

# The Mystery of the Kingdom

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# The Mystery of the Kingdom

When Jesus “began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matthew 4:17), most people didn’t understand His message. The reason is quite simple: He purposefully spoke in a way that hid key aspects of the truth. Though multitudes of people thronged to hear Him, most didn’t comprehend what He was saying about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' teaching style—authoritative and unlike the scribes—attracted people's attention (Matthew 7:29), and many came to be healed of physical ailments (Matthew 14:35-36). Others likely came hoping to see a miracle or watch Jesus verbally get the best of the religious authorities or possibly get a free meal (Luke 23:8; Matthew 15:1-20, 29-38; 14:13-21). But most didn't fully grasp what He was saying. While they couldn't deny the miracles and were intrigued by His style of preaching, His message was a mystery.

Jesus' use of parables—short stories to illustrate moral principles or truths—is well known (Mark 4:2). Most people today think that He used these to make His message easy to understand. But here is a little known truth: He spoke in parables so people *wouldn't* understand!

Do you find this hard to believe? Notice Jesus' explanation.

After Jesus had likened the Kingdom to a farmer sowing seed, His disciples—those He was personally training—privately asked Him what this parable of the sower meant. Here is His answer: “To you it has been given to know *the mystery of the kingdom of God*; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables” (Mark 4:11, emphasis added throughout).

Jesus purposefully spoke in parables to hide His message about the Kingdom. Jesus told His disciples: “The knowledge of *the secrets of the Kingdom of God* has been given to you, but to the rest it comes

by means of parables, so that they [the crowds] may look but not see, and listen but not understand” (Luke 8:10, Good News Translation).

Only a few were being given the opportunity to understand “the mystery of the kingdom.” And the mystery continues today. The “secrets of the Kingdom of God” remain hidden.

Instead of a clear explanation of Christ's central message, Christianity offers a dizzying array of teachings and competing gospels. While everyone acknowledges that Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” ideas about this Kingdom vary widely. The 38,000 plus denominations of Christianity in our modern world each have their own interpretation of Jesus' words. See “[What Is the Gospel?](#)” for an explanation of this term.

Given the variety of beliefs within Christianity, it is not surprising that some of them contradict the Bible. For example, the belief that good people go to heaven to be with Jesus when they die is a cherished assumption. Many have attended funerals where the minister and friends have referred to the deceased as looking down on everyone from heaven. But there are some perplexing problems with this common perception. Going to heaven after one dies isn't what the people of God in the Old Testament understood. And it isn't what Jesus' disciples preached after His crucifixion in the first century. So what's the *real* story?

Just what did Jesus mean when He said that the “kingdom of heaven is at hand”? What happens to good people when they die? Do we get to enter the Kingdom and be with Jesus or not? If so, when? Where? How? Read on to learn the mysterious secrets of the Kingdom. After all, it’s your life that is at stake!

## God’s purpose for you

Understanding why we were born is foundational to understanding the Kingdom of God. When we consider *why* we were born, we aren’t trying to figure out human reproduction—how a male and a female can produce a baby. Rather, we need to know *why* God created humanity. We need to know what God had in mind when He fashioned the first man, Adam, from the dust of the ground and then created the first woman from one of Adam’s ribs (Genesis 2:7, 21).

The Bible reveals that God had a plan for mankind from the “foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8) before “time began” (2 Timothy 1:9). Unique among all the physical life that God had created upon the earth, man was made in God’s “own image” and according to His “likeness” (Genesis 1:26-27). This fundamental aspect of our creation is why humans have abilities to think, reason and plan their lives that are far superior to any abilities of animals. Humans resemble God, only with lesser powers and abilities. But though created with less glory than God, humans have incredible potential.

When Jesus came to earth, He continued doing His “Father’s business” (Luke 2:49)—carrying out the plan that the Father had established long ago. Jesus said that He had come in His “Father’s name” (John 5:43) to do “the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38).

And just what was Jesus’ purpose for coming to earth? Jesus said that He had come to call “sinners, to repentance” (Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32) so that those who respond “may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

The life to which Jesus was referring in the preceding passage is far more than just a better physical life. As John, one of the disciples personally taught by Jesus, explains: “But as many as received Him [Jesus], to them He gave the right to become *children of God*, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

This process of becoming children of God includes having Christ, the Son of God, “formed” in us (Galatians 4:19). Speaking of this end result, John wrote, “Beloved, now we are the children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be; but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2).

Becoming part of the family of God—being born as children “of God”—is God’s ultimate purpose for you and for

every human being that has ever existed and that will exist! (Ephesians 3:14-15; 2 Corinthians 6:17-18). God is in the business of drawing people to Himself (John 6:44). He is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Now that we understand God’s purpose for humanity, let’s focus on this Kingdom to which Jesus referred.

