

VOLUME 2

LEADER'S GUIDE

Grace, Kingdom, Mission:
Small Group Studies for
Missional Engagement

KINGDOM & MISSION

*Following the Sent
& Sending of God*

ALBERT SHIM

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Volume 2 of Grace, Kingdom, Mission:
Small Group Studies for Missional Engagement

Kingdom and Mission - Leader's Guide

Grace, Kingdom, Mission - Vol. 2

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Introduction

Series Overview

It was perhaps predictable that Mission to the World should eventually come to publish *Grace, Kingdom, Mission: Small Group Studies for Missional Engagement*. After all, Mission to the World exists to see Christ-exalting churches planted among the least-reached peoples of the world. Our passion is to plant churches that plant churches that plant churches that plant churches. We are convinced that the lifeblood of church-planting churches is disciple-making disciples, and so it is unto this end that we have endeavored to create this curriculum. Discipleship is both our passion and our call.

Our sincere hope is that these lessons become much more than simply a *resource* for the teaching and equipping of the local church. Rather, we yearn to see these sometimes clumsy words on these pages become, by God's grace and the Spirit's power, a *tool* for life-on-life discipleship, a *vehicle* for the creation of mission communities, and a *catalyst* for inspiring ever-deepening, sacrificially intensifying missional engagement.

These admittedly ambitious goals have guided the creation of this series consisting of three volumes, all intended to be used in small group settings but each with a distinct focus:

Volume 1 | Gospel and Grace. We begin with gospel and grace, without which there is no mission, no good news. In this volume, we seek not only to nurture a deeper *understanding* of the gospel of grace but also to cultivate a *life* animated and sustained by its depth and richness.

Volume 2 | Kingdom and Mission. Upon this sure foundation, we next survey the biblical and theological foundations for mission and explore its nature, not primarily as mandate or “to do,” but as central to God's own nature and his church's identity.

Volume 3 | Culture and Context. Finally, we close with those concepts and challenges that bear significantly on the practice of gospel witness to human contexts, namely, culture, worldview, and contextualization. While especially critical to cross-cultural ministry contexts, we believe they are no less relevant to effective witness in our native culture.

Volume	Objectives	Distinctives
Gospel & Grace	Present the gospel of grace as the operating principle for Christian life and mission	Discipleship focus "Heart"
Kingdom & Mission	Explore the biblical foundations for mission.	Teaching focus "Head"
Culture & Context	Explore concepts of culture, worldview and contextualization	Equipping focus "Hands"

A Vision for Discipleship

Why discipleship? Fundamentally, it is simply because Jesus commands us: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. . . .” (Matt. 28:19). We are called to be disciples and make disciples. And movements of church-planting churches in the least-reached corners of God’s world will never be realized without the grounding, training, and equipping of disciple-making disciples.

What is a disciple? Somewhere along the way, we have come to associate the word “disciple” with those who are really serious about their faith; they are the more committed, more mature followers of Christ. Yet in Scripture, we find no evidence of this tiered spirituality. A disciple is simply someone who is learning how to follow Jesus. And it is not how far along we are, it is whom we are following. So as our working definition, *a disciple is an apprentice of Jesus who is actively engaged in learning how to live by the grace of God under his rule and authority.*

How are disciples made? We believe disciples are not mass-produced in a program or a classroom, since brute information unpracticed and unapplied does not beget changed and changing lives. Rather, we believe disciples are made in community, through the disciplined application of the gospel both to our own hearts and also our relationships. As others have put it, discipleship is life-on-life and not curriculum-on-life. The vehicle is relationship with the gospel as its bond.

Then why a curriculum? Despite the relational context within true discipleship occurs, there still remains a significant teaching-learning component to discipleship. We are called to “make disciples, *teaching* them to observe” all of Christ’s commands. So yes, curriculum—and doctrine—matters. But it is in the application of that teaching in the nurture of disciplines and the confession of sin, in peacemaking and reconciliation, and in mutual accountability and bold witness, that we grow as Christ’s disciples. We therefore view this curriculum simply as a *tool* with which the true work of life-on-life discipleship may occur.

How to Use This Study

Small Groups. We have designed these studies for use in small, intimate groups of three or four people who are dedicated to one another for a season of growth. Why such small groups? Because it is the safety of a small, mutually committed group that allows for greater degrees of honesty, accountability, and spiritual engagement.

Reading. Each lesson begins with a reading. Here the main points of each lesson are variously defined, explored, or illustrated in a hopefully accessible manner. The reading for each lesson should be read *prior* to the group meeting.

Bible Study. Scripture is our ultimate authority and so we have designed each gathering to begin with a Bible study from which the key concepts are derived.

Discussion Questions. Following the Bible study, discussion questions are provided to help guide your sharing and reflection. Here, our aim is to invite honest self-examination and provide opportunities to speak grace and truth into each other's lives.

Homework. Finally, a summary appears at the end of each lesson with the week's memory verse and to serve as a reminder to read in advance of the next meeting.

Discipleship Covenant

As a written expression of what I have committed to in my heart, both to God and to my discipleship group, I pledge to:

1. Be present and engaged for all group meetings.
2. Complete the assignments as faithfully as possible.
3. Contribute to an atmosphere of trust, honesty, love, vulnerability, and accountability.
4. Refrain from sharing with others that which is shared in confidence.
5. Pray for my group members.
6. Prayerfully consider reproducing this group with others upon completion.

Signed _____ Date _____

LESSON 1

Rediscovering Mission: Three Movements

Overview

Key Concept: The Mission of God | **Bible Study:** John 20:1–28 | **Memory Verse:** John 20:21–22

Objectives

- To understand mission as originating in the nature and purpose of the triune God
- To see the mission of God as the Bible's grand narrative

Rediscovering Mission: Three Movements

On any journey, it is important to know where we're going and how we're going to get there, particularly when the journey is long or in our case deep. So we begin not just with a roadmap but with some reflection on how to approach and interpret that map. What is mission and how is it to be understood? From where and to where does Christian mission go? And perhaps more pointedly, what are we to do about it?

Over the course of this study, we will explore mission in the context of the Trinity and the sending action of God himself, which ultimately includes the sending of the church. We'll do so by looking at the mission of God as the Bible's grand narrative through the lens of one of its unifying themes, the kingdom of God. This will bear on the church's essential identity as a sent community that cannot but bear witness to this kingdom, which will in turn have practical implications for each local expression of God's church.

So if that's where we're going, then a few introductory and orienting remarks are in order, framed here by way of three movements. Here I am indebted to Christopher Wright's *The Mission of God*.¹

Movement One: From the Church's Mission to God's Mission

Christopher Wright offers a helpful definition of mission: "Our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's

creation.”² It is God’s mission! It originates in God, flows from God, finds its impetus in God, concerns God’s creation, moves toward God’s destined end, all unto God’s glory.

Mission exists because God has freely determined to deal with humanity in a certain way, from creation to consummation. Deeper still, mission exists not just by God’s sovereign choice and unchangeable will, but by God’s very nature, his eternal attributes. Mission is at first about God, who he is and what he is like. It is about what he does in creation, what he does in response to ever-increasing rebellion and sin, and what he does to redeem the nations for himself. It is in every respect, *God’s* story, into which we have been lovingly written.

That story unfolds in precisely the way that it does because of who God is. And who then is he as he has revealed himself to us? God is the triune Creator King who reveals himself to humanity as King and determines to redeem for himself a kingdom-people “from every tribe and language and people and nation!” (Rev. 5:9). And how ultimately does God go about achieving this purpose? God sends *himself*. Specifically, God the Father sends the Son; then God the Father and the Son send the Spirit. The study of mission then begins as a study of the triune God himself. Only then can we begin to understand the mission of the church, who is then herself sent by the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The late mission theologian David Bosch observes that this is in fact how mission was understood throughout the great majority of the church’s history: “Until the sixteenth century the term [“mission”] was used exclusively with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, of the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son.”³ He continues, “Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology [the doctrine of the church] or soteriology [the doctrine of salvation]. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”⁴

This conception of the *missio Dei*, or mission of God, affirms the priority of God’s nature and purposes as the key to understanding the mission of the church. It can then be said, “It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world.”⁵ To rightly understand mission then, we must understand God’s nature and purposes as revealed to us in all of Scripture. So as one implication, mission begins then in Genesis 1, not Matthew 28. But more on this later.

Three quick caveats are in order. First, to maintain that God has been and continues to act in mission in no way absolves the church from committed action in her call to mission. If God is acting, must we? The answer of course is emphatically yes. We act precisely because God has acted

first! The sending movement of God toward his world necessarily involves and engages the church to action with the utmost sense of urgency and sacrifice.

Second, it would be mistaken to regard the church as solely an *instrument* at God's disposal to use unto his ultimate purpose in creation. It can be said with equal force and truth (and wonder!) that the church is itself an *expression* of that ultimate purpose. God did not enter into covenant relationship with the church just to accomplish his purposes in creation; he created to enter into covenant relationship with the church. And so it can be said, God "chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Thus, yes, the church is an instrument for God in his mission for his world. And, yes, the very existence, redemption, and glorification of the church are themselves central to that ultimate end. The church is both instrument and end.

Finally, to maintain the basic continuity of the mission of God and the mission of the church does not mean the *role* the church has to play in that mission is one and the same as the *role* of the Godhead. There are of course certain salvation-historical actions unique to the persons of the Trinity! Some in critique remind us that "we have no part, for example, in dying for the sins of the world."⁶ That we are to participate in the mission of God for his world is not to conflate our call with the work of the triune God. It is to conceive of our identity and mission in light of his; it is to see what he has called us to be, what he has commissioned us to do, and what he has empowered us to undertake, all under the great banner of God's great mission for his world: the revelation of God to humanity as King and the redemption of humanity as his kingdom people.

Mission is a movement from God to his creation. It is fundamentally a sending movement that culminated in the sending of himself, and it is a movement of mercy, kindness, and grace; pardon, promise, and deliverance; all where there ought only to have been judgment, curse, and death. And why? Because that is who God is! Mission is finally to be located in the character and trinity of God. It exists because God is a certain way. Or put another way, something about God renders mission inevitable. That's where we start. "To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward peoples . . . mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people."⁷

Movement Two: From Mission Imperatives to Missional Indicatives

Just as mission is to be located in the very nature and character of God, so is it also to be found in the essential identity of the church. It is not so much a thing for us to do but an expression of who we are. It is identity, not simply activity.

Imperatives are commands. As such, they represent what we are to do in obedience. Indicatives are affirmations or declarations. As such, they are engraved-in-stone truths that inform first who we are, and then secondarily what we are to do as necessary and inescapable consequence. And the order is important. In the Bible, it is, invariably, know who you are, then live that out. The imperative flows from the indicative. It's not simply, "Fly!" It's, "You are a bird set free, so then, fly!"

Mission can be conceived in purely imperative terms. "Go therefore and make disciples . . ." In such terms, mission is simply a command to be obeyed and incidentally one of perhaps many. Mission, however, is to be located not in the imperative, but in the indicative. Who we are defines our mission apart from explicit command. As God's people, united to Christ, and indwelt by the Spirit, we are a missionary community just as our Triune God is a missionary God. We are a sent people just as God is a sending God. And it is from this basis of our essential missionary identity that the imperatives are given. It is not just that we are to witness (and we are!), it's that we are witnesses.

