

THE STORY
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KINGDOM

*A Brief Narrative to Set the
Stage for the Gospel of Jesus*

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD

You want to know more about God and you're interested in being an apprentice to Jesus, but you're not sure how it all works. How does being a disciple of Jesus impact your *actual life* here and now? This study is designed to help you answer that question! But before we go further, let's talk about the kingdom of God because God's kingdom is foundational. By better understanding the kingdom of God, you'll be able to place how Jesus fits in the world—and make sense of your life too.

When we talk about “kingdom of God” and following Jesus, many people jump straight into the New Testament—those 27 books of the Bible about Jesus—but in our world today we need some additional context first. If we don't address the whole story, we'll miss the real Jesus for a figment of our imagination. It's like trying to get to know someone today without knowing where they're from. If you see only a snapshot of their life, you won't be able to understand them. But if you learn their story—and their family's story too—you can place someone in context and understand who they are. By knowing the story of God leading up to the life of Jesus, we can better understand Jesus' purpose on the earth, his call to follow him, and his plan for our lives.





Act **1** *An Invitation to Rule*

When Jesus started going public, he told everyone a special time had just come. He said that *the kingdom of God had come near*, but what exactly did he mean by that? From the very first pages of the Bible we begin to see the answer to the question “What is the kingdom of God?”

Let’s start in the book of Genesis, which means “the beginning.” In the beginning, we learn that God invited the first man, Adam, to rule with him over the newly formed creation in a place called the Garden of Pleasure (which is what “Eden” means). God said, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. *Rule over* the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” This applied also to the first-ever woman, named Eve. At this, we start getting at the mean-

ing of the “kingdom of God.” The kingdom of God is the power of God as it becomes evident in the world around us. When God told Adam to “rule,” he was inviting him to participate in his power and rule in the world. At the time, they had only plants and animals to rule over, but God—who had created the fishes of the seas, the birds of the air, and all the land animals in the world—was inviting Adam and Eve to join what he was doing in the world. When God said to Adam, “Rule the world with me,” he was calling him to participate in his kingdom. Through Jesus he offers that invitation to us too.

But things have changed since the beginning when all this started, so it’s a little more complicated now. While God has always wanted to share his kingdom with us, we have a major challenge now: a tyrant named Satan, also known as the Great Deceiver, who tries to destroy us just as he has tried to do from the beginning.



Act 2 *The Great Deceiver Rises*

From the beginning, God left Adam and Eve a choice in the middle of the Garden of Pleasure—quite literally—in the form of two trees. They could eat from the Tree of Life but not from the Tree of the Experience of Good and Evil. By eating from the second tree, they would personally experience both good and evil and eventually die. At first, they followed God’s instructions and only ate from the Tree of Life. They were enjoying their life with God, working with him and ruling over every living thing, but they soon turned their gaze toward the Great Deceiver.

Taking the form of a sly snake, the Great Deceiver tricked them into rebelling against God: they ate fruit from the forbidden tree. This is the first Big Mistake, and it started the rest of humanity on a downward spiral that is often called “the Fall,” because in this one Big Mistake, humanity tripped up, and it affects us all even to-

day. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, it was more than a little mistake, a mere slip up, or an inconsequential error; when they took the fruit, they rebelled against God and submitted to the new world order of the Great Deceiver.

This is not just their story, though; it’s our story too—every one of us.

That’s why one of Jesus’ main men named Paul wrote in the Bible, “You [too] were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you *followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air.*” Paul’s point here is that the Big Mistake of Adam and Eve goes beyond just messing up or missing what we aimed for. It’s called “sin,” and it means we have rejected God’s reign and submitted to another ruler. It’s a battle of two kingdoms you could say. Paul goes on by saying, “All of us . . . lived among [these people] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.” This just goes to show



that no one is exempt from rebellion. We all took the invitation to fulfill our desires through God as he designed it in the Garden of Pleasure and we traded it in for satisfying our own warped desires.

So what can we do about this? Not much—at least not much on our own. But God initiated a plan to get us out of our mess, and it started to get traction through a man named Abraham.

Act **3** *The Great Promise*
 God knew we all needed help—and we needed it badly—because humanity kept failing, being tricked by the Great Deceiver away from the path God intended us to live. This thing called sin goes beyond our actions and has become part of our very being. The result is what is often called “the flesh” in the Bible—flesh refers to the desires for evil that exist even in our bodies. This doesn’t mean that our bodies are bad, just that they are brimming with evil when we’re left to our own devices. The De-

ceiver has a heyday when we’re living only according to what our bodies want. He’s a tyrant, someone who doesn’t rest until he takes total control of our lives for his own sake, not sparing our souls.