### **Can we enter the Kingdom now?**

When people learn that Jesus said to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17), many assume that we can enter this Kingdom before we die. After all, they reason, Jesus said this kingdom was “at hand.”

Some perceive the Kingdom as being the Church. Others believe it is our world today when governed by Christian principles. Some believe the Kingdom exists in one’s heart. Most of these well-intentioned ideas are either mistaken or incomplete.

When we study this subject in the Bible, we find that Matthew was the only writer to use the term “kingdom of heaven.” The other Gospel writers—Mark, Luke and John—referred to it as the “kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; Acts 1:3; John 3:3, 5). Paul called it “the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Ephesians 5:5), and Peter referred to it as “the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11). In Revelation 12:10 John wrote of “the kingdom of our God.”

Considering these passages, we see that the predominant name is the “kingdom of God.”

Of course, all of these phrases refer to the same Kingdom—a Kingdom that belongs to God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Hence, it is indeed the Kingdom of God. So how are we to understand Matthew’s 33 references to “the kingdom of heaven” compared to five references to the “kingdom of God”? “Of heaven” simply means that it belongs to the divine Beings who rule in heaven. So do we have to go to heaven to enter this Kingdom? Is heaven where it will remain?

### **Future location of the Kingdom**

Over 2,500 years ago, God gave a Jewish prophet named Daniel special understanding of future world governments. While serving in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, God revealed to Daniel that throughout the course of human history there would be three more world-ruling empires following the Babylonian empire—the Persian, Greek and Roman empires.

God then inspired Daniel to write: “And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44). Later, Daniel added that the saints would possess this fifth world-ruling kingdom—God’s Kingdom—and

# What Is the Gospel?

When Jesus began His earthly ministry, He preached “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:14). The word “gospel” is derived from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means “good news.” So Jesus was preaching “good news” about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus’ message is also called “the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1), “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), “the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1), “the glorious gospel” (2 Corinthians 4:4, King James Version), “the gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13) and “the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15). While there is only one true gospel, each of these descriptions focuses on a different aspect of the same message.

The gospel or good news of the Kingdom is the message that Jesus brought to earth. As the only Being through whom we may receive salvation (Acts 4:12), we must heed His instruction to “repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). It is indeed glorious news that can give us peace of mind and salvation.

that it would stand forever (Daniel 7:18, 22, 27).

From Daniel's writings, we see that the Kingdom of God will be set up on earth and after it is established, all earthly kingdoms will eventually come to an end. So this prophesied Kingdom is not simply a philosophical movement or limited to a way of thinking that only resides in the minds of people. Instead, in its fullest sense it is a literal kingdom—a kingdom with territory, a ruler, laws and subjects—that will rule over all the nations on the earth.

When Jesus came to earth, the world-ruling empires prophesied by Daniel had not yet run their course. It was not yet time for God's Kingdom to replace all human governments on earth. On trial before Pilate, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). But the fact that the Kingdom of God had not yet come to earth didn't stop Jesus' disciples from asking questions about this most important subject. After all, Jesus had taught them to pray for this Kingdom to come and to make it the first priority in their lives (Matthew 6:10, 33).

Curious about this Kingdom, the disciples came to Jesus privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). They wanted to know what signs would

indicate that He would soon return and that the reign of human governments was coming to an end.

In answering the disciples' questions, Jesus told them that there would be false teachers, wars, famines, pestilences and earthquakes. But "the end will not come immediately," He said (Luke 21:9). These events were just "the beginning of sorrows" (Matthew 24:8).

Addressing these matters with His disciples after His resurrection, Jesus again affirmed that the prophesied Kingdom was not yet on earth (Acts 1:3-8). And here, He referred to "times or seasons" that were under the control of the Father. Understanding the broad expanse of human history like no human can, God the Father will decide when to send Jesus to establish the Kingdom of God on earth (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32).

In Acts 1 Jesus told His disciples that they needed to expand their understanding of the time God was taking to work with mankind. He explained what they would later come to understand more fully—that He would not return in their lifetimes. God was going to allow some time to pass during which "firstfruits"—an initially small group of people—would be called and trained to serve as teachers when Jesus returns to the earth to set up the Kingdom (James 1:18; Revelation 5:10).

Only after the series of events prophesied by John in the book of Revelation, will Christ appear. After the seventh angel

sounds, loud voices in heaven will then finally say, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!” (Revelation 11:15).

To summarize, the Kingdom of God is currently in heaven. But it will be established on earth when Jesus returns.