Movement Three: From a Biblical Basis for Mission to a Missional Basis for the Bible

Finally, our third movement is to reorient ourselves to God's own self-revelation in Scripture as it pertains to mission. Christopher Wright summarizes one approach to Scripture and mission that surveys those passages that provide both rationale and inducement for Christian mission to establish a case for the so-called biblical basis for mission. It is often a *tour de force* through all of the classic mission texts in Scripture: Genesis 12 and the promise to Abram; the book of Jonah in its entirety and his call to Nineveh; Matthew 28 and the Great Commission; Acts 1 and the promise to the disciples, and so forth.

The primary drawback to such an approach is that it can leave the impression that mission is just one thing that the Bible happens to talk about. See, it comes up here in this passage, and—*oh!*—here it is again over there! Wright concludes, "The Bible is turned into a mine from which we extract our gems—"missionary texts."⁸

The Bible of course, for all of its stunning diversity with respect to human authorship, genre, socio-cultural and historical context, and even language, tells a single story—a story that encompasses and elucidates the meaning of every constituent narrative and letter; every prayer and prophecy; every poem and proverb. And the story goes like this: "It begins with the God of purpose in creation, moves on to the conflict and problem generated by human rebellion against that purpose, spends most of its narrative journey in the story of God's redemptive purposes being worked out on the stage of human history, [and] finishes beyond the horizon of its own history with the eschatological hope of a new creation."⁹

Could it be that mission is not just an occasional theme to be discovered here or there as the story unfolds, but that the story *itself* is the mission of God for his creation? Could it be that the Bible is God's own self-revelation to us about who he is, about what he has done and what he is going to do? And, if so, isn't the entire story of Scripture a witness to the ultimate mission of God? Then because this great story goes beyond our own horizons, because it is revealed to us as both past and future, is not the present-day church forever caught up in this story and in this mission?

So it is not that we need to find the “missiological” meaning in our favorite texts. We discover who God is and what God's purposes for humanity are in the text—in every text! So, you want a missions text? You don't need to turn to Matthew 28. You can start in Genesis 1 and keep reading until you hit Revelation 22. The Bible is not just a book that happens to talk about mission; it *is* the story of God's mission for the world.

Furthermore, the very existence of Scripture is itself a missional phenomenon, a symbol of God's sending movement toward us and his creation. God reveals himself to us! God makes himself known to sinful humanity as Creator and Redeemer, as King and Father, as Savior and Friend. It is not so much about a biblical basis for mission in the traditional sense. Rather, “We could as meaningfully talk about the missional basis of the Bible as of the biblical basis of mission.”¹⁰

Over the next several weeks, we will ground our study of mission in *that* story. Specifically, we will read this story through the lens of one of its dominant and unifying themes, the kingdom of God. It is a story of a Creator King of unspeakable glory who spoke his “very good” kingdom into existence. It is a story of rebellion and ruin, of blessing turned curse, of life become death. It is a story of grace and hope and of a promise that the kingdom will one day be known. It is a story of wonder that a child King is sent by his Father to redeem for himself a kingdom people and whose very presence signified the coming of the kingdom. It is a story of both paradox and possibility for the kingdom would require the death of its King and prevail because of his resurrection. It is a story of a people made new by the indwelling presence of that future kingdom here and now. And it is a story of what those kingdom people are called to do, here and now, even as the glory of the final kingdom still awaits. It is a story of who God is and who we are. And it is a story of God's mission and ours.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read John 20:1–28.

- 1. The context of our passage is the resurrection of Jesus and three post-resurrection appearances: to Mary, to the disciples, then to Thomas. Describe the state of Mary, the disciples, and Thomas prior to the appearance of the resurrected Jesus. How do their encounters with the resurrected Jesus change everything?**

Jesus finds Mary weeping (11) by the tomb in the darkness of the morning (1), the disciples huddled in fear in a locked room (19), and Thomas hamstrung by doubt for eight long days (25). The resurrected Lord speaks to grief, fear, and doubt.

Into Mary's grief, Jesus speaks her name unto joy. Into the disciples' fear, Jesus speaks, "Peace." Into Thomas' doubt, Jesus condescends to show him his hands and side, and doubt turns to worship: "My Lord and my God!" (28). This is the first instance in any gospel in which Jesus is addressed directly, "my God!" So while Thomas may have been the last to get there (believing the resurrection), he is simultaneously the first to get there (Jesus, you are God)!

- 2. In each of the three encounters, how does the appearance of the resurrected Jesus call for action? What must happen now that Jesus is risen (17–18; 21; 28–29)?**

Mary is commanded to declare his resurrection to the disciples (17–18). She must bear witness to the resurrected Lord. The disciples are sent into the world (21) and Thomas is led to worship (28). Witness, mission, and worship are the necessary consequences of the resurrection of Jesus.

- 3. Read verses 19–23. What is precious to you about Jesus' response to his disciples? What changes as a result of the Jesus' resurrected presence?**

Jesus twice declares, "Peace be with you." Into their fear (which is likely to have been made worse by the sudden appearance of one they thought dead!), Jesus speaks peace.

The disciples who had recently abandoned or even openly denied Jesus are not met with rebuke or a call to repentance, but rather peace and a call to mission. The disciples are given the gift of Jesus' presence and his peace. They see his hands and his side that were pierced for them, and with Jesus now in their midst, everything changes. Fear is turned to gladness; literally they were "ecstatic," or "filled with great joy."

But there is not just a change in the disciples' emotional state but in their relationship to the world. The disciples are now to be sent into the world that just moments ago inspired fear, the world that lay on the other side of those locked doors. That world was now to be engaged all because Jesus is risen from the dead.

4. Read verses 21 and 22. What is the role of the three persons of the Trinity in the sending of the disciples?

The sending of the disciples is ultimately initiated by God the Father. And so Jesus is able to say, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." This recalls Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17:18: "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Two verses later, that for which they are sent is clearly stated: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word. . . ." (17:20). The disciples will be sent into the world so that others will believe in Christ through their word. There is a basic continuity between the sending of the Son and the sending of the disciples, with the important distinction that the sending of the disciples is derivative and secondary to the work that Christ alone was sent to accomplish. Jesus alone has overcome the world; the disciples are sent to be witnesses to that overcoming. Jesus is raised from the dead; the disciples are sent to be witnesses to the resurrected Christ.

God in Christ was sent to redeem humanity from their sin and, as we'll see, to bring God's kingdom to earth. He was sent to defeat death by his death and resurrection. He was sent to secure the peace which he is able to declare to his disciples. Because of this Jesus sends his disciples. Their mission is not to secure peace but to declare that it has been secured.

God the Spirit necessarily accompanies and even precedes the sending of the disciples. The "Helper" must come to be with them forever in their being sent (John 14:16). He would teach them and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus did and said (14:26). He would bear witness to Christ and thus empower them to be his witnesses (15:26–27; Acts 1:8). He would be the one who would convict the world of sin (John 16:8).

In context, the giving of the Spirit previews the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2. That the giving of the Spirit is narrated with the very particular detail and action of Jesus' breath recalls Genesis 2:7 where God breathes life into Adam and perhaps even Genesis 1:2 where the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. Some suggest that the breathing upon the disciples represents the new creation: resurrection community that is marked by the presence of the Spirit.

Discussion Questions

Refer to this week's reading, "Rediscovering Mission: Three Movements."

- 1. Share with your group your experiences with mission. In what ways have you engaged mission? In what ways can it be said you are living a life of mission?**

- 2. What is the role of mission in the life of the church? In what ways can it be said that your church engages mission?**

- 3. How might mission be understood as flowing from the very nature of God himself and not simply as an activity of the church? Is this a helpful distinction? Why or why not?**

- 4. How have you understood the relationship between the Bible and mission? Have you tended to view mission as one of many important themes in Scripture? How does the prospect that the mission of God represents the grand narrative of Scripture affect your understanding of mission?**

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** John 20:21–22.
- **Read** “The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 1,” in preparation for your next meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

John 20:21–22

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

LESSON 2

The Creator King and His Creation - Kingdom, Part 1

Overview

Key Concept: Creation | **Bible Study:** Psalm 8:1–9 | **Memory Verse:** Psalm 8:1

Objectives

- To learn what the creation account teaches us about God
- To understand the significance of the Sabbath rest of God

The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 1

We have said that we will explore mission by way of the mission of God as the Bible's grand narrative through the lens of one of its unifying themes, the kingdom of God. And if this narrative does in fact tell a single story, then like every story we must necessarily start at the beginning.

The Creator King

Please take a moment to read Genesis 1:1–2:3 in its entirety.

Now exhale! Perhaps the enduring struggle with Genesis 1 and its interpretation is due in part to a resistance to read it on its own terms. As Ancient Near Eastern literature, it is not offered to answer the metaphysical question of something versus nothing; it is not meant to reconcile any perceived conflict between science and faith; it is not even a dispassionate journalistic account of how things came to be.

It is the breathtaking and poetic account of a God who was there “in the beginning,” eternally self-existent, who *speaks* everything into existence. It is the stunning revelation of who this God is and what this God does simply by his word and by his will. It is above all else a theological declaration. God is used 35 times in the space of 34 verses, and almost always as subject. It is God who creates,

speaks, sees, declares as good, makes, separates, names, blesses, delegates, and finally rests. First and foremost, it is about God.

If this account means to tell us about this God, then what do we learn about this God? What are we meant to see? The narrative structure within the framework of “days” provides a clue. Over and over again, the mere *announcement*, “And God said,” is followed by the recurring *command*, “Let there be,” that is met every time with a *report* of the efficacy of the divine word, “And so God made. . . .” All that is created bends to his will by *being*. Who is this God? The Creator God is being pictured as a King, for only a king can but speak unto the fulfillment of his commands. And this king is King over all creation who speaks everything not only into submission but into existence. Nothing that exists lies outside his dominion.

What else do we learn about this God? If we press further, we find that we encounter not just a King of unrivaled glory and unprecedented power, but a King who delights in what he has made. Following each cycle of *announcement–command–report*, there is added an *evaluation*, “And God saw that it was good.” One writer comments, “I take this to mean at least that God was delighted with his work. He approved of it. He was glad that he had done it. When he looked at it, it gave him pleasure. It is as though he said, ‘Yes, that’s it. That will do just fine. That’s exactly right.’”¹ And so the psalmist would later declare in reference to his creation, “May the LORD rejoice in his works” (Ps. 104:31). Why does he rejoice in his works? Because they declare his glory: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1).

If we press further still, we find not just power and glory, and not just delight and gladness; we encounter dominion and authority. This Creator King is emphatically not the distant and disinterested supreme being who creates only never to intervene. Within these “days” and amid the framework of *announcement–command–report–evaluation*, there is also *naming*, “And he called. . . .” Five times God is said to name that which he speaks into existence: the light is called Day, the darkness Night, the expanse Heaven, the dry land Earth, and the waters Seas. But naming is indicative of dominion and so we are confronted here with absolute sovereignty over every created thing. Everything is subject to him.

