

The Kingdom of Heaven Has Come (Part 2): Matthew 4:12-17

In 1965 some boys had an idea. They lived on a small Tongan island that was less than a mile wide and little more than a mile long. They wanted to see the world. They decided to sail to Fiji. So, one evening the six boys, all between the ages of 15 and 19, stole a boat from the harbor and set sail.

This is a true story¹. And I will tell you how it ends. But I am going to stop at several key points in the story for an “Emotion Check”. That is your chance to participate by naming the emotions you would be feeling at that point in the story.

Let’s try one. They just stole a boat and set sail. ***Emotion Check...***

The strong wind grew into a storm. They didn’t drop the sail, so it ripped off, leaving them adrift at sea with no food or water.

Emotion Check...

They drifted for 8 days before spotting land, which they approached for the next twelve hours. When they were near enough to swim, they abandoned the boat. On shore, they hugged, cried, prayed, and fell asleep.

Emotion Check...

When they awoke, they explored the uninhabited island, which was over 100 miles south from their home island. They squeezed water from wet wood for their first drink in 8 days. They found papaya and coconut and climbed to the high point of the island to take it all in.

Emotion Check...

It took them three months to gain the strength and skill to light their first fire. They got into a rhythm. They built a hut of woven coconut fronds. They ate mostly fish, banana, and papaya. They had regular prayer and chores. They built a bench press and carved musical instruments. They were surviving!

Emotion Check...

Time passed and nothing changed. Every day they just hoped for something good to happen. Once they built a raft in an attempt to go home, but it failed to get out to sea. They wished to get on with their lives. They were young men. They wanted to finish school, but that had to wait. They wanted to have relationships, but that had to wait. They wanted to make money, but that had to wait. Everything but their island life had to wait.

Emotion Check...

Then one day, after 15 months of waiting, one of the boys looked out to sea and cried, “a boat has come”. He dove in the water and swam. The boat crew thought his cries for help were bird sounds before they realized there was a boy in the water, and five more, with no clothes on and long hair, standing on the shore, struggling to take in the reality that this was the time they had been waiting for. They didn’t have to wait any longer.

Emotion Check...

Now take the emotion around the reality that “a boat has come” and consider Jesus’ message “the Kingdom of Heaven has come.” The coming of the boat meant that the wait was over. They could get on with their lives. The reality that the Kingdom of Heaven has come means that our spiritual wait is over. We can get on with our spiritual lives. Are you weary of being stuck in a bad spiritual place? Do you want to grow spiritually? Have you longed for a better way of doing life? What are you waiting for? ***Now is the time you have been waiting for!*** Not because it is a new year, or because you are finally strong enough, but because the Kingdom of Heaven has come.

That is the emotion and the invitation we will carry through our study of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Matthew 4:12-17.

Matthew 4:12-13 Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Here is where we pick up the story. Jesus has just emerged victorious from battle with temptation in the wilderness. In part one we focused on the genealogy and birth story of Jesus and briefly covered the ministry of John the Baptist (chapter 3) and the temptations in the wilderness. The main point was that *Jesus is the one you are looking for*. He is the Messiah and the king that the Jews were looking for. As Matthew covers the beginning of Jesus’ ministry the main point is that ***now is the time you have been waiting for***.

His Galilean ministry starts with the news that John had been arrested. Remember why? The only other reference we get to the arrest of John is in chapter 14, after he is beheaded. Matthew says that Herod arrested John because John had said that it was unlawful for Herod to have his brother’s wife. It is not clear if these are the same arrests. But we know what kind of activity gets John arrested, preaching. And he preached the gospel of the kingdom. Check it out, he preached the same exact words that Jesus was about to preach.

- **Matthew 3:1-2** In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

- **Matthew 4:17** From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Jesus knew that John was imprisoned. He knew the kind of preaching that got him there. And this is how Jesus begins his ministry. If the message of the kingdom was not vital, that would have been the time to pull out a different sermon. The message he plans to build his ministry on just got his forerunner arrested. By preaching this message under these circumstances Jesus demonstrated the nonnegotiable importance of the message of the kingdom.

