

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN PAUL'S EPISTLES

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*The term “kingdom” is used sparingly by Paul, but there are important truths concerning the kingdom in his letters. For Paul, Jesus is the center of God’s kingdom plan and one must believe in Him to inherit the kingdom. As for its nature, the kingdom of Jesus the Messiah is future and earthly from Paul’s standpoint in history, yet there are kingdom truths that apply to Christians in this age before Jesus returns and the kingdom is established. Paul also explains the necessity of a kingdom reign of Jesus, the Last Adam, before the eternal state commences.*

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Compared to the gospels, references to the kingdom in Paul’s letters are considerably less. As Douglas Moo points out, “Paul does not often refer to the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> In Paul’s writing there are fourteen direct references to God’s “kingdom.”<sup>2</sup> This compares with 121 references to “kingdom” in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These Pauline references are Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; Col 1:13; 4:11; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5; and 2 Tim 4:1, 18. These few references, however, do not mean the kingdom is insignificant to Paul. Kingdom truths are located in his writings.

When Paul uses the term “kingdom” he does not define it, indicating that his audiences probably had prior knowledge about its meaning.<sup>3</sup> Several of Paul’s references indicate who will not enter God’s kingdom. For example, Paul states that “the

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 857. According to George Ladd, “Paul says almost as little about the Kingdom of God as he does about the messiahship of Jesus.” *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 450.

<sup>2</sup> See Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; Col 1:13; 4:11; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim 4:1, 18.

<sup>3</sup> In regard to Paul’s sole mention of “kingdom” in Romans with Rom 14:17, Yarbrough notes, “The fact that Paul can use the expression with no introduction or explanation suggests that both for him and

unjust will not inherit God's kingdom" (1 Cor 6:9). Galatians 5:21 and Ephesians 5:5 declare that people who practice ungodly behavior will not have an inheritance in God's kingdom. In addition, Paul says that those who worked with him were "co-workers for the kingdom of God" (Col 4:11). These verses reveal a strong connection between the kingdom and soteriology.<sup>4</sup> One must be saved and evidence righteous behavior to enter the kingdom. On the other hand, those who are characterized by evil deeds show that the kingdom does not belong to them. These truths do not indicate that salvation or kingdom entrance is based on works, but they show that, by faith, kingdom citizens have the power of the New Covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives bringing forth righteous behavior.<sup>5</sup>

Also, for Paul, the heart of the kingdom program is the resurrected Jesus who is the "descendant of David" (Rom 1:3; cf. 2 Tim 2:8). Thus, any kingdom truths in Paul are ultimately tied to Jesus the Messiah who brings fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant (see 2 Sam 7:12–16) over the course of His two advents.

But is there anything in Paul's letters that reveals his views on the nature and timing of the kingdom? Was his concept of the kingdom spiritual or physical, or both? Was the kingdom present or future? Much debate surrounds these questions. Our understanding is that Paul's ideas on the kingdom are consistent with those found earlier in the gospels and Acts. *The kingdom of God will come in the future after the return of Jesus.*<sup>6</sup> *Christians are positionally related to the King and His kingdom and are to exhibit kingdom righteousness in their lives. In this sense Christians in this age are related to the kingdom. Yet the kingdom and reign of Jesus the Messiah await the future.*

The futurity of the kingdom is stated explicitly on several occasions. For example, in 1 Thess 2:12 Paul stated, "We encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to walk worthy of God, who calls you into His own kingdom and glory."<sup>7</sup> With 2 Thess 1:5 Paul declared, "It is a clear evidence of God's righteous judgment that you will be counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also are suffering." The current experience of the Thessalonians was "suffering." But it is this suffering that makes them worthy of the "kingdom" they will be entering. Kingdom follows suffering. As Furnish notes, Paul "focuses on the eschatological future, assuring believers that through their sufferings God is qualifying them to enter that coming kingdom."<sup>8</sup>

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his readers, the term is already familiar." Robert W. Yarbrough, "The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Mark through the Epistles," in *The Kingdom of God*, eds. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 144.

<sup>4</sup> Vickers is correct that "Soteriology and kingdom go together." Brian Vickers, "The Kingdom of God in Paul's Gospel," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 12.1 (Spring 2008): 57.

<sup>5</sup> Vickers aptly notes that the fruit of the Spirit is linked to the kingdom: "It could justly be called the 'fruit of the kingdom'" (Ibid., 58). In my estimation this is true because of the close connection between the New Covenant and the kingdom.

<sup>6</sup> See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 857, n.40.

<sup>7</sup> According to Green, "Paul here speaks about the future of this *kingdom*, the time when God's glory will be revealed." Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 138. Emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 147.