This theme of dominion emerges again in the latter days of the creation account. It has been observed that the first six days of creation are paired such that the spheres or realms created on the first three days (light; the sky and seas; the dry land) are *filled* in the subsequent three days (sun, moon, and stars; birds and fish; land animals and humans). That which was “without form” is given form in the first three days, and that which was “void” and empty is filled in the subsequent three days; but then not just filled, but ordered with a delegated authority. The sun, moon, and stars are said to “rule” the day and the night: “And God made the two great lights—the greater light *to rule*

the day and the lesser light *to rule* the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, *to rule over the day and over the night . . .*” (1:16–18).

Then to a picture to which we’ll return, humanity is said to rule over the earth: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And *let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (1:26). And again, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (1:28). God the Creator King who is sovereign over all things, appears to establish for himself representative creature-kings (*lowercase k!*) to exercise dominion within his creation, over which of course he has ultimate dominion.

Temples, Enthronement, and Rest

After this breathtaking display of his power and might and wisdom, comes rest:

“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation” (Gen. 2:1–3).

If the creation of humanity represents the climax of the creation story, then the Sabbath rest of the King signifies both its completion and purpose. We are meant to ponder these verses, the profound significance conveyed to us by a number of literary devices: (1) there is no introductory formula, “Then God said;” (2) there is no closing refrain “evening” and “morning;” (3) it is the only day of the week consecrated by God; (4) the number of the “seventh” day is repeated three times; (5) it stands alone outside the paired days of creation; (6) the first three lines consist of seven words each, with the midpoint of each line having the same phrase “the seventh day.” The narrator is screaming to us, his readers, “Now, pay attention, this is very important!”

The Creator King coming upon his Sabbath rest represented much more than the completion of his creative task. God had not just created a place for his creature-kings to exercise their God-given dominion. He had created for himself a place in which to dwell and over which to rule. He had

created for himself a *temple*. And so God declares in Isaiah 66:1, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, *and what is the place of my rest?*”

The literature of the Ancient Near East is replete with this temple/divine rest connection: “In the Ancient Near East as in the Bible, temples are for divine ‘rest,’ and divine rest is found in sanctuaries or sacred space . . . divine rest is the principal function of a temple.”² In parallel accounts, Sumerian or Babylonian deities are pictured to build their temples or sanctuaries, and on the seventh day, accompanied by great celebration or a procession, they too would come to rest or dwell in their temple. To rest was to take their place in their newly constructed temple, not for physical rest, but to be enthroned and celebrated as king. Sabbath is enthronement.

Now if God’s rest comes upon completion of the cosmos, then the cosmos is his temple and his coming upon his Sabbath rest is his enthronement over all that he has made: “Inhabiting his resting place is the equivalent to being enthroned—it is connected to taking up his role as sovereign ruler of the cosmos.”³ And so, “By portraying Elohim as the cosmic builder who attained to the royal rest of the Sabbath day, the Genesis prologue identifies him as the Great King of the world.”⁴ It is no wonder then, that Israel’s call to Sabbath-keeping is commanded in terms of reverence for God’s sanctuary and his absolute lordship: “You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD” (Lev. 26:2).

This Sabbath principle unsurprisingly appears in the construction accounts of Israel’s tabernacle and temple, both sacred spaces patterned after creation as we’ll come to see. The construction of the tabernacle is narrated in six speeches by Moses. Upon its completion, God then comes to rest in his tabernacle: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34). This coming to dwell signifies God’s enthronement among his people.

Similarly, upon completion of Israel’s temple, the final step is that the ark of the covenant, representing the presence of God, is brought into the Most Holy Place. “And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1 Kings 8:10–11). The temple is completed and God comes to dwell.

This filling, the ceasing to work, this coming to dwell, and the display of glory are indicative of Sabbath rest. This is the Sabbath of Genesis. “This seventh day is not a theological appendix to the creation account, just to bring closure now that the main event of creating people has been reported. It intimates the purpose of creation and of the cosmos. God not only sets up the cosmos so that people will have a place; he also sets up the cosmos to serve as his temple”⁵

The story begins then with a Creator King of unspeakable majesty and power and glory who is there “in the beginning” and who speaks all things into existence. He completes his creative work, declares it “very good,” and finally comes upon his rest where he is enthroned over all he has made. And if God is King, then all of creation is his kingdom.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Psalm 8:1–9.

1. What elements of this psalm remind you of the creation account in Genesis 1?

Psalm 8 is the first hymn of praise we encounter in the Psalter and the only hymn that is directed to God in its entirety.

In it, we find several references to the creation account. First, the psalmist’s awe is inspired by the glory of his creation in verse 3: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place . . .” This of course recalls Genesis 1:16 where God creates “the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.”

The psalmist then ponders the creation of humanity, expressing wonder that God has bestowed to humanity such authority: “You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet” (Ps. 8:6). This clearly recalls the blessing and commission given in Genesis 1:26: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the live-stock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”

As well, humanity’s privileged and even royal status among creation is noted in Psalm 8:5: “Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.” Humanity’s uniqueness in Genesis 1, what distinguishes them among all created things, is that they alone are made in the “image of God.”

Finally, the catalog of verses 7 and 8, “all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,” recalls humanity’s mandate to exercise their God-given dominion “over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28).

2. See verses 1 and 9. What is the proper and necessary response to God the Creator? See also Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 95:3–7a; and Revelation 4:11.

The psalm is bookended by the identical declarations of verses 1 and 9. These represent the bottom line, the main point, the “so what?” of the psalm: “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” It is doxology. The response to the Creator God is unfettered

praise for his glory, power, wisdom, and majesty in creation. The first hymn of praise in the psalter then is fittingly a celebration of God's glory and majesty for his work in creation.

The biblical witness amplifies this. In Nehemiah it is declared, "You are the LORD, you alone. . . ." The psalmist in Psalm 95 proclaims ". . . the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods." The God of creation is the one Sovereign Lord and King over all things.

The consistent response to the God who creates is worship, just as we see in Psalm 8. In Nehemiah, "the host of heaven worships" the Creator God. In Psalms, we are called to worship, kneel, and bow down. And in Revelation, the elders around the throne of God proclaim God's worthiness to receive glory and honor and power, precisely because of his work in creation, declaring, ". . . for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." God's sovereignty and worthiness of worship is firmly rooted in his act of creation.

In Psalm 95, there is also a personal dimension. This great King who is above all gods is not just *the* God, he is "*our* God." He is *our* Maker and we are his people, the sheep of his hand. The God who spoke the heavens into existence is a shepherd to us!

3. What does the psalm teach us about God? What is God like? What has God done?

God is transcendent and glorious. His name is majestic in all the earth. His glory is above the heavens. God set the moon and stars in place. Yet God in his glory is mindful of man. God is said to recall or to call humanity to mind. And more than that, he *cares* for him, the implication being that he "seeks out" man to care for him. It is a precious image of God's love for humanity. Furthermore, God crowns humanity with glory and honor and delegates to humanity the authority to exercise dominion over all of God's creation.

4. What does the psalm teach us about humanity? How is this a cause for the psalmist's wonder? What ultimately does the psalm teach us about the relationship between God and humanity?

Humanity's frailty and seeming insignificance are in view in verse 3. In view of creation's grandeur, the psalmist expresses wonder that God would be mindful of man and care for him. The word used here for "man" (*enosh*) highlights the frailty, weakness, and mortality of man. It is set in noticeable contrast to the God who has set his glory "above the heavens" (8:1).

The object of the psalmist's wonder then changes from wonder that God would be mindful of man to wonder that God would bestow on man such honor. Humanity is privileged among all of God's creation, being made "a little lower than the heavenly beings" and having been

crowned with glory and honor. They are given a royal authority, unique among all creation, having been bequeathed dominion over God's creation. They are to function as God's kings, reflecting a God-given authority for God alone is King. Only of God can it be said, "How majestic is your name in all the earth!"

The psalm then does not simply highlight the majesty of God over against the frailty of humanity. It begins there but finishes with wonder at the bestowal of divine grace, empowerment, honor, and responsibility. The psalmist celebrates then the distinctive relationship humanity has with its Creator as God's image bearers.

Ultimately, we see the "glory and honor" bestowed upon humanity as wholly subordinate to the glory and majesty of God the Creator and King. God bestows. God crowns. It is God's dominion to delegate. The affirmation of human authority and honor is sandwiched between the affirmations of God's majesty. Human responsibility in dominion (and mission) is always bound by the worship of God: "How majestic is your name in all the earth!" As another has noted, "Doxology gives dominion its context and legitimacy. The two must be held together."⁶

We of course know what happens next. Subordination becomes rebellion; "glory and honor" gives way to sin and death; there is dominion without doxology. God's glorious intentions for humanity would need to be fulfilled by another, one who faithfully discharges the high calling of humanity, and one in whom all the earth will finally declare, "How majestic is your name!"

Discussion Questions

Refer to this week's reading, "The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 1."

1. What struck you most from your reading of Genesis 1:1–2:3. What was most surprising, or challenging, or awe-inspiring?

2. Why is creation the necessary starting point for understanding mission?

3. How might the concept of Sabbath rest as enthronement of God as King and not just a ceasing from work affect your understanding and practice of the Sabbath today?

4. What relationship, if any, is there between the Sabbath and Christian mission to all nations?

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Psalm 8:1.
- **Read** “The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 2.”
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Psalm 8:1

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

LESSON 3

The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 2

Overview

Key Concept: Kingdom | **Bible Study:** Selected Passages | **Memory Verse:** 1 Peter 2:9

Objectives

- To reflect on what it means to be created in the “image of God”
- To see the significance of the garden in Eden
- To understand the prohibition in the context of God’s kingdom

The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 2

When God’s creative work is completed he comes to rest in his temple, enthroned as the Great King over all he has made. And if God is King, then creation is his kingdom. Now what do you need to have a kingdom? The minimum basic requirements? We of course need a king and here we have been introduced to a King of matchless majesty, glory, wisdom, and power. But a king alone does not a kingdom make. We must also have subjects (or else, delusion), land (or else, exile), and government (or else, anarchy). And so, an apt and succinct working definition is that the kingdom of God is “God’s people, in God’s place, living under God’s rule.”¹ We’ll look at each of these in turn.

God's People: Created in the Image of God

Unique among all of God’s creation are man and woman, who alone are said to be created in the image of God. The recurring, rhythmic narrative structure of each “day” breaks down entirely when we arrive upon the creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26. We are meant to slow down, to pay closer attention. And when we do, we find that the creation of humanity alone is not by divine fiat (“Let there be”), but rather distinguished by divine deliberation (“Let us”). There is then a divine blessing, a royal commission, and God’s creation is declared for the first time, “very good.” There is something exceedingly significant about the place of humanity in God’s creation-kingdom.

If we approach Genesis on its own terms, we remember it to be an Ancient Near Eastern document given in a particular sociocultural context, albeit of uniquely divine origin. Certain concepts, words, and phrases then inevitably carry meaning and significance within that context that are not always immediately obvious to us—like, for instance, “image of God.”

In the Ancient Near East, kings set up “images” of themselves to mark their authority. They were physical, symbolic representations of their rule over that particular territory. The image, not necessarily a pictorial representation, could have been a stone, a column, or a pillar. The key was that it marked the king’s authority. And so elsewhere in the Old Testament, *tselem* (“image”) is used to refer to idols (2 Kings 11:18; Num. 33:52; 2 Chron. 23:17; Ezek. 7:20; 16:17). The idol was “image” insofar as it was a physical manifestation marking the authority of the god it was meant to represent.

