 12:26–28). God’s kingdom is unshakable.

Sections of Each Session

Key Words to Know. After the opening narrative, each session includes discussion of some of the key words found in the session. In addition to reading the provided definitions, you may wish to use additional resources, such as a Bible dictionary or commentary, for further study of these terms. Understanding these words will help you get the most out of the study.

Key Verses to Read. After the discussion of key words, you’ll find a key Scripture passage for the session. Carefully read the quotation and answer the questions after it. These key verses provide a biblical framework for the central teaching of each session. Whether you’re leading or participating in a small group or studying alone, you can consult the suggested responses for each session’s Key Verses to Read questions in the Study Notes at the end of the book. Not all questions have a “right” or “wrong” answer, but these suggestions will help stimulate your thinking.

Biblical Insights. This narrative section is the heart of each session. Carefully read it, taking notes as you go along. As you read, highlight meaningful or important points and write down questions that come to mind.

Discovery Questions. This section is designed to take you into God’s Word for a deeper understanding of the material covered in the Biblical Insights section. Suggested responses to these questions can be found in the Study Notes at the back of the book.

Key Points to Remember. This section briefly summarizes the key points for each session.

Closing Thoughts. This section provides a wrap-up of the session, designed to transition from the main body of the session to the personal application that follows.

Personal Application. Here’s where the study gets personal. These questions are designed to help you reflect on your own life and experiences and move you toward personal application.

A Practical Response. The optional activities suggested at the end of the session will help you tangibly apply the biblical teachings presented in that lesson.

If you're leading a small group through this study, before beginning please read the Leader's Guide. Guidelines are provided that will help you enhance your group's effectiveness.

Now, please join us as we delve into Scripture and discover the power and majesty of God's unshakable kingdom. It's a kingdom that touches your life profoundly, and God wants you to participate in advancing it. What role will you play? How will he use you to influence others? How will his eternal kingdom shape the story of your life? The answers could be exciting.

The Grand Vision

Several years ago a missionary met some young people in the Philippines who were thinking about joining the Maoist rebels. One day the missionary asked the group's leader what he found so attractive in Maoism that could not be experienced in the Christian faith. The young man's answer was profound and devastating.

He explained, "Maoism provides us...with four essential things: (1) a unified and coherent view of the world, history, and reality; (2) a definite goal to work for, live for, and die for; (3) a call to all people for a common fraternity; and (4) a sense of commitment and a mission to spread the good news that there is hope for the hopeless. The fact is...that the Christian faith in all of its beauty seems to be unable to provide us with such a vision."¹

In sadness and frustration, the missionary watched these young and idealistic people get caught up in a destructive ideology that captured their zeal.

A Basic Human Need

Vision is a basic human need. Scripture affirms this: "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Prov. 29:18, KJV). Even Jesus followed a

vision. He expressed his mission in these words: "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49). Jesus was driven by a vision that he compared to fire. It aimed at a complete transformation of the world and everything in it.

What was this fire that he came to ignite? What was this flame that burned within him? This fire—this vision—was the kingdom of God.²

Does this same vision drive the church today? The great missionary-statesman E. Stanley Jones (1884–1972) offered his tragic assessment: "The Church has lost it. The Church has lost the [biblical vision of] the Kingdom of God."³ Jones called this loss of vision "the sickness of our age."⁴ Through his missionary endeavors in India, E. Stanley Jones recaptured something of the true, biblical vision of the kingdom of God. Late in the missionary's life, a Hindu man approached him and remarked, "Jesus has gotten into your blood, hasn't he?"

Jones responded, "Yes, and he has raised my temperature. I'm excited over him. Now the Kingdom of God and the person of the Son of God—the message and the man—have come together in a living blend...and they have taken absolute possession of me. At eighty-seven one is supposed to dim down and take life easily and calmly. I do, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light, and I do things calmly, for this fire that burns in one's bones is like the burning bush of Moses, which was afire but not consumed. This divine fire does not consume, it consummates—you walk out of it like the Hebrew captives without the smell of smoke upon you."⁵

Recapturing the Vision

The church today can be divided into two different understandings of the kingdom of God. The first group views the kingdom of God as mystical, invisible, and heavenly. These Christians assert that Jesus is Lord of all, but his kingdom does not make a difference on the earth now because it is reserved for the future time when he returns. The contrasting group believes the kingdom of God makes a difference here and now, yet it tends to be dominated by political and social activists who try to establish God's kingdom on earth through human means and methods. Both of these views are incomplete in their understanding of God's kingdom.

In response, this Bible study explores the glorious biblical vision of the kingdom of God, hoping to define and rekindle within the church in our generation the same vision that burned inside E. Stanley Jones—and within Jesus himself. The biblical vision of the kingdom of God is not just any vision. It is the grandest vision the world has ever seen! This vision can replace the discredited ideologies of the past century.

“It is this vision [for] which Jesus lived, labored, suffered, and died. And it is this vision he entrusted to his disciples” and the church.⁶ It is this vision that provides the central theme of the Bible. It is this vision that is the “consummation of history—the accomplishment of God’s own intention for his entire creation.”⁷ It is this vision that provides the “most powerful symbol of hope” in the history of humankind.⁸ And it is this vision that provides the believer with a calling and a purpose that is higher than him- or herself. Indeed, it is a vision worthy to work for, to live for, and to die for.

The kingdom of God is undeniably the most profound, powerful, and unifying concept in all of history. In the lessons that follow, we will define the kingdom of God and its role as a central theme of the Bible. We will examine some of its key characteristics and learn that the perspectives, priorities, and value system of the kingdom of God are radically different from those of the world’s kingdoms. A biblical understanding of the kingdom of God explains the realities of death, evil, injustice, and corruption in the world, yet equally affirms the reality of a loving, almighty God who enters history and transforms it—one person, one family, one church, one nation at a time. God’s kingdom is unshakable.

 *What Is the Kingdom of God?*

The concept of the kingdom of God is one of the most confusing, controversial, and misunderstood ideas in the Bible. Some have launched violent revolutions in the name of establishing the kingdom of God on earth. Some have advocated elaborate schemes of social engineering and wealth redistribution in the name of advancing the kingdom of God. Many Christians simply ignore the concept, associating it with Christian sects that seem theologically heretical. For others it sounds like something wonderful. They think of it as heaven or as looking forward to Christ's return, but they are not clear about its nature or relevance to their lives on this side of eternity. They would have difficulty explaining it to non-Christians in clear, concise terms.

Yet it's an indisputable fact that the kingdom of God was the central theme of the teachings of Jesus. The phrase "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of Heaven" appears ninety-eight times in the New Testament! So if Jesus is our Lord, we dare not ignore this topic. Instead we must lay aside all our ideas and notions and seek to discover the biblical understanding of the kingdom of God and its relevance for how we live our lives. That's what this study is all about. What was this idea that burned so strongly in the heart of Christ? What was he trying to teach us?

Imagine that you are traveling on a bus or a plane. You are reading your Bible and a seatmate asks if you are a Christian. You reply with a yes. She is not a Christian but would like to ask you a question. She recently listened to a Christian radio program and heard a preacher mention the kingdom of God. She didn't understand what he meant and wonders if you could help. How would you answer? In this session, we'll offer an answer to this question that is simple yet life changing.

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

Knowing God's Will

God's Will

In the New Testament, the Greek word for *will* is *thelasma*, meaning intention or desire. When the Bible speaks of God's will, it refers to his intentions for us, and in many cases, it relates to direct commands in Scripture. The apostle Paul describes God's will as "good, pleasing and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). In some cases we are not sure what the will of God is for a particular circumstance. For example, in Acts 18:19–21 the apostle Paul mentions a visit to Ephesus, declaring upon his departure that he would return to visit them again if it was God's will. He wasn't certain what God's desire was for this circumstance. As Christians, our focus should be obeying God's revealed will in Scripture, trusting that he will guide our steps regarding our day-to-day decisions.

General Revelation

The word *reveal* means to disclose or make known something previously hidden. The Christian faith rests on God's revelation of himself. Nobody would know the truth about God or be able to relate to him personally unless God had first revealed himself to us. *General revelation* is the theological term for God's revelation of himself to all people. The Bible affirms that all people have a general knowledge of God, and of right and wrong, from the witness of creation and by using their reason and conscience (Rom. 1:19–21; 2:14–15; Ps. 19:1–4). They may choose to suppress this knowledge (Rom. 1:18), but it is readily available to everyone.

Special Revelation

Special revelation is the theological term for God's direct, supernatural revelation of himself in history, as witnessed to by the Bible. The Bible is witness to God's revelation, including his revelation of himself through Israel and his consummate revelation of himself in his Son, Jesus Christ. God has also revealed himself through the lives and inspired writings of his prophets and apostles. The Scriptures (which means "writings") are God's testimony and teaching in human form. The church calls the writings the "Word of God" because the authorship and contents were directly inspired by him. Jesus viewed the Old Testament Scriptures as his heavenly Father's instructions (Matt. 4:4) that he must obey, and the apostle Paul described the Old Testament as "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:15–17). Through special revelation, faithfully recorded in Scripture, God reveals more than we could know by the witnesses of creation, reason, and conscience. The Exodus, which clearly showed God's redemptive purposes, is an example of special revelation and has served as a frame of reference for God's people ever since. Within the Exodus, a specific example of special revelation appears in the story of the Ten Commandments. Exodus 32:16 declares that "the tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets." Ultimately, the paramount and unique example of special revelation is the life of Jesus Christ himself. Scripture testifies that Christ is the exact representation of God's being (Heb. 1:3).

KEY VERSES TO READ

Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done

This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

—*Matthew 6:9–10*

1. As you begin this session, what is your definition of the kingdom of God? Write it down. How would you explain it to someone who has never heard of this concept?

2. In Matthew 6:5–13, Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer, providing them (and us) with a model prayer in verses 9–13. In this prayer we are to begin by recognizing God as our heavenly Father and by reverencing his holy name. Following this are a number of requests or supplications. What is the first request we are to make? (See vss. 9–10). How could you restate this request in your own words?

3. According to these verses, where is God's will currently done? Where else could it be done?

4. Do you think there is a connection between God's kingdom coming and God's will being done? What might it be?

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

The Nature of God's Kingdom

What is the difference between heaven and earth? In other words, why is heaven heavenly, and why is earth not very heavenly?

In heaven God's will is completely obeyed by all its inhabitants. As a result heaven is a perfect place. It is the kind of place where most humans

on earth desire to be. In contrast, God's will is not completely obeyed on earth. The Bible teaches that Adam and Eve chose to sever their relationship with God. With this disobedience, known as the Fall, the relationship between God and humanity was broken. As a result people today rebel against God's wise will and intentions (Gen. 6:5; Rom. 3:23). Our individual lives, families, societies, and even the environment groan under the consequences of this rebellion.

Matthew 6:9–10, the key verses for this session, indicate there is a connection between God's will being done and his kingdom coming. It suggests that the kingdom of God is where God's will is done. This is a concise definition for the kingdom of God. His kingdom exists wherever his will is done.

How did your definition compare to this one? We can deepen this definition of the kingdom of God by answering three other questions: (1) What is a kingdom? (2) What is God's will? and (3) Where is God's will to be done?

What Is a Kingdom?

Every kingdom has four universal components: (1) a king who rules; (2) subjects, or those over whom the king rules; (3) laws, ordinances, and a government that administers them; and (4) a realm or territory over which the king rules.

The kingdom of God is no different. God is the ruler, and Christ is his appointed King (Ps. 2:4–9; Rev. 19:11–16). The angels and those who accept the kingship of Jesus through repentance, faith, and obedience to God's will are the subjects. God's will—his revealed laws and ordinances—form the government by which the kingdom is administered. The realm of God's kingdom encompasses every part of creation that submits to God's will.

What Is God's Will?

Like God himself, the will of an infinite God is unknowable by finite, human minds, except as he chooses to reveal it. Thankfully, God has

made himself known to us and has revealed a portion of his perfectly wise and loving will to human beings—the portion we need to flourish on the earth. The will of God for humanity is revealed at several levels.

First, God has revealed himself and his will to all humanity through the witness of creation and the faculties of conscience and reason. Through this revelation, available to all people and known in theological terms as “general revelation,” we obtain a general knowledge of God and of right and wrong (Rom. 1:20; 2:14–15).

Second, God has supernaturally revealed himself and his will in history, as witnessed to by Scripture. This revelation, known in theological terms as “special revelation,” includes God’s revelation through Israel; his revelation through the lives and inspired writings of his prophets and apostles; and ultimately his revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is the paramount example of special revelation. By looking at Christ, we receive a revelation by illustration—God’s will demonstrated through its flawless application (Col. 1:15; Heb.1:3). Christ perfectly did the will of his Father (John 14:31). He is sometimes referred to as the “Living Word” (John 1:1–14). Divinely inspired and “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16–17), God’s written Word, the Bible, is witness to God’s revelation, including his consummate revelation in Jesus.

Third, in addition to general and special revelation, we have the continuing witness of the Holy Spirit as he speaks to our hearts, teaching us all things and convicting us of what is, or what is not, God’s will (John 14:26).

God has provided multiple ways for us to know him and his intentions for us. Because God has made himself known to us, we know how to rightly relate to him, other people, the spiritual realm, and the rest of creation. The Bible contains examples, principles, and instructions—many are specific—for how God’s perfect will applies to us today. God has revealed himself to us and has given us his wisdom for life.

Where Is God’s Will to Be Done?

The answer to this question is found in the Key Verses for this session, Matthew 6:9–10. God’s desire is that his will and laws be obeyed at all

levels on earth—now—as they are in heaven. God desires this because he loves us and wants the best for our lives.

Imagine what would happen if God's will were truly done on earth as it is in heaven. What would happen if we obeyed all of God's intentions in the areas of personal holiness, integrity, care for our bodies, and relationships? What would happen if all family members obeyed God's intentions in their relationships to one another? What would happen in churches if all the leaders and members truly loved one another, served one another, advocated for the powerless, and lived in unity? What would happen if community leaders worked together for the common good with honesty and integrity? What would happen if there were no corruption in a nation? If there were real justice?

That is what Jesus told us to pray for. We are to ask that God's will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. What would happen if God's people not only prayed but *obeyed*? God answers, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14).

When God's people seek his face—when they hear and obey his will—he promises to heal the land. The healing of the land and the coming of God's peace to our communities, our nations, and the world directly relate to God's people doing his will. The kingdom of God reflects his original intentions for the earth and all that inhabit it. Human sinfulness interrupted those intentions, but it is God's purpose that his kingdom be reestablished. In the meantime, God calls his people to be a present expression of that future reign of Christ the King. How? By seeking to understand and obey his will, and by teaching others to do the same.

We can make this personal by saying, "To the degree that I obey the will of God, his kingdom comes to my life. To the extent that God's will is done in the life of my family and church, his kingdom comes to my family and church. To the extent that God's will is done in my community and nation, his kingdom will come there, and my community and nation will be healed." This is the grand vision of the kingdom of God!

Father, may your kingdom come. May your will be done.

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

The Kingdom in Scripture

The kingdom of God is a central theme of the Bible. In fact, the phrases “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” appear nearly one hundred times in the New Testament. On the lips of Jesus, they appear over sixty times. By contrast, Jesus uses the word *church* only twice. As he ministered, Jesus talked passionately about the kingdom of God.

Look at some of the things Jesus said about the kingdom of God. What do you learn about the kingdom of God (kingdom of heaven) from Jesus?

1. Matthew 4:17, 23

2. Matthew 6:33

3. Luke 4:43

4. Acts 1:3

The kingdom of God was the central theme of Christ's teachings. It also was important to the apostle Paul, the principle church planter of the New Testament. What do you learn about the kingdom of God (kingdom of heaven) from the apostle Paul?

5. Acts 19:8

6. Acts 28:23, 30–31

7. Romans 14:17

8. 1 Corinthians 4:20

If the kingdom of God was this important to Jesus and the apostle Paul, then it surely must be important for our lives today! Does your life reflect this same concern and passion for the kingdom of God?

