

# JOINING JESUS ON HIS MISSION

How to Be an  
Everyday Missionary



ELGIN, IL • TYLER, TX

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We can begin by summarizing the theology this way:

*The kingdom of God* (that is, the redemptive presence and activity of God in human lives) has come into the world to work out *the mission of God* (the redeeming and restoring of human lives to the kingdom of God) through *the people of God* (the redemptive presence and activity of God made tangible to other human beings).

My car has several complex systems working together in order to allow me to drive to the store simply. In the same way, God has his complex “systems” (namely, his kingdom and his mission) working together in order to allow us (his people) to be included in his redemptive mission ... and in a way that is simple enough for any of us to participate.

Let’s take a look at each of these in turn: the kingdom of God, the mission of God and the people of God.

### HERE’S THE POINT:

How do we seek, recognize and respond to what Jesus is already doing in the lives of the people we are enjoying? We start by paying attention to what he is already showing us. He says, “Open your eyes and look,” for a reason.

## CHAPTER 8 THE KINGDOM OF GOD

*“What shall we say the kingdom of God is like?”*

—Jesus in Mark 4:30

**T**he mission of God is to redeem and restore all people to himself and is ignited and unleashed by the arrival of the kingdom of God into the created world first through Jesus and now through us.

Huh?

I know. Let’s start unpacking this with an overview of what Jesus teaches us about the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is what Jesus came to announce, display and open up to all who would receive it.

Jesus indicates that the kingdom of God is already coming into our community each day and yet will not come in fullness until the last day. Jesus wants us to know that the kingdom is in play all around us, even though we may not get a direct look at it with our eyes. And yet Jesus still speaks of the kingdom as a present and redemptive reality that we can seek and find (Matthew 7:7). It is among us (Luke 17:21). It is within reach of us (Mark 12:34). It is messing with us (Matthew 13:33).

With the arrival of Jesus who is the king, the invisible kingdom of heaven is now coming into the created realm of earth ... breaking in ...

taking root ... taking over (Mark 3:27). The work of this kingdom is to reclaim and restore all created things (Revelation 21:5) but Jesus wants us to know that this "taking over" does not look like what the world would expect (Matthew 20:25). The restoration is taking root quietly (Mark 4:26-27) in the hearts of people (Mark 4:20), usually in little ways that can easily be underestimated (Matthew 13:31) but that will prove to be decisive and transforming in God's good time (Matthew 25:40).

And Jesus invites us to seek it first of all (Matthew 6:33).

When Jesus got himself born into our world, he brought his Father's kingdom with him. That means the kingdom is already in. Already happening. Already occurring right before our eyes. And we can see it if we seek it. In fact, Jesus says, the more we seek the more we will see (Matthew 7:8) and the more we see the more he can show us (Matthew 13:12). On the other hand, Jesus warns us that the kingdom can also be missed. Yes, it will be occurring right before our eyes, but will we recognize the activity we see as that of the kingdom (Luke 10:11)? Jesus warns us about being like so many who will "be ever seeing but never perceiving" (Matthew 13:14). In other words, there is a real danger that we will see what is, in fact, the activity of the kingdom of God right before our eyes but not recognize it (perceive it) as such. That's Jesus' warning. His *invitation* is for us to seek and recognize what is already happening, to watch for what is already occurring, to take note of what he is already doing in the lives of people around us.

And to join him.

Now, what does all this *mean*?

The announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God is the stump speech of Jesus (Mark 1:15). It is what Jesus travels around

teaching and displaying throughout the Gospels (Matthew 4:23). He uses the terms *kingdom*, *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of heaven* (all synonymous) over 100 times in the Gospels. If we are going to understand what Jesus was saying and doing in the Gospels, we need to understand what he meant by this term.

And what *does* he mean by it?

A working definition for us could be:

The kingdom of God is the redemptive presence and activity of God in human lives.

To say it simply, the kingdom of God is God himself. Wherever God is present and active, his kingdom is present and active. So, in the beginning when God created the physical universe, and people particularly, we were created to live with God and be in a loving relationship with God (Genesis 1-2). And *living with God* is what especially the New Testament means by *living in the kingdom of God* (Colossians 1:13).

Unfortunately, by the third chapter of Genesis, this relationship was already broken and ruined by human beings through unfaithful rebellion (sin) and we were excluded from his kingdom.

So, what would God do?