But human kings not only set up *inanimate* images of themselves, they themselves were considered *living* divine image bearers; they too were said to be the “image” of gods. And just as an inanimate *image* represented the authority of the human king, the *image* embodied in the human king, represented the authority of their god. He was that god’s representative on earth, a subordinate king ruling on behalf of his god. But how might such a conception of “image” inform humanity’s nature as created in the image of God?

Immediately after humanity is said to be created in God’s image, they are given this charge, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). The image bearers are charged to rule and exercise dominion over God’s creation-kingdom. Incidentally, we see an example of humanity functioning this way as early as Genesis 2. Adam begins to exercise his dominion over the animals by naming them (Gen. 2:19–20) just as God names in Genesis 1, naming being indicative of authority.

And where were they to exercise this dominion? Where would the Creator King claim his territory by virtue of the presence of his image? Everywhere! They were to fill the earth as God’s image bearers, marking all of creation as God’s. All of God’s creation-kingdom was to bear witness to God’s sovereignty and reign as his image would go forth in ever-widening circles to the ends of all creation.

The divine image in humanity then refers to the unique physical manifestation on earth of God’s own spiritual nature and kingly authority. Humanity bears God’s image in that we function as God’s representatives, created and commissioned to rule over God’s creation-kingdom as vassal kings of the Great King, governing on God’s behalf with a God-given and God-reflecting authority, such that all of the earth is filled with his image bearers as a sign of God’s ultimate reign—*everywhere!*

God's Place: The Garden of God

While the image of God was to fill the earth, the Creator King first places his image bearers in a garden. Gardens in the Ancient Near East were not of the backyard variety. They were fenced-off or walled enclosures that contained plants, trees, fountains, and even animals. Kings had gardens. And these royal gardens were typically found in temples or palaces. Could it be that this garden in Eden is to be understood as representing sacred space? As a holy dwelling place within the cosmos-temple for the Creator King? If we examine Eden's description in Genesis 2, here's what we find.

Eden was the place of God's unique earthly presence with man. In Genesis 3:8a, Adam and Eve hear the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden, with that same verb for "walking" later describing God's presence in the temple (2 Sam. 7:6–7; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:14).

Eden was the place of God's first priest. In Genesis 2:15, Adam is placed in the garden "to work it and keep it." When these two phrases are used together, the composite is usually translated "to serve and guard" with particular reference to the priestly service of serving and guarding the tabernacle (Num. 1:53; 3:7–8; 4:23–24,26; 8:26; 18:5–6). So for instance, Numbers 1:53: "But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony . . . and [they] shall *keep guard* over the tabernacle of the testimony." Adam was to do in the garden what the priests were to do for the tabernacle: render spiritual service and priestly worship to God. Adam was the archetypal priest who was to care for and guard God's garden. Adam was thus a priest and a king.

Eden was a place that had to be kept holy. Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden after their sin: "He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to *guard* the way to the tree of life." (Gen. 3:24). The cherubim are now to guard the way to the tree of life, keeping unclean man out of this most holy place.

Eden was the resting place of the divine image. Greg Beale writes, "The Genesis portrayal of humans being created in the image of God and being placed in the sanctuary of Eden is even generally in line with the Ancient Near Eastern practice in which images of the god were placed in a garden-like temple."²

Eden was a pattern for Israel's tabernacle and temple. Garden and cherubim imagery abounds in the descriptions of the tabernacle and temple. There were reliefs of carved cherubim with ornamental palm trees and open flowers on the inner walls of the holy place of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:29–32). The lampstand in the tabernacle is described as a small flowering tree with seven branches protruding from a central trunk. It has stems and flowers, branches and almond blossoms (Exod. 25:31–36). In describing the temple, 1 Kings 6–7 recounts "palm trees and open flowers," "pomegranates numbered two hundred in rows," "lily blossoms," and "ten lampstands" configured

like trees with blossoms, resembling a small orchard. Eden was God's first temple and so the later temples are constructed after its pattern.

Eden was a source of water. In Genesis 2:10, a river flows out of Eden and divides to form four rivers. Ezekiel foresees water flowing out from under the temple and providing life to desert regions (Ezek. 47:1–12); Zechariah envisions how at the coming of the LORD, life-giving water would flow from the house of the LORD (Zech. 14:1–21); Joel speaks of a fountain that will flow from the temple (Joel 3:17–18); and John sees a river of the water of life in the new creation (Rev. 22:1–2) in which the “temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22).

What do we make of all this? One scholar writes, “The garden of Eden is not viewed by the author of Genesis simply as a piece of Mesopotamian farmland, but as an archetypal sanctuary, that is a place where God dwells and where man should worship him.”³ In and from this garden, Adam and Eve are charged to fill all of God's creation-kingdom with his image. They are never meant to remain in Eden in a static sense. No, all the earth was to have a witness to God's glory and rule.

God's Rule: The Prohibition

So we have a King, we have his image-bearing people, we have his temple-sanctuary, and finally we have the King's rule, commonly referred to as the prohibition: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” (Gen. 2:16–17).

Why must there be a prohibition at all? And why such an arbitrary word: the fruit of one tree? It was a boundary marker symbolizing the Creator's absolute sovereignty and the creature's call to obey. It was a reminder that though themselves kings, there was a greater King. It was not then a test of their moral inclinations, but rather their covenant loyalty. Every hour it remained untouched was a confession of God's ultimate authority even as they are delegated creationwide dominion.

And so, “One tree stands in the midst of the garden as symbolic reminder that man is not God. All has been given to him graciously but the one exception reminds him that he must not confuse his bountiful blessedness with the state of the Creator. He is creature; God is Creator.”⁴

God's Creation-Kingdom

So finally, we see God as the Creator King over all creation who speaks all things into existence. Adam and Eve are created in the image of God and are commanded to exercise dominion over all other created things. They are placed in the garden-temple of Eden, received into fellowship with their Creator, invited to worship him, and ultimately commanded to multiply and fill all

of creation with a reflection of God's rule and authority as priests and kings. All of the earth was to be filled with his faithful image bearers until a God-reflecting and God-glorifying rule would encompass all of creation. As a marker that God alone is King, they are prohibited from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a sign of God's absolute sovereignty over his creation. God alone is King!

And so, we have God's people, in God's place, under God's rule. From the very beginning, God set out to establish a kingdom.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Exodus 40:34–38; 2 Chronicles 5:1–14; John 1:1–14; 1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19–22; Revelation 21:22–27.

1. Trace the motif of the temple, or the dwelling place of God, through the selection of passages above. What themes unite these passages? What similarities do you notice?

Upon the completion of both Israel’s tabernacle (Exod. 40) and temple (2 Chron. 5), God’s presence is visibly manifest. In the tabernacle, it is a cloud by day and a fire by night, and “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34–35). Moses is not able to enter the tent of meeting. Similarly, upon completion of the temple, “. . . the house of the LORD was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God” (2 Chron. 5:13–14). God and the glory of his presence comes to dwell among his people.

In John 1, God’s presence again comes to dwell among his people, this time in the person of Christ: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory . . .” (1:14). The Word becomes flesh. The presence of God to humanity would now come not as fire or cloud, but as flesh; not in tabernacle or temple, but as person. Literally, John writes that Jesus *pitched his tabernacle* among us, and John too is then compelled to comment on its attendant glory. We recall that the tabernacle was constructed at God’s command so that he might dwell among his people: “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Exod. 25:8). Here, God comes to dwell in our midst as Word become flesh. Significantly, later in John’s gospel, Jesus will refer to his body in terms of temple: “Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking about the temple of his body” (John 2:19–21).

In the New Testament, Paul speaks of believers as temples and as bearing the presence of God by the indwelling Holy Spirit: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). Now, the presence of God on earth is found in his church! Because God, by his Spirit, dwells within us: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom

the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19–22).

Finally, in Revelation 21, we read that in the new Jerusalem there will be no temple: “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22–23). Finally, when God’s kingdom is as it was meant to be, there is no need for a temple. God himself will be with his people forever.

2. What does the persistence of this theme from creation to new creation reveal about God? What does it reveal about the mission of God?

The grand narrative of the Bible could well be described as God’s stubborn determination to dwell with man and God’s persistent invitation to man to worship Him. This begins in the Edenic sanctuary and continues in Israel’s tabernacle (“that I may dwell in their midst” [Exod. 25:8]) and later temple (“And I will dwell among the children of Israel” [1 Kings 6:13]).

Then God himself comes in the person of Christ: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). But he did not just dwell *among* us, but indeed dwells *within* us: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple, and that God’s spirit dwells in you” (1 Cor. 3:16). God’s unique earthly presence is now found in his church, as it was in Eden and the Most Holy Place, even as it can still be declared, “. . . heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you” (1 Kings 8:27).

That presence is to go to the ends of the earth, until finally it will be declared: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev. 21:3). But until that time, God is still building his temple (Eph. 2:19–22), and he is still doing it with a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:19).

Read Exodus 19:5–6; Hebrews 4:14–16, 8:1–2; 1 Peter 2:9–10.

3. The reading suggests that Adam was both a priest and a king. Trace the theme of a royal priesthood through Scripture.

In Exodus 19, Israel is gathered at Sinai after having been delivered from Egypt. They are about to receive the law through Moses, ratifying their identity as God’s people called to obey their Redeemer King. And while God’s sovereignty is over all the earth (“all the earth is mine”), Israel was elected to have a special place in God’s kingdom purposes: “. . . you shall be my

treasured possession among all peoples . . . and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

In Hebrews, we find that Jesus is our Great High Priest. Unlike Adam and the Levitical priests who went before him, Jesus was sinless (4:15), and by his sacrifice and intercession, we are said to be able to “draw near to the throne of grace” (4:16). This priest is also a King “who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven” (8:1). Furthermore, this priest is eternal (7:23–25); is holy and exalted (7:26); entered “the greater and more perfect tent” (9:11); offered a greater sacrifice (9:12–14); and mediated a greater covenant (9:15); once for all (9:25–26); so that “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (10:14). And so upon completing his priestly work, he reigns as King: “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet” (10:12–13).

In this way, Jesus is the second Adam (Rom. 5:12–21) and the true Israel of God. Matthew 2:13–15 tells us that Jesus fulfills Hosea 11:1—“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Jesus too comes out of Egypt, passes through the waters, and is tested in the wilderness. He is the great priest and the true King.

In 1 Peter, precisely because of the redemptive work of Jesus, the Great High Priest and King, we are now “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9).

4. What does the persistence of this theme from creation to new creation reveal about humanity? What does it reveal about our call?