Second Timothy 2:12 also presents the kingdom as future. Paul does not mention the term, “kingdom,” but he does indicate that faithful endurance by Christians now will lead to a future “reign” in Jesus’ kingdom—“If we endure, we will also reign with Him.” This present age is characterized by trials, but for those who endure the kingdom is their reward. The future tense used here shows that a kingdom reign was not the current experience of his readers but, instead, will be a reward for enduring.<sup>9</sup> This present age is one of enduring hardship for the sake of Jesus. If this occurs, then reigning with Jesus will result when His kingdom begins.<sup>10</sup>

Then, in 2 Tim 4:1, Paul says, “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom.” Here Paul links the “kingdom” with Jesus’ “appearing.” Since Jesus’ “appearing” is future, “His kingdom” is future as well. This is soon followed by: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory forever and ever! Amen” (2 Tim 4:18). Paul refers to the Lord’s “heavenly kingdom” as future and something the Lord “will” (future) bring him to. Paul did not view himself as presently in the kingdom. He longed, though, for the day when the Lord would take him there. Farnell is correct that “in the epistles, the dominant teaching of the ‘kingdom of God’ centers on a future kingdom and not a present one.”<sup>11</sup>

### The Future Reign of the Saints (1 Corinthians 4 and 6)

First Corinthians has the most kingdom information of any Pauline epistle.<sup>12</sup> Our focus here is on chapters 4 and 6. In 1 Cor 4:8 Paul addressed the pride of the Corinthians: “You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.” The Corinthians were acting like they had arrived, that they were in God’s kingdom, reigning already. As Hughes, puts it, “In 4:8, the Corinthians were already reigning in a kingdom of their own making.”<sup>13</sup> But Paul, with sarcasm, mocked their attitude. He played along and said that they had become “filled” and “rich.” He then said, “You have become kings without us.” Paul then switched back to reality by telling them, “I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.” He then contrasts this with his own experience of suffering. So contrary to how the Corinthians were acting, they were not kings and they were not

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<sup>9</sup> Knight points out, “The future tense of *συμβασιλεύσομεν* refers to an end-time situation that comes after the responsibility of the present tense *ὑπομένομεν* has ceased, since this state of existence for Christians has ended.” George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 405.

<sup>10</sup> Collins says that with 2:11–13 Paul speaks of a “future kingdom” and “future reign.” Raymond F. Collins, *I and II Timothy and Titus: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 184.

<sup>11</sup> F. David Farnell, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament,” in *The Master's Seminary Journal* 23:2 (Fall 2012): 205.

<sup>12</sup> Yarbrough says this is true of any epistle in the New Testament. See Yarbrough, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Mark through the Epistles,” 145.

<sup>13</sup> Robert B. Hughes, *First Corinthians*, in *Everyman's Bible Commentary* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1985).

reigning already. It would be nice if they were reigning. In fact, Paul says he wishes that he and others were reigning too. As Knight observes, “Paul criticizes those who think and act as if they are already reigning with Christ. He wishes that it were so.”<sup>14</sup> This shows that Paul did not view himself or his readers as reigning in the kingdom. And this verse should be a warning to kingdom views that assert that this age involves a kingdom reign of the saints. That contradicts Paul’s message here.

Later in the chapter, Paul challenges and contrasts his ministry with those who were arrogant. All they had were words (1 Cor 4:19), but Paul had the power of the kingdom as his source: “For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power” (1 Cor 4:20). While the reign of the Messiah and the saints had not begun yet, Paul possesses the power of the Holy Spirit that can transform lives. This is evident in what he said earlier in 1 Cor 2:4–5: “And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” This kingdom power, no doubt, will manifest itself in the characteristics of “righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (see Rom 14:17).

In 1 Cor 6:1–11, Paul addressed lawsuits among Christians. He uses truths concerning the future kingdom of God and then applies them to a present situation. With verse 1 Paul rebukes those who “dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints.” Paul is disappointed that some Christians were going to the state with their problems instead of settling matters within the people of God. To counter this approach he says, “Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life?” (1 Cor 6:2–3).

Here Paul appeals to a coming eschatological truth that the saints will judge the world and the angels.<sup>15</sup> This should have practical implications for lawsuits among Christians. Paul’s point is this—since Christians are destined to judge the world and angels, certainly they should be able to solve personal issues among themselves. This is an opportunity for citizens of the kingdom to apply kingdom principles to their lives now. In this sense the future should impact the present.<sup>16</sup> As Ciampa and Rosner rightly note, “From the perspective of the everlasting kingdom, the Corinthian litigation is ‘trifling’ . . . and totally insignificant.”<sup>17</sup>

Also note that Paul views the activity of judging the world and angels as future—“the saints *will* judge the world.” The saints are not currently judging or reigning in Christ’s kingdom because that is a future event associated with Jesus’ second coming. Some theologians hold the view that the saints are already reigning with

<sup>14</sup> Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 405.

<sup>15</sup> This principle is found in other passages. Jesus explicitly promised positions of authority in Rev 2:26–27 and 3:21. When Christ returns to earth and establishes His kingdom Rev 20:4 states, “Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them.”

<sup>16</sup> “The future carries weighty implications for conduct in the present.” Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 228.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Christ now but this verse is evidence against that. If the saints are not ruling over angels then we can know that the kingdom awaits the future.