Next, we see that he left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea. Capernaum was where Peter lived, and it became Jesus’ homebase in his Galilean ministry. It is a town on the Northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Nazareth was Jesus’ hometown, remember, Matthew pointed this fact out as a fulfillment of prophecy (Matthew 2:23). Nazareth is in the hill country on the northern ridge of the Jezreel Valley at 1400 feet elevation. Capernaum is “by the sea” but it is not at sea level. The Sea of Galilee is 700 feet below sea level. There is a 2100-foot elevation drop between Nazareth and Capernaum. With modern roads, it is a 30-mile drive from Nazareth to Capernaum. At the time of Christ, the path was likely just a bit less straight. So, it wasn’t a huge move, but it would have taken some effort to make the journey.

We see further indication that Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience in that he identifies Capernaum as being in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali. He locates Jesus’ new home according to the divisions of the tribes of Israel, which were not in existence by the time of Christ.

Awe, but that wasn’t the only reason. It was also another point of fulfillment for Matthew to highlight.

Matthew 4:14-16 ...so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.”

I recently shared a reflection on this passage in a podcast episode that was titled “Spiritual Sunrise”ⁱⁱ. Jesus brings spiritual light to darkness in the way that the sun brings light over a dark land. When Jesus shows up in a place, the place is transformed from light to darkness. Do you need a spiritual sunrise? Good news, the kingdom of heaven has come!

Now is the time you have been waiting for!

So, this is the setting in which Jesus begins to preach.

Matthew 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Let me share with you a little secret about preachers. We cause a lot of stress for church secretaries because we are often late to communicate our sermon information. After years of making the person in charge of printing the bulletin pry my information out of me, late in the week, I am learning to plan ahead. But it still sneaks up on me when I am a guest speaker somewhere. They need the title and the text and sometimes after I get them that information, they surprise me with asking for the title of the closing hymn. We struggle to plan ahead. We struggle to decide what we want to talk about.

In extreme contrast, heaven did not procrastinate until the last minute to decide what Jesus’ message would be when he came to earth. His sermon topics and his teaching subjects were not thrown together at the last minute. God knew exactly what he wanted to tell the world through the life of Christ.

So, when it was Jesus’ turn to preach his message it was this, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17). ***Now is the time you have been waiting for.***

The message of Jesus is about a kingdom, and Matthew picked up on that in a big way.

Let’s take his message in three pieces: 1. Repent, 2. The Kingdom of Heaven, 3. Is at Hand.

Repent

The kingdom message begins with an invitation. Don’t be offended by the command to “repent”. “Repent” is an invitation to change our way of living and to belong to the kingdom. Repentance is the entrance into the kingdom, because we don’t live the same way in this kingdom. It is countercultural and all consuming. He is inviting us to officially immigrate. To become residents of the Kingdom of Heaven and to break our ties with the kingdom of this world.

Notice what Matthew records right after Jesus shares the message of the kingdom, he calls disciples.

Matthew 4:18-22

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Since the kingdom is at hand Jesus starts inviting people into it. And “immediately they left their nets”. We can follow immediately because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. We don’t have to wait for anything else to happen before we step into the kingdom. “Repent” is our invitation to step into the kingdom.

The motivation to repent is this reality that the Kingdom of Heaven is as hand. It is something worth changing for.

The Kingdom of Heaven

The title of this message series is *Your Kingdom Come*. The message of the kingdom is the theme of our study for the next 15 weeks. We will gain a clearer idea of what the Kingdom of Heaven is with each study. But it will be helpful to start with some basic definitions. The ***Kingdom of Heaven is living with Jesus as king***. We are in the kingdom when we are with the king. When we receive the king, we are received into the kingdom. It is a real kingdom with a real king. We enter it spiritually now and physically at the second coming. It is about living under the reign, rule, and lordship of Jesus. It is not a secret society. It is living in a relationship with king Jesus. We experience the Kingdom of Heaven by living in loving relationship with king Jesus.

Matthew writes with a heavy emphasis on both the “kingdom” and “heaven”.

- We have already seen the emphasis on kingship in the genealogy and the birth story of Jesus.
- In the gospel of Matthew, the word for “heaven” (*Ouranos*) occurs 82 times and the word for “kingdom” (*basileia*) occurs 56 times.
- The phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” occurs 35 times in the book of Matthew and nowhere else in the New Testament (if you are interested in more numbers check out the end notes)ⁱⁱⁱ. This is a striking uniqueness. It means the same thing as “the kingdom of God” in other gospels, only it is Matthews unique name for it.
- There are a total of 11 parables in Matthew that begin with the words, “the kingdom of heaven is like...”.
- The kingdom is featured in many recognizable passages. See if you can fill in the blanks and answer these questions.
 - When Jesus was asked why he taught in parables he replied, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the _____” Matthew 13:11
 - Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the _____.” Matthew 19:14
 - After the rich young ruler went away sad, Jesus said to his disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the _____” Matthew 19:23
 - In the woes to the religious leaders, what was it that the scribes and Pharisees would allow anyone to enter, and would not enter themselves? It was the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew 23:13