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

The Kingdom of God in Review

1. In God's kingdom, he is the ruler, and Jesus is his appointed King. The angels and those who submit to his will are the subjects. God's revealed laws and ordinances form the basis of the government by which the kingdom is administered. The realm is every part of creation in submission to his will.
2. God's will is revealed to humanity at several levels: (1) through general revelation, or the knowledge of God that is available to all people through the witness of creation and their own reason and conscience; (2) through special revelation, or God's supernatural revelation of himself and his will as witnessed to by the Bible, including his consummate revelation of himself in his Son, Jesus Christ, the living Word; and (3) through the continuing witness of the Holy Spirit.
3. God's intention is that his will be done at all levels on earth as it is in heaven.
4. The kingdom of God was central to the teachings of Jesus and the apostle Paul.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

A Kingdom for Today

The kingdom of God was the central passion of Jesus. Paul carries this same passion into his inspired teaching of the early church. And because that church is our model, the kingdom of God is important for believers today.

People of every age, gender, nationality, and creed are looking for a cause—a vision to which they can commit their lives. There is no vision more worthy than the kingdom of God. Both Jesus and Paul lived for it, taught it, and gave their lives to see the glorious intentions of God realized on earth as they are in heaven. We too can be used by God to expand the kingdom.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

What Would It Be Like?

God's will is to be obeyed at all levels on earth—now—as it is in heaven. As our loving Creator, he knows how our lives, families, churches, and communities ought to function. What would change if God's will were more fully obeyed in the following areas?

1. Reflect on God's will for your life as revealed in the Bible. How would your life be different if you more fully obeyed his will? Consider your relationship to God, your body, your work, and other people, including friends, neighbors, coworkers, and even your enemies.

2. How would your family life be different (either the family you grew up in or your current family) if God's will were more fully obeyed?

Consider the relationships between husband and wife and children and parents.

3. How would your church be different if God's will were more fully obeyed? Think about the relationships between members, the vision and purpose of the congregation, and the leadership.

4. Consider God's will for civic leaders and citizens. How would your city or community be different if God's will were more fully obeyed? Think of your city's government, legal, and educational systems. Imagine the relationships between the community leaders and the citizens. What would your city or community be like if Jesus were the mayor?

Is it really possible for God's will to be done on earth? Review the four scenarios you created above to answer the following questions.

5. Do you think it's possible to bring God's kingdom to these areas? Why, or why not?

6. What are some barriers to bringing God's kingdom to these areas?

7. How could these kingdom barriers be removed?

8. What might God be asking you to do to bring his kingdom more fully into your life? Name one area and pray about it.

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

Observing God's Kingdom

How has the kingdom of God already come to your culture and community? This week look for ways the kingdom of God already functions around you. What good things are happening that reflect kingdom principles and God's work in your world?

When you see God's kingdom at work, write in a notebook or on a piece of paper, "I see the kingdom of God at work through..." and then briefly describe the observations. The observations should reflect a specific action. Bring these observations to the next meeting and report on them. Or if you complete this activity alone, share your notes with a friend.

Discuss what encourages you about observing the kingdom of God at work. What conclusions can you draw about the kingdom in your culture and community?

The next session: *The kingdom of God is comprehensive.*

 *The Comprehensive Plan*

Christian author and lecturer Os Guinness tells a fascinating story of how his great, great grandmother approached the brink of suicide and then stepped back. Her name was Jane Lucretia D'Esterre, and the year was 1815. At that time she was eighteen years old and living in Scotland. She was young, talented, and beautiful, but her husband had recently died in a dueling match, leaving her alone and impoverished with two small children to raise by herself. Given such sad circumstances, we can understand Jane's dark thoughts as she stood on the edge of a bridge and contemplated the cold waters of the small river far below.

As Jane prepared to jump, her eyes momentarily lifted to a small field beyond the river. She saw a young farmer at work with his plow and horse. He looked about her age and was focused on his task. Meticulous and skilled, the young man's newly turned furrows looked as finely executed as the paint strokes on a master artist's canvas. As he plowed, she could hear his distant voice quietly singing hymns.

Despite herself, Jane was fascinated, and a deep sense of wonder and admiration welled up within her. Then slowly her admiration turned into

rebuke. What was she doing on this bridge, wallowing in self-pity? How could she be so self-absorbed when she had two small children who needed her? With a renewed sense of determination, she returned to her home—saved from death by the simple sight of work well done.¹

Although nothing more is known about this farmer, most likely he was a Christian. A man who sought to live his life—including his menial work plowing fields—to the glory of God and for his kingdom. The mere witness of his devotion to God, expressed in how he plowed his field, was enough to renew hope within Jane and pull her back from despair.

In this session you'll learn that the kingdom of God is not a narrow, spiritual place but a comprehensive reality that brings substantial healing to every aspect of our lives and every part of creation.

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

How Big Is the Kingdom?

Comprehensive

The word *comprehensive* describes something that is broad, all-inclusive, extensive, or complete.

Redeem (Redemption, Redemptive)

To redeem means to save or rescue from captivity or bondage. It also means to “buy back” or repurchase. For example, if someone is kidnapped, a sum of money (a ransom) might be paid to the captors to redeem the kidnapped person. Biblically, *redeem* often refers to the work of God through Christ to deliver creation from the bondage and penalties of sin.

Sanctify

To sanctify something sets it apart for sacred use, or makes it holy. The theological term *sanctification* refers to the process of growing in holiness and perfection, reflecting the image of Christ. This process is a supernatural work carried out by the Holy Spirit in the life of believers, yet it also requires that believers apply God's truth to their lives.

Secular

Secular refers to things that are “worldly” or “of this world” and disconnected from the spiritual realm. Although the Bible makes a distinction between the physical and spiritual realms, it rejects the notion of things being “secular.” Even material things have an ultimate origin and an ongoing connection to the spiritual realm (Heb. 11:3; Col. 1:16–17).

Substantial

In this session, *substantial* describes something that is mostly finished but not fully complete. For example, a person’s eyewitness account of an event may be substantially true or accurate, that is, mostly true and complete, although he or she may have missed a few details. The kingdom of God brings substantial healing to things broken by the Fall now. This means real, significant healing, yet healing that is still partial and not yet complete. It won’t be finished until Jesus returns and his kingdom is fully realized.

Vision

In this session, *vision* describes a future state that must be seen with the eyes of the mind before it becomes reality. The biblical concept of the kingdom of God provides us with a vision or a mental picture of what the world could be like if it were completely healed from the effects of evil.

KEY VERSES TO READ

The King’s Supremacy

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and

the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

—*Colossians 1:15–18*

1. How does this passage describe Jesus?

2. What was Jesus' role in creation? What did he do? What does this suggest about his authority?

3. Can creation sustain an ongoing existence apart from God? Why, or why not?

4. What is Christ's role in the church?

5. Over what does King Jesus have supremacy? What does this mean?

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

The Kingdom Reaches Everything

Perhaps the greatest weaknesses of the church in our generation are the narrowness of its vision and the tendency to divide reality into spiritual and secular categories. For many Christians, the kingdom of God, if

understood at all, is viewed in narrow, personal, and spiritual terms. “I became a child of the kingdom,” one might say, “when I accepted Jesus as my savior by faith.” Of course this is true (John 3:3), but there is more that we can say about the kingdom of God.

The coming of the kingdom of God is a primary biblical image used to describe God’s redeeming activity in history. When Adam and Eve turned their backs on God in the Garden of Eden, the consequences of their rebellion were far-reaching, comprehensive, and devastating. At least four fundamental relationships were broken through the Fall. First, their intimate relationship with God was broken. This was the primary relationship they were created for, the most important in their lives. When this relationship was broken, the other relationships faltered too. These included their relationships to themselves, to each other, and to the rest of creation.

The results of this comprehensive brokenness have plagued humanity ever since. Wars, hatred, violence, environmental destruction, injustice, corruption, idolatry, poverty, and famine all sprang from original sin. So when God set out to redeem his creation from the effects of this rebellion, his redemptive plan could not be narrow. Rather, it included everything broken through the Fall, including each of these relationships. God’s redemptive work is comprehensive.

The Kingdom Arrives

God’s kingdom, which was foreshadowed in the Old Testament (Dan. 4:34–35; Isa. 9:6–7) arrived with Jesus Christ, the redeemer of the world. The apostle Paul describes the scope of Christ’s redeeming work in Colossians 1:19–20: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Why did Jesus die on the cross? Many in the church respond this way: “He died to save me from sin and purchase my salvation.” This is true, but the Colossians passage says he came to redeem *all* things. To emphasize this point even more, Paul added, “whether things on earth or things in heaven.”

The coming of God's kingdom to earth represents "a total, global transformation in which everything is impacted. It is a vision of the entire cosmos purified of evil and full of the glory of God,"² writes Leonardo Boff. With the arrival of Jesus, his sacrificial death on the cross, and triumphant resurrection, the kingdom of God became a present reality. Yet at the same time it is a future reality in its fullness. In one sense God's kingdom has already come, but in the fullest sense it is still to come (Luke 11:20; 16:16; 22:16). Because the kingdom has already come, Christians can enjoy its benefits today. For example, we receive salvation from sin, renewed fellowship with God, and substantial healing within ourselves, with others, and with the environment. Yet complete and total healing will not be realized until Christ's future return (Rev. 21:1–5).

Our task, as the church in this "in-between time," is to extend the blessings of God's kingdom throughout creation. In the words of Francis Schaeffer, we should be working "on the basis of the finished work of Christ...[for] substantial healing now in every area where there are divisions because of the Fall."³ We are not to hold to the common view of many contemporary Christians that the kingdom of God is a "spiritual only" or "future only" reality. Rather, we are to believe that substantial healing can be a reality here and now in every area on the basis of the finished work of Christ. This healing will not be perfect or complete on this side of Christ's return, yet it can be real, evident, and substantial.

The Lord of Everything

Because Jesus is Lord of everything, his kingdom encompasses everything! It even sanctifies the common things that we think of as "unspiritual" or mundane. For example, the apostle Paul said, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). Even actions like eating and drinking are done in the light of God's kingdom and for his glory.

What could be more mundane than cooking pots in the kitchen? Yet the Bible claims:

On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD'S

house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the Lord Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty.

—Zechariah 14:20–21

In this passage the prophet Zechariah describes life after the return of Jesus, when his kingdom reigns fully. On that day even lowly cooking pots and bells on horses will be inscribed with HOLY TO THE LORD. Because the kingdom of God is comprehensive, it gives significance to things that the world considers to be meaningless and insignificant.

This is a radical notion for many in the church today who tend to categorize things as either “spiritual” or “secular.” The spiritual category includes such things as prayer, Bible study, church attendance, and careers in “full-time Christian service.” Most other things fall into the secular category. But God’s kingdom encompasses everything! There are no spiritual and secular categories. Even everyday things are “holy to the Lord.”

When we understand this truth, it brings a fresh sense of purpose and dynamism to our lives. Even simple, menial tasks take on a new importance and dignity. Our lives are no longer divided between “spiritual” and “unspiritual” activities. Instead, we infuse God’s truth into every area of life. Whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we seek to “do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17).

The sixteenth-century European Reformers used a simple Latin phrase to capture this important truth. The phrase *coram Deo* means “before the face of God.” For the Christians of that generation, all of life—each moment and task—was lived before the face of God, under the authority of God, and to the glory of God. They understood that Christ’s death on the cross was meant for the redemption of all things. They understood that God wanted all their devotion, whether they worshiped in church, cooked a meal, plowed a field, practiced law, shared the gospel, or fed the hungry.

One woman who held this view had a plaque made for her kitchen that read, “Worship services held here three times a day.” She understood that preparing meals, when done in light of God’s kingdom, becomes a significant act of worship. She wasn’t a Christian only when she attended church, or only during her times of Bible study. She lived *coram Deo*, and a vision of God’s kingdom permeated her life. Likewise, when her husband planted his field, he stood before the face of God and asked himself, *How can I glorify God as I plant my field today? This is God’s field. I want to make it bountiful for him!*

Do you have this same comprehensive understanding of the kingdom of God?

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

The Scope of God’s Kingdom

The following three New Testament passages illustrate the comprehensive scope of the kingdom of God. Examining them can help expand your understanding of the kingdom.

1. Read Colossians 1:15–20. How many times does the word *all* appear in these verses?

2. In your own words, how does Christ relate to “all things”?

3. Colossians 1:15–20 and Hebrews 1:1–3; 2:6–9 closely parallel each other in their messages about the kingdom of God. Write down the similar ideas or statements from these two passages. What do they say about Christ?

4. Read Hebrews 2:6–9 and Matthew 28:18. What is presently under Christ’s authority and subject to him? Does everything *appear* to be under Christ’s authority? Explain your answer.

Read Romans 8:18–22 to answer the next questions.

5. Four times in this passage, Paul describes something that is waiting for redemption. What is it? What does this reveal about the scope of God’s redemptive concern?

6. In the past, what happened to creation?

7. How is the present condition of creation described?

8. What is the future hope of creation? How is it described?

9. Who are the “sons of God” and “children of God” referred to in verses 19 and 21? What will happen to creation when they are revealed? How do you think this will happen?

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

The Kingdom in Review

1. In the Bible the dominant image or symbol used to describe God's redemptive purpose in history is the kingdom of God.
2. The coming of God's kingdom to earth represents a total, global transformation.
3. The kingdom of God became a present reality through the life and work of Jesus, yet it won't be fully realized until Christ returns.
4. The church's task is to extend the blessings of God's kingdom throughout creation. We can see substantial healing in every place affected by the Fall.
5. In God's kingdom there is no distinction between the spiritual and the secular. Each moment and task is lived before the face of God, under the authority of God, and to the glory of God.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

God Is a Farmer

Understanding that God's kingdom is comprehensive is an empowering, liberating truth. How the church needs to return to this truth in our generation!

In the small, rural mountain village of Huarina, Bolivia, most community members belong to impoverished farming families. In Bolivian society, as in much of the world, the social standing of religious leaders is high while respect for farmers is low. Bolivian cultural stories, like those

in many societies, reinforce the notion that people who work the soil have no worth.

At a small church in this village, a guest speaker shared a message from Genesis 2:8. He opened the Bible and read: “Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden.” He read the words again: “The LORD God planted a garden.” He paused for a moment to let this simple sentence settle in.

God was a farmer! He had planted a garden! As this reality dawned, downcast faces looked up and began to shine. They were farmers, but who else was a farmer? The King of the kingdom was a farmer! Their sense of dignity was restored.

The kingdom of God is comprehensive. It encompasses everything.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Do It All to the Glory of God

Because Jesus is Lord of all, his kingdom encompasses everything. It even encompasses the small or mundane things in our lives that we may tend to think of as “unspiritual.” Use the questions below to reflect on your own life and how you can increasingly “do [everything] for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

1. Because of the Fall, at least four fundamental human relationships were broken: our relationships with God, ourselves, our neighbors (other people), and the rest of creation. What evidence do you see of this brokenness in your own life, your family, your neighborhood, and your community?

2. As God's kingdom comes, there is hope for substantial healing now in every area where there are divisions because of the Fall. Consider the four main relationships that were affected by the Fall. In what ways have you seen the kingdom of God impact these areas and bring substantial healing in your own life, your family, your neighborhood, and your community? Take time to thank God for his healing power.

3. Think about the different areas or parts of your life (for example, your work, your family life, your leisure time, and your time at church or in prayer and Bible study, etc.) Do you tend to categorize these areas as either "spiritual" or "unspiritual"? If so, focus on those situations or activities that you tend to view as "unspiritual." How might your behavior in these areas be affected if you were to see them as spiritual, and "do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus"?

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

"Whatever You Do"

Select a day sometime in the next week when you will keep a journal or log of everything you do during the course of that day. On the left side of the paper, list each hour of the day starting with the hour you woke up. Your log should include everything you did during each hour. For example:

- 6:00–7:00 Woke up and took a shower
Had breakfast
Read my Bible and prayed
- 7:00–8:00 Drove to work
etc.

At the end of the day, look at each thing that you did during the day (each item on the list) and write down if you typically think of each activity as a “spiritual” activity or as an “unspiritual” activity. If you’re not sure, write “not sure.” For example:

- 6:00–7:00 Woke up and took a shower (unspiritual)
Had breakfast (not sure)
Read my Bible and prayed (spiritual)
- 7:00–8:00 Drove to work (unspiritual)
etc.