He put into play a plan to redeem and restore the created universe, and people particularly, to himself – or, as the New Testament would say it, to his kingdom. This plan of redemption and restoration is the mission of God. However, until Jesus arrived into our world the kingdom of God would be out of reach for human beings. Thus, as we start working our way through the Old Testament, God's redemption and restoration of all things is a *promise* of what would come to pass

*someday*. In the Old Testament the kingdom of God was most often described as being beyond us in the heavens or separated from us sinners in the Holy of Holies.

For instance, in Psalm 103:19 it says, "The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all." At this point in the plan's timeline, the kingdom was described as the reign of God *over* us in the created world. This was an awesome proclamation. But because of our sin, it was also as fearsome to us as it was awesome (for example, think about Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19). At this point on the timeline of God's redemptive mission, the kingdom was awesome, fearsome and out of our reach.

However, in the New Testament, the Gospels begin announcing a new season in God's redemptive plan. It was a season that had been foretold from the beginning, but it was just now coming to pass in real time. The kingdom of God was now literally entering the created world through the incarnation of God himself in the man, Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, God got himself born into our created world in order to accomplish his own mission of redeeming and restoring all things to himself and to his kingdom.

John 1:14 describes in a straightforward way how God inaugurated this new season of redemption himself, "The Word [God] became flesh and made his dwelling among us." God got himself in. And, so, the promise of what God *would* do to redeem and restore his created world was what God was now *actually doing*. In other words, game-on! He no longer simply reigned *over* the created world fearsomely; he had now entered *into* the created world redemptively.

When Jesus then began his public ministry around the age of 30, his stump speech centered on this new season of redemption which

he was launching. This stump speech is preserved for us in Mark 1:15, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" What was perhaps most striking about Jesus' announcement of God's kingdom was that its coming was no longer fearsome to sinners (like it was on Mt. Sinai) but "good news" to sinners.

This "good news of the kingdom" is what Jesus went around unpacking in his teaching and displaying in his miracles (Matthew 4:23). This is what he disciplined his followers to imitate and replicate (Mark 1:17, Luke 8:1, 9:1, 10:1, and Matthew 28:19-20). This "good news of the kingdom" excited and mobilized the outcast and marginalized while at the same time causing the religious elite to plot his murder. In the end, the reason Jesus' goal was to go to the cross was so that he could once and for all open the kingdom of God to all who would simply receive it – that is, receive the *full redemption and restoration of God*.

Good news, indeed.

It's all there in Jesus' stump speech. So, let's take a closer look at his announcement.

Jesus starts by saying, "*The time has come.*"

The word *time* is translated from the Greek word *kairos*. In Greek, there are two words commonly translated as *time*. One word is *chronos* which refers to the normal passing of time. This is the word which comes to us in the word *chronology*. But Jesus uses the other Greek word for time, *kairos*, which refers to an appointed time, a time anticipated and prepared for which is now here. What Jesus is saying is that the time for prophecies, promises and preparations is now complete. The season of waiting and hoping is over. The time has now arrived for fulfillment,

for action and activation of the foretold season of redemption. From this time forward, everything will be different for our created world.

And what will be different from this time forward?

*"The kingdom of God is near."*

Jesus announces to all who would receive it that, from this moment forward, the kingdom of God is no longer unattainable to us up in the heavens or separated from us sinners behind the temple curtain in the Holy of Holies as it had been from of old. From now on, heaven has come to earth. There is now overlap. Intersection. Invasion. The kingdom has arrived. The kingdom has come and is now on the loose in our very midst. It is at hand, within reach, very near to each of us.

For what purpose? To begin what God had promised from the beginning: the reversal of what has become of the created world since its fall and ruin in Genesis 3. From the day of Adam, ruin had been spreading throughout the created world because of the rebellious activity of people. From now on, however, Jesus was putting into motion God's rescue mission of restoring people and making all things new as is celebrated in redemption's final triumph in Revelation 21.

And Jesus – standing in Galilee, making this announcement in Mark 1:15 – is literally the physical epicenter of this God-movement of restoration being unleashed. God's restoration arrived *in* Jesus and then got loose *through* Jesus. His restoration is not yet complete, but it is already spreading widely. Think of it like ripples on a pond that spread out from where a stone hits the water. The ripples have not yet reached the outer edges of the pond, but they are spreading and *will* reach the edges in due time. It is assured because the stone has already hit the water setting the ripples in motion. Think of it like a pinch of yeast that spreads out and permeates a loaf. The pinch of yeast has

not yet reached throughout the loaf, but it is spreading and *will* reach throughout the loaf in due time. It is assured because the pinch of yeast has already been inserted into the loaf setting the yeast's permeation in motion.