With 1 Cor 6:9 Paul states that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Then after giving a list of those who practice certain sinful activities, he states that these kinds of people will not inherit the kingdom of God (10–11). The concept of “inheritance” in the Bible often refers to future rewards for the people of God (Col 1:12; 1 Pet 1:4). As Yarbrough points out, “By connecting inheritance with the kingdom, Paul indicates that he is using ‘kingdom’ in its eschatological sense.”<sup>18</sup>

Paul's point is that when the kingdom of God comes in the future those who act wickedly will not enter or participate in it. Thus, 1 Cor 6:1–11 has important implications for the kingdom program. It tells us that (1) the kingdom is future; (2) the future kingdom should impact how we live today; and (3) unbelievers will not inherit the kingdom.

### **The Kingdom of the Son (1 Corinthians 15:20–28, 50)**

The main topic of 1 Corinthians 15 is the resurrection. Yet, this chapter also intersects with the kingdom. Some view this chapter as evidence that Jesus' kingdom reign is spiritual from heaven in this age, while others see it as evidence for a future kingdom reign of Jesus over the earth. Our view is the latter. First Corinthians 15 indicates an intermediate kingdom after the return of Jesus but before “the end” when Jesus presents the kingdom to God the Father and the eternal state beings. And this passage also tells us the Son's role in regard to the kingdom program. The Son's role, as commissioned by the Father, is to bring this wayward world back into conformity with God's perfect will. When the Son completes His mission, which was originally tasked to Adam in Gen 1:26–28, He will hand over His successful kingdom to God the Father and the transition to the eternal state will commence.

#### **The Kingdom after the Return of Jesus**

A proper interpretation 1 Cor 15:20–28 depends upon several things including an understanding of key terms and quotations of OT passages. Paul begins by saying that Christ's resurrection is “the first fruits of those who are asleep” (15:20). Since Jesus is raised from the dead, so too will those who are in Him. Then in 1 Cor 15:22–24 Paul declares:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

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<sup>18</sup> Yarbrough, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Mark through the Epistles,” 156. Fee states, “This of course refers to the eschatological consummation of the kingdom.” Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 266.

Here Paul gives a timeline of the “order” of the resurrection by pointing out three events and their relation to the kingdom. First, he says that Christ is “the first fruits” (v. 23a). This is a reference to the bodily resurrection of Christ. Christ’s resurrection is the pattern and the guarantee that the resurrection of others will occur. Second, “after that” there is a resurrection of “those who are Christ’s at His coming” (v. 23b). This second stage is future. When Jesus returns those who belong to Him will be resurrected. At least two-thousand years separates these first and second phases of the resurrection program. Third, Paul states, “Then comes the end,” when Jesus “hands over the kingdom to the God the Father” (24a). This period of “the end” appears to be another stage, a third phase in the resurrection program. To summarize, there are three stages of the resurrection according to 1 Cor 15:23–24a:

1. “Christ the first fruits”
2. “after that those who are Christ’s at His coming”
3. “then comes the end . . . .”

While there is not much debate concerning the first two stages, there is considerable disagreement concerning the “end” and whether this is a third stage of resurrection or not. Those who hold that there is an intermediate kingdom after the return of Jesus but before the eternal state believe that Paul’s words (“then comes the end”) indicate a significant period of time between events 2 and 3. An era exists between the resurrection of those at Christ’s coming and the “end” when Jesus hands the kingdom over God the Father. The “end” does not occur immediately after Jesus returns but occurs after the kingdom reign of Jesus. As Craig Blaising argues, “Christ’s coming marks the second stage, not the third (in which the end occurs).”<sup>19</sup>

Those who do not agree with an intermediate kingdom of Christ after His second coming assert that “the end” follows immediately after Jesus’ coming. For them, “the end” occurs as a result of the second coming of Christ. There is no third stage of the resurrection program. And, thus, there is no room for an intermediate kingdom or millennium after the return of Christ. When Jesus returns and His people are resurrected, the end comes at that time and the eternal state begins.<sup>20</sup>

So which understanding is correct? Our view is that Paul is telling of a three-stage resurrection program that leaves room for a kingdom reign between Jesus’ return and the “end,” the kind of kingdom that John speaks of in Rev 20:1–6. Let us explain.

First, Paul’s use of “order” (*tagma*) seems to hint at a progression of more than two events. While an “order” of events could apply to only two resurrections, more than two is likely. Also, a considerable gap of time certainly exists between the first and second resurrections. From our standpoint in history, at least two thousand years separates these two events. Paul refers to Christ as the “firstfruits” of the resurrection

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<sup>19</sup> Craig A. Blaising, “A Premillennial Response,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 79.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed defense of this view see Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2013), 143–48.

and then uses the temporal adverb *epeita* (“afterward”) to then discuss the resurrection of those who belong to Christ as His coming. Then, in what D. Edmond Hiebert has referred to as “the crux of the millennial issue,”<sup>21</sup> Paul begins verse 24 with the indefinite phrase, *eita to telos* (“then comes the end”). The temporal adverb *eita* “likely implies an interval time between the coming of Christ and the end.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, just as there is a considerable time gap between Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of those who belong to Jesus (events 1 and 2), there will be a time gap between the resurrection of the people of God and the end when Jesus hands the kingdom over to the Father (events 2 and 3).