Now, go back over the list and highlight everything you marked as “unspiritual” or “not sure” and answer these two questions: (1) What, if anything, does God’s Word have to say about this item? Write it down along with any Bible references. (2) Could I do this activity/item in a way that would bring glory to God? If so, how? Write it down.

At first glance, this may seem to be somewhat difficult because we tend to think that many of the things we do every day are too mundane to include in the spiritual category. If you feel this way, remember the admonition of the apostle Paul, who said, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17) and “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Here’s an example. Perhaps you read the newspaper every morning at breakfast. You listed this as an “unspiritual” activity. But how might you go about reading the newspaper in a way that brings glory to God? It’s not a silly question! Perhaps you could pray as you read—lifting up to God the needs of the world. Perhaps a story you’re reading is about government

corruption. Rather than simply reading it, take time to think about what the Bible says about corruption and what causes it. Compare this to what the author of the article says.

Try to think about even the simple things of your life differently—from the perspective of God's kingdom—and prepare yourself for a revolution!

The next session: *What is the right-side-up kingdom?*

 *A Right-Side-Up View*

In the second century a devastating smallpox epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. The epidemic was so severe that over the next fifteen years a quarter to a third of the Empire's population died from smallpox, including the famous Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius.

According to Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, the typical Roman response to the illness was to flee from it. "At the first onset of the disease, [the non-believing Romans] pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead. [They] treated unburied corpses as dirt." Even Galen, the famous physician, left Rome quickly once the epidemic began, departing for his country estate in Asia Minor until the danger receded.

In contrast, wrote Dionysius, "Most of our Christian brothers showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ...drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and caring for others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead."¹

Why was the response of the early Christians so dramatically different from the unbelievers? What compelled them to sacrificially care for sick people—including those who were not relatives—knowing that they, the caregivers, might easily die as a result? They operated from a perspective that was, in many cases, opposite of the Roman culture. They followed the value system of God's kingdom. They obeyed the central teachings of Jesus, who said, "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12), and "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

In this session, we'll learn that the kingdom of God represents a viewpoint that is the opposite of the world's outlook. It turns the perspective of the world upside down—or rather, right side up. It looks at things the way God originally intended.

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

What's Your View?

Bless (blessed)

This term occurs in the Gospels more than thirty times. In its broadest form, to be blessed means to be happy or joyful. In the Bible, to be a truly blessed individual one must trust in God, fear him, and love him.

Value (value system)

In this session the term *value* indicates the worth one places on a thing, action, attitude, or belief. To value something means to have a high estimation of it. A value system is a person's mental ranking of the worth of things, actions, attitudes, and beliefs. Cultures and communities often share a common value system.

KEY VERSES TO READ

Preparing the Lord's Way

[D]uring the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John [the Baptist] son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness

of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’”

—*Luke 3:2–6*

1. God sent John the Baptist to announce the coming of Jesus and to “prepare the way” for him. John claimed several things would happen when the Lord arrived. What were these things?

2. When John quoted from Isaiah 40:3–5, he illustrated the impact of the coming kingdom of God. What would God’s kingdom be like?

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

The Right-Side-Up Teachings of Jesus

John the Baptist walked the desert regions around the Jordan River, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and quoting the prophet Isaiah. The passage in the Key Verses section illustrates the dramatic changes the Messiah would incite. Nothing would remain the same. Notice the striking reversals in this picture: “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth” (Luke 3:5).

To understand John the Baptist’s message, we can remember that sin had marred the world. The Fall destroyed the original order of God’s creation. However, the Messiah would start establishing God’s perfect order

again. He would take this world, turned upside down because of sin, and turn it right side up again.

This right-side-up nature of God's kingdom permeates the teachings of Jesus. A prime example is his Sermon on the Mount. Note whom Jesus refers to as "blessed" and to whom he proclaims, "Woe to you." Note how different his perspective is from sinful humanity's viewpoint.

Looking at his disciples, he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when men hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you
and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.

Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all men speak well of you,
for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

—*Luke 6:20–26*

The Meaning of Blessed

Who does Jesus describe as blessed in his kingdom? They are the poor—those who are humble and aware of their spiritual need. Those

who hunger and weep. Those who have given everything for the cause of Christ. Not many would consider such people blessed, yet that is how the King of the kingdom describes them.

Now look at those to whom Jesus declares, “Woe to you.” These are the rich and the well fed. We often view prosperous and well-fed people as blessed. But this is not necessarily so, according to the right-side-up value system of the kingdom of God. “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17). While such people may appear blessed, their comfort might keep them from discovering the reality of God’s kingdom.

The right-side-up values of the kingdom of God also affect how we treat our enemies. According to Jesus, we are to love them.

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

—*Luke 6:27–31*

As members of God’s kingdom, we are to do the unthinkable: we are to love our enemies and do good to those who mistreat us. How strange this teaching sounds! It seems naive and backward. Yet for those adopted into God’s kingdom, this merely forms part of our everyday value system.

The Purpose of Life

Who am I? What is the purpose of my life, and how do I discover it? Many people seek these answers by looking inward, often leading to self-absorption and self-indulgence. Yet Jesus answered this question with self-denial. He said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself

and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23–24).

In God's kingdom, we find purpose, meaning, and joy by giving away our rights and dying to ourselves for the sake of his kingdom. Jesus perfectly demonstrated this lifestyle:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

—*Philippians 2:6–7*

Do we believe in the King and his wisdom? Will we adopt his perspective and priorities? Will we live according to the right-side-up value system of God's kingdom?

The End of Life

Death was not part of God's original intention for his creation. Rather, it was a consequence of Adam and Eve's rebellion (Gen. 3:19). For most people, their inevitable death generates more fear than anything else. They will do nearly anything to delay it. Yet from the perspective of God's kingdom, death is a defeated enemy. We need not fear death. To those in the kingdom, the almighty King says, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Rev. 1:17–18).

The apostle Paul described this fearless approach: "For he [Jesus] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. *The last enemy to be destroyed is death*" (1 Cor. 15:25–26, author's italics).

Jesus has authority over everything, including death. He even had authority over his own death (John 10:17–18). He also conquered the fear of death. Humans grapple with the fear of dying, and Christians are not immune. Death evokes an apprehension of the unknown and a separation

from loved ones. Even Jesus struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane over his approaching death (Matt. 26:38–39). Yet the Cross defeated Satan and the fear of death.

Jesus conquered death so we might experience eternal life in his kingdom. The writer of Hebrews explains, “He too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held *in slavery* by their fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15, author’s italics).

Because Jesus conquered the fear of death that enslaved us, we might also think he died to set us free from suffering. Instead, being set free from the fear of death, we are free to risk, to suffer, and to give our lives for the sake of his kingdom, regardless of the personal cost. The blood of the martyrs gives testimony to this (Heb. 11:31–40). The kingdom of God is characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy (Rom. 14:17) but also by suffering. The apostle Peter explains, “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21).

We have not been set free from suffering, but we have been set free from the fear of death. With the church through the ages we proclaim, “‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:54–57).

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

Taking on God’s Priorities

Jesus taught that, as children of God, we are to be like our Father. We are to live by his priorities. We look at things from God’s perspective and value the things he values. We are to be utterly unlike the world. In the following passages, Jesus further describes these right-side-up priorities.

1. Read Matthew 6:25–34. What is the priority of the people of this world?

2. What is to be the priority of the people of God's kingdom? When we adopt this priority, what will result?

3. Read Matthew 6:11–15 and 18:21–35. In your culture, what is a common response from someone who has been sinned against? How is it different from Christ's teaching on forgiveness?

4. Why are we to forgive other people when they sin against us?

5. What is the consequence if we refuse to forgive?

6. How many times are we to forgive someone who sins against us? Why would the standard be so high?

7. Read Matthew 22:36–40. What is the greatest commandment?

8. What is the second greatest commandment? Why would Jesus describe it as "like" or similar to the first?

9. How did Christ embody this commandment in his life?

10. Read John 15:18–21 and 2 Corinthians 1:8–11. What can we expect if we adhere to the perspective, priorities, and value system of God's kingdom? Why?

11. According to 2 Corinthians 1:9, what can God teach us through persecution and suffering?

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

Keeping the Right Side Up

1. After the Fall, God's original intentions for creation were turned upside down. However, with the coming of his kingdom, the perfect order is being reestablished.
2. A primary theme of Jesus' teaching was the right-side-up perspective and value system of God's kingdom. His Sermon on the Mount expresses this viewpoint (Matt. 5:16–29).
3. We find true meaning, purpose, and joy as we die to ourselves and live for Christ.
4. Our highest priority is to love God, then to love our neighbor. We are to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness.

5. Christ says we are to love our enemies and forgive those who sin against us.
6. Living according to the value system of God's kingdom, we can expect persecution and suffering. Yet through persecution and suffering we can draw closer to God.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Revolutionary Ideas

As angry crowds pressed in on Paul and Silas that hot afternoon in Thessalonica, they accused the two Christians: “[These men] have turned the rest of the world upside down, and now they are here disturbing our city” (Acts 17:6, NLT). The crowds were right: Paul and Silas were rattling the status quo. Except they were not turning the world upside down; they were turning it right side up!

The perspective and value system of God's kingdom has shaken the world's history. According to sociologist Rodney Stark:

The notion of a God who loves those [whom he created] was something unheard of prior to the arrival of Jesus. In fact, during the days of the Roman Empire, mercy and sympathy were viewed as pathological and destructive emotions—defects of character to be avoided. By contrast Jesus taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—indeed, because God is merciful to us, we are required to be merciful to others. Likewise, because God so loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they love one another. And because God demonstrates his love to us by sacrificing his only Son on our behalf, then we must demonstrate our love for one another through similar personal sacrifice.²

Such teachings are revolutionary. They've turned the world right-side-up in the past and hold the power to do so today. Let us commit ourselves to the magnificent right-side-up outlook of God's kingdom.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Making God's Perspective Your Own

This session contrasted the perspective of God's kingdom with the world's outlook. Use the chart below to review the differences between the kingdom and your nation's culture.

Value	Scripture	God's Kingdom	Nation's Culture
Our highest priority	Mt 6:25–34 Mt 22:34–40		
How to treat people	Mt 22:34–40 Lk 10:25–37		
How to treat enemies	Lk 6:27–31		
The practice of forgiveness	Mt 6:9–15 Mt 18:21–35		
The meaning of life	Lk 9:23–24 Mk 8:34–37 Jn 12:23–26		
The attitude toward suffering	Lk 6:21–23 2 Cor. 1:8–11		
The view of death and dying	Jn 11:25–26 Heb 2:14–15 Rv 1:17–18		

How Do You Look?

How about your perspective? Does it reflect God's kingdom? The following questions will help you evaluate your outlook.

1. Review the list again, thinking about your life. Consider an area where your perspective reflects God's kingdom. How did you come to this outlook?

2. Now select an area where your perspective reflects your culture more than God's kingdom. Write down your ideas about why and how this area has influenced you.

3. This week pray about this area and ask God to help you get his perspective. As you pray, meditate on what the Scriptures teach about this area. Begin now by writing a prayer to God.

4. Decide on one practical thing you can do this week to practice God's perspective. Perhaps there is someone you need to forgive. Perhaps there is something you want to have that has become more important than God in your life, and you need to let it go. Perhaps there is

a neighbor or someone who needs your help. Write down what you plan to do. Share it with a friend who will gently hold you accountable. Thank God for any change you make in the direction of his kingdom.

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

Try It Again

Look at your answers in the Personal Application section. According to these responses, what are your culture's views or values in the following areas: (1) our highest priority, (2) how to treat people, (3) how to treat enemies, (4) forgiveness, (5) the meaning of life, (6) suffering, and (7) death and dying.

Watch for your culture's values this week—in books, movies, magazines, news reports, advertising, conversations, and so forth. Write down examples of what you observe. Then choose one of these examples and write out how the event or attitude could have reflected God's values. Report your observations to the group or a friend.

The next session: *the supernatural power of kingdom math*

 *Doing Kingdom Math*

The year was 1884. The location: a working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A young girl named Hattie May Wiatt stood weeping outside a small Baptist church. She had been turned away because the Sunday-school room was too crowded. Just then the pastor, a kind-hearted Civil War veteran named Russell Conwell, walked by. He saw Hattie's tear-stained face. Taking her in his arms, he carried the girl through the crowded entryway into the Sunday-school class and seated her in a dark corner near the back of the room. From then on, whenever Pastor Conwell saw Hattie, he promised to build a larger Sunday-school classroom so her friends could learn about Jesus too.

Two years later Hattie died. As someone lifted her tiny body from the bed, he found a worn and crumpled purse. Inside was fifty-seven cents and a note scribbled in childish handwriting. It read, "This is to help build the little church bigger so children can go to Sunday school."

When the pastor tearfully read that note, he knew what to do. Holding the small purse and the note, he stood before his congregation the following Sunday and told them Hattie's story. He challenged them to

follow her example and give sacrificially toward building a larger Sunday-school building. Inspired, the working-class congregation donated and raised enough money to expand the Sunday-school building and church property. The congregation also established a small health clinic to minister to the physical needs of people in the community, along with a small pastoral and vocational training school.

Years later, in 1912, Pastor Conwell delivered a sermon recounting God's many blessings that flowed from Hattie's fifty-seven-cent gift. Over the years the church continued to expand. It changed its name to Temple Baptist Church. The clinic became one of the largest hospitals in Philadelphia, serving hundreds of patients each year. The small training college grew into Temple University, which today is one of the largest universities in Pennsylvania.

The pastor marveled at how God started these ventures with a tiny gift given by a poor, eight-year-old girl. He ended his sermon with these stirring words: "When we think of the influence of [Hattie's] life upon the world...we feel as though she was one of the greatest of the earth who had accomplished that which leaders of armies had failed to do, and that which kings upon their thrones could not accomplish.... The humblest of his Christian servants is doing just as much for his Kingdom, when... doing faithfully their little duty, as are the seemingly great."¹

In this session you'll learn that God delights in using the small, poor, and weak things of this world to extend his kingdom. He takes seemingly insignificant talents, acts of service, and generosity supplied in obedient faith and supernaturally multiplies their effect many times over. We call this principle "Kingdom Math."

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

A Kingdom Principle

Incarnation

The *Incarnation* is a theological term that describes the mysterious miracle at the heart of historic Christianity. That is, Christ took our human nature into union with his divine being and became a man. The term expresses

our understanding of Jesus as one divine-human person, both fully God *and* fully man.

Principle

A principle is a general truth or tenet that serves as a rule of action. It is a fundamental law or doctrine. The kingdom of God has many such general truths. One of these is the focus of this session: God advances his kingdom by multiplying the gifts and talents—given faithfully, sacrificially, and obediently—of the poor and the weak.

KEY VERSES TO READ

The Wonder of God's Power

Do you not know?
 Have you not heard?
 The LORD is the everlasting God,
 the Creator of the ends of the earth.
 He will not grow tired or weary,
 and his understanding no one can fathom.
 He gives strength to the weary
 and increases the power of the weak.
 Even youths grow tired and weary,
 and young men stumble and fall;
 but those who hope in the LORD
 will renew their strength.
 They will soar on wings like eagles;
 they will run and not grow weary,
 they will walk and not be faint.

— *Isaiah 40:28–31*

1. How is God described in these verses?

2. What does God do for the weary and the weak?

3. Put God's action into a mathematical formula, using the following elements: Strength, Trust in God, Our Weakness, Times (x), Equals (=)

4. What must we do in our weakness to gain renewed strength?

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

God Does More with Less

When we're assigned an important task to complete, we may want to turn to the highly educated, wealthy, or talented for help. We think that for a project to be successful, it must be large in scope, well funded, and staffed by professionals. Yet when God wants to complete the most important task of all—the advancement of his kingdom—whom does he typically choose? He often chooses the weak, poor, and insignificant—the opposite of the world's expectations. In a letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul explains why God does this.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

—1 Corinthians 1:26–29

Expanding the kingdom is God's work. The Almighty chooses to work through humans, but he often uses people who are weak, poor, or uneducated. In this way his glory can shine through them in ways that can't be mistaken for human power, wealth, or knowledge. In short, God delights in multiplying the strength of the weak to advance his kingdom.