- In establishing his church, Jesus said that the gates of hell will not prevail against it, what keys did Jesus give Peter? The keys to the kingdom. Matthew 16:18-19
- There is a gospel that will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. What gospel is that? The gospel of the kingdom. Matthew 24:14
- The central teaching discourse, the Sermon on the Mount, is a message about the kingdom. It mentions the kingdom 9 times.
 - The kingdom of heaven is the reward in two of the beatitudes (5:3,10)
 - Jesus teaches about being the greatest and the least in the kingdom of heaven. (5:19)
 - We are taught to pray, “your kingdom come”. Matthew 6:10
 - It is to God that belongs the “kingdom and the power and glory forever” Matthew 6:13
 - Instead of worrying we are to seek first his kingdom and righteousness. Matthew 6:13
- As has already been mentioned, the preaching in Matthew is about the kingdom.
 - The message of the kingdom first appears with John the Baptist’s preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2).
 - Then Jesus began to preach, and he has the same message (Matthew 4:17).
 - Later, when Jesus sent out the twelve, he gave them the same message (Matthew 10:7).

Are you getting the picture that the Kingdom of Heaven is a central theme in the gospel of Matthew? As we continue to read this gospel we will continue to be invited in to this kingdom and we will gather more descriptions on what it is like. All of this will rest on this basic understanding that the ***Kingdom of Heaven is living with Jesus as king.***

Is at hand

It is not just a message about the Kingdom of Heaven. The message is that this kingdom is “at hand”. That means that it is here! It is present! We can enter it now! ***Now is the time you have been waiting for.***

Matthew’s use of “heaven” challenges and enriches our concepts of heaven. If he were to call it the “Kingdom of God”, though it means the same thing, we would understand that God is omnipresent for we can have the Kingdom of God here. But is heaven omnipresent? If the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, here on earth, then heaven is not only a location but a lifestyle. It is not only a realm to live in but a ruler to live under. Heaven is not only future; it is at hand.

But... the Kingdom of Heaven is one of those realities that we must understand in both the categories of the “already” and the “not yet”. In saying, “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” Jesus is declaring that it is in the “already” category. But there are some wonderful elements of the kingdom that are not yet. The boys on the island were not home yet when the boat had come. But they could live like it. They could abandon their hut and their fire because they had a

new reality; already rescued but not yet home. We need to understand both realities of “already” and “not yet” to best appreciate the kingdom message.

Not Yet: We see the Kingdom of Heaven as future reality in the following verses:

- **Matthew 13:21** “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.
- **Matthew 6:10** “Your kingdom come.”
- **Matthew 8:11** “I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”
- **Matthew 16:28** “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”
- **Matthew 26:29** “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Don’t you look forward to those things, eating with Abraham. The second coming of Jesus, feasting with him in the Kingdom? The not yet is good! If you are a bit disappointed that the kingdom has come and there is still so much that is not right just remember the not yet.

Revelation 11:15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”

Already: We see the Kingdom of Heaven as present reality in the following verses:

- **Matthew 4:17** From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
- **Matthew 12:28** But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.
- **Luke 17:21** ...nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”
- **Colossians 1:13** He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

The promises of God are yet in Christ! He has given us everything we need for life and godliness! We don’t have to wait to live with Jesus as king!

So, what should we make of the already and the not yet? Both conclusions are good! First, we are invited to enter the kingdom now by our relationship with King Jesus. We can live as citizens of heaven, even while still in this world. We can develop kingdom character now. We can enjoy many kingdom blessings now. Second, there are so many more kingdom blessings to be enjoyed when Jesus comes and takes us home.

What is the already of the kingdom that you need to begin living in? What is the not yet of the kingdom that you need to hold on, to the hope of?

Think of it this way, kingdom refers to both reign and realm. It is the rulership of a king and the territory of a king. Believers are already living under the reign of King Jesus but not yet living in the realm of King Jesus. We are living under Christ's reign in the kingdom of this world.

