

The Gospel of the Kingdom

[Luke 4:42–44](#)

Why did Jesus devote so much time to teaching about the kingdom of God? In this sermon, R.C. Sproul continues his series in the gospel of Luke as he identifies the kingdom and explains its integral relationship to Christ's message of salvation.

We will continue this morning with our study of the Gospel According to Saint Luke. We are coming now to the very end of chapter 4, and I will just be reading a couple of verses from [Luke 4:42–44](#). This is a small portion of sacred Scripture, yet one that is greatly important:

Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; but He said to them, "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent." And He was preaching in the synagogues of Galilee.

Once more, you have had the wonderful privilege of hearing a word from God Himself. His Word comes to us superintended by His Spirit, who is not only the Holy Spirit but the Spirit of Truth. So, may you receive the words that you have just heard as from the Lord. Let us pray.

Again, our Father, as we contemplate the things that were spoken by our Lord and Savior Jesus, we pray that You would give us understanding of them. May His Word dwell in us richly and bring us into conformity to Jesus. For we ask it in His name. Amen.

What Is the Kingdom of God?

When I was a college student visiting home for the Christmas holidays, the pastor of our church had a dessert and invited students to come. On that occasion, he turned to me privately and said, "R.C., tell me, what is the kingdom of God?" I had absolutely no idea how to answer that question.

If someone approached you with the same question, "What is the kingdom of God?" how would you answer? If there is any theme that unites the Old Testament with the New Testament, any single thread that runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, it is the concept of the kingdom of God.

What I find particularly significant about the text I just read to you is that there are a few occasions in the New Testament where Jesus tells people why He came to this planet. He tells them what His mission is, given to Him by the Father, and He gives different concepts at different times, none of which are mutually exclusive.

On one occasion, He said, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly." On another occasion, He said, "I didn't come to be served, but to serve, and to give My life as a ransom for many." Still on another occasion, He said, "I came to seek and to save those who are lost." Then, when He was on trial before Pontius Pilate, He said to Pilate, "For this cause I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth, and all who are of the truth hear my voice." All these things connect with each other, but when the crowds tried to persuade Him not to depart from them in [Luke 4](#), Jesus explained His mission this way: "I have to go. I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this

purpose I have been sent.” Jesus said, “The reason I am here, the purpose for My coming, is to proclaim the kingdom of God.”

If proclaiming the kingdom of God is the reason Jesus came, then it is certainly imperative that we have some understanding of what He means when He talks about the kingdom of God.

Good News of the Kingdom

When we look at the word *gospel*, we see three distinct references of that word in New Testament categories.

The first way we see the word *gospel* used is to describe a particular genre of literature, namely the four books that give us biographical information about the person and work of Jesus. We speak of the gospel of Matthew, the gospel of Mark, the gospel of Luke, and the gospel of John. The word *gospel* comes from the Greek *euangelion*, which means “good news” or “good proclamation.”

The most frequent way in which the term *gospel* is used in the New Testament, particularly in the Apostolic writings, is as “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” It is that gospel that first comes to us from God. It is God’s possession, but the content of that gospel has to do with the person and work of Jesus, and secondly how the benefits of Jesus’ life and ministry are appropriated by us through faith and through faith alone. Normally when we talk about the gospel, we’re talking about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The first way the gospel is proclaimed in the New Testament, however, is “the gospel of the kingdom.” Initially, the gospel of Jesus Christ was known as the gospel of the kingdom of God. What is it? What is this good news that Jesus must preach to all these different cities? What does He mean when He says, “If you see me casting out demons by the finger of God, then you know that the kingdom of God has come upon you”? What does He mean when He says, “The kingdom of God is not within you, but among you, in your midst”?

What is puzzling about Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom is that, throughout the Old Testament, Scripture speaks of the kingdom of God and makes clear that the Lord God omnipotent reigns. God has reigned over His creation from the very moment He made that creation. His sovereignty is from everlasting to everlasting, and so God has been King from the beginning. So, what is new about this kingdom that Jesus must preach to all the cities of the land?

The Lion of Judah

To understand what is new about the kingdom Jesus proclaims, let me just spend a few minutes looking at a thread that goes from Genesis to Revelation. Let’s look first at [Genesis 49](#), in which we have the record of Jacob’s blessing to his sons. We expect, of course, that the great blessing would go to his firstborn, but that is not what happened. Instead, we read in verses 8–12 these words:

Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise;
Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
Your father’s children shall bow down before you.
Judah is a lion’s whelp;
From the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He bows down, he lies down as a lion;
And as a lion, who shall rouse him?

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor a lawgiver from between his feet,
Until Shiloh comes;
And to him shall be the obedience of the people.
Binding his donkey to the vine,
And his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
He washed his garments in wine,
And his clothes in the blood of grapes.
His eyes are darker than wine,
And his teeth whiter than milk.

What is the scepter? The scepter is the rod of the king. It signifies his royal authority. What Jacob is saying prophetically, announcing the Word of God to Judah, is that God's earthly king will come through the tribe of Judah. He will not come through Zebulun, Reuben, Gad, Naphtali, Issachar, or anyone else, but through Judah. Judah is the lion's whelp, so God promises a king who will be known as "the Lion of Judah." Throughout the Old Testament—in the ascension songs, for example—Scripture speaks of one who will come to manifest the kingship of God on earth.