We understand more completely Adam’s calling and God’s purpose for man. God places his vassal-king into his royal temple to reign and rule as subordinate king but also to render spiritual worship as priest. He is in essence, a priest-king, with both priestly (oriented toward God) and cultural (oriented toward the world) tasks. His priestly tasks consisted of providing service to God, keeping his Law (which in this case is the prohibition), and guarding the garden-sanctuary from uncleanness. His cultural commission consisted of subduing the earth and exercising his God-given, God-reflecting dominion over all creation. He was also to fill the earth with the image of God. His vocation was not limited to the garden; it extended to the whole earth. So how do these two tasks come together? It has been suggested that they were to extend the geographical boundaries of the garden until Eden covered the whole earth: “If people were going to fill the earth, we must conclude that they were not intended to stay in the garden in a static situation . . . perhaps, then, we should surmise that people were gradually supposed to extend the garden as they went about subduing and ruling.”⁵

Adam's role is recapitulated in Israel, the corporate Adam. They were to be a kingdom of priests, his representatives, and as such, a light to the Gentiles. They too were placed in sacred space (Canaan), but were expelled for their disobedience. They are ultimately exiled and their temple is destroyed.

Only Jesus fulfills the demands of the priest-king, making Jesus the most fully "human" human, even in light of his full divinity. He is the second Adam and the true Israel. Throughout all of human history, God is determined to have a people for himself.

The church now is God's royal priesthood also with both priestly and cultural tasks. What is our role now as his royal priests? Our call now is to "proclaim the excellencies" of our Redeemer God (1 Pet. 2:9). A few verses earlier, Peter also speaks to our being a "holy priesthood," which also entails offering "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5). Finally, as God's royal priesthood, and as exiles and sojourners, Peter exhorts us to holy living and good works so others will glorify God (1 Pet. 2:11–12).

Discussion Questions

Refer to this week's reading, "The Creator God and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 2."

5. Humanity is created with the utmost dignity and bestowed a most solemn responsibility.

What implications does this have for Christian mission?

6. What is the significance of understanding the garden of Eden as a temple or sacred space?

What does this teach us about God and his posture toward humanity?

7. What does the prohibition teach us about God and his posture toward humanity?

What implications does this have for us today?

8. If Genesis 1-2 portrays the creation of God's kingdom and if the kingdom of God is "God's people, in God's place, under God's rule," where is the kingdom of God now?

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** 1 Peter 2:9.
- **Read** “The Fall and the Promise of the Kingdom, Part 1.”
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

1 Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

LESSON 4

The Fall and the Promise of the Kingdom, Part 1

Overview

Key Concept: Fall | **Bible Study:** Genesis 11:1–9 | **Memory Verse:** Romans 6:23

Objectives

- To understand the significance of the Fall
- To recognize the promise and provision of God even after the Fall

The Fall and the Promise of the Kingdom, Part 1

Into formlessness and emptiness, the Creator King speaks his “very good” creation-kingdom into being. God comes to his rest, enthroned as the Lord over all with his image bearers set in his sacred space, commissioned to fill all of creation with a witness to God’s righteous rule and with but one sign that God was sovereign and not man.

It is then of course that unspeakable tragedy befalls the kingdom, laughter and life giving way to despair and death: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes . . . she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6).

The creature-kings abdicate both their kingly commission to exercise dominion over the serpent and their priestly task to guard the garden by failing to cast the serpent out from the holy place. Instead, they are themselves cast out, and in death the earth now will exercise dominion over them: “and to dust you shall return” (3:19).

In rebellion, the mutinous creature-kings aspire to become “like God.” In this catastrophic declaration of independence, we encounter the essence of sin as not just transgression of a rule but rejection of a relationship. They declare as “good” what was not good, aspiring to a kingship that belonged

only to the sovereign Creator. The boundary line delineating Creator-creature and King-king is in one tragic moment breached with devastating consequences.

And to this, the anguished Creator exclaims, “What is this you have done?” (3:18). The kingdom is ruined.

The Fall and Its Effects

The immediate effects of their rebellion are profound and no relationship is spared.¹ They are *spiritually* alienated from their Creator: “and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God” (Gen. 3:8). Where once they lived in unbroken fellowship, they now hide from God. Fear now characterizes their relationship with their King and they are expelled from the garden.

They are *psychologically* alienated from their true selves. They now experience guilt and shame—“I was naked.” Anxiety (translated “pain” in 3:16) is also introduced to the human condition.

They are *socially* alienated from one another. Where before they were “naked and were not ashamed” (2:25), sharing an intimacy for which they were created, they now sew fig leaves into loincloths (3:7). They shift blame, and strife will now come to characterize the marital relationship (3:16b). And in the *first* generation, there is homicide.

And finally, they are *physically* alienated from the earth (3:17–19). Adam and Eve were to subdue the earth as God’s image bearers. However, death enters and humanity will now instead succumb to the earth: “to dust you shall return” (3:19). Furthermore, the ground is cursed on account of humanity’s sin. It will yield “thorns and thistles” (3:18) and toil will define this relationship.

We see also the frustration of the dominion mandate-blessing. “Be fruitful and multiply” and “subdue [the earth],” once blessings, are now both met with pain and toil (better translated “anxiety” or “mental anguish”).

What now will God do? What will the Sovereign King do about his kingdom? And what will he do about his rebels?

Promises and Provision

Into utter ruin, God the righteous judge speaks a verdict through a series of pronouncements directed in turn toward the serpent, the woman, and the man. And stunningly, what we find in the ashes of rebellion, judgment, and curse, is hope, promise, and provision.

To the serpent he declares, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (3:15). In the Fall, man and woman break their allegiance to their Creator King and in its place broker an alliance with the serpent. But God declares that he himself will break this alliance. The league between the serpent and man will be severed, this the pledge and promise of the great King of the world. The Creator King will reclaim humanity for himself!

On the heels of the promise of enmity comes the promise of a seed. Humanity will indeed multiply, and in the “seed of the woman” there will be one who will ultimately defeat the serpent. This champion will incur a blow, a bruise to the heel, but will inflict a mortal wound, a bruise to the head.

In response to this promise, Adam names his wife Eve, or “source of all living.” Adam clings to the promise that there shall indeed be life in the midst of death. And so, what will the Creator King do about his rebels? About his kingdom? “The miracle is not that they are punished, but that they live . . . when the facts warrant death, God insists on life for his creatures.”²

Alongside these promises, God gives a physical sign. God is said to clothe his rebels: “And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21). The provision of clothing has been variously interpreted as a gracious provision for shame, a bestowal of inheritance, the first act of social justice, or perhaps a gesture prefiguring sacrifice. There is another potentially profound implication of this act of grace.

The image of a man’s spreading a garment over a woman constituted a symbolic pledge of marriage. So for instance, in Ruth 3:9 (NIV), Ruth asks of Boaz: “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” In addition, in both biblical and extra-biblical legal symbolism, the condition of nakedness figures as a sign for divorce. And so in Ezekiel 16:8, God addresses his faithless, adulterous bride Israel: “. . . I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you. . . .”

The provision of the garment (singular) here in Genesis 3 is thus a divine pledge. It is a re-covenanting. If their nakedness signals divorce, this then is their remarriage, to one another and to God. God covenants himself to his rebels! God declares by this one act, “You are still mine:” “Both the strange resistance of the world and the deep resolve of the creator persist in the text . . . the purpose of God will not leave the world alone . . . creatureliness is bound to a determined, pathos-filled creator.”³

We find then both judgment and grace, curse and promise, and now the first clues to what God will do about his kingdom: it will be redeemed. And it will come through the seed of the woman.

From Adam to Abram

This promised seed of the woman survives immediate tumult as Abel is murdered and Cain exiled. It would take their third son, named Seth. If Adam's naming of Eve ("source of all living") is his expression of his faith in God's promise, then Eve's naming of Seth ("appointed") represents her own faith act. The seed will survive through Seth.

Through Seth comes Noah. We learn this from the Genesis 5 genealogy in which the dominant refrain is "and he died." Yet, in death, life and promise persist and, through Noah, the seed survives the cataclysmic flood. The striking narrative parallels between the Flood account and the Creation account remind us that the Creator King is still building his kingdom.

Just as in the formlessness and void of Genesis 1:2, the *ruah* (wind, Spirit) of God is over the waters of chaos (Gen. 8:1). There is a separation of waters (1:6; 8:2–3), followed by the appearance of dry land (1:9; 8:5) and vegetation (1:11; 8:11). Noah removes the covering of the ark and life appears again on the land, beginning with birds (1:20; 8:7–8) and land animals (1:24; 8:19) and finally, humanity (1:26; 8:18): "So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him" (8:18). God then renews the blessing of Genesis 1:28: "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'" (9:1). We see also the Sabbath principle when Noah "builds an altar to the Lord" offering sacrifices to his Lord and King.

The parallels don't end there. Both Adam and Noah are explicitly associated with the image of God; both are to care for the animals and, in fact, the animals come to them; both are given the blessing and the commission to multiply and fill the earth; both "fall" in a garden or at least in association with a tree/vine; both are found to be shamefully naked; both are clothed by another; both narratives end with a curse; and both have three named sons, one of whom will give rise to the redemptive seed.

For Noah, the seed survives through Shem: "He also said, 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant'" (9:26–27). Through the seed of Shem, we ultimately come upon Abram and the nation of Israel. And in some way, the Japhethites will share in that blessing. Those not directly descended from Shem or from Abram are said to dwell in their tents. Or as one writer put it, "We are all Japhethites dwelling in the tents of Shem."⁴ This blessing extends to us.

Before Abram arrives on the scene, we come to find that humanity is dispersed into distinct political, ethnic, linguistic, and geographical entities, this following the rebellion at Babel. If the seed is to give rise to a particular nation, then how are the others to receive blessing? The answer of course is

that the blessing has come to one nation precisely so that through this one nation, all the families of the earth would be blessed. Israel is created for the sake of the nations. God will reach all of humanity through this one family, through this promised seed, to bring blessing to all the families of the earth.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Genesis 11:1–9.

1. What is the offense of the Babelites? What is their sin and how is it similar to the sin of Eden?

Theirs is the sin of human pride exemplified both by their hubris and name-lust: “Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (11:4).

Their sin becomes clearer when we consider the Ancient Near Eastern context. Shinar (11:2) is a region in ancient Mesopotamia. And the Tower of Babel is to be understood as an ancient Mesopotamian ziggurat. The technology used for its construction in Genesis 11:3 was known to have been typical of ancient Mesopotamia and was reserved for buildings of supreme importance as it was an expensive and labor-intensive proposition. Furthermore, the phrase “with its peak in the heavens” (11:4) is a characteristic description of ancient ziggurats. Almost every occurrence of this phrase in the literature of ancient Mesopotamia refers to a ziggurat.

The mythopoetic doctrine of the ziggurat was such that the towers were seen to represent a gateway to heaven. They were characterized by long ramps or staircases that the gods could conveniently use to come down to earth. At the top of the ziggurat was a shrine furnished with a table so the deity could eat, and a bed so the god could rest. These shrines were not used by people and did not play a part in any known rituals.

What then does this signify? It was humanly decreed sacred space. Humanity is creating a sacred space for god and not the other way around. It is the degradation of deity, the re-casting of God in human form. They believe by their ingenuity they can access heaven. The fear and reverent awe of the Sabbath principle is jettisoned.

There are echoes of Eden where the appeal “and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:5) proved to be too strong to resist.