That such a gap exists is implied from the *epeita . . . eita* construction in 23b–24a which shows one event being followed by another. It is also supported by a similar *epeita . . . eita* formula earlier in the chapter. In 1 Cor 15:5–8 Paul lays out a chronological order of events concerning Jesus’ resurrection appearances. After stating that Jesus was raised on the third day (v. 4) he says,

and that He appeared to Cephas, then [*eita*] to the twelve. After that [*epeita*] He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then [*epeita*] He appeared to James, then [*eita*] to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

No doubt exists that Paul is offering a chronological progression of resurrection appearances,<sup>23</sup> and that uses of *epeita* and *eita* reveal a progression of appearances. Verse 7 is particularly significant since, like 1 Cor 15:23b–24a, this verse also offers the *epeita . . . eita* formula and shows chronological progression with a time gap. Jesus appeared to James and then appeared to all the apostles.<sup>24</sup> And in both cases the formula indicates a similar time gap:

1 Cor 15:7: *epeita . . . eita* indicates a time gap of days

1 Cor 15:23b–24a: *epeita . . . eita* indicates a time gap of which we now know includes thousands of years (at least two thousand—one thousand)<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, “Evidence from 1 Corinthians 15,” in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, eds. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 229.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 230. Leon Morris states that “*Then (eita)* does not necessarily mean ‘immediately after.’ It indicates that what follows takes place at some unspecified time after the preceding.” Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 211.

<sup>23</sup> “He [Paul] indicates that he is listing the appearances in chronological order.” Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 749.

<sup>24</sup> Ciampa and Rosner point out that Christ appears to two individuals who are leaders of two groups. Jesus appears to Peter and then the group that Peter is the leader of—the twelve. Likewise, Jesus appears to James and then the “slightly enlarged group of apostles” related to him in Jerusalem (749).

<sup>25</sup> The “one thousand” is taking into account the thousand-year period mentioned several times in Rev 20:1–10.

The fact that that the *epeita . . . eita* formula indicates a gap of similar time in 1 Cor 5:7 (days) reveals the likelihood that the formula in 1 Cor 15:23b–24a also indicates a gap of similar time (many years). Remember, the main issue is whether the *epeita . . . eita* formula allows or indicates a time gap between the resurrection of those at the time of Jesus' coming and the "end." The evidence indicates that it does, not only from the immediate context of 1 Cor 15:22–24, but from a similar grammatical construction in 1 Cor 15:5–8.

In sum, 1 Cor 15:22–24 reveals a three-stage resurrection program with a gap of time between the second and third stages that allows for a considerable period of time for a kingdom reign of Jesus before the "end" comes.

### The Son's Mission from the Father

Not only does Paul give significant information about the kingdom in regard to the resurrection program, he also states how the kingdom program relates to the Son. As 1 Cor 15:24b–28 shows, the Father has a mission for Jesus, and when Jesus fulfills this mission a transition takes place in the kingdom program:

then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

Verse 24 tells us that when "the end" comes Jesus will hand the kingdom over to God the Father. So there comes a point when the kingdom reign of Jesus is followed by a handing of His kingdom over to the Father. *Some transition occurs*. This transition only happens, though, after the Son has "abolished all rule and all authority and power." So Jesus must reign and stamp out all opposition and then the eternal kingdom can begin. Any authority or power that is opposed to God must be fully and finally dealt with. Paul uses two OT passages—Psalm 110 and Psalm 8—to reveal that he is referring to a future earthly reign of Jesus.

With 15:25 Paul says, "He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet" (25). The "must" means it is necessary that Jesus reigns. Paul's wording in verse 25 is a reference to Ps 110:1–2 which states:

The LORD says to my Lord:  
 "Sit at My right hand  
 Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."  
 The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying,  
 "Rule in the midst of Your enemies."

This allusion to Ps 110:1–2 is evidence that the “reign” of Jesus is a future earthly reign. The context of Psalm 110 is David’s Lord, the Messiah, sitting at the right hand of God for a session in heaven “until” He begins His earthly reign over His enemies from “Zion” in Jerusalem. In reference to Ps 110:1, the author of Hebrews says that Jesus is “waiting” at the right hand of the Father (see Heb 10:12–13). When the heavenly session is over, God installs His Messiah on the earth to reign over it. From our current historical perspective, Jesus is currently at the right hand of God the Father but this will be followed by a reign upon the earth. Thus, Jesus “must” reign from earth because Psalm 110 says this must happen. In Acts 3:21, Peter also uses “must” in regard to Jesus and His heavenly session before He returns to earth to restore everything:

whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.<sup>26</sup>

Peter’s point is that heaven must receive Jesus “until” the “period of the restoration of all things” occurs. This restoration has not occurred yet, but it will when Jesus returns to earth (see Acts 3:20). What Peter speaks of is similar to Paul’s point in 1 Cor 15:25.