The devil knows this. Just before Jesus appeared preaching that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 4:17), the devil had just reminded him that it wasn't his realm by showing him all the kingdoms of the world and offering them to him if he would just worship him (4:8). He was hoping to change Jesus' sermon plans and avoid the whole message of the Kingdom of Heaven. He offered the alternative that Jesus could rule over the people the easy way if he would simply share his rule with Satan. Jesus didn't take that deal. He refused a kingdom in which he is not the supreme ruler. Praise God! Because he didn't take that deal, we don't have to either. Our loyalties don't have to be divided between Christ and Satan. Satan comes at us with the kingdom temptation too. Instead of the hard path of entering the Kingdom of Heaven, we can have it all if we just bow to king Jesus and to the devil. Because Jesus refused to share his throne, we don't have to give any part of our lives to the control of Satan!

The Kingdom of Heaven has come! So, enter it. It is right here. What are you waiting for? I have lived most of my life with a messy bedroom. We moved to a new house over the summer, and we never got around to organizing our bedroom. There are so many boxes that it is easy to let important things wait. But this week I cleaned my room. It is transformational. I can find socks. A clean room saves me time. I enjoy being in my room. It lifts my attitude. There is less risk of stubbing my toe when I get up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom. I have not reformed my identity as a clean room person. I have decades of habit to undo. But having a clean room makes me want that change. What it has left me asking is, why didn't I do this sooner? And I know why. But why did I let those excuses and habits keep me from this change? If I could trust the significance of the change, I would have found a way to make the change sooner. What was I waiting for?

2 Corinthians 6:2 Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

We don't have to wait any longer to experience life in the kingdom. Sure, we have reasons, but they are not big enough reasons to delay us. The Kingdom of Heaven has come!

Now is the time you have been waiting for!

ⁱ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4adky9/shipwrecked-on-uninhabited-desert-island>

ⁱⁱ <https://speaklord.buzzsprout.com/2043226/11831553-spiritual-sunrise>

ⁱⁱⁱ **Occurrence of “Kingdom of God in Matthew:** Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 5:3; 5:10; 5:19; 5:19; 5:20; 7:21; 8:11; 8:20; 10:7; 11:11; 11:12; 13:11; 13:24; 13:31; 13:33; 13:44; 13:45; 13:47; 13:52; 14:19; 16:19; 18:1; 18:3; 18:4; 18:10; 18:23; 19:12; 19:14; 19:23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1

When we consider a few more numbers this uniqueness in Matthew’s writing becomes even more striking.

I get my numbers from my count of the following Greek words:

- The Greek word for “heaven” οὐρανός (ouranos), which occurs 278 times in the New Testament.
- The Greek word for “kingdom” βασιλεία (basileia), which occurs 163 times in the New Testament.

Matthew wrote with a special emphasis on heaven. He used *ouranos* 82 times. He also wrote with a special emphasis on the kingdom. He used *basileia* 56 times.

This leaves another 196 occurrences of “heaven” and 107 occurrences of “kingdom” in the New Testament. But outside of Matthew the two words never meet up in the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven”. However, the phrase “Kingdom of God” does make it into the rest of the New Testament on 61 occurrences.

Matthew didn’t only refer to the kingdom as the “kingdom of heaven”.

- 7 times Matthew refers to the kingdom as God’s kingdom without using the name God. Instead, he uses pronouns like your, thine, his, and your father’s. Matthew 6:10, Matthew 6:13, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 13:43, Matthew 16:28, Matthew 20:21, Matthew 26:29
- 4 times Matthew refers to the kingdom as the “Kingdom of God”. Matthew 12:28, Matthew 19:24, Matthew 21:31, Matthew 21:43.

What should we make of all of this?

- Each Biblical writer has a unique voice. Matthew’s voice is clearly heard in his unique use of “the kingdom of heaven”.
- Matthew has a special emphasis on heaven and the kingdom that should be emphasized in our reading of his gospel.
- Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience. A common understanding of why Matthew used the term “Kingdom of Heaven” was to be sensitive to his Jewish audience who had the practice of not using the names of God. I am not sure about this one since the phrase “kingdom of God” doesn’t actually use God’s name and Matthew does make an exception on four occasions. However, there is some evidence that the original text of

Matthew's gospel was written in Hebrew. In this case there would be increased sensitivity to the term the "Kingdom of God".

- There is no difference between the "Kingdom of Heaven" and the "Kingdom of God". They refer to the same kingdom in different terms.