The ultimate consequence of all this is death, which is inevitable for all of us upon physical death since we no longer have access to the Tree of Life that Adam and Eve once enjoyed. The question is not whether life will be hard, because it will be hard. It’s not whether we will die, because we will die one day. These things are certain. The real question is will we truly live?

In the first book of the Bible called Genesis, God saw something admirable in a man named Abraham—his heart-felt loyalty to God. So God vowed to bless him and make him into a great nation. God gave him a challenge that required boldness:

“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your



name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

This is when the story really starts to take off and the kingdom of God begins to take shape. Did you notice that God made a promise to Abraham that his family would be a *great nation*? Nations rule on the earth, you know. This is the first sure sign of a kingdom-of-God plan. God tells Abraham, who became the father of the Jews that “all peoples on the earth will be blessed through you.” When God said this, he meant that families on earth would find true life only through his plan with Abraham. That promise to Abraham was ultimately fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

Notice, though, that God made a kingdom promise to Abraham, not just an individual plan of salvation. Remember that God said to him, “I will make you into a *great nation*.” That’s not a promise to just one

person so they can be religious and have a good afterlife. It’s the promise of a nation—also known as a kingdom—that includes the here and now and expands into the hereafter. Every nation has three things: a leader, land, and a law. God was their leader and soon he would give them land and a law. But the question for them was this: Would they continue following him after they became a nation?

Act 4

The Birth of a Nation

So when do we see God’s promise of a nation really take shape?

Well the nation God promised to Abraham was formed over hundreds of years, believe it or not, and was birthed through the crucible of slavery in Egypt. Abraham’s son Isaac had a son named Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes of Israel. Now, Jacob’s name was changed to “Israel,” so when we talk about the twelve tribes of *Israel*, we’re talking about Jacob’s twelve sons who multiplied and whose families grew



so large that they became known as the nation of Israel.

The twelve sons of Jacob eventually made their home in Egypt due to a famine, and that's how they became the twelve tribes of Israel. They started in Egypt and had an "in" with the king of Egypt because their brother Joseph was one of his top officials in the country. As time passed, a new King of Egypt, who didn't know this new nation, rose to power. So the nation of Israel became slaves and served Egypt as such for over 400 years.

But that fate was not what God promised to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob; he had promised a great nation.

As the oppression of slavery worsened, the Jews began to cry out to God for salvation. God listened and sent Moses, whose name means "to draw out." That's what happened to God's people: God drew them out of slavery in Egypt and led them to their Promised Land. Through ten miracles of

deliverance (which came to be known as the Ten Plagues) God drew his people out of Egypt and led them through the desert, where he tested them and gave them their playbook as a nation called "the Law."

The Law laid out the boundaries and parameters of citizenship in God's kingdom, including the Ten Commandments. But before God gave them the Law, he spoke a message of love, identity, and freedom over them. While they had spent the first three months of their liberation complaining, doubting, and questioning God—I mean they did just spend 40 years in the desert!—God didn't take it personally. That's why, in the book of Exodus, God spoke words of life and deliverance to his people. He said,

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole



earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Wow, notice how he called them back to his original intent: to be a great nation, to be a kingdom. God was making good on his promise, but would they do their part? Notice that God didn’t *make them* do anything but *invited them* to participate; he gave them a choice when he said, “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant . . .” But would they fully obey him?

Act 5 *The Development of the Kingdom*

Well they did their best for sure. They made it to the Promised Land, set up camp, and eventually built a temple and settled down. They had kings and prophets and priests—the whole nine yards. Really they did a decent job, considering their circumstances, but had they truly become a “great nation” as God had promised they would become? Did they fulfill their end of the bargain?

If anyone served as a poster child of Israel, it was king David. He was the best of the best of the best, so if they were going to fulfill their part of the deal, it would have been through people like him. Until his reign, no king of Israel had done as well as king David. He was a warrior and sensitive too; he was a creative musician and poet and he was street smart too; he was humble yet powerful too. What more could you ask for? And on top of that, he knew God personally. In fact, God said that David was perfectly aligned with his heart.

But even David had his mistakes, which eventually led to his downfall—the trickle-down effect eventually toppled the nation too. At the peak of his reign, he sinned by committing adultery. Even worse, he killed the woman’s husband to cover up for it. Then late in his life, he let power get to his head, and he made another mistake that led to the death of thousands of his people.