### **Why people don't understand**

Earlier we noted that Daniel had foretold that the saints would eventually possess God's Kingdom (Daniel 7:18, 22, 27). Approximately 600 years after Daniel's prophecy, Christ came to earth preaching “the gospel [good news] of the kingdom of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14-15).

When Jesus said that the Kingdom of God was “at hand,” He meant that its representative, the King, and the instruction that people needed to enter the Kingdom were now available to the few who would understand the message, repent of their sins and believe in the gospel. This was only a small number of people. After Jesus' 3½-year ministry, the number of disciples gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost—an annual holy day of God—was only “about a hundred and twenty” (Acts 1:15).

The number of people who respond to Jesus' message today is likewise small. It is generally acknowledged that only a third of the earth's inhabitants claim to be

Christian; and among this group, beliefs vary widely. So why is there so much confusion and lack of understanding?

We've already considered Jesus' explanation that He spoke in parables to hide the meaning from most people. Jesus had told His disciples: “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matthew 13:11). Continuing, He added, “Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (verse 13). This was a fulfillment of a prophecy God had given to Isaiah (verse 14-17).

In further explaining why some would be allowed to understand His message while others would not, Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). One reason why God has to specifically invite people to become children of His Kingdom (John 1:12) is because an evil spirit called “the Devil and Satan ... deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9).

Paul likened this deception to a veil that blinds people's minds (2 Corinthians 3:14; 4:3-4). With the realization that Jesus' message will not be fully understood unless God the Father removes this veil of spiritual blindness, let's consider what the vast majority of people have not understood about Jesus' teaching.

### **Repent and believe**

To respond to the good news regarding

the Kingdom, Jesus said people must do two things: “*Repent*, and *believe* in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Sadly, this important instruction is widely ignored or, at best, only partially explained.

Some say that all you have to do is “believe on Jesus.” Too often, this popular but incomplete explanation has blurred and clouded the understanding of the true gospel. With this common teaching, Christianity is wrongly reduced to the mistaken idea that all people have to do to receive eternal life in the Kingdom of God is to simply believe that Jesus is their Savior and that He lived a righteous life for us. What is lacking in this explanation is what believing in Jesus entails and what it means to repent.

According to the Bible, repentance includes two important parts. First, repentance is a gift of God. Because God has to open a person’s mind and draw him or her to Himself, this aspect of repentance must come from God. As such, He leads people to repentance (Romans 2:4). Without God’s involvement, true biblical repentance is impossible.

Second, repentance also includes a sustained decision by the person to change his or her life from doing whatever he or she pleases to obeying God’s commands. In response to God mercifully removing the veil of spiritual blindness and thereby allowing the person to understand, God expects him or her to stop sinning—breaking His laws—and begin living as

He commands.

Illustrating the personal response required of people when they repent, [John the Baptist told the religious leaders of that day that they needed to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” \(Matthew 3:8\). The fruit they needed to bear was visible evidence of a changed life—a life now oriented toward God.](#) Explaining this same principle, Paul taught that faith and actions go hand-in-hand. Real repentance includes receiving God’s grace and “obedience to the faith” (Romans 1:5).

To repent, one must be sorry for his or her past sins and fully commit to a life of obedience. Repentance includes the recognition that our sins are an affront to God and that Jesus gave His life so our sins might be forgiven. This is a humbling realization that has a profound, lasting impact upon our lives. Explaining what repentance is, *Barnes’ Notes* on Matthew 3:2 says, “There are two words in the New Testament translated ‘repentance,’ one of which denotes a change of mind, or a reformation of life; and the other, sorrow or regret that sin has been committed.”

Coupling both of these concepts of repentance, conversion occurs when one’s way of thinking changes from a primarily selfish orientation to one yielded to God. Jesus said this must occur if we are going to enter the Kingdom. “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven”

(Matthew 18:3).

In addition to genuine, heartfelt repentance, Jesus commands those who follow Him to “believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Truly believing means not only being sorry for our sins but changing how we live (2 Corinthians 7:10). As Paul noted, “the doers of the law”—as opposed to “the hearers of the law”—are the ones who will be justified, considered right in God’s sight (Romans 2:13).

As we are converted, we change from the inside out. Because our way of thinking changes, what we do changes. Instead of rebelling against God’s laws as all humans naturally do (Romans 3:23; 6:23), we now desire to obey God and be like our Father in heaven.

**Jesus made it clear that those who wish to enter the Kingdom must keep the commandments.** Responding to the commonly asked question as to what one must do to receive eternal life, Jesus repeatedly told people to obey the commandments (Matthew 19:16-20; Mark 10:17-23; Luke 10:25-27; Luke 18:18-24). Furthermore, Jesus explained that those who practice lawlessness will not be in the Kingdom. Although obedience to God’s commands doesn’t earn one salvation, which is a gift of God (Romans 6:23), unrepentant people who willfully break God’s law will be destroyed (Matthew 13:41-42). See [“What Is the Punishment of the Wicked?”](#) for additional explanation.

