

# The kingdom of God: Beautiful feet

## Session one

Announcing the reign of God

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Below are key concepts (“take-aways”) and background material to help guide your group’s discussions.

### INTRODUCTION

**Key take-away:** Jesus frequently talks about what English-language Bibles commonly call “the kingdom of God.” What he says about this phenomenon is termed “good news.”

**Purpose:** To explore examples of the widely-used phrase “kingdom of God (or heaven).” Here are the (upside-down) missing words from the verses:

a. repent; b. someone who is rich; c. little children;  
d. death; e. world; f. paradise; g. righteousness;  
h. peace, joy; i. blood; j. darkness; k. power.

### KINGDOM OF GOD AND OTHER EXPRESSIONS

**Key take-away:** “Kingdom of heaven” (in Matthew) and “eternal life” (in John) are alternative expressions for the “kingdom of God.” These exemplified an effort by the early church to adapt religious language in ways that were sensitive to cultural concerns..

**Purpose:** To invite participants to discuss ways that some contemporary churches attempt to do what churches did in the New Testament period (adapt language to be culturally sensitive).

### REIGN OF GOD, RULE OF GOD

**Key take-away:** The phrase “kingdom of God” (and related expressions) in our English-language Bibles does not refer to a location but to an activity: the phenomenon of God ruling or reigning, whenever and wherever that may be.

**Purpose:** To prompt participants to consider (or re-consider) the meaning of biblical passages when the “kingdom of God” is understood as an activity rather than (primarily) as a location. In Matthew 6:33 (“Seek first the kingdom of God...”), Jesus probably does not mean that our first priority in life is to make certain we will go to heaven when we die. Rather, our first priority is to live a life ruled by God (living, with God’s help, the way God wants). Everything else will fall into place.

### WHAT CHURCH LEADERS LEARN AT SEMINARY ABOUT THE “KINGDOM OF GOD”

In terms of content, the most prominent topic addressed by Jesus in the New Testament is the imminence and certainty of God’s rule. Jesus often uses “kingdom of God” (or “kingdom of heaven”) to describe the sphere of God’s influence and power, a phenomenon that cannot be restricted by time and space. According to Jesus, the “kingdom of God” (a phrase that can also be translated “rule of God” or “reign of God”) is not just in heaven or in the future but is a reality to be experienced here and now. When Jesus says, “The kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15), he means something like, “God is ready and willing to rule our lives—right here, right now.” But that is not all there is to it; the kingdom also has a future dimension, and the New Testament presents Jesus as speaking of this as well.

There will be a final judgment at which Jesus himself will preside and human beings will either be granted access to eternal bliss or condemned to everlasting punishment, depending on their status relative to God and to Jesus himself. Jesus indicates that the blessings of the future kingdom are for those who believe in him and who are faithful to him in word and deed.

— Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2018), p. 81.

For example, what [might] God's will be for me with regard to finances? It's not easy to tell, because *sometimes* God gives people in the Bible much more, yet at *other times* God tells people to give all their money away. So, before putting God in charge of my money, I would like a **preview**: Which way is it going to go in my case? Unfortunately, there is no preview—but we do get a **promise**: whether we have plenty or only a little, we will be content with what we have (Philippians 4:11-13) and enjoy the best possible life we can have in this world. (Source: Mark Allan Powell, *ELCA Stewardship Notes*, 2021).

#### HERE AND THERE, ALREADY AND NOT YET

**Key take-away:** Since the expression “kingdom of God (or heaven)” refers to an activity rather than to a location, its meaning is not limited by time. Sometimes it refers to God's ultimate future reign, but much of the time it refers to God's rule becoming evident in our lives, here and now. (See sidebar, “What church leaders learn...”)

**Purpose:** To consider whether biblical passages refer to the present or to the future or to both. Since the rule or reign of God cannot be limited by time or space, it is possible that key biblical texts may mean something different (referring to either present or future) depending on the person or the circumstances.

#### THE MOST IMPORTANT THING JESUS EVER SAID

**Key take-away:** Central to Jesus's message is the good news that God is ready and willing to rule our lives! This invitation becomes a challenge because putting God in charge means surrendering control.

**Purpose:** To help participants to envision what a life ruled by God might mean, and to consider this question: Do we trust God enough to believe that a life ruled by God will be a better life than one in which we are in charge?

#### FOR SHORTER MEETING TIMES

Here's how to adapt the 90-minutes study to fit an even shorter time slot:

##### 30-minute study

1. Read the “Introduction.”
2. Read the Bible verses listed under “Share aloud or reflect #1” and supply the missing words.
3. Read “Kingdom of God . . . and other expressions.” Ask if participants have any questions.
4. Skip “Share aloud or reflect #2.”
5. Read “Reign of God, Rule of God” and “Here and There, Already and Not Yet,” skip “Share aloud or reflect #3,” which separates these two sections.
6. Read “Share aloud or reflect # 3,” and invite comments about the meanings of the four verses found here.
7. Skip “Share aloud or reflect # 4.”
8. Read “The most important thing Jesus ever said.”
9. End by considering “Share aloud or reflect # 5.”

##### 45-minute or 60-minute study

Follow the 30-minute format, but:

- 1) At the start of the study, have participants “guess” the missing words in the activity.
- 2) Include “Share aloud or reflect # 2.”
- 3) Only if time allows, add “Share aloud or reflect # 4.” 🌿