A kingdom is the realm ruled by a king, and it is usually understood in terms of geographical boundaries and borders, the realm over which the king presides. In biblical terms, however, God's kingdom is not merely that area, that land, that geography, that realm over which He reigns and over which He rules.

God reigns already over the whole world, over all things. In biblical categories, the kingdom of God doesn't just describe that place where God rules, but it also describes preeminently that place where God saves. The kingdom of God is the realm of the redeemed, the society of those who have experienced the salvation of the King, because the promised Messiah will not only be a king, but also a priest. He is a king who will redeem His subjects through His priestly ministry.

Worthy to Open the Scroll

Let us jump forward now to a familiar passage, one of my favorites, in the book of the Revelation of St. John. In chapter 5, John is on the island of Patmos, and God is drawing back the curtain of heaven and letting John peer into the inner chambers, the heavenly court. He sees a spectacular scene where the books of judgment have been prepared.

We read at the beginning of chapter 5 these words: "And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals." The scroll was sealed up so tightly and bound so closely that it seemed an impossible task for anybody to open it and look into the contents of the books.

John continues, "Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?'" In the whole heavenly court, all the angels and the archangels are present, and one angel stands up and gives the announcement with the question, "Who out there can come and open this book?"

"Who shall ascend into the hill of our Lord?" was the way the Psalmist stated it in the Old Testament: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart." But required to open this book is not strength, but worth.

Who is worthy to open this book? Then we read these sad words: “No one in heaven, no one on the earth, no one under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look at it.”

John had been so excited when he heard the angel raise the question. John peered through the veil into heaven and was waiting to see somebody move and come forward to open the scroll, but no one was found worthy. So, the Apostle was crushed with disappointment, and he wrote, “So I wept much.” He began to sob because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or even to look at it.

“But” John says, “one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.’” In other words, the elder was saying: “The Lion of Judah is worthy and able to take these seals away and open this scroll to see every word that is contained within it, so stop crying. The Lion of Judah has prevailed.”

John continues: “And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out all into the earth. Then he came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.” John looked. The elders said, “Don’t cry—the Lion of Judah has prevailed.”

When John looked for the lion, no lion appeared. Just a lamb that had been slain. Is that not incredible, that the Lion of Judah was also the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world? The King is also our High Priest who offers Himself for our salvation. That is what’s new. That is what Jacob could only dream of. That is what David could only hope for. Now the time had come to pass where this One from the tribe of Judah prevailed.

“When He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” This scene unfolds in heaven, where all those present fall on their knees. Instead of hanging their harps on the trees of Babylon, they are laying them down in the kingdom of God in heaven, bringing the bowls of the prayers of their saints, the bowls of incense precious to God, and pouring them out before Him:

And they sang a new song, saying:

“You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;
For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
And have made us kings and priests to our God;
And we shall reign on the earth.”

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
To receive power and riches and wisdom,
And strength and honor and glory and blessing!”

And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power
Be to Him who sits on the throne,
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!”

Recently, we had a memorial service for a woman who had long been a member of our choir. At the end of that memorial service, our choir stood with us all, and they sang the Hallelujah Chorus: “For He shall reign forever and ever, hallelujah.” This is the song given to the angels in heaven:

Blessing and honor and glory and power
Be to Him who sits on the throne
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!

Jesus Reigns Now and Forever

Jesus was compelled to leave Capernaum that He might preach the kingdom of God to all the cities. He taught His disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Sadly, there are many Christians today who believe that the kingdom of God is something totally, completely, and utterly future. Others believe that it has been totally realized and consummated already. A pox on both of those houses.

To think of the kingdom of God as being totally and completely future is to miss one of the most important announcements of the New Testament: our King has come, He has ascended into heaven, He has gone to his coronation, He has been crowned as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The reign of our King is already real, as invisible as it may be. But He’s not finished. The Lion of Judah will return, and when He returns, every knee will bow, either willingly or when He breaks those knees until they bow in submission to Him.

During an election year, you read every day in the paper and watch on television all the latest polls and discussions about the candidates that are running for office—for President, Vice President, Senate, the House, and all the rest. We get all worked up about it because it is important who sits in the White House. In proximate terms, it is extremely important how the future of this country will work out. But, dear friends, ultimately it is not who sits in the White House that matters; it’s who sits over the White House.

When we talk about the elements in the life of Jesus, we talk about His birth, we talk about His ministry, His life, His transfiguration, His atoning death, and His resurrection from the dead. We talk about His ascension to heaven, and we also speak of His session.

What is the session of Jesus? The session of Jesus is when He takes His seat at the right hand of God, and from that throne, He rules over the kingdom His Father has given to Him. All who put their faith in that King, all who are His loyal subjects, experience now and forever the fullness of the salvation He has achieved for us. Behold, the Lion of Judah has prevailed, and the Lamb of God is worthy to receive glory, honor, dominion, and power now and forever more. Let’s pray.

Our Lord, we thank you for our King, our Great King, our Shepherd King, our Priest King, our Lion King, our Lamb King who rules and reigns and saves all in His kingdom. Amen.