Someone who repents and truly believes will obey all God’s commands. Later, we will examine some of God’s instructions that are commonly disregarded; but before we do, let’s consider what God expects after one repents and demonstrates his or her belief through obedience to God’s law.

## **Baptism**

When people have truly repented, they have a tender conscience toward God and are willing to acknowledge their sins. Preaching to such individuals on the Day of Pentecost, Peter spoke of their and our culpability—our responsibility and involvement—in the death of Jesus. Our sins necessitated His death. Because of the sins of humanity, Jesus endured the pain and humiliation of crucifixion so we might be forgiven. Jesus laid down His life and became a sin offering for us. Humbly recognizing this profound truth of which Peter had spoken, many “were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37).

Peter then answered, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (verse 38).

When one is baptized, he or she is immersed in water (John 3:23; Acts 8:39). “The words ‘baptize’ and ‘baptism’ are simply Greek words transferred into English. ... It means ... to dip a thing

into an element or liquid” (*Easton’s Bible Dictionary*, “Baptism, Christian”). Jesus underwent this symbolic experience to “fulfill all righteousness”—that is, to set an example for us (Matthew 3:13-16). Of course, Jesus did not need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sin because He lived a perfect, sin-free life (1 Peter 2:22).

Jesus was baptized to show us what we must do. Through baptism, we commit our lives to God and agree to “follow His [Jesus’] steps” and “walk just as He walked” (1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6).

It is also important to note that Jesus instructed those who would lead the Church to “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

Being completely immersed in water symbolizes the death and burial of our old way of living prior to repentance, and coming up from the water symbolizes our resurrection—being brought back to life—to a new sin-free way of living (Romans 6:3-11). Paul also referred to this process as putting “off the old man with his deeds” and putting “on the *new man* who is renewed in knowledge” (Colossians 3:8-10).

## Led by the Spirit

Baptism includes another important component in addition to being immersed in water. After being baptized, we must have hands laid on us by a minister who, in prayer, asks for God to grant

us His Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17-18; 19:6; 2 Timothy 1:6).

The Holy Spirit is a “gift of God” that overcomes fear, gives us spiritual understanding and empowers us to love both God and our fellow man (Acts 1:8; 2 Timothy 1:6-7). After the laying on of hands, God’s Spirit begins residing within us and evidence or “fruit” of it becomes obvious to ourselves and others. The characteristics of “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” describe our way of thinking and conduct (Galatians 5:22-23).

The Holy Spirit does not force us to live God’s way or become like Him. Instead, it leads us in the right direction. We must allow God’s Spirit to guide us because “to be carnally minded [primarily governed by our own way of thinking apart from God] is death” (Romans 8:6). This natural, human way of thinking is “against God” (verse 7). The only way we will please Him is by yielding to His direction, allowing ourselves to be led by His Spirit. Paul then further explained, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Romans 8:13-14).

The Bible here defines God’s people as ones who “are led by the Spirit.” And if we have God’s Spirit residing within us, we will eventually also be “glorified together” with Christ (verse 17).

Repenting, being baptized, becoming converted and being led by God's Holy Spirit are all required steps for those who wish to inherit eternal life in the Kingdom of God. (Note: If you believe you are ready to commit your life to God via baptism, please contact us. A minister will respond to your request.)

## When we may enter the Kingdom

Returning to the occasion when Jesus answered His disciples' questions about His coming and the end of the age, Jesus explained when the elect—those who had repented of their sins, been baptized and demonstrated their belief in God through obedience to His laws—would be invited into God's Kingdom. Here is His teaching.

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matthew 25:31-34).

The time when people will enter the Kingdom of God is when Jesus “comes in His glory.” Contrary to what many believe, humans do not enter the Kingdom prior to Christ's return. This means

that good people do *not* go to heaven when they die. The Bible teaches that when people die, their bodies return to the earth and their thoughts cease (Ecclesiastes 9:5; Psalm 146:4, King James Version). Their conscious existence has come to an end. Those who died faithful to God are “asleep” in their graves, awaiting Christ's return when they will be resurrected—brought back to life (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; Job 14:10-15).

So where did this idea that people go to heaven when they die originate? History shows that humans have believed in an afterlife—another life after one's human life—for a long time. The ancient Egyptians, for example, preserved the bodies of those who had died and buried treasures along with the deceased because they thought all these things would later be needed by the person. They believed that humans had both a physical body that would die and a spirit that would continue to live after death.