Note also that there is a “reign” of Jesus. This “reign” involves more than the second coming event (see Rev 19:11–21). The second coming is a swift event but a “reign” involves considerable period of time. Jesus the Son and Messiah must have a sustained reign in the realm where the first Adam failed (see Gen 1:26, 28; 1 Cor 15:45).

With 15:27, Paul quotes Ps 8:6: “For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET.” Paul is interpreting Ps 8:6 both literally and christologically. The psalm originally refers to man’s right to rule God’s creation. So how does this apply to both mankind and Jesus? Corporate personality is in view here. Psalm 8 is addressed to man in a general sense, but since Jesus is the ultimate Man and last Adam, He represents man. As Mark Stephen Kinzer notes, “The psalm is read in both an individual and a corporate sense.”<sup>27</sup>

The use of Psalm 8 is further evidence that Paul is thinking of a future earthly reign of Jesus. Psalm 8 explains and expands upon Gen 1:26–28 and its truth that God created man to rule successfully over the earth. *Since the last Adam, Jesus, must succeed from and over the realm where the first Adam failed, Jesus must reign over the earth.* The Last Adam’s destiny is not to rule from heaven in a spiritual kingdom. Instead, He is to rule *from* and *over* the earth just like first Adam was supposed to do. But unlike Adam, Jesus will succeed. Those who place Jesus’ kingdom reign in this age from heaven over a spiritual kingdom are not giving justice to an important part of God’s kingdom program—which is for man to reign over the earth as God originally tasked him to do. Jesus as the ultimate man and representative of mankind will fulfill this task. A spiritual reign from heaven does not complete what God requires

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<sup>26</sup> Emphases are mine.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Stephen Kinzer, “‘All Things Under His Feet’: Psalm 8 in the New Testament and in Other Jewish Literature of Late Antiquity,” Ph.D. diss., The University of Michigan, 1995, 261.

in Gen 1:26–28 and Psalm 8. God expects a successful reign over the earth and Jesus the Son will accomplish this task.

With verse 28 Paul declares that all things will be subject to Jesus, yet he notes that there is one exception—God the Father. The Father is the One who commissioned the Son to reign over the earth, so the Father is not subject to the Son. Paul then states that when everything has been subjected to Jesus, Jesus then willingly subjects himself to the Father so that the Father can be “all in all.” The language here finds a cultural parallel in a Roman emperor who sends a trusted general with the task of squashing and fixing a rebellion in the empire. The emperor would grant the full authority and force of Rome to the general who would act on his behalf. When the trusted general succeeded in his mission and vanquished the enemies, he would then return to the emperor, not to challenge the emperor, but to show his subjection to him. The general acted with the full authority of the emperor and when victory occurs, he returns in victorious yet humble submission to the one who commissioned him.

This is similar to what Jesus does on behalf of the Father. The Father commissions Jesus to conquer and restore this fallen world on His behalf, and when Jesus accomplishes this task He then will subject himself to the Father. Jesus’ mission is accomplished and the Father is pleased with His reign. Every square inch of the universe has been restored. At this point the reign of Jesus is followed by the universal reign of God the Father. This does not mean that Jesus ceases to reign. Revelation 11:15 says Jesus “will reign forever and ever.” So as McClain notes, “This does not mean the end of our Lord’s regal activity, but rather that from here onward in the unity of the Godhead He reigns with the Father as the eternal Son.”<sup>28</sup> Messiah’s kingdom is then blended into the Father’s universal kingdom. Jesus’ prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10) is fully accomplished. Jesus’ kingdom does not end like earthly kingdoms do by defeat but by fulfillment of its mission.

Let us look even more closely at the statements that the Son “hands over the kingdom to the God and Father” (v. 24), and “the Son himself also will be subjected to the One [the Father] who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all” (v. 28). *These statements indicate a distinction between the Son’s kingdom and the Father’s kingdom.* Of course, these two phases of the kingdom plan work in perfect harmony. It is the Father’s will that the Son’s kingdom happen and succeed. It is the Son’s desire to fulfill the Father’s mandate for man to rule and subdue the world for God’s glory. Yet there is a distinction. It is during the Son’s reign that Jesus, the ultimate man and king, fulfills all the prophecies, covenants, and promises concerning God’s mediatorial kingdom program. When this occurs then the eternal kingdom of the Father commences. This truth again indicates the need for an era that is distinct both from this present age and the eternal kingdom. One should not simply assume that unfulfilled promises awaiting fulfillment will be fulfilled in the eternal state. In

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<sup>28</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), 513.

doing so this would put fulfillment outside of the reign of Jesus the Messiah to whom the task of fulfillment belongs.<sup>29</sup>

In sum, 1 Cor 15:20–28 teaches us that there are three phases of the resurrection program and that Jesus' kingdom occurs between His return and the "end." At the time of the third phase of God's resurrection plan, which comes after the intermediate kingdom, Jesus will hand the kingdom over to God the Father. The Son fulfills the kingdom mandate given to man to rule over the earth, and when this occurs the transition to the Father's eternal kingdom begins.