Where did this type of corruption start? It started even before David took the throne. In fact, God knew it was going to happen. He actually said as much when Israel asked for their first king:

“This is what the king who will reign over you will do,” and then he describes all the things that will happen: “He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

In this quotation, God was saying that their kings would have power but not know how to rule with ultimate justice and fairness. They would make mistakes—sometimes big mistakes. This is exactly what happened with king after king in Israel. Each one took the throne but spoiled it by an abuse of power. As the life of David, who

was the best king they ever had, shows, they never really got it right. They failed to live up to what God asked of them when they first became a free nation.

God had explained to Samuel, one of his main messengers back then, what would happen when the people asked for a king of their own making. He said, “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you.”

Israel’s continual choice to reject God and do things their own way eventually led to their demise. They didn’t want to live the way God wanted, so God gave them what they asked for: a life without him. If the Exodus was their journey out of slavery, their journey back to slavery was called the Exile.



Act **6** *The Exile of Israel*

Long after King David was gone, the Twelve Tribes of Israel divided into two kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. But, in the words of Jesus, “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.” Eventually, they were taken captive by foreign invaders, which marked their end as a nation. Just like with Egypt, they lived in Assyria and Babylon as slaves. First, the ten tribes of the north were taken into exile in Assyria; then, the remaining two tribes of the south were taken into Babylon as slaves. Their captors left no one except a few farmers to take care of the ground.

The Bible says that the Spirit of God left their land. According to the messenger Ezekiel, “The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.” The kingdom as they knew it had collapsed. All that re-

mained were vestiges of a holy nation and remnants of God’s people.

While some remained in the land, the majority of them—the rulers, the leaders, and all the people who held any real power—had been extracted from the Promised Land. For hundreds of years, even with hints of return from exile and rumors of repatriation, no real evidence—even today—suggests that Israel ever fully and finally returned from Exile into the Promised Land. They became alienated from God, people without a place and without power—without the presence of God.

They longed for God’s return to his people and the Spirit of God to rest on his holy place. They wanted back their identity as God’s chosen people, but when they cried out, they heard only faint whispers of a time when God called them, “My beloved.” All that was left of the tapestry of God’s promises were fragments of beauty shattered on the ground.

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Act 7 *The Return of the King*

But God remembered his promise. While his people had failed, God remained faithful. As a first-century Christian poet wrote, “If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” Just when the sight of the kingdom of God had faded into the night, a new light pierced the darkness: the Son of God was born. His name was Jesus. He came onto the scene of Israel’s brokenness and announced that a new world order had arrived. They had all gone their own way, but Jesus came with a message of hope. He announced, *God’s reign has returned! Stop going your own way and trust me on this. A new day has dawned, and it’s right around the corner.*

Jesus was announcing the kingdom of God, which is the actual reign of God in our lives—here and now. You can begin identifying what the kingdom of God is by answering this question, “What would this place look like if God were in control?”

That’s what Jesus showed us throughout his life. He showed us not just with his death and miraculous resurrection from death but also with his entire life. When Jesus said that the kingdom of God is now at hand, he was saying that we could now participate in God’s original plan. Jesus called it “everlasting life,” which means vitality that begins at our spiritual birth and continues forever.

Jesus didn’t promise a pie in the sky; he offered us true life as it’s meant to be lived on this earth—and in the next life too. We all had found a way to satisfy our desires apart from God, but through Jesus we can find our real satisfaction in God and in his way of life. Jesus not only died and rose from the dead but he also showed us how to truly live. In Jesus we no longer have to be a slave to our bodies’ desires and follow the tyranny of the Great Deceiver. Our real desires are fulfilled in God through Jesus.

Through Jesus we can unlearn the ways of this world—which are not working for us



anyway—and become apprentices to his way of life, where we live as God intended from the beginning, ruling over creation with him. That’s the life Jesus offered us all when he said, *Change your ways and trust me; the kingdom of God is right around the corner*. That’s why we become disciples: to join the actual reign of God through total surrender and obedience to Jesus. He satisfies us with the fruit of the Tree of Life we were always meant to enjoy.

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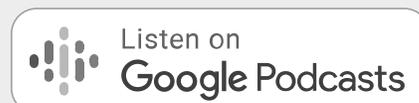
Citations from top to bottom: Mark 1:15; Genesis 1:28; Ephesians 2:1-2; Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:4-6; Acts 13:22; 1 Samuel 8:11-18, 7-9; Mark 3:25; Ezekiel 11:23; Jeremiah 11:15; 2 Timothy 2:13.

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