Later, the Greeks and Romans expanded upon the Egyptian belief with the idea that after death the souls of good people were rewarded and the souls of bad people received punishment. The really bad people were believed to be consigned to everlasting punishment in hell.

While God's plan is for people to live eternally with Him in His family, what these ancient peoples didn't understand was *when* eternal life would be made available to humans. Not understanding this concept, many assumed that humans

have an immortal soul. And if humans have an immortal soul, then obviously souls have to go somewhere when a person dies.

What the Bible clearly teaches is the possibility of eternal death: “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:20). The unrepentant soul (“soul” meaning a living being) will cease to exist—not continue to live in another state (Romans 3:23; 6:23). Even those who are righteous will physically die once and be unconscious in the grave (Hebrews 9:27; Ecclesiastes 9:10).

Understanding this concept, Peter told people in the first century that King David remained dead and buried “to this day” (Acts 2:29). Please note that Peter said this after Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Humans do not have an immortal soul residing within them, and no human has gone to heaven. As John 3:13 confirms, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.”

The question of when we may enter the Kingdom is part of the mystery of the Kingdom of God. “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. . . . Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed . . . at the last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:50-51).

Because humans are mortal, the righteous will have to be *given* immortality when Jesus returns to establish the King-

dom of God on earth. When He returns, “the dead in Christ” will be resurrected back to life as immortal spirit beings (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17), and the faithful in Christ who are alive will likewise be changed (1 Corinthians 15:50-54). From this time forward, these faithful humans now changed into immortal, eternal spirit beings will then “always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

## Seeking the Kingdom

Even though the Kingdom of God is not yet here on earth and we cannot enter it until Christ returns, our thinking and our lives must be focused on this prophesied event. In this sense, the Kingdom of God should be in our hearts or minds because we are continually thinking about it. But as we’ve already seen, the Kingdom is much more. It is also a Kingdom that will come to earth and replace all human governments.

## Is the Kingdom within you?

Responding to a question from the Pharisees about when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21). The first part of Jesus’ answer has been fairly easy to understand. Misunderstanding regarding the latter part however, has given many an incomplete picture of the Kingdom.

When Jesus came to earth, the Jews were

# What Is the Punishment of the Wicked?

In teaching about the Kingdom, Jesus spoke a parable about wheat and tares growing together in the same field until the harvest, when they would be separated (Matthew 13:24-30). After sending the multitude away (verse 36), Jesus told His disciples that this harvest represented “the end of the age” (verse 39) when angels would reap the harvest of people for the Kingdom.

Continuing, Jesus explained that in this harvest the angels would “gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:41-42).

This “furnace of fire” is also referred to in Scripture as “the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15), where those whose names were not written in the Book of Life will be cast. The punishment of the wicked—those who will not repent of their sins—is to be burned up.

As the prophet Malachi explained, “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,” says the LORD of hosts, ‘that will leave them neither root nor branch’” (Malachi 4:1). Continuing, God says to the righteous, “You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this,’ says the LORD of hosts” (verse 3).

Because of the mistaken idea that humans have an immortal soul, many have likewise mistakenly assumed that the wicked will suffer eternal torment in an ever-burning fire. But this is not what the Bible teaches. Instead, unrepentant humans will be mercifully destroyed.

looking for the Messiah to return and elevate the Jewish nation to prominence. Instead of hearing a message of repentance, they anticipated a Deliverer who would lead them in a successful liberation of their nation. And some of the religious authorities apparently believed that they—because of their careful investigation—would be the ones to first discover the promised Savior’s return. In the above noted passage, Jesus told the Pharisees that their thinking was mistaken. Jesus’ first coming was to announce the Kingdom. Later, He would “appear a second time ... for salvation” and the establishment of the Kingdom here on earth (Hebrews 9:28).

When Jesus returns, there will indeed be dramatic signs that all will be able to discern (Matthew 24:5-14, 21-27; Revelation 1:7). But in saying “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’” (Luke 17:20-21), Jesus was explaining to the Pharisees of that generation that in spite of their meticulous efforts, their mistaken understanding would not allow them to identify the Messiah’s first coming. Furthermore, they would not see the astonishing signs of His second coming—the signs for which they were looking. **As Jesus noted, His second coming would be clearly observable like lightning flashing across the sky. However, His return would be in another “day” (verse 24)**—a time period long after the Pharisees to whom He was speaking had lived and died.

After telling the Pharisees that they wouldn’t be able to observe the coming of the Kingdom of God in the way they had anticipated, He said, “For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you” (verse 21). In this passage, the phrase “is within you” is also translated “is in the midst of you” (Revised Standard Version) and “is among you” (Bible in Basic English). The New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, Modern King James Version and Green’s Literal Translation translate this phrase “in your midst.” In this sense, Jesus, the King of the coming Kingdom of God, was standing in the midst of the Pharisees. These translations are clearly better, for the Kingdom of God was not in the hearts of these Pharisees.