The grammar of 1 Cor 15:20–28 indicates a future reign of Jesus after His second coming to earth. Yet the context of 1 Corinthians also strengthens this understanding. As we saw, Paul viewed the kingdom reign as future in 1 Corinthians 4 and 6. With 1 Cor 4:8 he chided the Corinthians for thinking they were reigning already when they were not ("I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you"). And in 1 Cor 6:2–3 he stated that the kingdom reign of the saints involves judging angels, something that clearly was not happening in the present. A close connection exists between the kingdom reign of Messiah and the reign of those who belong to Messiah. So if Paul clearly places the kingdom reign of the saints in the future (which he does), this makes it likely that the kingdom reign of the Son described in 1 Cor 15:20–28 is future as well. Thus, what Paul has revealed earlier in 1 Corinthians must help inform what he is claiming later. Hence, both grammar and context indicate a futuristic understanding of Jesus' reign in 1 Corinthians 15.

### Inheriting the Kingdom (1 Cor 15:50)

Paul spends much of his discussion after 1 Cor 15:20–28 on the nature and necessity of a physical resurrection of believers. He then returns to the topic of the kingdom in verse 50: "Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." This is not a claim that physical bodies do not exist in the kingdom of God or that believers are only spirits. He has already explicitly affirmed the resurrection of the body (see Rom 8:23). Instead, his point is that human beings in their fallen, perishable bodies cannot inherit God's imperishable glorious kingdom.

How does this relate to the kingdom? Paul already discussed the kingdom earlier in the chapter (see 1 Cor 15:20–28). He referred to two phases of the kingdom plan. First, there is a kingdom of Jesus who must reign over the earth until all His enemies are defeated. After this, Jesus' kingdom is handed over to the Father and

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<sup>29</sup> To offer an example, the amillennialist Anthony Hoekema rightly insisted that the promised harmony among nations promised in Isaiah 2:2–4 will occur in the future and is not being fulfilled in the church. See Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 205–06. But Hoekema put its fulfillment in the eternal state and not Jesus' millennial kingdom. Yet the prophecies of Isaiah are linked with the "child" and "son" upon which "the government will rest on His shoulders" (Isa 9:6). This refers to Jesus. He is the one who will rule the nations. With Hoekema's scenario the reign over the nations of Isa 2:2–4 would not take place under the direct reign of the Messiah in His millennial kingdom. But this goes against the message of Isaiah. It is better to view Isa 2:2–4 and other passages that are not fulfilled yet as coming to fulfillment in a coming intermediate kingdom under the direct rule of the Messiah.

merged into the Father's kingdom. So what phase of the kingdom is Paul referring to in 15:50? The Father's eternal kingdom is probably in view. Why? If the kingdom solely refers to Jesus' kingdom, the conditions Paul offers in verse 50 do not fit with other biblical truths. This is true whether one holds a premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial view of the kingdom. Premillennialism holds that there will be some people in non-glorified bodies who populate Jesus' millennial kingdom that occurs after Jesus' second coming. But Paul states that "flesh and blood" (i.e., non-glorified humans) cannot inherit the kingdom of God. On the other hand, both amillennialists and postmillennialists claim that Jesus' messianic kingdom is in operation now. But Paul's words do not fit their scheme either since non-glorified saints (whether dead saints in heaven or living saints on earth) are said to be part of Jesus' kingdom today. But Paul says only glorified saints enter the kingdom of God. If he is referring to Jesus' messianic/millennial kingdom then the amill/postmill view cannot be accurate since those camps claim that Christians currently participate in Jesus' kingdom in a non-glorified state.

What does fit, though, is if Paul is referring to the Father's eternal kingdom, or what we call the eternal state. When it comes to the Father's eternal kingdom, everyone present must and will have glorified, imperishable bodies. With 1 Cor 15:51–57 Paul tells of how the resurrection plan relates to His readers. Since the believing Corinthians trusted in Christ, they will be part of the second phase of the resurrection plan—"those who are Christ's at His coming" (1 Cor 15:23b). For them, the removal of death will take place and they "will be changed" (15:51b) and for them "this perishable must put on the imperishable" (15:53a).

While 1 Cor 15:50 offers all interpreters challenges, the kingdom Paul presents in this verse is a future kingdom, one in which all will have glorified bodies. Since no believers have been glorified yet, we can know that the kingdom Paul discusses is still future.

### **Jesus' Authority at the Right Hand of God (Ephesians 1:19–22)**

Ephesians 1:19–22 also has implications for the kingdom. Paul explains the authority that Jesus currently has at the right hand of God in heaven:

and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church.