For further background, the Hebrew word for Babel is identical to Babylon. In almost every instance it is used in the Old Testament, it is translated Babylon. Shinar is also associated in the Old Testament with Babylon, so there is geographical warrant for making this connection as well. What did Babylon come to represent in the Old Testament and even the New? Babylon came

to represent the city of man that is at war with the people and the city of God. It represents human pride and rebellion and is the object of prophetic scorn for its commercial and military tyranny. It is used later as a symbol for corrupt Rome, and becomes identified with the persecution of the redemptive community. This is the spirit of Babylon in its infancy.

2. **What is God’s response to the sin at Babel? In judgment, is there mercy?**

The carefully crafted Babel narrative centers around verse 5: “And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.” God comes down to investigate. And in response to what he finds, God confuses their language. The judgment is directed against human solidarity in the God-belittling rebellion and renders their plan impossible to accomplish. They are thus forced to disperse and scatter.

The judgment is merciful in that it restrains the escalation of sin. “This is only the beginning of what they will do” (Gen 11:6). The scattering and linguistic confusion prevents, for the time being, their sin from maturing even further. “The breaking up of the united human race into peoples with different languages was a divine act for the good of man.”⁵ Ultimately of course, there is not just a mitigation of sin in view here, but God’s redemptive purposes for mankind, for “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

A witness to God’s mercy in judgment persists throughout the text. Adam and Eve are given garments of skin and the promise; Cain receives a mark of protection; humanity is given a pledge of life in the person of Noah and his family; and here the nations are to receive blessing. This judgment sets the stage for Abram.

Put another way, the mission of the Creator King for his world persists through the rebellion in Eden; the world’s first homicide; the cataclysmic flood event; and the rebellion at Babel.

3. **How does the author use irony to reinforce his message?**

There is a strong sense of irony and even sarcasm. They don’t want to scatter, but end up scattering. They want a name, and they do end up with a name (Babel), just not the one they might have wanted. They wanted to build a tower to the heavens, but God must come down to see it. They wanted to build a tower so that the deity would come down and visit them, and it works, but not in the way they envisioned. Man constructs and God deconstructs. What man does in sin, God undoes with both judgment and mercy.

4. The Babel account is flanked by two genealogies. Scan Genesis 10:1–32 and Genesis 11:10–32. How are these genealogies different? What purpose might these genealogies serve?

The Genesis genealogies are a genre unto themselves, each with a particular narrative function. Whereas the so-called Table of Nations of Genesis 10 diversifies and universalizes, the genealogy of Genesis 11 particularizes and traces a single line. In this way, the linear genealogy of Genesis 11 is parallel to that in Genesis 5. Where Genesis 5 traces the seed from Adam to Noah, Genesis 11 traces the seed from Shem to Abram. If the Genesis 11 genealogy includes Noah, then it becomes a ten-name genealogy that is segmented in the tenth generation to three descendants, just as in Genesis 5. The correspondence reinforces that the purposes of these two genealogies are the same—they trace the seed of the woman.

Despite the rebellion at Babel, the promised seed of the woman survives. God’s kingdom and God’s mission for the world and for all of his creation persist even as they now find a particular focus in the one man Abram and his barren wife Sarai.

One significant note appears toward the end of the genealogy. Sarai is barren: “This innocent little verse is too carefully placed and too cryptic to be regarded simply as a historical observation. It is, in fact, a quite intentional theological notice. The blessing, mandate, and promise was to ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ And now barrenness.”⁶ It is from this context of barrenness that the promise comes and God’s mission for his world endures.

If the very particular genealogy of Genesis 11 traces the seed to Abram through whom all the nations are to be blessed, then the genealogy of Genesis 10 provides a preview of those same nations. Interestingly, Genesis 10 and Genesis 11 are dischronologized, with the events of Genesis 11 at Babel serving as the event by which the nations of Genesis 10 find their origin. Only after Babel can the refrain of Genesis 10 apply: “by their clans, their languages, their lands and their nations.” These nations of Genesis 10 then represent the families of the earth that would come to receive the blessing that would come through the genealogy of Genesis 11.

Discussion Questions

Refer to this week's reading, "The Fall and the Promise of the Kingdom, Part 1."

- 1. What does the Fall narrative teach you about sin and temptation? How does the serpent tempt Eve? What implications does this have for you?**

- 2. What is God's posture toward sinful humanity? What does this reveal about the character and attributes of God?**

- 3. How does today's reading give you comfort and hope despite its tragic context? How does it speak to present struggles with sin and suffering?**

- 4. Consider the devastating impact of sin. How do the impact of sin and promise of grace inform Christian mission? Do we regard sin with the gravity it deserves? Do we regard grace with the glory it deserves?**

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Romans 6:23.
- **Read** “The Fall and the Promise of the Kingdom, Part 2.”
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

LESSON 5

The Fall and the Promise of the Kingdom, Part 2

Overview

Key Concept Promise | **Bible Study** Psalm 67 | **Memory Verse** Galatians 3:13–14

Objectives

- To see God’s global purposes in his promise to Abram and the election of Israel
- To survey the history of the kingdom of Israel and examine its place in fulfilling the promises of God

The Fall and the Promise of the Kingdom, Part 2

We have said that we will explore mission in the context of the Trinity and the sending action of God himself, which ultimately includes the sending of the church. Mission is rooted in a movement from God toward humanity and we have already seen how this movement begins to unfold. It is at first a movement of supreme blessedness as creation in the “image of God.” Then in humanity’s transgression, there is both judgment and mercy. In judgment, there is promise; amid anguish, there is provision; in death, life persists. And what of God’s kingdom? There is the promise of a seed. God’s kingdom is ruined but not abandoned.

The Promise to Abram

While the story of God’s kingdom begins as cosmic and universal, it now becomes intimately particular. Our focus turns not just to a single nation, or a single family, but first to a single individual. Through the line of Seth, then Noah, then Shem, blessing and promise come to Abram:

Genesis 12:1–3: Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Abram is called to a three-fold leaving of increasingly intimate kinship units: his country, his kindred, and his family. It implies not only the forsaking of his earthly inheritance, but also the forsaking of his national, tribal, and household gods (Josh. 24:2). To an undeserving Abram and his barren wife, God promises, “I will make of you a great nation.” This nation would have God’s blessing, God’s favor, and God’s protection, and would be realized in an immediate sense by the nation of Israel. And to what end? To what end does God’s favor rest upon Abram and later Israel? It is so that in him, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).

Israel would not exist for its own sake. Its favored status was not so it might become the world’s superpower or a repository of great material wealth. Israel is created to mediate blessing to the ends of the earth, so that all the families on earth would be blessed! Israel is created for the sake of the nations. Through Abram and Israel, the promised seed of the woman would come, the serpent would be defeated, and the Japhethites would come to dwell in the tents of Shem.

Now if we look at Genesis 11 and the Babel episode through the lens of Genesis 12 and the promise to Abram, here’s what we discover. Even the great sin at Babel will be redeemed unto God’s greater glory. The scattering from Babel is judgment, yes. But the judgment is mere backdrop to the glory that will be Christ’s upon the redemption of all nations. The language of rebellion will become the chorus of heaven: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9) Every language will have the words to say, “Salvation belongs to our God!”

Now if we next look at Genesis 10 and the Table of Nations through the lens of Genesis 12 and the promise to Abram, here’s what we discover. Why would a chapter like Genesis 10 exist in Israel’s history? Israel is discernible in this catalogue of nations only through the obscure Peleg. But Genesis 10 is the antecedent to Genesis 12. The promise to Abram must be read in this context,

and when it is, then what do we have? Genesis 10 is a redemptive genealogy. It is a map of where the blessing will go! It is the canvas on which God's redemptive purposes for creation will be realized and it is the context for the creation and calling of Israel. This Table of Nations, a document utterly unique in antiquity, and as representative of the known world, is a redemptive roll call: ". . . all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

There was a world of people before Abram. They too bear God's image, brought into being by a majestic, glorious King still jealous to redeem for himself a kingdom people, still unrelenting in his invitation to humanity to know and worship him, still intent upon establishing his kingdom. These nations were never hidden from God's view or purposes in the calling of Abram.

So how does the nation of Israel begin to mediate blessing to the nations? Here's but a start.

The plagues on Egypt had an evangelistic character: ". . . so that my name will be proclaimed in all the earth." Did it work? It did for those Egyptians that feared the LORD: "Then whoever feared the word of the LORD among the servants of Pharaoh hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses, but whoever did not pay attention to the word of the LORD left his slaves and his livestock in the field" (Exod. 9:21-22). When Israel leaves Egypt, a "mixed multitude" or "many other people" (that is, not Israelites) went with them (Exod. 12:38). Israel begins to mediate blessing to all of the families of the earth, even their captors. Egypt too would receive blessing.

In Numbers, Israel sends twelve spies to the Promised Land and only two come back with a good report: Joshua, the Ephraimite, and Caleb, the Kennizite. Caleb, through Kenaz, was descended from Esau. Caleb was an Edomite, yet he represented the tribe of Judah on that mission because when you are adopted into Israel you are adopted into the tribe of Judah. Israel begins to mediate blessing to all of the families of the earth through incorporation into the people of God.

Who else? Rahab, the Hamite. The Canaanite prostitute along with Ruth, a Moabite, appear in the genealogy of the Messiah. Naaman, the Syrian, is blessed through Elisha. The Assyrians receive blessing through a reluctant Jonah. "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And so, the psalmist sings in Psalm 87:4-6 (NIV): "I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me—Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'" Indeed, of Zion it will be said, "This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her." The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: "This one was born in Zion." The Gentile nations are being pictured as acknowledging God and in the Lord's register, they are figuratively said to be born in Zion!

Now we said this is but a start because we happen to know that Israel would not be the ultimate fulfillment of this promise to Abram. But in the history of the nation of Israel, we begin to see blessing go to the nations, albeit in seed form. Still, there will be a greater blessing to come.

The Kingdom of Israel

We have spoken of Israel as nation and as mediator of blessing to all nations, but it is particularly significant to speak of Israel in terms of kingdom. Again, if the kingdom of God is God's people, in God's place, living under God's rule, then we see that the nation Israel was indeed an earthly manifestation of God's kingdom. God is King (although later in their history, they would ask for a human king). Israel constituted the people of God, Canaan the promised place, and the Torah, God's rule. Could this be the redemptive kingdom that God sought to establish following the tragedy in Eden? A survey of Israel's history suggests otherwise.

In Exodus, God delivers Israel from Egypt, declares that they are "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6) and gives them the Law. Significantly, deliverance and rescue precede the Law. Yet, even as God is giving Moses the Law, they worship a golden calf. The kingdom is, at that early stage, threatened to be destroyed, but Moses intercedes; there is salvation from judgment through the intercession of a mediator.

In Numbers, Israel is to take the Promised Land but they rebel in fear of the inhabitants. They wander in the wilderness until a generation passes away. In Joshua, they finally enter the Promised Land, but there is more disobedience and they never fully expel the inhabitants.

In Judges, there is a record of Israel's obstinacy, sin, and rebellion. It is said, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). In Samuel, Israel wants to be like the other nations, so they reject God as their King and seek human kings. These human kings are mostly wicked and lead Israel astray into disobedience and idolatry. And yet, in the midst of Israel's disobedience, amid judgment, God's posture and movement toward his creation persists. As before, where there ought to have been death, there is still life; amid curse, there is still blessing; in hopelessness, there is still promise. Significantly, God promises in 2 Samuel 7:16: "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." God promises David an everlasting throne and kingdom and yet we know that his earthly throne does indeed come to an ignominious end. So what then of this promise?