So what about the concept of the Kingdom of God being in our hearts? The Scriptures show that this subject should be on our minds. After all, we are supposed to pray for the Kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10) and Jesus told us to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (verse 33).

When we repent of our sins, are baptized and begin following the lead of the Holy Spirit, we voluntarily place ourselves under the laws and authority of the coming Kingdom of God. Describing this process, Paul, who was being held prisoner in Rome at the time, explained, “He [God, the Father] has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love”

(Colossians 1:13). So there is a sense of us being symbolically “conveyed,” “translated” (King James Version) or “transferred” (English Standard Version) into the Kingdom when we commit our lives to God and begin living as He instructs. Our primary allegiance is transferred from all kingdoms of this world to God’s Kingdom. We are then subject to different laws (God’s laws) and belong to a different community (the Church of God).

Even though the Bible speaks of our “citizenship” as being in heaven after we are baptized (Philippians 3:20), in order to enter the Kingdom, humans must be changed from flesh and blood into spirit, from mortal into immortal at Jesus’ second coming (1 Corinthians 15:50-53; Hebrews 9:28). When the Kingdom of God comes to earth, it will rule over all the “kingdoms of this world” (Revelation 11:15).

Unfortunately, in reading Jesus’ statement that “the kingdom of God is within you,” many have mistakenly limited the Kingdom of God to a philosophical perspective or a way of thinking. In reality, the coming Kingdom of God is far more than what is in the hearts and minds of Jesus’ followers. In fact, it is the Kingdom that God’s faithful elect will enter at Christ’s return and that will be established here on earth.

In order to keep this vision of the future clearly in mind, Christ instructs us to pray for this Kingdom to come (Matthew 6:9) and to “seek first the kingdom

of God and His righteousness” (verse 33). It is not enough to simply learn about this mystery that has been hidden from most of mankind and then continue living the same way we always lived prior to receiving this knowledge.

Instead, our lives must change so that we become examples for others. As followers of Jesus Christ, we become “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14). Here is how we can stay focused on God’s coming Kingdom and represent it to others.

## **The weekly Sabbath**

One of the biggest changes in the lives of those who are seeking God’s Kingdom is the days upon which they assemble to worship God. In mainstream Christianity, most people assume that Sunday is the day to attend church and that the holidays of Christmas and Easter are the celebrations to observe in honor of Christ’s birth and resurrection. But—and here lies another part of “the mystery of the kingdom” (Mark 4:11)—these days are not the commanded days of worship in the Bible. Instead, God has different days of worship for those He is calling and preparing for His Kingdom.

The weekly day of worship—the “Sabbath,” as it is called in the Bible—is not the first day of the week, Sunday, as so many assume. Instead, the Bible states that it is the seventh day of the week, Saturday. God established this day of rest from the beginning when He fashioned

the earth as we know it in six days. “And on the *seventh day* God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the *seventh day* from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the *seventh day* and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Genesis 2:2-3).

God specifically stated that “the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation” (Leviticus 23:3). The seventh day was and remains the day to rest from our regular labors and to assemble with God’s people to worship Him. Contrary to popular belief, God never blessed or sanctioned worshipping on another day of the week. This weekly day of rest and assembly to worship has never been changed by God.

When Christ came to earth, He worshipped on the seventh-day Sabbath (Luke 4:16), and this was the day upon which His disciples and the New Testament Church worshipped (Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 18:4). As one of the commandments of God (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15), the seventh-day Sabbath continues as a “perpetual covenant” and “sign” of God’s people today just as it was for ancient Israel (Exodus 31:13, 16-17). As Christ said, we must keep the commandments if we want to receive the gift of eternal life (Matthew 19:16-19; Mark 10:17-19).

In the book of Hebrews, Sabbath-keeping is spoken of as a reminder of the coming Kingdom of God. In making this con-

nection, the author speaks of the promised land, Canaan, as a type of “rest” for ancient Israel (3:7-19) and of another “rest” that the people of God might enter (Hebrews 4:1). As one of the main subjects of our prayers (Matthew 6:10) and what we seek first in our lives (verse 33), the Kingdom of God is clearly the rest we look forward to entering.

The author of Hebrews then points out that God rested on the seventh day from His creative works and that there “remains therefore a rest for the people of God” (Hebrews 4:9). The Greek word translated “rest”—*sabbatismos*—literally means ‘a Sabbath rest’ according to Louw and Nida’s *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*. The next verse then adds that anyone who enters the Kingdom will have followed God’s example of ceasing from working on the Sabbath (verse 10).