Paul informs the Ephesians of the great power of God at work in them. This incredible power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at God's right hand is the same power that God works "toward us who believe" (1:19). The "right hand" language in verse 20 is an allusion to Ps 110:1 which discusses God's king as sitting at the right

hand of God. Jesus' session at the right hand of God has certain ramifications according to Eph 1:20–22. First, it means that Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” Hoehner asserts that the “all” is better translated “every” and means that “Christ’s position in the heavenlies is above ‘every kind of’ power that exists.”<sup>30</sup> The cluster of entities that Jesus is above involves every “rule,” “authority,” “power,” and “dominion.” There is debate as to whether these categories are human or angelic. If angelic, are they evil or good, or both? Hoehner claims that all four terms are in reference to evil angelic powers.<sup>31</sup> If so, Jesus’ session at the right hand of God relates to evil spiritual forces. This view appears well supported by the context of Ephesians. Paul refers to “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2). He also says that Christians struggle “against the rulers, against powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). So Paul is explicitly conscious of evil spiritual forces that oppose Christians in this age.

Second, Jesus’ session at the “right hand” of God means His name is above every other name for all time whether it is this present age or the age to come. There will never come a time where Jesus loses His position of authority. Third, Jesus being at the right hand of God means that God has subjected all things under Jesus. Paul relies on Ps 8:6 and man’s right to rule over the creation. With Jesus, the last Adam, there is nothing in creation that is outside His authority. And fourth, Jesus is “head” over all things related to the church.

With Eph 1:19–22 we see that Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of the Father where He shares the throne of deity with the Father in heaven. The Christian should be encouraged that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him with authority in heaven is the same power at work in his life.

### **Relationship of the Kingdom to Today (Romans 14:17 and Colossians 1:13)**

For Paul the kingdom is a future event. The Messiah who is exalted in heaven now will once again come to rule the world directly with His saints. But Paul also teaches present implications of the kingdom for Christians. For example, Rom 14:17 declares, “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Also, Col 1:13 states: “For He has rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son.”

At first glance, Rom 14:17 seems to contradict the connection between eating and drinking and the kingdom in the gospels.<sup>32</sup> The context of Rom 14:17 concerns

<sup>30</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 276.

<sup>31</sup> “Hence, these powers most likely are angelic and evil and wish to rob us of our spiritual benefits.” Hoehner, 280.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Smit observes, “At first sight, there can be no greater discrepancy, than between Paul’s claim in Rom 14:17, that the Kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking, but rather about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, and traditions found in the synoptic Gospels.” Peter-Ben Smit, “A Symposium in Rom. 14:17? A Note on Paul’s Terminology,” *Novum Testamentum* 49 (2007): 43.

Christian liberty and instruction for Christians who disagree over matters like observance of days and eating unclean foods. Paul responds by highlighting the priority of “righteousness,” “peace,” and “joy” over observing days or which foods to eat. Spiritual characteristics are at the heart of the kingdom and it is these that the Corinthians should emphasize. But emphasizing these matters does not mean that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with the physical realm or that eating and drinking will not occur. Jesus stated that drinking from “the fruit of the vine” would take place in “the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:18). Paul wrote that the creation itself would one day be glorified (see Rom 8:19–23). So it is unlikely that Paul, in Rom 14:17, was promoting some Platonic understanding of the kingdom that is divorced from physical elements. Instead, he prioritizes the importance of righteousness, peace, and joy. If one gets these areas right, then the other issues will fall in line. So Paul is not discussing the nature of the kingdom as much as he is stressing what is most important in it. While food is necessary, the spiritual requirements of fellowship and harmony are what is most important. Paul’s readers should not act like Pagan hedonists who place physical pleasures and desires above love of others.

With Col 1:13 Paul teaches that Christians have been transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God’s Son. Some say this indicates a present kingdom of Christ. Curtis Vaughan, for instance, claims that “kingdom” in this verse “is not to be interpreted eschatologically. It was for the Colossians a present reality.”<sup>33</sup> Likewise, O’Brien claims that the “aorist tenses [ἰκανώσαντι, ἐρρύσατο, μετέστησεν] point to an eschatology that is truly realized.”<sup>34</sup> Saucy, though, observes that the context of Col 1:13 “favors an eschatological meaning for the kingdom.”<sup>35</sup> Verse 12 states, “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” The term “inheritance” has eschatological overtones and may indicate that the kingdom reference in Col. 1:13 is also future-oriented even though there are present implications. Thus, Saucy may be correct when he concludes, “Although the blessings of the salvation of the kingdom are present, it is difficult to see in Paul’s words any idea of a present kingdom of Christ in which believers share in his reign.”<sup>36</sup> In response to O’Brien’s grammatical argument for Col 1:13, Farnell points out that the language of Colossian 1 is consistent with a futuristic understanding of the kingdom:

However, these verses may be easily understood as futuristic aorists that emphasize the certainty of the future event, especially since inheritance is in Paul’s mind in the immediate context which points to the accompanying blessings of that kingdom (Col 1:12). While believers have been transferred to citizenship

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<sup>33</sup> Curtis Vaughan, “Colossians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:180.