In both instances, completion is assured, a done-deal, a slam-dunk because the stone has been thrown and the yeast has been inserted. It has started, it is happening, and it will be complete in due time.

So it is with God's rescue mission of redemption and restoration. From the moment Jesus threw the stone of his announcement in Galilee and then permanently inserted the yeast of redemption into the created world through his death and resurrection, completion was assured, a done-deal, a slam-dunk. God's restoration has not yet reached *throughout* the created world, but it has begun and is spreading and it *will* reach throughout the created world in due time. The ripples of restoration are going out to more and more people even now; the yeast of restoration is permeating more and more lives as we speak. All this was unleashed as Jesus launched his public ministry with the words, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near."

In Luke 4:16-21 we are introduced to this same "unleashing" in another way. Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth and stood up to read a 700 year old prophecy from Isaiah. For 700 years the people of God had heard this prophecy. It recorded what God had promised to do; had committed to do; would *certainly* do ... someday.

Luke explains that when Jesus was handed the scroll, he found the passage he was looking for in Isaiah 61 and began to read it. "The Spirit of the LORD is on me," Jesus read, "because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the

oppressed, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor." This prophecy promised that someday God would unleash his redemption. Someday God would inaugurate the great reversal of the fall and ruin of his created world. Someday ...

Having finished reading what God had been promising for 700 years, Jesus rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant and sits down. Luke records that the eyes of everyone in the room were fastened on Jesus. And that's when Jesus announces it: "Today ... *starting now* ... this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

In other words, *game-on*.

No more promising or waiting. From now on the words of Isaiah were unleashed and in play. From now on, Jesus said, redemption is on the loose. The full restoration of all things is in motion. The Spirit of God is on the move in the created world and will not be turned back until all things are made new.

"*From this time forward*," Jesus said to them, "*game-on*."

Luke and Mark end up in the same place. Mark 1:15, "*The time has come*," the time for waiting and hoping is complete. "*The kingdom of God is near*," from this time forward, the kingdom of God is in the world and in play. Game-on!

Which brings us to the final phrase Jesus uses in Mark 1:15. The phrase is intended to focus us on our response to his announcement: "*Repent and believe the good news!*" In other words, "What I want you to do in response to this announcement is repent and believe this good news!" When we hear the word *repent* we may think it means something like *stop doing naughty things*. And, indeed, we should stop doing naughty things. But the Greek word which is translated here as *repent* is the word *meta-noeo* which is much bigger than *stop doing*

*naughty things*. Literally *meta-noeo* means a *changing of the mind* which is accompanied by a correspondingly *changed direction of life*.

In other words, Jesus is inviting us to completely reorient our minds and lives *around* this new reality of the kingdom being redemptively present and active around us. He is saying, "Reorient your thinking and presumptions around it. Reorient your values and priorities around it. Reorient how you interpret what you are seeing and hearing around it. And believe this good news I am telling you."

In chapter eleven I will show you how to do this in some very practical ways. But for now how does all this make joining Jesus on his mission simple for us? The pressure is off! Jesus doesn't send us to do these things *for* him; he invites us to come do these things *with* him. The kingdom has come and is on the move missionally. Jesus is already doing all the truly complicated work. All we have to do is enjoy the people he has put around us and pay attention to what Jesus might be up to in their lives.

It's called "seeking first the kingdom of God," (Matthew 6:33). We can do this.

Think of how your day could go tomorrow if you took up the practice of "seeking the kingdom." Tomorrow you will probably wake up and prepare for your day as usual. Perhaps you'll shower and have some breakfast. Hopefully you'll take some time to *meta-noeo* (reorient your mind) around the good news that the kingdom will be on the move around you today.

Then what?

As we walk out our front door and into the new day, we can have two simple questions on our mind: "Jesus, what are you up to today?" And then, "How would you have me join you?"

You see, as we head into our new day, we can have great confidence that the kingdom has already come and the missional presence and activity of Jesus is already in play. We don't have to worry about how to get Jesus into our offices, classrooms or neighborhoods. He's already on the move there. We don't have to concern ourselves with how Jesus will ripen people for their next-step toward faith. He's already on it.

All we really have to do is look for what Jesus is already showing us. In other words, seek the kingdom. Look for what is already happening.