As we worship God on the seventh day of the week, we are reminded that God established the Sabbath by resting Himself when He prepared the earth for mankind and that this day also represents the future rest we anticipate in God’s Kingdom. The weekly, seventh-day Sabbath is thus an important reminder of God’s ongoing plan to invite humans to become part of His eternal family.

### **Annual holy days**

In Leviticus 23 we find the seven annual holy days of God. These “holy convocations”—commanded assemblies—outline His plan of salvation for

mankind. The fourth of these annual holy days, the Feast of Trumpets, represents the return of Christ to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The remaining holy days remind Christians of additional steps God will take to complete the plan He and the Son designed for humans from the beginning.

These holy days were observed by Christ, His disciples and the Church of the first century. Though given in the Old Testament, Jesus enhanced their Christian meaning. One of these holy days, the Feast of Tabernacles, pictures the 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth.

During this Millennium, with the Kingdom firmly established on earth, wonderful blessings will come upon all peoples who hear and respond to Christ's teaching. From the healing of physical infirmities (Isaiah 35:5-6) to abundant agricultural production (verses 2-3; Amos 9:13) to universal peace (Isaiah 9:7; 52:7; 54:10, 13), the Kingdom of God is going to be a most welcome change for earth's inhabitants. But the greatest blessing of all will be the knowledge of God that includes an invitation for everyone to become part of His family and live forever if he or she will respond to God's loving instructions (Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14).

See ["What Are the Meanings of Each of God's Festivals?"](#) to learn more about these biblical celebrations. Observing these annual holy days helps us keep God's plan for each of us and the entire

world firmly in mind.

### **Concealing the mystery**

Since the first century when Jesus' disciples explained the mystery of the Kingdom to the Church, this knowledge has gradually disappeared. Edward Gibbon, in his book *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, documents how the understanding of Christ coming to earth to establish the Kingdom of God fell out of prominence within mainstream Christianity:

"The ancient and popular doctrine of the Millennium was intimately connected with the second coming of Christ. As the works of the creation had been finished in six days, their duration in their present state, according to a tradition which was attributed to the prophet Elijah, was fixed to six thousand years. By the same analogy it was inferred that this long period of labour and contention, which was now almost elapsed, would be succeeded by a joyful sabbath of a thousand years; and that Christ, with the triumphant band of the saints and the elect who had escaped death, or who had been miraculously revived, would reign upon earth till the time appointed for the last and general resurrection. ...

"The assurance of such a Millennium was carefully inculcated by a succession of fathers from Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, who conversed with the immediate disciples of the apostles, down to Lactantius, who was a preceptor to the son of Con-

stantine. Though it might not be universally received, it appears to have been the reigning sentiment of the orthodox believers; and it seems so well adapted to the desires and apprehensions of mankind, that it must have contributed in a very considerable degree to the progress of the Christian faith.

“But when the edifice of the church was almost completed, the temporary support was laid aside. The doctrine of Christ’s reign upon earth was at first treated as a profound allegory, was considered by degrees as a doubtful and useless opinion, and was at length rejected as the absurd invention of heresy and fanaticism” (Chapter 15, “The Progress of the Christian Religion, and the Sentiments, Manners, Numbers and Condition of the Primitive Christians”).

In conjunction with the dismissal of the teaching that Christ will bring the Kingdom of God to earth, the biblical days of worship that remind us of this doctrine were likewise suppressed. Worship on Sunday replaced the seventh-day Sabbath, and holidays founded in paganism replaced the annual holy days of God. The new days of worship were given meanings connected with Jesus’ birth and resurrection.

The deception has worked so well that now a majority of people believe Christians should worship on Sunday in honor of Jesus’ resurrection, observe Christmas in honor of His birth and celebrate Easter in remembrance of His resurrection.

Eventually the deception will be revealed and the wrath of God will come “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). But for now, the mystery continues for the vast majority of people deceived by Satan (Revelation 12:9).

However, this “*mystery* which has been hidden from ages and generations . . . now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this *mystery* among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:26-27).

### **Now that you know**

As you finish reading this revelation of the mystery of the Kingdom, you are in a condition similar to that of Jesus’ disciples. After explaining the parable about the sower and seed, Jesus said to them: “But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear” (Matthew 13:16). They had been given the explanation of the mystery and now so have you.

So now that you know “the secrets of the Kingdom of God,” what will you do with this knowledge? (Luke 8:10, GNT). Your response will be one of four identified by Jesus in His parable of the sower. Carefully consider these responses people have upon hearing this hidden knowledge of the Kingdom explained to them.

“Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then

the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.

“But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

“Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.

“But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and

understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matthew 13:18-23).