Could this be the enduring kingdom of God? If not Eden and if not Israel, then what? What will God do about his kingdom in light of persistent rebellion and now exile? One clue is the prophetic witness. Throughout Israel's tumultuous history, God sends prophets to call Israel back to covenant

obedience and worship. Ultimately, Israel does not heed the warning of the prophets. They are conquered, and then not just conquered, but exiled. And at the hand of their enemies, their temple, the dwelling place of God among them, is defiled and destroyed. And then comes divine silence.

Still, God does not leave humanity alone. The seed of the woman is still to come, the promise to Abram still unrealized, and the promise to David still unfulfilled. At this point, it is important to note that the history of Israel is not God's failed Plan A. God's eternal and unchanging decrees demand that we understand the eventual coming of the kingdom in the very light of Israel's tragic history. In some way, the King and the kingdom who are to come are most fully revealed by way of Israel's election, through the law of Moses, the promises to Abraham and David, the centrality of the temple, the significance of their feasts, and not least of all, the Spirit-inspired words of the prophets who themselves looked forward to the culmination of Israel's history and the coming of the kingdom.

In this kingdom, there will be a new King: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (Isa. 9:6–7).

In this kingdom, there will be a new people: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the LORD. And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you" (Zech. 2:10–11).

In this kingdom, there will be a new place, indeed a new creation: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind" (Isa. 65:17).

And in this kingdom, there will be a new covenant: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:31–33).

That is the prophetic witness. God's people, in God's place, under God's rule. The kingdom is yet to come. In Israel, we see a pattern for God's earthly kingdom, but it is filled with imperfection, disobedience, and rebellion. There would be another kingdom, an eternal one with an eternal throne, with a greater King, in which all of the families of the earth would be blessed. God still will not leave his creation alone; he has bound himself to it and so will redeem it for his glory.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Psalm 67.

1. What does this psalm teach us about God? What attributes are celebrated here? In what ways is God said to act?

God is gracious.

God is the source of all blessing. God blesses.

God regards humanity and can be said to shine his face upon us.

God is powerful unto salvation. God saves.

God is worthy to be praised.

God is just. God judges.

God has authority over the nations. God guides nations.

God is sovereign.

2. Who is said to experience the blessings of these attributes and actions? What is the response to God's attributes and actions?

The immediate recipients or beneficiaries of God's blessing are Israel. The Psalms might be considered Israel's hymnbook and in fact the psalmist invokes Aaron's priestly blessing in verse 1 (see question 3). Yet, the concern of the psalm is that all nations should praise their God! It is for the gladness of the nations, that "all nations" and "all the peoples" would have a song to sing.

The scope progresses in ever-widening circles. It is "on earth," then "all nations" (verse 2); it is "the peoples," then "all the peoples" (3, 5); and finally it is "all the ends of the earth" (7). The ends of the earth are to join in the praise of Israel's God!

The response of the nations to God's grace and blessing and saving power is manifold. It is praise (3), gladness and singing (4), and finally it is fear, or reverence and awe (7). The knowledge of God, the praise of God, exuberant singing, and reverent fear go to "all the ends of the earth."

3. Read Numbers 6:22–27. What is the significance of the psalmist's use of Aaron's priestly blessing in this hymn of praise?

The priestly blessing of Numbers 6 was to be used by Aaron and his sons, the Levite priests, to bless the congregation of Israel. It is a blessing that in its original context is applied only

to Israel. The symbolic function of the blessing is revealed in verse 27: “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” In its utterance, God is said to put his name upon the people of Israel! They are his people.

What is remarkable about Psalm 67 is that the blessing in which God claims who belongs to him is invoked now for all the nations! What may not be immediately clear to us is that the psalmist, inspired by the Spirit, actually alters the blessing at a significant point: “Rather than saying Yahweh (‘Lord’), the covenantal and personal name used by those who have an intimate relationship to God, the psalmist substituted Elohim (‘God’), the name used when one must express the Lord’s relationship to all people, nations, and creation.”¹ Where “YHWH” is used in Numbers, it is “Elohim” in this psalm.

Furthermore, God is said to “guide the nations upon the earth” (Psalm 67:4). That verb “guide” or “lead” (nāḥâ) “describes the way shepherds care for their flocks, and it is a natural verb to apply to God’s relationship with Israel (Psalm 77:20; 78:14, 53, 72). How strikingly, then, that it here applies to the nations. They, too, are God’s flocks.”²

All the nations are to share in the blessing of Israel’s God! God’s saving power and his just rule will inspire the praise and reverence of the nations.

4. Read Genesis 12:1–3. How does this psalm recall God’s promise to Abram in Genesis 12:1–3?

In Genesis 12, the very particular blessing that was to go to Abram and his family and ultimately to the nation Israel was for the sake of the nations: “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). Israel was to be not just repository of blessing but in some way a mediator of blessing for all nations.

Here, the psalmist invokes Israel’s own priestly blessing, but again it is to be for the sake of the nations, even to “all the ends of the earth.” In Israel’s hymnbook, they sing that all the nations would sing! As one commentator writes: “It is interesting to note that the psalmist has directly applied to all the peoples and nations on earth what the high priest Aaron and his fellow priests bestowed on the nation Israel. It is from this theme of enlargement that we boldly announce that this is indeed a missionary psalm. Nor can it escape our attention that the purpose for this enlarged blessing upon all the nations of the world is specifically so ‘that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations’ (Ps. 67:2). That is why God had been gracious to Israel and had blessed it in such an extraordinary manner. With that conclusion, Genesis 12:3b is in full agreement.”³

He further points out: “It is not without significance that this psalm was sung at the Feast of Pentecost. When one remembers that it was at the Feast of Pentecost that God was to pour out his Spirit on all flesh, just as the prophet Joel had predicted (Joel 2: 28–31), the connection of this psalm with the Feast of Pentecost and its missionary message is all the more remarkable.”⁴ We recall that it is at Pentecost that the church is empowered for their witness to the nations by the coming of the Spirit.

We’re getting a little ahead of ourselves, but we know now of course that the blessing is mediated through the person and work of Jesus Christ: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14). The blessing that would go to all nations would come through Jesus, who himself would bear the curse of crucifixion. Blessing through curse so that “the blessing of Abraham”—and this psalm—“might come to the Gentiles.”

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Galatians 3:13–14.
- **Read** “God the Son and the Coming of the Kingdom.”
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Galatians 3:13–14

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

LESSON 6

God the Son and the Coming of the Kingdom, Part 1

Overview

Key Concept: Incarnation | **Bible Study:** Selected Passages | **Memory Verse:** John 1:14

Objectives

- To see how the sending of the Son fulfills all the Old Testament promises of the kingdom
- To see that the kingdom of God comes to earth in the coming of Jesus

God the Son and the Coming of the Kingdom

The Journey So Far

We continue our exploration of mission by studying the mission of God as the Bible's grand narrative through the lens of one of its unifying themes, the kingdom of God. Unique among all that God creates is humanity, who alone are created in the image of God and thus commissioned to multiply, fill the earth, and exercise dominion over all created things. They are to fill God's creation-kingdom with a reflection of God's gracious rule and authority as God's vassal-kings. They are received into fellowship with their Creator and invited to worship him, with just one prohibition to remind them that their authority was subject to their King's; they are creatures, God is Creator.

What follows is a tragedy of rebellion and ruin. Sin enters, then death, blessing turns to curse, and the kingdom is ruined. But into this misery and anguish, God speaks promises: the promise of a seed, the promise that blessing will go to all families of the earth, and the promise of an everlasting throne. God will redeem humanity for himself.

These promises, however, are not ultimately fulfilled in the earthly kingdom of Israel. That kingdom is filled with imperfection, disobedience, and rebellion—the kings of Israel faithless, the God of

Israel despised, the armies of Israel defeated, the temple of Israel destroyed, and the people of God exiled.

So we are confronted again by that question: what will God do about his kingdom? What of his promises? To Abram and to David? To the prophets? The serpent is supposed to be defeated! There's supposed to be blessing to all nations! Where is this eternal kingdom with that eternal throne? It is into this darkness and void that the Creator King acts decisively and powerfully to redeem his creation.

Incarnation and Inauguration

The promise for which all of creation held its collective breath came unheralded and uncelebrated, save for those wise men with the Spirit-given insight to ask, “Where is the one who was born King of the Jews?” and of course the virgin Mary to whom the angel declares, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. *And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David . . . and of his kingdom there will be no end*” (Luke 1:31–33). This child born a King is at once and by no coincidence elsewhere introduced to us as “the Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1) and thrust into a suffering world where mothers weep over the slaughter of their children.

“The Word become flesh. Ultimate Mystery born with a skull you could crush one-handed. Incarnation. It is not tame. It is not touching. It is not beautiful. It is uninhabitable terror. It is unthinkable darkness riven with unbearable light. Agonized laboring led to it, vast upheavals of intergalactic space, time split apart, a wrenching and tearing of the very sinews of reality itself. You can only cover your eyes and shudder before it, before this: ‘God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God . . . who for us and for our salvation,’ as the Nicene Creed puts it, ‘came down from heaven.’ Came down. Only then do we dare uncover our eyes and see what we can see. It is the Resurrection and the Life she holds in her arms. It is the bitterness of death he takes at her breast.”¹

What will God do about his kingdom? He himself would come. God the Father sends God the Son to bring his kingdom to earth, to reclaim humanity in the defeat of the serpent, to bring blessing to all the families on earth, and to sit on the only throne without end. The King came down. And with him came a kingdom.

The Coming of the Kingdom

It's not difficult to understand why the sending of God the Son into the world to inaugurate the kingdom of God gets overlooked when reflecting on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Between the unthinkable miracle of the incarnation, the horrible wonder of the cross, and the astonishing

victory of the resurrection, there is enough to inspire endless contemplation and awe. And so, for example we confess in the Apostle's Creed, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." It's the birth of Christ, then it's his death, with nothing in between.

But what if the "in between," or the "missing middle"² as it's been called, contains something (or many things!) of supreme significance? What if we have just plain left out, for one thing, Matthew chapters 3 through 26? What did Jesus come to do in the context of this unfolding drama? In the context of all the glorious promises that came before? In the setting of the Father's good and glorious intentions for all of his creation?

I want to suggest that the long-awaited kingdom of God becomes a present reality in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Although the final, consummated kingdom is yet future, the reign of God has entered into human history through the person of Jesus Christ. His incarnation then inaugurates the kingdom. It is how God would finally accomplish what he purposed from the beginning. It is how God would finally come to dwell among his people. What Adam and Israel and all the flawed kings of Israel couldn't do, Jesus could and did. The King and the kingdom has come in the life and ministry of Jesus. God the Father sends God the Son, in mission, to establish his eternal kingdom.

Now read the gospels with this in mind and it jumps off the page. We have already seen the gospel birth announcement declaring the yet unborn Christ as the Davidic King whose kingdom will have no end. But take John the Baptizer. Remember his entire ministry is built upon preparing the way for Jesus—and what is his message? "Repent . . . for the *kingdom of heaven* is at hand." For John, the coming of Jesus was indissolubly linked to the coming of the kingdom. And if that is John's testimony, here is Jesus': his first words in Mark's gospel are, "The time is fulfilled, and the *kingdom of God* is at hand" (Mark 1:15).