Old Testament Multiplication

Who did God raise up to lead Israel from its bondage to the Egyptians? Moses, a man overwhelmed with his weaknesses and lack of abilities. He claimed, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" (Exod. 4:10). In other words, Moses was exactly the kind of person God would choose for this history-altering task!

God responded forcefully to Moses: "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say" (Exod. 4:11). In essence, God said to Moses, "This is my job, and you're my chosen instrument. I gave you everything you need to do the job, so don't worry. Trust in me! I can take what you see as a weakness and turn it into strength for my glory. I'll work through you to get the job done."

So God worked miraculously through Moses to lead his people through their wanderings in the desert, and eventually to the doorstep of their promised homeland of Canaan. Led by Moses' successor, Joshua, the nation of Israel occupied Canaan. During this time, God showed his glory through a lowly farmer named Gideon. Judges 6:1–6 sets the stage for this story:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves, and strongholds. Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites...invaded the country.

They camped on the land and ruined the crops....They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.

God's chosen rescuer for Israel was Gideon, who described himself as "the least in my family," a family that was part of the weakest clan of the tribe (Judg. 6:15). Then when God sent Gideon to attack the Midianites, he provided the unsuspecting leader with an army of only three hundred men—a group ridiculously outnumbered by the swarms of Midianite invaders. The Lord created this imbalance "in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her" (Judg. 7:2).

This same pattern repeats in the life of David, the greatest of the Old Testament kings of Israel. David, the youngest among the boys in his family, was a shepherd. Armed only with a sling and an unshakable faith in God, he slew the giant, Goliath (1 Sam. 17:1–51). Later God appointed him to be king, even though he appeared to be the least likely candidate (1 Sam. 16:1–13). It seems that God delights in doing more when he has less to work with!

This principle permeates Scripture. Amazingly, we see it powerfully displayed in the Incarnation. Writing on this topic, the apostle Paul reminds us that even almighty God didn't exempt himself from this pattern. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

The New Testament Poor

When God sent his Son to earth, the birthplace was a dusty stable in an occupied, repressed colony on the fringe of the Roman Empire. As an adult Jesus became a carpenter, with no readily apparent qualities to pinpoint him as a leader. The prophet Isaiah described Jesus this way: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance

that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isa. 53:2–3).

In keeping with this lowly approach, Jesus chose a ragtag bunch of men to be his followers. One was a fisherman, another a hated tax collector. But after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples, who courageously proclaimed the gospel to Jerusalem. When the people heard the disciples, they were amazed because they recognized that they were “unschooled, ordinary men...[who] had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). When a crippled beggar at the temple gate asked Peter and John for money, Peter told him, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk,” and immediately the man was healed (Acts 3:6).

These followers of Jesus were poor, yet they had something of far greater value than wealth. They had the almighty, sovereign Lord of the universe! A God who delights in revealing his power through the weak and poor who are faithful and obedient. Peter and John understood that nothing, and no one, is “too little” or seems “too insignificant” to God.

As he did through Peter and John, God works through our prayers and loving service. Perhaps you think you have too many weaknesses to be used by God. Perhaps, like Moses, you don’t appreciate your gifts. Or maybe you live in a nation that, from the world’s perspective, is weak and poverty stricken. Consider this again in light of God’s right-side-up kingdom. He delights in using people like you to accomplish extraordinary things, if you keep your eyes fixed on him.

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

Examples of Divine Multiplication

Many biblical stories reinforce how God strengthens the weak to advance his kingdom. To appreciate this spiritual principle, look at these examples: John 6:1–14 (Jesus feeding the five thousand), 1 Kings 17:7–16 (Elijah and the widow of Zarephath), and Mark 12:41–44 (the widow’s mite). Then answer the following questions.

1. Did Jesus exempt the materially poor from giving their resources for kingdom purposes?

2. Who were the “poor” people from each story? What did they give?

3. Based on what you learned in these stories, what do people need in order to be obedient to Jesus’ command to love their neighbors?

4. From these stories, what evidence do you see to indicate that God blesses a poor person’s gift?

5. Did those who gave their gifts and talents in these stories always see how God used their contributions? Explain.

6. Read Matthew 25:14–30, the story of the talents. What is the consequence for the poor if they use their poverty as an excuse not to obey God?

7. According to this story, what is the consequence for anyone who does not give or invest what God has given them, regardless of the reason?
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KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

Kingdom Math in Review

1. Expanding the kingdom is God's work. He chooses to work through humans, but he often chooses to work through people who are weak and poor so that his glory can shine through them.
2. The call to invest in kingdom purposes is to all believers. To obey Jesus' command to love our neighbor, we need only what we already have.
3. There are no circumstances in which what we give sacrificially is "too little" or "too insignificant" to be used by God.
4. God blesses by multiplication. He delights in doing more with less. Trust in God \times Our Weakness = Strength.
5. God multiplies gifts sown in loving obedience, even if we do not see the multiplication personally.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Power Perfected in Weakness

Kingdom Math does not mean God never uses wealthy or highly educated people in his service. He wants to enlist everyone in his kingdom work. The apostle Paul sets an example here. He was one of the "greatest" of his generation. He was a highly educated, respected religious leader. Yet he learned that ultimately he couldn't trust in his status or education. He needed God. "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:7–8).

The great apostle described his need for God's supernatural power. "But [Jesus] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

In God's kingdom, no person or nation is too small or poor or weak. His power strengthens us.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Kingdom Math in Your Life

With these questions, reflect on Kingdom Math in your own life.

1. Can you think of people who have sacrificed and in whose lives God's multiplication principle is evident? If so, what do these people do?

2. How do you feel about what God does through these sacrificial people?

3. Do you have any doubts or questions as to whether this kingdom multiplication principle really works? If so, describe them.

4. Are you practicing any Kingdom Math now (in your family, at work, in church, etc.)? If so, what has been your experience?

5. Is Kingdom Math evident in your church? If so, how?

6. How can you open your heart and life more to Kingdom Math and the principle of spiritual multiplication?

7. What is one thing you will do differently because of this study?

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

Kingdom Math in Action

With a partner, create a simple “giving project” that you can do together, asking God to show you how Kingdom Math works. It could be beginning to tithe, donating time to a charity, contributing at church, or feeding the poor. After several months, or another time period you agree upon, evaluate the results and see if you’ve observed Kingdom Math at work in the lives of other people, or in your own. How do you feel about the results?

The next session: *In God's kingdom, the servant is the greatest.*

 *The Definition of Greatness*

What do you want to be when you grow up?" That's a favorite question we enjoy asking children. And the answers we get usually are "a policeman" or "a nurse" or maybe "a fireman." Some kids are visionary. They answer "a movie star" or "a singer" or "a doctor." One child, when asked this question, replied that he wanted to be a garbage collector. When asked why, he replied, "So I can get dirty!"

Let's take this same question and ask it another way. Let's imagine asking Jesus what he wants us to be when we grow up. Suddenly, it's a whole new question. He would probably answer the same way for all of us: "I want you to be a servant."

—Charles R. Swindoll¹

Of all the right-side-up values in God's kingdom, service may be the most radical. We live in a radically sinful world. A world that is self-centered and self-absorbed. A world where people look out for their own

interests, even if it means walking over others in the process. So Jesus challenged this attitude directly. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Christ walked the earth to serve, and his life revealed that servanthood is both an attitude and an action. A servant attitude is central to Christ’s character. He looked out for the interests of others. At the same time, he performed many acts of service. The greatest was his death on the cross for us.

The parable of the good Samaritan captures this attitude-action combination (Luke 10:25–37). When the good Samaritan saw the man who lay beaten and dying along the road, he put aside his personal agenda and sacrificially served the broken man. This parable illustrates what Jesus accomplished for each of us while we were “dying” on life’s road in our sin and brokenness. Jesus ends the parable of the good Samaritan with the command, “Go and do likewise” (vs. 37).

What does Jesus want us to be when we grow up? He wants us to be like him. He wants us to be radically different from the world. He wants us to be servants.

In this session you’ll learn that, in the kingdom of God, “greatness” is not defined by status, position, or power but through humble obedience and sacrificial service.

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

The Nature of a Servant

Servant

There are several Greek words in the New Testament for the English word *servant*. Two of the more common ones are *doulos* and *diakonos*. A *doulos* was a bondperson or slave, someone owned by another. In the church, *doulos* was used as a metaphor to describe people who completely submitted to God’s will. Though in English we usually render the apostle Paul’s description of himself in Romans 1:1 as “servant,” he actually used the word *doulos*—literally, “Paul, the slave of Jesus Christ.”

Diakonos refers to a minister or a servant. The English word *deacon* derives from this Greek word. In the early church, a *diakonos* was the servant assigned to care for the poor and needy and to distribute money collected for their use. This word also described a waiter, or a person who serves food.

Serve

There are three Greek words in the New Testament for the English word *serve*. *Latreuo* means to serve by rendering religious worship or homage. It's interesting to note the close connection in the New Testament between worship and acts of service. *Diakoneo* means to serve or wait upon another person, as in the practice of hospitality. This involves taking care of and supplying the needs of the poor. *Douleuo* means to serve as a slave obeys his master, to be completely yielded or submitted in service to another.

KEY VERSES TO READ

Not So with You

Jesus called [his disciples] together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

—Mark 10:42–45

1. Read Mark 10:32–41 to understand the context of the Key Verses above. What is the setting of this discussion between Jesus and his disciples? What was on Jesus' mind?
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2. In verses 37–41, what did James and John want Jesus to do for them? Why couldn't he grant their request? How did the other disciples react?

3. According to verse 42, what is the world's standard of greatness?

4. What is the significance of the sentence "Not so with you" in verse 43?

5. What is Christ's standard for greatness?

6. According to verse 45, what is one thing Christ did *not* come to do? What two things did he come to do?

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

The Supreme Kingdom Value

Through the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, we encounter a foreign value system—the value system of God's kingdom. In this system "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). The weak are actually strong and mighty because "power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9–10). Greatness is determined by humble service (Mark 10:41–45).

These right-side-up values of the kingdom powerfully contrast with the upside-down values of this world. In the world greatness is demonstrated

as the powerful “lord it over” their subordinates and exercise authority over them. The world’s value system recognizes the great person as the one with the most servants.

This lust for power and position manifests itself in the modern world in many ways. For example, in many cultures a powerful tyrant dominates the family, the community, the government, and sometimes the church. Certain cultural proverbs, such as “Keep her barefoot in the winter and pregnant in the summer” and “A woman’s heaven is under her husband’s feet,” reflect the drive of men to exercise dominance and power over women.

This same desire for power forms the root of slavery in the world, where one race or ethnic group holds the key to life and death over another. Slavery was institutionalized in the United States at one time. Today it exists in parts of North Africa. A desire for power also exists in the upper-class Brahmins of Hindu society, displayed as they “lord it over” the lower ethnic castes and struggle to maintain power, despite Gandhi’s teaching and the modern Indian nation’s efforts to establish more humane and democratic values.

The struggle also manifests in economic-class warfare, in which one group of people (the “haves”) hold power over another group (“the have-nots”). And it erupts in political circles, about which British scholar Lord Acton famously said, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

As in biblical times, the natural instinct of people today is to exercise power over others, even over entire groups of people.

The Heavenly Father’s Nature

In contrast to the world’s thirst for power, the King of the Universe entered the earth to serve. Christ’s service didn’t violate his kingly nature. Rather, it perfectly reflected his royal Father’s loving character.

Genesis 2:19 provides an example of God’s generous nature: “Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was

its name.” In this passage, God humbly allowed Adam, his own creation, to name the animals. God could have said, “I will name the animals, and you call them by whatever name I give them.” Instead he delegated this responsibility to man. God the Creator uses the names that Adam selected.

The King also serves as our shepherd, caring for and nurturing his sheep. In the beautiful and comforting lines of Psalm 23, God provides for and protects us. The psalmist wrote, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (vs. 5). The servant sets the table in a household. In this passage, the servant is almighty God.

In the New Testament divine humility and service gloriously appear in these words written by the apostle John: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Despite our sinfulness, God willingly sacrificed his only Son to purchase our redemption. In a similar manner, Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus, our Master and King, sacrificed his life to demonstrate the extent of his love for us.

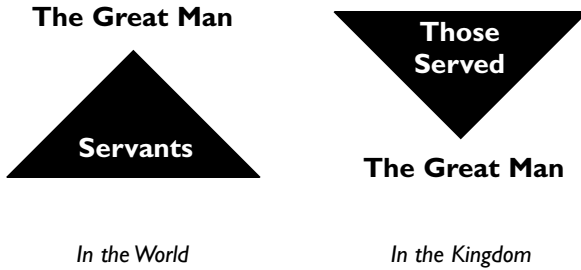
Perhaps the most astonishing reality of the kingdom of God is this: the King is a servant. Therefore, the greatest in the kingdom are servants, too. Jesus repeatedly said that “no servant is greater than his master” (John 13:16, 15:20). If our master is a servant, then there can be no higher calling in our lives, no greater ambition, than to serve others. This is the supreme value of the right-side-up kingdom of God.

Loving One Another

Stated in another way, servanthood means that we are to love one another in the manner that Jesus loved us. By this people will know we are citizens of the true, eternal kingdom.

When Jesus wanted to express love to the disciples, he did the unthinkable—something only the lowliest household servant would do. He washed their feet. In his last meeting with his disciples before going out to his arrest and crucifixion, he demonstrated servanthood. Jesus said to his followers, and to the church through the ages, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s

feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:14).



While the world believes the greatest person is the one with the most servants, God says a person of true greatness is one who serves others. When we understand that the Lord and Master loves and serves us, we are free to serve and look out for the interests of others.

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

Perspectives on Servanthood

Many scriptures address the theme of service. You’ll study a few of them here, but you may want to study further, creating your own “biblical theology” of service.

Biblical Servants

We can learn about servanthood by reading about biblical people who practiced it. From the privileged to the lowly, the Bible honors those who served others by recording their stories for the ages.

1. Read the following passages and describe how each of these people served others. What did they do?

Rebekah, Genesis 24:10–25

Boaz, Ruth 2:1–18

Dorcas, Acts 9:36–43

A sinner, Luke 7:36–38

2. Are there common threads among these people's attitudes and actions? If so, what are they?

3. Describe a person you know who is a servant. What characteristics in his or her life would you like in your own?

Leadership Issues

It's a common question: Can people in authority both lead and serve at the same time? Study some passages that will shed some light on this matter.

4. Read Matthew 28:18 and Mark 10:45. Did Jesus' description of himself as a servant and his claim of authority create a contradiction in his life?

5. How do you see authority, leadership, and service at work in the life of Jesus?

6. Read 1 Kings 12:1–11. What did these people want to do?

7. What actions of the prior king hindered them from their goal?

8. What did the elders recommend? What did the young men recommend? Whose advice did Rehoboam listen to? What was the result in verses 16–19?

9. Based on the above passages, does holding a position of leadership or authority negate the need to serve others? Why, or why not?

10. Consider the various roles you have in your life in which you are a leader (at work, at home, at church, etc.) In what ways can you both lead and serve at the same time?

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

Taking on Servanthood

1. In the kingdom of God, “greatness” is not defined by status, position, or power but through humble obedience and sacrificial service.
2. Servanthood is an attitude and an action.
3. Jesus is both a King and a servant. His attitude and acts of service reflected the character of his Father. There is no contradiction between service and authority/leadership.
4. Jesus said, “No servant is greater than his master” (John 13:16). Jesus is our Master and we are his servants. Therefore our greatest ambition is to serve others.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The Second Greatest Commandment

Jesus explains a Christian’s “love” priorities in Matthew 22:37–40: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

These two commands are eternally linked together. When we love our neighbor, we are loving God. When we serve our neighbor, in some mysterious way we are serving God.

Proverbs 14:31 says, “Whoever is kind to the needy [whoever serves the needy] honors God.” Proverbs 19:17 adds, “He who is kind to the poor [who serves the poor] lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done.”

Jesus reinforces this teaching in his parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31–40. “For I [Jesus] was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.’... Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you...?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, *whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me*’” (vss. 35–40, author’s italics).