If you want to be in this last category—those who bear abundant fruit that will allow them to enter the Kingdom of God—feel free to contact us. Experienced ministers will be pleased to counsel you for baptism, answer your questions and welcome you into a fellowship of believers who like Joseph of Arimathea are “waiting for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43).

We hope you will respond to this priceless opportunity. Jesus is saying to you: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

# What Are the Meanings of Each of God's Festivals?

God's annual festivals and holy days represent His plan of salvation for mankind. Though given to ancient Israel (Leviticus 23), Jesus, the disciples and the New Testament Church continued to observe these days with Christian meaning. Here is what each of these commanded assemblies represents.

**Passover**, celebrated with the killing of a lamb in the Old Testament, pointed toward Christ giving His life for our sins (1 Peter 2:24). In observing the Passover with His disciples prior to His crucifixion, Jesus instituted New Testament symbols of bread and wine to represent His broken body and shed blood. He now represents the Passover lamb. As Paul told the Church at Corinth: "Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

**The Days of Unleavened Bread** last for seven days and are observed by putting leaven and leavened products (which represent sin) out of our homes. By not eating leaven for this period of time, Christians are reminded that we must put sin out of our lives (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

**Pentecost**, which is the 50th day counted beginning with the first day of the week (Sunday) during the Days of Unleavened Bread, represents the day upon which the New Testament Church—referred to as "firstfruits" (James 1:18; Revelation 14:4)—began with the out-

pouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). After understanding that Jesus died for our sins, we must repent of our sins in order to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32). This festival also reminds us that once baptized, we must allow God's Spirit to lead us (Romans 8:8-9).

**The Feast of Trumpets** pictures the return of Jesus Christ to earth to establish the Kingdom of God (Revelation 11:15).

**The Day of Atonement** symbolizes the binding of Satan so humans will no longer be deceived by him and the demons (Revelation 20:1-3). This act prepares the world for what the next holy day represents.

**The Feast of Tabernacles**, which lasts for seven days, pictures the 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth. During this Millennium, the saints will serve as kings and priests assisting Christ in teaching humans God's way of life (Revelation 5:10). During this time of peace, humans will be healed of diseases (Isaiah 35:5-6), and the earth will become abundantly productive (verses 1-2). This celebration will continue to be observed during the Millennium (Zechariah 14:16).

**The Last Great Day** represents another period of time after the Millennium in which all humans who have ever lived without full knowledge of God's way of life will be resurrected to a physical life. These people will then be instructed in God's way and given an opportunity to respond (Ezekiel 37:14; Matthew 12:41-42).

# Who We Are

The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, Inc., is a vibrant and mission-driven community of believers living throughout the world. Our vision is to reach the ends of the earth with the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15) and to teach Christ's disciples the original, unchanging, authentic message He brought to earth (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).

## Our roots

We trace our history back to the first-century Church of God. Jesus promised that from the time He founded the Church onward through His second coming to the earth there would always be believers who understood and held to the truth.

"I will build My church," Jesus said, "and the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). While Christ promised that His Church would never die out, He also prophesied the rise of counterfeit churches throughout the ages. In comparison to these other churches, His description of the original group of disciples proved prophetic, for He called them a "little flock" (Luke 12:32). The Church of God has always remained small in comparison to others, but Christ has kept His promise: His Church has survived, and it continues today.

In the United States the Church grew rapidly and did a powerful worldwide work under the direction of Herbert Armstrong (1892-1986). Incorporated as the "Radio Church of God" and later as the "Worldwide

Church of God," Mr. Armstrong made effective use of his background in advertising as he preached the gospel through radio, television and print media.

After Mr. Armstrong's death, the leaders of the Worldwide Church of God began changing the Church's traditional doctrines and practices. This led to a large number of faithful believers gradually separating themselves to continue the faith of the first-century Church, and over time a number of Church of God organizations formed. The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, is one of several organizations tracing its roots through Herbert Armstrong.

## Our service to you

If you have questions or believe God is opening your mind to Jesus' first-century message, we have trained ministers around the world who will be pleased to counsel with you and welcome you into our congregations. Following Jesus' instruction to "freely give" what we have received (Matthew 10:8), our literature and counsel are free of charge. Our work is made possible by the tithes and offerings of members of the Church and those who voluntarily choose to support our efforts. Please contact us if we may be of assistance.

### **Church of God, a Worldwide Association, Inc.**

P.O. Box 781885

Orlando, FL 32878-1885

407-926-0171

U.S. toll-free 888-9-COGWA-9 or  
888-926-4929

**Author:** David Treybig **Editorial Reviewers:** Kevin Epps, David Johnson, Doug Johnson, Tom Kirkpatrick, Steve Moody, Greg Sargent, Richard Thompson, Don Waterhouse **Design:** Rachel Venish