And join in.

### HERE'S THE POINT

The kingdom of God is God himself and came into the created world through Jesus. When Jesus arrived here, he unleashed the promised season of world redemption. It is happening now. Wherever God is redemptively present and active his kingdom is at work. We can seek it, recognize it and join with it.

## CHAPTER 9 WHAT DOES THE KINGDOM OF GOD LOOK LIKE?

*"Therefore every teacher ... who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."*

— Jesus in Matthew 13:52

So, if we can seek and find the activity of the kingdom of God around us, the next question is, "What does it look like?"

Certainly God "shows" us his kingdom in various ways. For instance, whenever we go by a church building, we have a pretty good idea that the kingdom of God is near because wherever God's Word and sacraments are being offered, the kingdom of God is redemptively operational. That's simple enough to "see." Likewise, it's not too hard to "see" the kingdom's presence and activity when we see a person's "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control," (Galatians 5:22-23). Paul calls this the fruit (or evidence) of the Spirit's presence and activity in a human life.

Jesus also says in John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In other words, if you see a Jesus-follower loving others you are seeing and recognizing evidence that the kingdom is present and active through the person. Again, simple enough to "see."



However, what about everyone else? What does the kingdom of God look like when it is present and active in the life of someone living *without* the good news of the kingdom? When someone doesn't yet know, or understand or believe the kingdom has come and redemption is theirs? What does the kingdom look like when it is still ripening someone *toward* redemption?

It will usually look like human need. It will look like where love, hope or redemption are *needed*. We can look around and ask ourselves, "Where can grace be applied? Where can a little love and truth make a difference?"

For those living *within* the kingdom, love is the evidence of the redemption the kingdom has brought. For those living *without* the kingdom, human need is the evidence that the kingdom is near and working toward *bringing* redemption.

We learn to seek and recognize the kingdom in this way by watching Jesus in the Gospels. He recognizes the human need around him and begins to respond to it. Think about how often we see Jesus pressing in and coming near to those in need. There were those who had physical needs, like those who needed healing or food. But there were also those who had spiritual, emotional and relational needs as well.

- Nicodemus in John 3 asking the hard questions he was wrestling with
- The woman at the well in John 4 entangled in toxic relationships and religion
- The disciples in Matthew 18 arguing over who was the greatest

- The woman in Mark 5 suffering from both an issue of blood and the rejection of her community
- The crowds in Matthew 9 who were harassed and helpless but also ready for good news
- The man in Mark 9 who needed faith but could not yet muster faith
- The man in Mark 12 who had right answers but not yet right understanding
- The rich young ruler in Luke 18 who wavered between the kingdom and his stuff, the fulfilment he sought and the sadness for which he settled
- The woman caught in adultery in John 8 who very nearly threw her life away for fleeting pleasure

Human need. The places where redemption is still needed.

By seeing their various needs, Jesus recognized where the kingdom was at work in them and he recognized that they were actually ready for him to respond.

The bottom line is this: if we see a need for redemption and restoration in a human being, whatever it might be, we can recognize that the kingdom of God is nearby and active. Why? *Because that's where Jesus will be.* Remember, Jesus is on a mission. Redemption is what Jesus does. We don't have to wonder if he is ready to respond to the need. So we watch for what he is already showing us. "What is Jesus up to today? Where can grace be applied?" We can do this with strangers along life's way. But what if we regularly did this with people within our relational reach?

By the way, seeing what Jesus is showing us in our daily life is not done through magic or mysticism. It's done through the Gospels. By reading the Gospels over and over again, we can watch what Jesus has already shown us and listen to what Jesus has already told us. What Jesus did in the Gospels he is still doing today. What Jesus said in the Gospels he's still saying today. The more we watch and listen to Jesus in the Gospels the more we will recognize what we are seeing and hearing from him in our daily life.

"For everyone who seeks finds," Jesus says (Matthew 7:8). "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," (Mark 4:9).

Sometimes "seeking and finding" is easy. The need is obvious. The pain is clear. Like the beaten man lying on the road in the story of the Good Samaritan. If we came across such a man, we would literally have to step around the person to avoid him. However, because Jesus is showing the person to us, maybe instead of avoiding them, we could respond to them.