As Christ’s followers, our highest ambition is to imitate him by loving and serving our neighbor. This practice is not only radical but revolutionary. If followers of Christ everywhere consistently practiced it, entire cultures would be transformed. And it begins with individuals. How about you?

PERSONAL APPLICATION

What’s Your Ambition?

Ambition in God’s kingdom differs from the self-serving goals of people without Christ. The Lord wants his followers’ ambitions to be consistent with his focus on servanthood. Use these questions to consider your culture’s attitudes and ambitions, then your own.

1. Think about whether people in your culture have goals and aspirations for their lives. How would you describe their ambitions? If they don’t have goals and ambitions, explain why they don’t.

2. On the next page circle the words you believe best describe the values—the goals for which people strive—in your culture.

Assistant	Influential	Owner	Servant
Bond-slave	Insignificant	Poor	Slave
Boss	Large	Prestigious	Small
Chief	Last	Principal	Subordinate
Director	Leader	Proprietor	Success
Employee	Lord	Primary	Superior
Employer	Manager	Respected	Supportive
First	Master	Rich	Underling
Helper	Menial	Ruler	Winner
Inferior	Minor	Secondary	

3. Consider the words you selected. What do they reveal about your culture's ambitions?

4. Pick five words from the list that best describe your personal goals and ambitions. Do your goals differ from those in your society? If so, how? If not, what does this say about you?

5. Most of the words in the list are synonymous with one of two words, *master* or *servant*. Write your own definition of these words.

Master:

Servant:

6. What is one thing you will do differently because of this study?

7. Write out a prayer to God, asking him to increase your desire to be a servant. Be honest about what you fear, wrestle against, or don't understand. Talk to him about anything that concerns or thrills you about servanthood.

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

Encouraging a Servant

Who is a leader that you admire? Write out a list of this person's leadership characteristics. Without revealing the leader's name, read the list of attributes to your group (or just to yourself). Then consider which of these characteristics represent the biblical qualities of a leader.

What do you discover? Do you need to adjust your opinions about what makes a good leader according to Scripture? As a group, discuss what qualities a biblical leader would have. Can you think of anyone who fits these qualities? Write a letter to this person, as a group or by yourself, encouraging him or her in his or her leadership role.

The next session: *The kingdom is open to all.*

 *Come One, Come All*

An “untouchable” community dwells near the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh. These people are members of the lowest caste of that society. Poverty-stricken, they live atop a garbage dump. Originally they were brought from India to Bangladesh by former British colonizers to serve as slave labor in the construction of roads and railroads. Now they earn a meager living by sweeping streets, cleaning toilets, and working as garbage collectors.

They have a simple school, but it consists only of the first grade. In class six-year-old children sit side-by-side with teenagers. When guests from other countries visit, the local charity workers encourage them to interact with the children—to talk to and listen to them, to reach out and touch them. The focused attention and wholesome touch of strangers send a powerful message to these kids. It communicates that they are loved and of great value, that they are not untouchable in God’s eyes.

Nearly every country shoves aside and treats some people groups as insignificant. These people are lonely and hopeless. By contrast, no one is untouchable in the kingdom of God. Everyone is welcome and important. Anyone can belong.

In this session you’ll explore how the kingdom of God is open to everyone.

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

A Place to Belong

Diversity

The word *diversity* describes a situation where distinct, unlike, or dissimilar things or qualities coexist. The opposite of diversity is *uniformity*. There is unity and diversity within the Godhead, and creation exhibits both qualities. For example, within the human race, God created two distinct genders—male and female (diversity), yet both share equally God's image (unity). Scripture teaches that God created diversity purposefully and calls us to rejoice in, appreciate, and seek to understand the purposes for the amazing diversity within creation.

Gentile

The English word *gentile* (*goy* in Hebrew) refers to all peoples except the nation of Israel, or the Jewish people. Over time, as the Jews developed an attitude of superiority as God's chosen people, the term took on a negative association and was used with contempt.

Nation

In the Old Testament the primary usage for *nation* is the Hebrew word *mishpachah*, which means a family group, tribe, or clan. The New Testament uses the Greek word *ethnos*, indicating a race, people, or ethnic group. While reading the Bible, it's important not to confuse the modern meaning for nation, which is a nation-state, with these biblical definitions. For example, Ethiopia is a nation-state, but it is home to nearly one hundred people groups or nations.

KEY VERSES TO READ

We Are One in Christ

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

—Galatians 3:26–28

1. Have you ever felt excluded? If so, how did it feel?

2. On what basis does somebody become a child of God?

3. Before we were adopted as “sons of God” through faith in Christ, what was our relationship to God like? See Ephesians 2:11–12.

4. According to Galatians 3:26–27 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, what have Christians been baptized into?

5. How are we unified as followers of Christ? See 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. Are there any who are spiritually superior in God’s kingdom?

6. In the above passage, do you think Paul intends to abolish all human diversity? For example, between ethnic groups or genders?

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

Destroying the Wall of Hostility

The well-known verse, John 3:16, invites us into the kingdom of God. It says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (author’s italics). Notice the word *whoever*. *Whoever* wants to belong to the kingdom may do so—rich or poor, upper or lower class, all races and

nationalities. The poor and oppressed flocked to Jesus. The broken in spirit were drawn to him. They learned that “whoever” included them.

This same inclusiveness appears in the invitation of Revelation 22:17: “Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and *whoever* wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (author’s italics). Tribalism, racism, and oppression mark our world. Yet an open-door policy characterizes the kingdom of God. It is open to anyone who places his or her faith in the person and work of Jesus and seeks to live a life of faithful obedience to his teaching.

God created the world’s diversity, and it should be respected, honored, and celebrated. Yet because of our sinful nature, diversity has become a source of conflict, jealousy, hatred, and oppression. In ancient times some Jewish men prayed, “I thank God that Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.”¹ Paul addresses this prideful superiority directly by stating that for Christ’s followers such distinctions of position and importance no longer exist.

Paul isn’t attacking human diversity. In Christ there is still the creative physical distinction between the sexes and ethnic groups (1 Cor. 12:11–19). There are different roles, for example, for husbands and wives (Eph. 5:21–33; Col. 3:18–20; 1 Pet. 3:1–7). But there is no spiritual distinction, no barrier that makes one group more worthy or significant than another. Paul underscores the unity that all followers share: “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). We are spiritual coequals. We can celebrate our diversity, our unique roles and gifts, and also our spiritual equality. Francis Schaeffer, in *No Little People*, summarized the relationship of Christians to one another this way:

The basic relationship between Christians is not that of elder and people, or pastor and people, but that of brothers and sisters in Christ. This denotes that there is one father in the family and that his offspring are all equal. There are different jobs to be done, different offices to be filled, but we as Christians are equal before one Master. We are not to seek a great title; we are to [live] together as brethren.²

The Scriptures teach two things at the same time—all people are equal and all people are different. We are equal in value but different in role or responsibility. In the kingdom, representatives of every race, gender, and class will stand shoulder to shoulder before the throne of Jesus. In this sense there will be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. This kingdom perspective revolutionizes the nations it touches.

Neither Jew nor Greek

It is natural to extol and identify with our own nation or ethnic group. But Satan can distort this appreciation so that some groups feel superior, viewing other groups as inferior or wicked. This distortion fueled the Nazi movement during World War II and the mass murder of millions of Jews in death camps. It led to the enslavement of generations of blacks by whites and has fed violence and discrimination against blacks in the United States and many other countries. It underlies the tribal conflicts throughout Africa, which cause bloodshed and poverty. And it emerges in terrorist acts around the world. Nationalism gone awry reaps pain, separation, and destruction.

This false ethnic superiority rose in the Jewish nation during Christ's time. In the temple a wall separated the Gentile area of the temple from the inner courts, which were reserved only for Jews. The wall represented the Jews' privileged status as God's chosen people (Exod. 19:5–6). But in a letter to the church at Ephesus, the apostle Paul challenges the separation and hostility between the two groups. He says Jesus died on the cross to tear down the wall of division.

For [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

—*Ephesians 2:14–16*

The kingdom of God is not the exclusive property of any ethnic group. Nor is it exclusively a Western concept, as some believe today. (In fact, it arose in the Middle East and spread within a relatively short time period to India, North Africa, and Europe.) In the kingdom, people of diverse ethnic backgrounds find unity in Christ.

Neither Slave nor Free, Male nor Female

Where slavery exists, humanity divides into the owners and the owned. The masters are the owners and the slaves are their property. Slaves possess no rights but simply exist to do the will of their masters.

Slavery was common during biblical times. Jesus and the apostles didn't attack the institution of slavery directly, but their teachings undermined it so completely that in societies where the gospel has taken root (such as in England and America), slavery as an institution has been abolished. Jesus and the apostles taught that slaves and masters are equal in God's sight. Both are slaves under the authority of their heavenly Master (Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1).

When Paul sent the runaway slave Onesimus back to his owner Philemon, he instructed Philemon to greet him as a brother (Philem. 1–16). In the early church, when slaves and slave owners met for worship, they greeted one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Slavery cannot continue in a society in which the dominant view says, "There is no slave or free, no inferior or superior in the kingdom of God. We are brothers and sisters in Christ."

Throughout history and in nearly every culture, men have oppressed women. The satanic lie that men are superior to women causes more poverty and misery than perhaps any other. Historians have discovered that in the Greco-Roman world, a high percentage of newborn baby girls were left outside to die, exposed to the elements.³ Yet scholars estimate that the early Christian church may have been 60 percent female.⁴ Most likely, women loved the early church because in Christ there was neither male nor female. Women received a substantially higher status in the church than in the prevailing culture.

The church believes in the equality before God of every individual. Despite the unbiblical subjugation of peoples and women by some Christians throughout history, the church has promoted the dignity of women and has been instrumental in working against slavery and racial prejudice, in keeping with Christ's true teaching.

In a culture that is significantly influenced by a biblical worldview, subjugation and exclusion cannot continue. For example, while slavery existed in America for over two hundred years, it was always controversial within the nation as a whole. While some Americans wrongly used the Bible to justify slavery, Christians who understood Christ's true teaching led the campaign for abolition, on the basis of true biblical principles. Ultimately, the ill-fitting institution of slavery, incompatible with a biblical worldview and the nation's foundation, led to a civil war that resulted in freeing of slaves and the abolition of slavery.

No More Untouchables

God's kingdom is open to everyone. This includes all nations, ethnic groups, genders, levels of authority, children (Matt. 19:14), the physically disabled (Luke 5:17–20), and the “untouchables” by the dominant society (Luke 5:12–14). Anyone.

As followers of Jesus, our lives can reflect this openness to all people regardless of race, class, or gender. We can reach out across the “dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14) and extend the love of Jesus to everyone—even if it means acting contrary to the prevailing norms of society. By accepting and loving all people, God's invisible kingdom becomes visible on earth. We act as “salt” and “light” in a decaying and dark world (Matt. 5:13–16).

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

Opening the Kingdom's Gates

The kingdom's doors swing wide to anyone who needs the King's grace and love. It beckons them to enter its gates with joy and confidence.

Study the following verses to learn more about this open-door policy to all kinds of people.

1. Read the following passages and describe the source of equality before God for humans and believers in Christ.

Genesis 1:26–27

Exodus 23:9; Ephesians 2:11–13

Matthew 23:8

2. Now read the story of the apostle Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. What did God command Peter to do (vss. 19–20)? Why was he hesitant to obey (vs. 28)?

3. What was Peter's overall conclusion as a result of Cornelius's conversion (vss. 34–35)?

4. Review the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in John 4:1–26. Why was the woman so surprised when Jesus asked her for a drink of water (vs. 9)?

5. From these stories, what can you conclude about Jesus' attitude toward women and Gentiles?

6. How did Jesus' followers respond to the blind beggar in Luke 18:35–43? How did Jesus respond?

7. What does the beggar's story tell you about God's kingdom?

8. What are Paul's instructions to slaves and their owners in Ephesians 6:5–9 and Colossians 3:22–4:1? How does his teaching bring dignity to slaves while undermining the institution of slavery?

9. Read James 2:1–9. Whom should we not show favoritism toward? Why not (vss. 8–9)?

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

The Joy of Diversity

1. In God's kingdom, followers of Christ from every ethnic group, gender, and class are coequals.
2. Slaves and masters are equal in God's sight, as both are under the authority of their heavenly Master.

3. Jesus treated women with dignity and respect. Men and women are equal in God's kingdom.
4. God's kingdom is also open to children, the physically disabled, those considered untouchable by society, and anyone else. There are no inferior people.
5. In God's kingdom we can honor and celebrate our diversity.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Everyone Is Welcome

We have learned in this session that God's kingdom is open to anyone who needs God's grace and love. As subjects of God's kingdom and followers of Jesus, we are to love and accept all people. The apostle John expresses this clearly: "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:19–21). As believers, we are called to follow Christ, reaching across divisions and loving others, no matter whether they are similar to us or very different. Scripture teaches us to celebrate diversity between ethnic groups, genders (male and female), spiritual gifts, and biblically defined roles.

However, while God commands us to love and accept our *neighbor*, he does not teach us to celebrate and accept every *behavior* as equal and good. We are to hate sin (Ps. 97:10) and in love help our neighbors escape sin (Lev. 19:17). In his letters to the early churches, Paul speaks out repeatedly against idol worship, sexual immorality and homosexuality, gossip, slander, envy, deceit, pride, disobedience toward parents, and many other sins that devastate our relationships with ourselves, with others, with creation, and with God (Rom. 1:16–32, Col. 3:8, Gal. 5:19–21). Similarly, John writes, "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we

know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:3–6).

Clearly Scripture teaches us to hate sin but love sinners. Where do sinners flee if not into the kingdom of God? John writes, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1–2).

God calls us broken people into his kingdom—Jew and Greek, slave and free, men and women—where we, our families, our communities, and our nations will be transformed and healed!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Getting Honest about Attitudes

Use these final questions to evaluate the attitudes and inclusiveness of your life, church, and culture. Your answers may surprise you.

1. Are there racial or ethnic groups that people in your society discriminate against or express prejudice toward? If so, who are they? What names, labels, stories, proverbs, or jokes are told about these groups that reinforce this superior attitude?

2. Is this “typical” racial/ethnic view the same inside your church or in other churches in your society? If so, how is it expressed? If not, how has this prejudice been overcome?

3. What are your own views of people from these ethnic or racial groups? Take time to prayerfully consider this, asking God to reveal any hidden prejudices.

4. How are women typically viewed and treated by men in your culture? What names, labels, words, stories, proverbs, or jokes are told by men that teach or reinforce this view?

5. Is this typical view of women the same inside your church or in other churches in your society? If so, how is it expressed? How does this view relate to the biblical view that we examined in this session?

6. What are your own views of the opposite gender? If you are a man, what attitudes of superiority might you hold against women? If you are a woman, what resentments might you feel? Take time to prayerfully consider your attitudes and actions, asking God to reveal any hidden prejudices.

7. Who are the “untouchable” people in your society? It may help to think of groups that tend to be placed “out of sight” from the general public. Examples may include an ethnic group, class of people, the mentally disabled, or the elderly.

8. Do you express God's love to these untouchables? Is so, how? If not, why?

9. What does your church do to reach society's untouchables? If nothing, what are the barriers to reaching out?

10. What general conclusions can you draw about you, your church, and your culture regarding prejudices toward certain groups? Write out how you feel about these attitudes.

You:

Your church:

Your culture:


12. What is one thing you will do differently because of this study?

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

Opening Your Church's Doors

This week think about the church where you worship. How does it practice inclusiveness toward a variety of people? How does it not? Pinpoint one thing you could do to encourage a “come one, come all” approach at your church, with gentleness and respect. Report back to the group about your experience.

The next session: *advancing the kingdom of God*

 *Advancing the Kingdom*

For many people Saint Patrick is a mythical figure like Santa Claus. In Ireland and other countries, Saint Patrick's Day celebrates the beginning of spring, and people wear green clothes as part of the tradition. But there was a real Saint Patrick, whose deep faith in God and obedience to his calling changed Ireland forever.

