

Jesus on Message: *Where Are We Going?*

Every four years, the United States engages in the national ritual of electing a new president. Candidates from the various parties begin lining up to convince prospective voters about their ideals for the country and how they would make the best and strongest leader. The presidential candidates develop their political platform – the values and key issues of their candidacy. In recent years, voters have become more and more disillusioned by political speeches that are long on rhetoric and short on specifics of what one candidate will do to solve the nation's ills. Voters have come to accept that we will not hear about specifics until the candidate's debate. It often takes the opposing side to bring a candidate out of his corner and tell us what he really thinks about a certain issue. Even then, we voters are often surprised at the skill of some candidates to deflect and dodge the issue and tell us nothing about their true positions.

Did Jesus have a spiritual platform? What was Jesus really trying to do? Was Jesus clear about his mission? Understanding Jesus' mission and message is a clue to understanding everything he says and does. It will also help us understand what he expects from his followers.

Journey Together:

1. How important are the message and objective of presidential candidates?
2. How do you decide who to vote for? How important is it to understand his or her message and position in making your decision?
3. What was Jesus' message? Did he have a clearly stated mission? After listening in on Jesus' conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus in John 3, what would you say was Jesus' message and mission? (John 3:1-8)

(Answering this question will help unlock the message of the entire Bible as Jesus himself once said that all the Scriptures directly or indirectly point to him. It will also help us understand Jesus' ongoing mission and how we fit into it today.)

The Roadmap:

4. What does Mark 1:14, 15, tell us about Jesus' message? What is the Kingdom of God and how was it coming "near" at the launching of Jesus' ministry?

5. Matthew 4:23-25, begins Jesus' public ministry with an assault on Satan's kingdom through miraculous healings, deliverance from evil spirits, and forgiveness of sins. How do these actions help clarify the "good news" of Jesus' Kingdom?

6. In the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9, 10) Jesus taught the disciples to pray "*Thy kingdom come – Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" How is heaven a good example of God's Kingdom and what would life on earth be like if God were followed and obeyed like he is in heaven?

7. Kingdom is an old-fashioned word that we do not often use in more democratically run societies. What do you think Jesus meant by the *Kingdom of God*? How is the ministry of Jesus establishing God's Kingdom on earth?

Note: *When we think of kingdom, we often think of the medieval world of King Arthur's court and the story of Robin Hood.*

8. In Matthew 12: 22-30, Jesus is a kind of spiritual Robin Hood taking from the devil and giving back to God. What are some comparisons you can make between the story in Matthew 12 and the legend of Robin Hood, and how does it help you appreciate Jesus' mission from a larger kingdom perspective?

9. When asked about the whereabouts of the Kingdom by a group of Pharisees, Jesus replied, "*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.*" How was Jesus' Kingdom already "in their midst"? Where do you see the continuing presence of God's Kingdom today, and where do you most need to experience God's rule in your own life right now?

10. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus made it clear that his kingdom was different from the nations and kingdoms of this world and that entering his kingdom demands a new birth experience. What do you think Jesus meant by this new birth experience and what is the relationship between it and entering his kingdom? How do you relate to the new birth and in what way is it like a change of kingdoms?

11. How can this group pray for you right now?

My Journey:

1. How has God been continuing to use the larger group study and discussion in your life this week?
2. Surprisingly the “good news” or gospel, as it is often referred to in the Bible, is almost always the “good news of the Kingdom.” How does seeing the good news from God’s “kingdom” perspective broaden your understanding of the gospel?
3. Read Luke 12:32. How have you experienced the Kingdom of God this week? What are some ways that God might be directing you to help advance his Kingdom?

Backstory: The goal of this week’s journey with Jesus is to listen closely to his message and how he describes his mission. Too often, our understanding of Jesus and his mission has centered around our own personal salvation or the business of growing and advancing the church. The more we reflect and listen closely to what Jesus is saying the more we begin to realize that both of these outcomes are results of his greater mission – establishing the Kingdom or rule of God on earth. Understanding this larger perspective opens our eyes to who Jesus was and will begin to unlock the New Testament and the entire Bible for us.