<sup>34</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, vol. 44. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 28.

<sup>35</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

in the future kingdom, they also experience spiritual blessings while they await its appearance, as Col 1:14 goes on to stress. . . .<sup>37</sup>

In sum, those who have believed in Jesus the King have been transferred from the realm of Satan to the authority of Jesus. They have a present relationship to His kingdom, even before it arrives. As McClain puts it, "We have been (aorist tense) transferred *judicially* into the Kingdom of our Lord even before its establishment."<sup>38</sup>

Paul does not view Christians as currently reigning with Jesus. In fact, Paul already chided the Corinthians for acting as if they already were reigning (see 1 Cor 4:8). Instead, Christians are positionally transferred to Christ's kingdom but the actual establishment of the kingdom with the actual reign of Christ awaits His second coming.<sup>39</sup>

### The Kingdom and Israel (Romans 9–11)

Romans 9–11 is Paul's treatise on God's sovereignty and how this relates to the people of Israel. Paul emphatically denies that God has rejected His people Israel (see Rom 11:1). This cannot occur because of God's "choice" and the fact that Israel is "beloved for the sake of the fathers" (11:28). Also God's "calling" is "irrevocable." There is coming a day when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26). The timing of Paul's words are important. Not only is Israel's rejection of Jesus established but the church as an entity is well-established too. If there ever were a chance to declare that national Israel's place in the plan of God has been forfeited or the church had replaced Israel, this was it. But instead Paul affirms Israel's place in God's plans.

Romans 9:4 is strategic as Paul declares certain truths concerning his "kinsmen" (v. 3). Even though Israel is in a state of unbelief Paul states that certain important things are still the present possession of Israel: "who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises." Although Israel is not experiencing these things in their current state of unbelief, they have not been cut off from these matters. They still possess "adoption as sons" which shows that God's fatherly relationship to them has not been forfeited. The "covenants" still belong to Israel. This must include the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants. Israel is also related to the "temple service" and the "promises." These issues such as Israel's relationship with God, the covenants of promise, temple service, and the promises of God all have a direct relationship to the kingdom of God.

Romans 11:11–12 also has kingdom implications. After emphatically asserting that Israel has not stumbled permanently, he goes on to say that Israel's stumbling and fulfillment have implications for the world:

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<sup>37</sup> Farnell, "The Kingdom of God in the New Testament," 206.

<sup>38</sup> McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 435.

<sup>39</sup> This would parallel what John said in Rev 5:9–10 where the people of God are said to be a "kingdom" even though the reign over the earth was still viewed as future. It would also parallel the truth that living Christians are citizens of heaven even though they currently are not in heaven yet (Phil 3:20).

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!

This reveals that this age is not the culmination of God's plans. What has occurred is great but more is to come. Israel exists to bring blessings to the nations of the world (see Gen 12:2–3; Jer 4:1–2). And even with Israel's "transgression" via unbelief, salvation has come to the Gentiles. But Paul also points out that Israel's "fulfillment" leads to even greater blessings for the world. This "fulfillment" is linked with the salvation of all Israel and the return of Jesus the "Deliverer" (11:26).

So not only does Romans 11 speak of a future salvation of Israel at the time of Jesus' second coming, it also indicates that national Israel's salvation results in greater worldwide blessings. Paul affirms the truth that Israel's restoration under the reign of the Messiah results in global blessings that go beyond what is taking place in the present age (see Isa 2:2–4; Amos 9:11–15). So while the term "kingdom" is not explicitly mentioned, this text affirms significant kingdom truths—namely God will restore Israel under Messiah and the world will be blessed to an even greater degree during that time.

### **Conclusion**

While the kingdom theme is not as prominent in Paul's letters as other sections of the NT, Paul still offers significant information about the kingdom program. For Paul the kingdom is future with present implications. Christians today are related to the kingdom and are to evidence kingdom righteousness in their lives even now. On the flip side, those who are characterized by wickedness are not qualified to enter it.<sup>40</sup> Also, the kingdom reign of Jesus and His saints awaits His second coming. Jesus must reign in His kingdom over the earth. When He, as the Last Adam, succeeds in reigning from and over the earth, then His kingdom will transition to the kingdom of the Father and the eternal state will commence.

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<sup>40</sup> Kee strikes the right balance between Paul's view of a future kingdom with present implications: "The future kingdom of God . . . has a significant role in the thought of Paul. He asserts the qualities that characterize those who will share in the new circumstances when God's rule takes on its encompassing role over God's people and the world as a whole. That context will be characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. . . . Yet moral failures will result in disqualification for sharing in the kingdom." Howard Clark Kee, *The Beginnings of Christianity: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Madison Square Park, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 483.