Patrick was born around A.D. 390 to a middle-class Christian family in Roman Britain. When he was a teenager, marauding Irish raiders attacked his home. Patrick was captured, taken to Ireland, and sold to an Irish landowner as a slave. During his long, lonely existence in Ireland, he began to pray. He wrote in his *Confessions*, "I would pray constantly during the daylight hours" and "the love of God...surrounded me more and more."¹ Patrick's life was transformed through faith in Christ. He eventually escaped, returned to Britain, became a priest, and later a bishop. Then thirty years after Patrick fled Ireland, he sensed God calling him to return as a missionary.

The Irish of the fifth century were known throughout Europe as unusually violent and barbaric people. They frequently practiced human sacrifice. By returning to Ireland, Patrick understood the danger he faced.

He wrote, "I am ready to be murdered, betrayed, enslaved—whatever may come my way. But I am not afraid of any of these things because of the promises of heaven; for I have put myself in the hands of God Almighty."²

Thomas Cahill describes Patrick's missionary life in his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. He writes, "Patrick devoted 30 years of his life to these warrior children, that they might 'seize the everlasting kingdom' with all the energy and intensity they had devoted to enslaving each other and seizing one another's kingdoms."³ His love for the Irish "shines through his writings...He [worried] constantly for his people, not just for their spiritual but for their physical welfare."⁴

Patrick's missionary work succeeded beyond his dreams. Countless Irish people gave their lives to Christ because of his witness. As a result Irish society was transformed. Cahill explains:

Within his lifetime or soon after his death, the Irish slave trade came to a halt, and other forms of violence, such as murder and intertribal warfare, decreased. His disciples lived faithful lives for Christ, reminding the Irish that "the virtues of lifelong faithfulness, courage, and generosity were actually attainable by ordinary human beings and that the sword was not the only instrument for structuring a society."⁵

In his last years of life, Patrick observed a transformed Ireland—changed because of his obedience to God's call, his sacrificial love for the Irish people, and the supernatural power of God's Word.

Through the obedience of a single person, God is able, within a relatively short period of time, to dramatically advance his kingdom and transform an entire culture. Even a culture as bloodthirsty and warlike as fifth-century Ireland.

In this session we'll examine how the kingdom of God can advance in any culture.

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

Transforming the Culture

Culture/Society

The word *culture* derives from the Latin word *cultus*, from which the English word *cult* evolved. A cult is a system of religious worship and belief. Building on this definition, a culture is a particular pattern of human thought, speech, and behavior that is derived from deeply held beliefs about the nature of reality. These patterns, rooted in religious beliefs, are passed from one generation to the next. It is in this sense that we speak of cultures, for example the Japanese culture or the Latin culture. Cultures change over time as the religious beliefs at their core change. The word *society* has a similar definition. A society is a larger community of persons, even a nation, in which the majority shares a common purpose, traditions, core assumptions about reality, and behavior patterns.

Regeneration

Regeneration literally means a “new birth,” or the transformation of a person’s core being. In the New Testament, regeneration describes the passing from death to life (1 John 3:14), becoming a new creature in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17), and being “born again” (John 3:3), a term that Jesus used. Regeneration is change brought by the Holy Spirit, and it transitions a person from spiritual death to spiritual life in Christ (Eph. 2:1–10).

KEY VERSES TO READ

Mustard Seed and Yeast

[Jesus] told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

—*Matthew 13:31–33*

1. Why would Jesus choose the mustard seed to describe how the kingdom of God (or the “kingdom of heaven”) grows and advances?

2. In this parable, what would the mustard seed represent? What would the mustard plant represent?

3. Read 1 Corinthians 3:6. What additional insight does this verse provide about the mustard-seed parable?

4. Think about the parable of the yeast. How does yeast affect dough? How much yeast does it take to raise a loaf of bread?

5. Jesus told the parable about the yeast and the dough to help us understand the kingdom of God. What do you think the yeast represents? What could the dough represent?

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

Advancing from the Inside Out

Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as something that was coming (Matt. 6:9–10) or advancing. In Matthew 11:12 he told his disciples, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.” Jesus speaks of the kingdom as something moving and progressing, like an advancing army capturing new territory and pushing back the enemy.

While the methods and weapons are very different, the Old Testament story of the conquest of Canaan, recorded in the book of Joshua, provides an analogy for the advancement of God’s kingdom today. In this story God’s chosen people are the children of Israel. God is their ultimate ruler, and Joshua serves as the commanding general (Deut. 31:14, 23). Today God’s chosen people comprise the worldwide body of Christ, the church (1 Pet. 2:9). As with Israel, the church exists under God’s authority, but Jesus commands the troops (Rev. 19:11–16).

In the Old Testament, the object of conquest was the Promised Land of Canaan. Today, the Promised Land is the entire world! The church has been enlisted to engage in a world-transforming campaign, with its final goal the establishment of God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). In the Old Testament story, God assured his chosen people of their ultimate victory. He promised Abraham, the forefather of the nation of Israel, that someday his descendants would inherit Canaan (Gen. 15). God restated this promise to Joshua several generations later, on the eve of the invasion (Josh. 1:1–5).

While God assured Joshua and his people that ultimate victory was theirs, they still had to assert themselves. They were to pick up their weapons, and in the power and might supplied by God, occupy the land by force. They had to be active and strategic. They had to work for the victory. Today God has promised Jesus, our commanding general, the ultimate victory (Ps. 2:6–9). However, just like the children of Israel, the church must actively engage in advancing the kingdom of God. We cannot sit idly by and wait for God to fulfill his promise. We must be active

and strategic, working in God's strength. We must join in the battle, working in humility and service, faithfully following the example set by Jesus himself.

The Weapons of Advancement

During Canaan's conquest, warriors fought with the sword, spear, and battering ram, but our weapons exist in the spiritual rather than the physical realm. The apostle Paul writes, "We fight with weapons that are different from those the world uses. Our weapons have power from God that can destroy the enemy's [Satan's] strong places" (2 Cor. 10:4, NCV).

Throughout church history, people have tried extending the kingdom entirely through human efforts, wisdom, and methods. In some cases they have instigated social action. Though Christians must be engaged in the social arenas, none of these activities alone will advance God's kingdom. Other believers have advocated violent revolution, but there is no place for physical violence in advancing God's kingdom. Christ disarmed the church at Gethsemane (Matt. 26:52). When Jesus says, "I came not to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34), he was warning his disciples that the world would not quickly or easily accept their message; he was not recommending bloodshed.

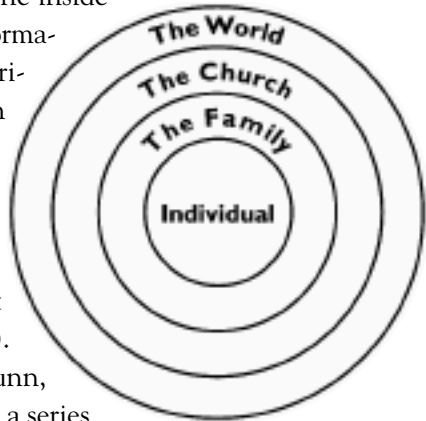
Today we advance the kingdom with the figurative sword, the Word of God (Eph. 6:17). The Word of God is a far more powerful weapon than the literal sword. Only it holds God's power to transform human hearts. God's Word is "living and active and sharper than any two edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). While God's Word tells us that civil authorities may "bear the sword" (Rom. 13:4), it is not so for the church in its efforts to advance the kingdom.

Instead the church advances God's kingdom with spiritual armor and weapons (Eph. 6:10–18). Our ultimate foe is Satan, not "flesh and blood" (Eph. 6:12). We follow our conquering Commander into battle and fight in his strength, not our own (Rev. 19:11–16; 2 Cor. 12:9–10). We move forward with prayerful humility, sacrificing all, including our lives, if necessary. The kingdom of God advances "not by might nor by power, but by

[God's] Spirit" (Zech. 4:6). Humanity wants to conquer the world with force, violence, and the sword. The kingdom's army follows the King into battle and advances on its knees through prayer and faithful action.

Advancing from the Inside Out

The world's kingdoms often expand their territories through warfare and domination. They seek to transform the world through bloody revolutions and the imposition of new rulers, laws, and structures. In contrast, the kingdom of God advances from the inside out. In God's kingdom, global transformation begins inwardly, through the spiritual regeneration of individuals. In John 3:3 Jesus claims, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Individuals need to be rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God (Col. 1:13).



An article by Pastor Grover Gunn, "Making Waves," explains "culture as a series of concentric circles, with the bull's eye being the individual heart and the surrounding circles representing, in order, the family, the church, and the world."⁶ Each of these groups can advance the kingdom of God if they have been changed from the inside out.

Transforming the Individual

"God's law must be written on the individual's heart, then later on the stone tablets of the institutions of society," says Pastor Gunn.⁷ In the conquest of Canaan, the first battle commenced at the heavily fortified city of Jericho. The New Testament counterpart is the battle for a human heart. Jesus Christ "invades the heart and [destroys] the sin nature, that inner inclination to do wrong."⁸ Until this critical battle is won, there is no real advancement.

Jericho had high and impenetrable walls; so does the human heart. It takes God's direct, supernatural intervention to destroy these inner walls and subdue the heart. An attempt to extend the kingdom of God without dealing with sinful hearts will fail. These efforts will turn into empty utopian dreams. The church must keep its zeal to share the gospel and offer eternal life through Christ's salvation to people everywhere. "Our primary means of [transforming] the world is through proclaiming the Gospel message of Jesus in word and deed.... We today must never question the effectiveness of the Gospel message as the cutting edge of positive social change."⁹

Once individuals are regenerated through the Holy Spirit's power, they are to enroll in God's "Bible school."¹⁰ They repent (which literally means to have their mind-set transformed) from the "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col. 2:8). They are to give their whole lives in service to Christ and his kingdom. They must no longer be conformed "to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [the] mind" (Rom. 12:2).

While the advancement of God's kingdom begins with individual regeneration, it certainly doesn't end there! Many who are passionate about evangelism, missions, and church planting have forgotten this important truth. The kingdom of God is more than saving souls for heaven and planting churches. "All the earth rightfully belongs to Jesus and owes him submission and allegiance."¹¹ God's kingdom is to impact not only all of life but all of society as well.

Beginning with Family

The family is the most basic social unit of any society. Likewise, it should be the first social unit impacted by God's kingdom. Once people experience heart and mind transformation, their families can live out the right-side-up value system of God's kingdom.

The family can function as the "microcosmic Kingdom of God."¹² The roles of husband, wife, child, parent, and grandparent can be brought into line with God's revealed intentions. The father, as head of the family,

declares along with Joshua, “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15).

Mobilizing the Church

The church is God’s chosen community, selected to advance his kingdom on earth. “The task of the church is to make the invisible kingdom visible through faithful Christian living and witness-bearing. The gospel of Christ is the gospel of the kingdom [and the church must not only share the gospel, but] make its message credible by manifesting the reality of the kingdom life.”¹³

The church is the place where God’s kingdom materializes on earth in a particular and concentrated way. The church is the embassy of God’s kingdom on earth, and followers of Christ are to be kingdom “ambassadors” (2 Cor. 5:20). The church is responsible for proclaiming the gospel and training new believers. It also has the responsibility “to prepare God’s people for works of service” (Eph. 4:12) as they work toward social and cultural transformation.

Influencing the World

Transformed individuals and families advance God’s kingdom as the church takes the Word of God into all nations and into all spheres of society. As believers, our “specific engagement with the world will be determined to a large degree by our calling in life or vocation. Every Christian must examine himself as to what gifts God has given him, consider what opportunities God is giving him to develop these gifts, and exercise them.”¹⁴ Most Christians will be called to advance the Kingdom of God through small arenas where they exercise some degree of influence. Always, they can work to the best of their abilities and to the glory of God.

According to Pastor Gunn, different vocational areas offer unique opportunities to advance God’s kingdom. Christians engaged in politics and legislation can acknowledge God as the supreme authority and his laws as the highest laws. Christian businessmen and businesswomen can work with honesty and integrity. Christian doctors can respect the sanctity of human life. Christian artists can reflect God’s nature and the glory

and beauty of his creation through their creativity. Christians engaged in science can seek to understand the design and purpose expressed in God's created order and develop innovations to help fight hunger and disease.

Christians should be thoughtful citizens, looking for opportunities to provide leadership in the community and the workplace. Some Christians will bring about institutional reform within their vocations—reform that is consistent with the biblical truth. Others will respond to God's calling to confront institutionalized evil within their cultures. In all cases Christians' activities must be linked to the message and power of the gospel, and to advancing the kingdom from the inside out.¹⁵

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

Our Warrior King

Can you picture Christ as a mighty conqueror, marching his troops to war? Perhaps these scriptures will stir you toward spiritual battle, following the Warrior King.

1. Revelation 19:11–16 paints a vivid, stirring picture of our King and Commanding General, Jesus Christ. What is the overall picture or image of Jesus in this passage? What is he doing?

2. “The armies of heaven were...dressed in fine linen, white and clean” (vs. 14). Read Revelation 19:6–8. What does the fine linen represent?

3. “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (vs. 15). According to Hebrews 4:11–13, what does the “sharp sword” represent?

4. Read Psalm 2. What does the Father promise the Son in verses 7–8?

5. Read Matthew 28:18–20. What role do we have in helping secure the promise of Psalm 2? What three things are we specifically commanded to do?

6. As we seek to advance God’s kingdom, we must dress as soldiers in armor, carrying the proper spiritual weapons. Read Ephesians 6:10–18. Who is our battle against? Who is it not against?

7. In the Ephesians passage, what are the components of our spiritual armor? What does each part represent?

8. If the human heart is not transformed, advancing the kingdom is doomed to failure. Why is this? See Genesis 6:5 and Jeremiah 17:9.

9. Why must the advancement of God’s kingdom move beyond transformed hearts to impacting the rest of creation? See Colossians 1:18–20 and Romans 8:19–22.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

Moving Forward, Step-by-Step

1. The church must be actively engaged in kingdom advancement.
2. We advance the kingdom with the spiritual sword, the Word of God.
3. The kingdom of God advances from the inside out. It begins inwardly, through the spiritual regeneration of individuals.
4. The family is the first social unit in and through which the kingdom advances.
5. The church is God's chosen community, selected and empowered by him to advance the kingdom on earth.
6. The kingdom advances as the church takes the Word of God into all nations and spheres of society.
7. For us as believers, our engagement with the world is largely determined by our specific calling or vocation.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Now, but Not Yet

As we seek to advance God's kingdom on earth, we can keep an important truth in mind. The kingdom will not come in its fullness until the King returns. As theologian J. I. Packer describes it, "The Kingdom is present in its beginnings though future in its fullness; in one sense it is here already, but in the richest sense it is still to come (Luke 11:20; 16:16; 22:16)."¹⁶

As servants of the King, we use our gifts, talents, and resources to advance the kingdom until Christ returns. We are not to sit idle and wait for him to return with his kingdom (Luke 19:11–13). God promised our Commander success in his battle for kingdom conquest. We must follow him into battle.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

All for Jesus

God wants to use you to advance his kingdom. Think about how you can break down personal hindrances and join the King’s spiritual battle.

1. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). Think about your own life in light of this verse. Are you seeking his kingdom first in your life? If so, how do you know this? If not, how do you feel about this?

2. “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matt. 13:45–46). In your life what would it mean to “sell everything” to gain the kingdom? What are you still holding on to?

3. Consider your family. Whether you are single or married, write a brief statement about how your family can help advance God’s kingdom.

4. Think about your vocation. Do you consider it a means for advancing the kingdom of God? If so, how? If not, what hindrances need to be overcome?

5. Write a brief statement about how you can advance the kingdom of God through your vocation.

6. What is one thing you will do differently because of this study?

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

Putting It into Practice

How can you advance the kingdom? Consider a place in your community that needs radical kingdom advancement. Take any or all of these actions to bring Christ and his kingdom to Satan's realm.

1. Pray for this place every day this week, asking God to break down the spiritual strongholds and to reveal how you can advance the kingdom in this location.
2. Identify one small action you can take to advance the kingdom in this place with compassion and humility. Do it.
3. Consider how others could join you in advancing the kingdom in this place over the next year. Organize the group for action. Remember to keep praying and to reflect Christ's character in whatever you do.