To begin with, Jesus and the disciples rarely speak of the Good News (gospel) apart from the good news *of the Kingdom*. It is always the good news *of God’s Kingdom*. The challenge is to help people begin to wrestle with what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God. How does this greater unfolding of Jesus’ mission and message enlarge our own understanding of who Jesus was and what he came to do? What does discovering the good news of Jesus’ Kingdom mean for us?

John does not talk so much about the Kingdom of God. John tends to refer more to belief and the personal struggle that goes on in the decision making process about Jesus as Messiah. However, in the night visit of Nicodemus, Jesus gets straight to the point. When Nick flatters Jesus by calling him Rabbi and refers to the miraculous works that Jesus is performing, Jesus calls him out and gets to the real question. Nicodemus believes Jesus is somebody special and that God is with him. But what he really wants to know is whether Jesus was the One they had been looking for?

The popular view was that when the Messiah would come he would usher in the Kingdom of God, which will be more like a return of the glorious days of David and Solomon when Israel was on top. Nicodemus believed that God was with Jesus, but he wanted more evidence that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus cut right through all the flattery of Nicodemus and let him know that his real question was about the coming of the Kingdom. In effect, Jesus says, “Nick you will not know if I am the Messiah and if the Kingdom of God has come unless you have been born again,” since the Kingdom of God is not the political reality you and the religious leaders are looking for. It is first off a spiritual reality, and all must be born again to even perceive it.

This, of course, supports the efforts and ministry of John the Baptist, since John was preparing people for a spiritual kingdom by calling them to repentance and baptism. According to Jesus, one could be in the very presence of the Kingdom and miss it if they were not tuned in spiritually and if they were looking for the wrong thing. The ultimate evidence that the Kingdom of God has come will be the sign of Jesus being lifted up on the cross, embracing the world’s sin and burying it in his death and resurrection. The Cross becomes the ultimate evidence of Jesus’ Kingdom. His death and resurrection mark the end of the tyranny of sin and death, and the beginning of a new life of forgiveness, freedom from sin and reunion with God.

Both Mark and Matthew begin their accounts of Jesus’ public ministry on the heels of Jesus’ victory over the Devil in the wilderness, with the proclamation that “*the Kingdom of God has come.*” Jesus has defeated the Devil and he has come to take back that which had been lost through sin. This is why Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for the full-blown arrival of the Kingdom, since this is the reason for his coming.

But what are the implications of the arrival of God’s Kingdom reign in Jesus? *Kingdom* is an antiquated term for most of us in democratically run societies. A kingdom is the area or space over which a sovereign ruler has jurisdiction and absolute authority. Earth has been taken over by an enemy ruler – the Devil, and Jesus has come to rescue and redeem the earth for God. The result is our deliverance and freedom. It also marks the end of Satan’s rule. His power has been broken and the ultimate weapon of death has been vanquished. “*For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*” (Col. 1: 13, 14).

Perhaps no better illustration of this message can be found than in the story of the healing of the blind, deaf, demoniac of Matthew 12. This man could not see, hear, or speak and was demon possessed. His healing marked a complete

turn around of the outward hold and internal grip that Satan had on him. His healing was significant and it made everyone sit up and take notice. It was so significant that the Pharisees and teachers of the law could not dispute the power and importance of it. But if they accepted it as a healing from God and gave Jesus the credit he deserved, then they would have to accept that there was a new ruler in town – that the Kingdom of God had come. Satan's power had been broken. So...they came up with a new interpretation. They gave Jesus the credit for an amazing miracle, but tried to discredit him by saying that his power to perform such miracles came from the Devil himself. In fact, they said that Jesus was in league with the Devil. Jesus' response was to tell them a story about breaking into a strong man's house and tying him up and stealing his belongings. This is what Jesus had done. It is one of the best illustrations of Jesus' message and mission. Jesus had marched right into the enemy's camp, tied him up and was taking back all that rightfully belonged to God. Satan was powerless in the presence of Jesus. Here is the evidence that the Kingdom of God was at hand! Where was this kingdom? Jesus was and is the kingdom of God! Jesus is the rule of God on earth! In Jesus, sin and death have been defeated and God is making all things new through his Son! This, then, was Jesus' message – *“The time has come,”* he said. *“The kingdom of God is near. Repent* (repent means - turn away from the kingdom of darkness and turn to the Kingdom of God's dear Son) *and believe the good news!”* (Good news meaning - the Kingdom of God is here).