I was out cutting my lawn this last July during the hottest part of the day. Not smart in League City, Texas. So I was taking a water break in the shade of my garage trying to cool off. As I stood there, I noticed one of my neighbors walking by on the sidewalk in the hot summer sun. Folks don't usually do that in Texas. As she came closer I could see that she was noticeably upset. I knew this woman. She's one of my neighbors. Something was wrong. It was easy to recognize that the kingdom of God would be nearby. I was there. She was walking by with a lot on her mind.

Coincidence? I don't believe in coincidences any more. Only God-incidences. So I called out to her.

She was a little startled to realize someone was nearby. She hadn't noticed me. She was also a little embarrassed to be discovered in her angst. However, God knew how this needed to go. The details are not important. Suffice it to say that she needed someone to ask how she was doing and to be willing to listen. We ended with a prayer on the sidewalk and some hope.

"Seeing" the kingdom was pretty simple in that case.

Often it is not as obvious. Most of us have become very good at keeping our hearts hidden. People make it hard for us to see what is actually going on inside of them. (I know I can be pretty good at hiding my heart ... how about you?) However, if we continue to be with people, and enjoy them as we are seeking and listening, eventually even those who are good at hiding will show us where Jesus is at work in their life.

During my college summers, I worked for an offshore drilling company. Oil companies hired us to drill their oil wells. After we drilled the hole, they came in and started pumping the oil. One summer, the drilling business wasn't doing very well. Instead of our rig being in Alaska or the Gulf of Mexico drilling, it was sitting idle in the mouth of the Sabine River. We had a skeletal crew on the rig that summer, just enough people to keep it maintained and to protect it from anyone who might want to walk off with some free scrap metal.

The rig boss announced he needed a couple crew members to work the night shift. Whoever was chosen wouldn't need to do much maintenance. Mostly they needed to guard the rig from bad guys coming on board. Since I am such a big strong menacing man (this is said with a sarcastic tone), I was somehow chosen to be one of the two night watchmen.

The other man was Joe. Joe really was a big strong menacing man.

We looked like a comedy team—only it wasn't funny. He was about six feet, four inches tall and weighed about 230 pounds. He never smiled. Ever.

I was maybe five foot, ten inches tall with my boots on and weighed about 160 pounds right after a really big meal. And I smiled. A lot. Especially when I got nervous.

Back then I wouldn't have had the vocabulary to describe it this way, but the "kingdom of God" was definitely up to something by putting Joe and me together that summer.

Joe was angry, harsh, bitter, cynical and ... did I mention he was angry?

And I got to spend 12 hours every night with Joe drinking coffee and hearing what he was angry about. At first I just tried to endure it. Then I started listening more carefully. Behind all the sarcasm and cynicism and foul language was a lot of hurt. Eventually, I figured something out. Joe was a person. And in between all of Joe's harsh words and attitudes was a guy wondering if there was any hope, any justice, any way to somehow get past the grinding disappointments he had endured.

Joe was absolutely not interested in anything having to do with church or religion. Of course, after I heard some of his stories, I couldn't blame him. If what had happened to him had happened to me, I would be angry and cynical, too. Over time, Joe found out I was someone who followed Jesus. And while, at first, that was a target for some of his church-focused anger, eventually I was able to help him untangle the difference between Jesus and what he had experienced at the hands of church people. I never did make much progress with Joe on the subject

of church, but he did start asking more questions about Jesus. Very early on, I realized that I couldn't fix Joe and that he didn't want fixing. But as I simply watched and listened, (again, I didn't have this vocabulary back then) I realized the kingdom of God was nearby and active around Joe's anger, swagger and pain.

Joe and I became friends that summer. He still could be gruff and still shot profanity at me whenever he was complaining about my various shortcomings. But the deepest pain Joe had been carrying around seemed to diminish. Peace occasionally showed itself on his face as we talked about God's grace and about better ways to live in a messed up world. And from time to time Joe even smiled. It wasn't pretty but at least it was a smile.

I never saw Joe again after that summer. I don't know if he ever came to trust Jesus or not. I know that by the end of that summer, he still hadn't. However, I also know that the kingdom intersected Joe's life that summer in a way that began its redemptive work in him. The work wasn't complete, but the stone was thrown. The yeast was inserted. The kingdom had come to Joe and started him on his journey of redemption and restoration.

All I had to do was notice.

And join in. That's why joining Jesus on his mission is simple for us.

"What's Jesus up to today? Where can grace be applied?"

## HERE'S THE POINT

If we see a need in a human being we can recognize that the kingdom of God is nearby and active. That is what Jesus invites us to look for, recognize and respond to.