The next session: *God's kingdom is utterly unshakable.*

 *The Unshakable Kingdom*

God's kingdom advances in a small, rural town in China, where an American Christian family rescues young children locked in the “dying room” of a local orphanage. Because of this country's one-child-per-family policy, orphanages burst with abandoned baby girls. If Chinese families can only raise one child, many prefer a male heir.

As a result, girls become “throwaway children.” They have no names, no history, no recorded birth date. When the orphanages grow too crowded, the weakest children are left to starve in the dying rooms. They sit on small stools in the dark, too weak to cry.

These orphanages are understaffed and primarily employ young women who were abandoned babies themselves. Because these women never received love or care, they don't know how to nurture the orphans. So every day this Christian family visits the orphanage and cares for its children and staff. On several occasions the family has opened its home to severely wounded children and nursed them back to health. Or family members have lovingly held children as they died. The family has also encouraged local Christians to join in this compassionate ministry, and many locals have responded. Some have even adopted children.

The world hasn't heard about this Christian family. Its members will probably never appear in the headlines of the *New York Times* or be featured in a Hollywood film. Yet the kingdom of God mightily advances in China through this family's ministry.

In this session you'll examine how the kingdom of God and Satan's kingdom of darkness exist side by side. Both are advancing. Satan's work grabs the newspaper headlines and forces our attention. But God's kingdom advances in quiet, unnoticed ways. However, the author of Hebrews says that one day there will be a terrible "shaking." After it ends, Satan's kingdom will lie in ruins and only the true kingdom will remain (Heb. 12:26–29). God's kingdom is unshakable.

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

Satan's Counterfeit Work

Counterfeit

A counterfeit is a copy or imitation of an original. Made without authority or right, it deceives or defrauds, masquerading as the original. The best-known example is counterfeit money.

In the spiritual realm, Satan's dealings in this world are a counterfeit of God's work. Satan is described in Scripture as "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). He uses deception and appears as an "angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14) to disguise his evil work as something good.

Satan

Satan appears in the Bible as an angelic creature who openly rebels against God and leads other fallen angels in this conflict. He is the constant enemy of God, Christ, and the kingdom. Scripture describes him as "the adversary" (Job 1:6–12, REB), "the devil" (Matt. 4:1), "the great dragon" (Rev. 12:9), "the ancient serpent" (Rev. 20:2), "the prince of this world" (John 12:31), and "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4).

Satan is a creature. He is stronger than humans, but he is not divine. He has no more power than God allows, and we can access heavenly power and spiritual weapons to fight him (Eph. 6:10–18). Satan is our

defeated enemy. Christ triumphed over him at the Cross (Col. 2:15). While Satan continues his destructive mission, he is ultimately a defeated enemy, destined for eternal death (Rev. 20:10).

KEY VERSES TO READ

The Consuming Fire

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”

—Hebrews 12:28–29

1. What does the author of Hebrews mean when he says, “we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken”? To help you answer this question, read Hebrews 12:26–27. At the end of the age, what will be shaken and topple? What will remain standing?

2. We are to “be thankful and...worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.” Why?

3. The Hebrews author refers to God as “a consuming fire.” The “shaking” and the “consuming fire” in this passage allude to God’s holy wrath and judgment of evil. The metaphor of God as a consuming fire appears in other Scripture passages. Read Psalm 18:7–15. What metaphors are used to describe God in these passages? For additional study, look at Exodus 24:17; Isaiah 30:27–33; and Luke 12:49.

4. According to 2 Peter 3:10–14, how should the knowledge of the coming “fiery shakedown” affect the lives of believers?
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BIBLICAL INSIGHTS

Pressing On toward the Prize

To encourage a church in its struggles, the author of Hebrews chronicles the lives of great men and women of faith recorded in Scripture. Near the end of this “hall of faith,” he writes these stirring words:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

—*Hebrews 11:13–16*

What drove these great men and women of faith? They longed for “a better country—a heavenly one” (vs. 16). They followed a vision to build God’s kingdom. In the words of Jesus, they were “not of the world, even as I am not of it” (John 17:16). They lived as aliens and strangers on earth because they were “sent...into the world” (John 17:18) to see God’s kingdom advanced “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). And still they didn’t receive the vision’s fulfillment while they walked the earth.

In contrast we often think in short time frames. If God promises us something and we don’t receive it immediately, we are tempted to look for “the problem.” Were we wrong? Is God mad at us? Are we in sin?

Though these factors could be possible, there may be another reason. The Creator often works in time frames that span generations. The unfolding and advancing of his kingdom is a multigenerational task. Like the heroes in Hebrews, we are called to work by faith. We are to be unshakable and steadfast in our pursuit of the kingdom, even if we don't see the fruit of our efforts during this lifetime.

When we pursue God's kingdom with the long view in mind, God will not be ashamed to be called our God (Heb. 11:16). This marvelous commendation comes as we keep the promise of God's kingdom before us, striving to advance his kingdom with everything we are, with everything we have, with everything we know—regardless of an observable success.

No Easy Battlefield

Advancing God's kingdom is no easy task. Scripture often depicts it as warfare. In this battle we face Satan, our spiritual enemy, as he opposes God's kingdom with everything in his power. The heroes of the hall of faith paid the price in this battle.

Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.

—Hebrews 11:36–39

These Christians paid the price because they believed in the kingdom's surpassing value. They gave everything to obtain the “[pearl] of great value” (Matt. 13:45–46).

Satan will oppose our advancement of God's kingdom. As “the prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30) and “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4),

he exercises a degree of authority on earth. But he doesn't own the world. It belongs to the Lord, who sent his Son to reclaim it for the kingdom! The apostle John tells us, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). Just before he was crucified, Jesus said, "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out" (John 12:31). This "driving out" of the enemy runs parallel to the advancing of God's kingdom. Jesus claims in Matthew 12:28, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

The Key Turning Point

The Cross provided the key turning point in the battle against Satan. The apostle Paul tells us that Jesus, "having disarmed the powers and authorities, ...made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them *by the cross*" (Col. 2:15, author's italics). Jesus disarmed Satan and the demonic world through the Cross. He took away Satan's greatest weapon, the fear of death. The writer of Hebrews tells us that "[Jesus] shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were *held in slavery* by their fear of death" (Heb. 2:14–15, author's italics).

At the Cross Jesus confronted Satan head-on. It was a tremendous struggle. The battle was so intense, Jesus wept as he fought. As a result, Christians can live to the fullest for Jesus and his kingdom, regardless of the cost, because we know we will never die.

We face a defeated enemy, whose final destruction is guaranteed (Rev. 20:7–10). Still, Satan "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). He still causes damage, but Christ's cross disarmed him and secured his ultimate doom and our victory. This defeat will be obvious and complete at the end of the age. In the meantime, we are to "resist him, standing firm in the faith" (1 Pet. 5:9). "We must take him seriously," according to theologian J. I. Packer, "yet not so seriously that we live in abject terror of him, for he is a beaten enemy."¹ Just as Jesus triumphed over Satan, we resist him with the "armor of God" (Eph. 6:10–18; see session 7).

The Conflicting Kingdoms

Jesus told the parable of the wheat and the weeds to illustrate the conflict between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner's servants came to him and said..., "Do you want us to go and pull them up?"

"No" he answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn"

—*Matthew 13:24–30*

God is building his kingdom around the world today. At the same time, Satan works frantically to oppose this kingdom and advance his own. This counterfeit kingdom captivates the world. It looks impressive. It feels seductive and appealing. In contrast, the world seldom notices the expansion of God's kingdom. It advances through Christians who visit prisoners, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, open their homes to strangers, care for widows, and look after orphans with AIDS. It advances through those who live their everyday lives *coram Deo* (before the face of God) and desire to glorify him through everything they do, even in seemingly insignificant activities.

But Hebrews 12:26–27 tells us that one day there will come a great shaking. Everything that Satan has built in his counterfeit kingdom will collapse in a pile of rubble. What will remain standing? The unshakable, eternal kingdom of God! In that day, the world will be amazed. The unshakable kingdom will be revealed in all its glory. God was building his kingdom in our midst all along!

DISCOVERY QUESTIONS

The Wheat and the Weeds

Open your Bible and learn more about God's powerful, unshakable kingdom.

1. Read John 17:15 and Luke 22:31–32. What specifically did Jesus pray for in these two passages?

2. What did Jesus not pray for in John 17:15? Why did he not pray for this, according to John 17:18?

3. Now read John 14:30–31. In this passage “the prince of this world” refers to Satan. What is he coming to do to Jesus? If you're unsure, read John 19:16–18.

4. About Satan, Jesus said, “He has no hold on me.” Who is stronger, Jesus or Satan?

5. According to verse 31, why did Jesus go to the cross?

6. Read 1 John 4:4. Who is “greater,” he who is in you (Jesus) or he who is in the world (Satan)?

7. What can these verses tell you about the battle between Christians and Satan in this world?

8. According to Revelation 20:7–10, what is Satan’s ultimate destiny?

9. The Biblical Insights section examined the parable of the wheat and the weeds. In Matthew 13:36–43, Jesus explains the parable to his disciples. What does each of the following represent?

Weed seeds: _____

Good seeds: _____

The field: _____

The harvest: _____

10. How does this parable describe the past, present, and future of God’s kingdom?

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

God’s Victorious Kingdom

1. Jesus calls his followers to advance God’s kingdom wholeheartedly, regardless of whether we see the results in our lifetime.
2. Satan forcibly opposes our work to advance God’s kingdom.

3. Jesus came to destroy Satan's work and to "[drive] him out" of this world (John 12:31). This process runs parallel to advancing God's kingdom.
4. At the Cross, Jesus secured Satan's ultimate doom and disarmed him of his greatest weapon, the fear of death.
5. Satan's demonic kingdom and God's kingdom exist side by side on earth, and both are advancing. However, Satan's counterfeit kingdom will be judged by God and destroyed.
6. God's kingdom is unshakable. It will overcome in the end, even if things sometimes seem hopeless.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Be on the Offensive

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.

—*Matthew 11:12*

Not only is the kingdom of God advancing, it is forcefully advancing! While this forceful advance may not be publicized, it is still happening. Think about your local church. It is an outpost of heaven, working behind enemy lines to forcefully advance God's kingdom. When the Lord established the church, he told Peter, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18, KJV).

In the days of Jesus, walls and gates protected the cities. Builders constructed them to defend against outside enemies' advancing against the city, attempting to conquer it. The gates formed a defensive barrier. In the picture that Jesus paints of the church, the enemy Satan is behind the gates and the church takes the offensive.

The church is on the offensive, pushing back the enemy. The gates of hell will not be strong enough to withstand the onslaught of our King!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Resisting the Counterfeit Kingdom

God has saved you for a purpose: to join the campaign to advance his kingdom. Use these final questions to apply this session’s principles to your life.

- 1. Think of your own community or nation. Where is Satan’s kingdom of darkness advancing? What is being impacted and how?

- 2. Where do you see God’s kingdom advancing in your community or nation? What is being impacted and how?

- 3. Review the armor of God in Ephesians 6:6–10. Then read the table below. The left side lists the parts of our spiritual armor.

The Armor of God	Cracks in the Armor
Truth	Believing lies (often very subtle)
Righteousness	Continuing in sinful patterns or habits
Gospel	Believing in a false gospel (Gal. 1:6–10)
Faith	Fear and doubt
Salvation	Lack of salvation, lack of assurance of salvation
God’s Word (Scripture)	Other sources of authority for faith and action
Prayer	Too busy to pray

4. Of the various elements of God's armor, which is your strongest part? Why?

5. Which is your weakest part of God's armor? How could you strengthen this area?

6. What is one thing you will do differently because of this study?

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

Strengthening Your Armor

Review the armor of God presented in the Personal Application section. Choose one of the parts of God's armor (truth, righteousness, gospel, faith, salvation, God's Word, and prayer) to focus on this week. As you manage your days, how are you strong in this area? How are you weak? Ask God to strengthen this part of your armor, and to show you how to do this. Then devise a plan for action, improving this piece of armor in the next month.

You may want to draw or clip out a picture that represents you being spiritually strong with this part of the armor. Tack it somewhere you will see it every day, using it for inspiration.

Remember: *The kingdom of God is eternal and unshakable!*

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Leader's Guide

We suggest the following guidelines for people leading study groups through this Bible study. Of course you will need to adapt the studies and our suggestions to your particular group and culture.

Preparing for and Facilitating a Group

- ◆ We suggest meeting for one hour per session. This will allow:
 - ❖ 20 minutes to review the Key Verses and Biblical Insights sections.
 - ❖ 20 minutes to discuss the Discovery Questions and Personal Application sections.
 - ❖ 10 minutes to pray for one another.
 - ❖ 10 minutes for general prayer and worship.
- ◆ To ensure that everyone contributes to the conversation, it's best to keep the group at six to eight participants (no more than twelve). If the membership increases, consider splitting into smaller groups during the discussion times and coming back together for concluding prayer.
- ◆ If group members have their own books, ask them to complete the session individually before they attend the meeting.
- ◆ To guide the group effectively, complete each session yourself before you meet together. Make sure you understand the main points of each session. Think about how they apply to your own life. Then, as you lead the group, you can better facilitate the discussion by clarifying the questions when needed and offering suggestions if the conversation lags.
- ◆ For each session, before you meet together, read through the Practical Response ideas at the end of the lesson. If you plan to complete one or more of the activities as a group, bring any necessary supplies to the meeting.
- ◆ For each meeting, arrive ahead of time to prepare the location (chairs, refreshments, teaching aids, etc.) and to greet group members as they arrive.

- ◆ For your first meeting, be sure to take time to introduce each group member. You may wish to do an activity that will help group members get to know each other. Introduce the study by presenting key ideas from the Introduction and reading the overall objectives for the sessions (listed in the Study Notes following this Leader's Guide).
- ◆ Be a *facilitator*, not a teacher. Here are some suggestions:
 - ❖ Encourage group participation. Sitting in a circle (rather than rows) can help.
 - ❖ Use group members' names.
 - ❖ Ask different people to pray and read.
 - ❖ Ask questions and wait for answers. Don't immediately give your own answer.
 - ❖ Thank group members for their ideas, and ask others what they think.
 - ❖ Draw out members who aren't contributing much.
 - ❖ Tactfully redirect the focus from participants who tend to dominate the discussion.
 - ❖ Ask participants for explanation when they give simple "yes" or "no" answers.
 - ❖ Pace your study at a rate that allows for group members' maximum understanding. Review as often as necessary.
 - ❖ Keep the session objective in mind as you work through the session. These objectives, as well as possible responses for questions, are listed in the Study Notes.

Suggestions for Leading Each Session

- ◆ Have a group member open and close each meeting time with prayer.
- ◆ Begin the meeting by reviewing the Key Points to Remember from the previous session. Take time to discuss how group members may have applied the teaching from the previous session since the last meeting.
- ◆ You may wish to assign the Key Verses to Read as a memorization exercise. If so, take time at the beginning of the session to allow group members to recite the verses corresponding to the session. This can easily be done in pairs to save time.

- ◆ Refer back to the Key Words to Know section as necessary during discussion.
- ◆ Read the Key Verses to Read and answer the questions provided as a group. (See possible responses to these questions in the Study Notes.)
- ◆ If each group member has a book, take turns reading the Biblical Insights section together. If you're the only one with a book, share the main points or read this section to the group. The Key Points to Remember section will help present the main ideas.
- ◆ Answer the Discovery Questions together as a group. (See possible responses to these questions in the Study Notes.)
- ◆ Answer the Personal Application questions together as a group. If group members have their own books, you may wish to break up into smaller groups (two to three people) and have each subgroup read and answer the Personal Application questions.
- ◆ Work on a Practical Response activity if you've chosen to do so. These optional ideas are provided to help group members apply the session's main points in their own lives.
- ◆ You will find the session Objectives, Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read, and Possible Responses to Discovery Questions for each session in the Study Notes that follow this Leader's Guide.

Study Notes

Whether you lead or participate in a small group or study alone, you may find it helpful to consult the session objectives and suggested responses for each session's Biblical Insights and Discovery questions. Not all questions have a "right" or "wrong" answer, but these suggestions will help stimulate your thinking.

Session 1: What Is the Kingdom of God?

Objective: To define the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is anywhere God's will is done.

Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read

1. Please write your own definition of the kingdom of God.
2. The first request is this: your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Another way to state this might be, May your perfect will and intentions be done on earth, now, exactly as they are in heaven.
3. His will is currently being done in heaven. It should also be done on earth.
4. The kingdom of God is where God's will is done.

Possible Responses to Discovery Questions

1. Jesus told us that the kingdom of God "is near" and that it's "good news."
2. Jesus told us to "seek first" the kingdom of God.
3. Jesus said he must preach the good news of the kingdom. He said, "This is why I was sent."
4. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples and taught them for forty days "about the kingdom of God."
5. In Ephesus, Paul spent three months "speaking boldly" and "arguing persuasively" about the kingdom of God.

6. For two years, while under house arrest in Rome, Paul taught visitors “boldly and without hindrance” from morning till evening about the kingdom of God.
7. Paul taught that the kingdom of God is “righteousness, peace, and joy.”
8. Paul taught that the kingdom of God is “not a matter of talk, but power.”

Session 2: The Comprehensive Plan

Objective: To understand that the kingdom of God is not a narrow, spiritual place but a comprehensive reality that brings substantial healing to every aspect of our lives and every part of creation.

Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read

1. Jesus is described as “the image of the invisible God,” “the firstborn over all creation,” “the creator of all things,” the one who is “before all things” and in whom “all things hold together.” He is described as “the head of the body, the church,” “the firstborn from among the dead,” and the one who has supremacy over everything.
2. Jesus created all things. This suggests that he has authority over what he created.
3. No. The passage tells us that in Jesus “all things hold together.” The suggestion is that without Jesus’ moment-by-moment involvement in his creation, everything would fly apart.
4. He is the “head” of the church.
5. He has supremacy over “everything.” There is nothing in all creation that is not included in this “everything.” He is the ultimate Lord over all creation.

Possible Responses to Discovery Questions

1. “All” appears seven times in the English New International Version.
2. Please answer this question in your own words.
3. See the chart below.

Colossians 1:15–20	Hebrews 1:1–3; 2:8–9
He is the image of the invisible God... God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.	The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.
For by him all things were created.	Through [Jesus] [God] made the universe.
In him all things hold together:	The Son...sustain[s] all things by his powerful word.
So that in everything he might have the supremacy	[God] put everything under his feet... God left nothing that is not subject to him.
And through him to reconcile to himself all things...making peace through his blood, shed on the cross	The Son...provided purification for sins... He suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

4. Everything is presently under Christ's authority and subject to him, yet as the author of Hebrews states, "yet at present we do not see everything subject to him." This reflects the "now, but not yet" aspect of the kingdom of God. Jesus presently has all authority, yet it appears that much of the world is not under his authority and not subject to him. This, however, will change. When he returns, "Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God" (Rom. 14:11).
5. "The creation" is waiting for redemption. The scope of God's redemptive concern encompasses his entire creation.
6. Creation "was subject to frustration" through the Fall.
7. Creation is "waiting for the sons of God to be revealed." It is "in bondage to decay" and has been "groaning as in the pains of childbirth."
8. That it will be "liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God"
9. The sons and children of God are those who have been born again through saving faith in Jesus. As substantial healing occurs in their lives, they will be equipped to exercise the kind of dominion and care over creation that God originally intended, and creation, too, will be substantially liberated.

Session 3: A Right-Side-Up View

Objective: To understand that the kingdom of God represents a viewpoint that is the opposite of the world's outlook. It turns the perspective of the world upside down. Or rather, right side up—the way God originally intended.

Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read

1. “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.”
2. It would be opposite of what has happened before. It would be sharply different.

Possible Responses to Discovery Questions

1. Their priority is what they will eat, drink, and wear for clothes.
2. Our priority is to seek the kingdom of God. When we make this our priority, God will take care of our needs for food, drink, and clothing (our daily necessities) without our having to worry about them.
3. Please answer based on your own culture.
4. We forgive because God forgave us first.
5. If we refuse to forgive others, God will refuse to forgive us.
6. Seventy-seven times. The standard is so high to illustrate just how much God has forgiven us. Because of our sin, our debt to God was very large. Because he forgave us such a large debt, we ought to be extreme in our forgiveness of others.
7. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.
8. Love your neighbor as yourself. It's similar to the first because, throughout the New Testament, we learn that loving our neighbor is the essential, practical way that we express our love to God.
9. The Great Commandment instructs us to “love God.” Jesus clarifies this by telling us “whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (John 14:21). Jesus lived this out in his own life. He tells us in John 14:31, “I do exactly what my Father has com-

manded me.” The Great Commandment instructs us to “love our neighbor.” Jesus tell us that “greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus lived this out by dying for us on the cross.

10. We can expect “hatred,” “persecution,” “hardship,” “pressure,” and “threats of death.” Jesus told us that if they treated him this way, they will surely treat his followers in the same way.
11. We can learn not to “rely on ourselves, but on God.”

Session 4: Doing Kingdom Math

Objective: To learn that God delights in using the small, poor, and weak things of this world to extend his kingdom. He takes seemingly insignificant talents, acts of service, and generosity supplied in obedient faith and supernaturally multiplies their effect many times over. We call this principle “Kingdom Math.”

Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read

1. God is described as “everlasting” and “Creator of the ends of the earth.” He is described as one who “will not grow tired or weary” and whose “understanding no one can fathom.”
2. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
3. Trust in God x Our Weakness = Strength
4. To gain renewed strength, we must hope in the Lord.

Possible Responses to Discovery Questions

1. No
2. The poor people are (1) the young boy with five small loaves and two small fish, (2) the widow of Zarephath with a handful of flower and a little oil, and (3) the widow in the temple with less than a penny.
3. To be obedient, people need only what they have—no matter how small, even if it is something immaterial, such as love or care—plus great faith in God and a willingness to risk.
4. Jesus miraculously multiplied the small boy’s five loaves and two fish into enough food to feed more than five thousand people. God miraculously kept the oil and flour jar of the widow of Zerephath filled.

God used the sacrificial gift of the widow in the temple to provide inspiration and motivation for countless Christians down through the ages to give more than they thought possible. In a real sense, her small gift has been multiplied over and over again.

5. No, the widow in the temple probably never lived to see how her sacrificial gift would be recorded in the pages of Scripture and provide inspiration and motivation for countless Christians, and all the good generated as a result.
6. They may incur the wrath or anger of God.
7. What little we have may be taken away, and we risk eternal damnation.

Session 5: The Definition of Greatness

Objective: To learn that in the kingdom of God “greatness” is not defined by status, position, or power but through humble obedience and sacrificial service.

Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read

1. Jesus and his disciples travel the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. It is Jesus’ last trip to Jerusalem. He thinks about his upcoming suffering and crucifixion.
2. James and John want a seat on Jesus’ right and left hand. Jesus can’t grant this request because this is a decision that only the Father makes. The other disciples react with anger and indignation when they hear about the request.
3. To “lord it over” others and to “exercise authority”
4. It’s significant because it proclaims that the disciples are to live by a different standard than the world’s standard.
5. Whoever wants to become great must become a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all.
6. Jesus did not come to be served. He came to serve others and give his life as a ransom for many.

Possible Responses to Discovery Questions

1. Rebekah gave Abraham’s servant (a stranger to her) a drink from the water she fetched from the well. She also watered his camel and

opened her father's home to the stranger for the night. Boaz protected Ruth (a foreigner). He allowed her to glean from his fields and drink from his jar. He provided her with a meal. Dorcas "was always doing good and helping the poor." She had made robes for the women in town. The "sinner" in Luke 7:36–39 washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair and poured perfume on them.

2. All of them were looking out for the needs of others, particularly the poor, strangers, or foreigners. All of them expressed an attitude of kindness and gentleness toward those they served, seeking their well being.
3. Please provide your own answer to this question.
4. No. Service and authority do not conflict in the life of Jesus. Both are evident. See answer to question 5 below.
5. Examples of authority might include Jesus' teaching. He taught with authority (Matt. 7:29). He had authority on earth to forgive sins (Matt. 9:1–8) and drive out demons (Mark 5:1–20). In Matthew 28:18, Jesus said, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Examples of leadership: he called, led, and instructed his disciples. Examples of service: he said he "did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45), and he washed his disciples' feet (John 13:1–5).
6. They wanted to serve the new king.
7. The previous king (Solomon) had put "a heavy yoke" of hard labor on them.
8. The elders recommended that he, as king, serve the people. The young men recommended that he lord his authority over them and make their yoke even heavier. Rehoboam listened to the advice of the young men. The result was that many in Israel rebelled and broke away and the kingdom divided.
9. Leadership does not negate the need to serve. In fact, biblically, authority always accompanies service. They are linked. The ultimate example of this linkage is Jesus' life and death.
10. Please provide your own answer to this question.

Session 6: Come One, Come All

Objective: To understand that no one is spiritually inferior in the kingdom of God. Everyone is welcome and important. Anyone can belong.

Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read

1. Please provide your own answer to this question.
2. Through faith in Christ Jesus
3. We were separated from Christ, aliens to the covenants and promises, without hope and without God in the world.
4. We have been “baptized into Christ,” into the “body” of Christ.
5. There is unity because we are all members of Christ’s body. Nobody is spiritually superior in God’s kingdom. We are all one in Christ Jesus.
6. No. Paul’s intention is not to abolish diversity but to emphasize unity. We know this because in other passages, Paul affirms different roles and functions for different people. See 1 Corinthians 12:12–30 and Colossians 3:18–4:1.

Possible Responses to Discovery Questions

1. *Genesis 1:26–27:* We are all made in the image and likeness of God. *Exodus 23:9 and Ephesians 2:11–13:* We were, at one time, all separated from Christ. We were all aliens to the covenants and promises. *Matthew 23:8:* We all have the same teacher (Jesus) and all of us are “brothers.”
2. God commanded Peter to go to the house of Cornelius. He was hesitant to obey because it was against Jewish law for Jews to associate with Gentiles.
3. Peter concluded that “God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”
4. She was surprised because he was a Jew and she was a Samaritan. Jews considered Samaritans to be inferior and therefore did not associate with them.
5. Jesus does not show favoritism but accepts both men and women from every nation.

6. Jesus' followers rebuked the man and told him to be quiet. Jesus stopped and healed him.
7. The kingdom is open to all, even the poor and physically disabled. Where the kingdom comes, there is healing for those who are broken.
8. Paul instructed slaves to obey their masters with respect, fear, and sincerity of heart, just as if they were obeying Christ. They were not just to obey to "win favor" but to serve wholeheartedly as if they were serving God, not men. Paul instructed masters to treat their slaves in the same way, not to threaten them, and to treat them fairly. They were to realize that they have a common master, the Lord Jesus, who shows no favoritism between slave and master. This radical teaching puts masters and slaves on the same level in God's eyes. Neither is inferior or superior. It undermines slavery, which is based on the idea that one race or group is inferior.
9. We should not show favoritism toward the wealthy over the poor. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves, even if they are poor.

Session 7: Advancing the Kingdom

Objective: To examine how the kingdom of God can advance in any culture.

Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read

1. Jesus uses the illustration of the mustard seed because the nature of a seed is to multiply. From one seed grows a plant, and that plant produces many seeds. The original seed of the kingdom is Christ. From this "small seed" a "plant" is growing (the church) that will one day fill the earth. Second, God delights in using "small" things for a large kingdom impact. God can use a single person, transformed inwardly through faith in Christ, to transform an entire culture. God can use a small gift, sacrificially given in faith, to accomplish things far beyond the size of the original gift.
2. The mustard seed represents Christ, and the plant represents the church. (See also John 12:24.) At another level, the mustard seed represents the faithful, sacrificial efforts by Christians to advance the kingdom. God can use such efforts for a large impact.

3. Different people have different roles in advancing the kingdom, but only God can cause the kingdom to grow.
4. Yeast causes the whole lump of dough to rise. It takes only a tiny pinch of yeast to affect an entire lump of dough.
5. Yeast has a dynamic character. Once it has begun the leavening process in a lump of dough, it is impossible to stop. The yeast represents the dynamic, transforming power of the kingdom, and the dough represents the world.

Possible Responses to Discovery Questions

1. It's a picture of Jesus as a mighty and awe-inspiring commanding general leading a great army into battle.
2. Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.
3. The "sharp sword" represents the Word of God.
4. He promises the Son to "make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession."
5. Our role is to tell people the good news of the kingdom. We are commanded to make disciples, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything Christ commanded.
6. Our battle is against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." It is not against "flesh and blood."
7. The "belt" is truth. The "breastplate" is righteousness. The foot protection is the gospel. The "shield" is faith. The "helmet" is salvation. The "sword" is the Word of God.
8. Because the human heart has been corrupted by the Fall
9. Because all of creation was impacted by the Fall, and God's redemptive plan extends to all creation. He is Lord over all creation.

Session 8: The Unshakable Kingdom

Objective: To understand that the kingdom of God and Satan's kingdom of darkness exist side by side. Both are advancing. However, the author of Hebrews says one day there will be a terrible "shaking." After it ends,

Satan's kingdom will lie in ruins and only the true kingdom will remain (Heb. 12:22–29). God's kingdom is unshakable.

Possible Responses to Questions for Key Verses to Read

1. God's final judgment is referred to as a "shaking" in these passages. Only the kingdom of God will remain intact after this shaking. Everything else will collapse in a pile of rubble.
2. Because we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. An eternal kingdom. And because we worship an awe-inspiring, powerful, righteous God, who is described as a "consuming fire."
3. Smoke, fire, dark clouds, thunder storm, warrior
4. We ought to live holy and godly lives as we look forward to Christ's return.

Possible Responses to Discovery Questions

1. In both passages, Jesus is praying for his followers, that they would be protected from Satan and that their faith would not fail.
2. He did not pray that we would be taken out of the world. He desires for us to remain "in the world" to be used by God to advance his kingdom.
3. To crucify him
4. Jesus is!
5. Because this was exactly what his Father had commanded him to do
6. Jesus is greater or more powerful than Satan.
7. We can take great courage and comfort that Jesus is more powerful than Satan and that his power is in us. He has also prayed for us in our battles against Satan.
8. He will be thrown into the "lake of fire" and tormented forever.
9. The "weed seeds" are the "sons of the evil one." The "good seeds" are the "sons of the kingdom." The "field" is the world. The "harvest" is the final judgment.
10. In the past both seeds were sown. In the present both weeds and wheat are growing side by side. In the future the weeds will be pulled up and burned but the wheat from the good seeds will remain.

About the Authors

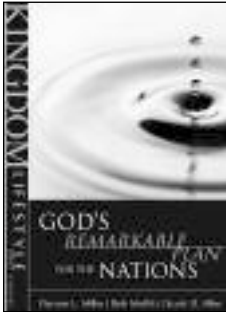
Darrow L. Miller is a vice president with Food for the Hungry International and cofounder of the Disciple Nations Alliance. He has served with FHI since 1981. His passion is helping people understand and apply the biblical worldview so that nations can be released from hunger and poverty. His book *Discipling Nations* (1998, YWAM Publishing) reveals his heart to renew the church's vision for discipling nations. Darrow has an M.A. in adult education. He has four grown children and lives with his wife, Marilyn, in Cave Creek, Arizona.

Bob Moffitt is president of the Harvest Foundation and co-founder of the Disciple Nations Alliance. For over thirty years he has developed and directed Christian organizations designed to encourage and enable Christians to demonstrate God's love, especially to broken people and their communities. He writes and teaches curricula designed to enable lay Christians to live out their faith in practical terms, particularly in the context of their local churches. He and his wife, Judy, live in Phoenix, Arizona.

Scott D. Allen is the worldwide coordinator of the Disciple Nations Alliance. He has served with Food for the Hungry International (FHI) since 1989, serving as Director of Human Resource Development. He has also served as a missionary in Japan, teaching English through local churches in the Osaka area. Scott has a bachelor's degree in history and education from Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. Scott lives with his wife, Kim, and their four children in Phoenix, Arizona.

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Samaritan Strategy Africa

Dennis Tongoi, Team Leader

PO Box 40360, 00100

Nairobi, Kenya

Phone: (254) 20-2720037/56

Email: afg@cms-africa.org

Website: www.samaritan-strategy-africa.org

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