Notice Jesus says "the time is fulfilled." See, the coming of the kingdom of God wasn't a new or unforeseen notion. It was anticipated. It was longed for throughout Israel's history (although none could have anticipated exactly *how* it would unfold). So naturally the Pharisees ask Jesus when this kingdom would come, and here's his answer: "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, *the kingdom of God is in the midst of you*" (Luke 17:20–21).

Jesus tells them, “You want to know about the kingdom of God, about everything *your* history and the history of the world has been anticipating? Well, it’s now here, in your midst, because *I’m* now here, in your midst.” The kingdom of God finds its expression in the presence of Jesus, the coming of Jesus is the coming of the King is the coming of the kingdom. Incarnation is inauguration.

But let’s keep looking. Jesus spent quite a bit of time teaching. So what was he teaching about? Matthew tells us, “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming *the gospel of the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction...” (Matt. 4:23). Later he writes, “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming *the gospel of the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction” (Matt. 9:35). Luke tells us the same thing: “When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of *the kingdom of God* and cured those who had need of healing.” (Luke 9:11).

So John the Baptizer says of the ministry of Jesus, that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus says of his own ministry that the kingdom of God is at hand. And everywhere he goes, he’s teaching about the kingdom of God. And did you notice the other refrain? “Healing every disease and every affliction.” There’s a connection between the kingdom and the healing ministry of Jesus. So what’s the connection?

Well, we know that when the kingdom comes in its fullness, there will be no more tears, no death, no pain. I take this to mean that the healing ministry of Jesus was not just about the compassionate relief of an individual’s suffering in that particular moment in time—although it certainly was about that! But more than that, it was a tangible sign, a demonstration that the kingdom has come and has broken into human history. The natural order of disease and suffering would have to yield to the King who had now come.

Now perhaps the most dramatic example of this is when Jesus casts out demons, and here’s what Jesus has to say about that: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Even that is about the kingdom! See, the King has come, and has power and authority over the enemy.

So then, think about the life of Jesus—the teaching, the healing, the casting out of demons, the declarations of John the Baptizer and Jesus himself—the life and ministry of Jesus Christ was about the coming of the kingdom of God, finally and decisively, though not yet fully. What do I mean by that?

Well, look around. Read the paper, browse the internet or better yet, drive through town—and really start looking people in the eye—make it so you don’t look away so quickly at the injustice

and suffering in this world—and when you can see again through your tears, it won't be long until you begin to wonder, “*Where* is this kingdom? Has it really come?”

And our answer to that is, yes, it absolutely has come, because the King has come. And we experience a very real taste of it now, even as we continue to wait for the day when the fullness of the kingdom, in all its glory and finality will be revealed. Remember, Jesus himself talked about the kingdom as a mustard seed.

And so what does this mean for us now? Here's a start: it is right to lament. It is an act of faith to confess that things are not the way they are supposed to be—and perhaps even a show of solidarity with God who himself laments over the evil and suffering that remain in this world.

But it is also right to long—to hope for that day when the kingdom that Jesus ushered in will finally be consummated—when there will be justice for the oppressed and respite for the suffering. And that's how Jesus taught us to pray, isn't it? “Thy kingdom come.” *Long* for that and live as though that day will surely come. And how do we do that? How do we live between lament and longing?

We live as the community that knows that God in Christ has secured the ultimate victory. We live now by his Spirit and by a new ethic as faithful citizens of this heavenly kingdom that is indeed here. We proclaim with our lives and our words that Christ the King has come to redeem the nations for himself: “Those who know that God will one day wipe away all tears will not accept with resignation the tears of those who suffer and are oppressed *now* . . . And anyone who believes that the enemy of God and humans will be vanquished will already oppose him *now* in the machinations in family and society.”³

It's mission. Lament, longing and mission. That's how we live as if the kingdom is real. That's how we bear witness to the presence of the kingdom to the watching world.

The purpose of all of human history, from creation on, is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. Jesus, the long-awaited and rightful King is sent by God to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth. And the longed-for kingdom of God becomes a present reality in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Although the final, consummated kingdom is yet future, the reign of God has entered into human history through the person and presence of Jesus Christ.

That's what he came to do. To make all things new. To make all things right. To bring God's kingdom. To dwell with his people. To show his creation that there is a great and gracious King. Jesus, the King, has come.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read the selected passages indicated below.

1. Read John 1:1–18. What is the significance of John’s introducing the coming of Jesus with such clear allusions to the creation account of Genesis 1?

John 1:1–3 begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”

John’s use of the construction “in the beginning” serves a number of purposes. First, it establishes the divinity of Christ. He is pre-existent, always there, uncreated, “in the beginning.” He was not only with God in the beginning as the Word, “the Word was God.” The Creator enters his creation.

Second, John’s use of the creation account places the coming of Israel’s Messiah squarely within the history of humanity. He came as the fulfillment of Israel’s history, yet his coming is placed within the scope of the creation of the world. John is not starting a new story; he is building upon an old one whose climax is about to be revealed.

Third, it intimates the purpose of the coming of Jesus. It implies that in Jesus, creation is coming to its destined end. If, as we saw in Genesis, creation was essentially a kingdom-building endeavor, then the incarnation is unto the same. In Jesus, comes new creation.

The themes of light and life also recall the creation account. The God who decreed life to all living things, who breathed life into humanity, comes now in Jesus to give life to his creatures beset by sin, curse, and death. And the God who spoke light into being is come in Jesus to give light to humanity—“the life was the light of men” (1:4).

And the God who must dwell with his people, from Eden on through the tabernacle and temple, becomes flesh (1:14) and now “tabernacles” among them to make all things new, to give light and life, and to bring God’s kingdom to earth.

- 2. Read Matthew 1:1, 1:22–23, 2:5–6, 2:13–15, 2:16–18, 3:1–3, 3:16–17, 4:1–11, 4:13–17, and 5:1. These selections give us a snapshot of Matthew’s depiction of the early life and ministry of Jesus. What strikes you about Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus? What theme or themes emerge? In what ways can Jesus be said to fulfill the history, purpose, and destiny of Israel?**

Matthew’s gospel begins, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). From the very outset, Matthew places the coming of Jesus in the context of Israel’s history. Immediately, we are to recall the promises to Abraham and to David. Jesus has come to fulfill those promises.

And fulfillment is indeed the dominant theme of the early chapters of Matthew. He fulfills the prophecies of Isaiah and the virgin birth (1:22–23); Micah and the promised ruler from Bethlehem (2:5–6); Hosea and the calling out from Egypt (2:13–15); Jeremiah and the killing of the innocents (2:17–18); Isaiah and the coming of a forerunner (3:1–3); and again Isaiah and the place of Jesus’ ministry (4:13–17). Time and time again, Jesus is said to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament. Everything that Israel anticipated (and by extension, “all the families of the earth”) is fulfilled in Jesus.

But more than this, we see that Jesus himself embodies the people of Israel, such that Jesus can be said to be the new Israel. Jesus is born but must flee to Egypt. Like Israel, Jesus is called out of Egypt. Jesus passes through waters and is tempted in the wilderness for forty days and nights. Each time Jesus is able to withstand the temptation of the devil, he quotes the Torah recalling episodes in Israel’s history where they failed to obey God. Where they failed, however, Jesus didn’t. Finally, the scene shifts to a mountain where Jesus gives an extended sermon. He opens with blessings and speaks of the law being fulfilled in his presence. This of course recalls the giving of the law on another mountain. Jesus recapitulates Israel’s history in the early chapters of Matthew. He is the culmination of Israel’s purpose and destiny. He will bring blessing to all of the families of the earth.

- 3. Read 2 Samuel 7:16 and Luke 1:30–33. How does Luke’s gospel portray Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise to David? What does this reveal about Jesus’ mission particularly in light of the historical context of foreign domination and divine silence?**

Israel could hardly be called a kingdom at this point in their history. They had returned from exile but remained under foreign rule. And while the temple had been rebuilt, the glory and presence of God did not attend their worship. Rather, from Malachi to Matthew, Israel was met with divine silence.

Into this silence, the angel sent to Mary quite explicitly recalls the promise to David: “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31–33). In particular, the promise of an enduring throne and an everlasting kingdom would be realized through the child Mary would carry in her womb.

4. Read Galatians 3:7–14. How does Paul portray Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham? What is surprising about how it is ultimately fulfilled?

Paul refers to the promise to Abraham as “the gospel preached beforehand,” the content of which is that God would justify the Gentiles by faith. In this way, those who believe are said to be “the sons of Abraham.” The blessing to all nations would be justification before God by faith in Christ alone. The law was revelatory and not unto salvation; it was always by faith.

What is surprising about how blessing goes to the nations is how the curse is undone. It is substitutionary in that Christ becomes a curse for us in his crucifixion. The notion of substitutionary atonement, incidentally, would not have been foreign to Israel and its laws and sacrifices. But he who would fulfill the promise to Abraham, whose work upon which the promise is given, would have to die to redeem the children of Abraham from the curse and secure for them blessing. This blessing is received by faith and is said to include the reception of the Holy Spirit.

But it is clear that the nation of Israel would not be the ultimate fulfillment of the promise to Abram. The blessing that is to go to all of the families of the earth would ultimately be appropriated by Jesus Christ, the second Adam and true Israel.

Discussion Questions

Refer to this week's reading, "God the Son and the Coming of the Kingdom, Part 1."

- 1. In our story, we see a King who insists upon redemption for his rebels and who longs to dwell among his people, culminating here in the coming of God the Son. How does the incarnation speak hope or comfort to you today?**
- 2. If Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God, where is that kingdom now? What is your role (or the role of the church) with respect to this kingdom?**
- 3. The reading refers to the "missing middle" as a tendency to neglect the coming of the kingdom as central to the work of Christ. Do you agree? What is the relationship between the cross and the coming of the kingdom?**
- 4. How is lament an act of faith? What is the role of lament in your life of worship both privately and corporately?**

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** John 1:14.
- **Read** “God the Son and the Coming of the Kingdom, Part 2.”
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

LESSON 7

God the Son and the Coming of the Kingdom, Part 2

Overview

Key Concept: Resurrection | **Bible Study:** Colossians 1:15–20 | **Memory Verse:** Matthew 28:18–20

Objectives

- To explore the significance of the cross and the resurrection in the coming of the kingdom
- To explore the relationship between resurrection and mission to all nations

God the Son and the Coming of the Kingdom, Part 2

Incarnation and Inauguration

God the Father, in mission, sends Jesus into his creation. The Word became flesh and with him came a kingdom. Jesus, the long-awaited and rightful King, is sent by God to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth. By his testimony, he declared the kingdom of God was at hand; in his teaching, he proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom; through his miracles, he bore witness to the reality of the kingdom; and to those who would ask, he would declare that the kingdom was present in their very midst. The kingdom's King is here, and so too his kingdom.

Passion and Paradox

The paradox of the kingdom, of course, is that this kingdom finds its life through the death of its King. He bears a crown, but it is a crown of thorns. He is bestowed a royal robe which would be stripped, and a kingly staff by which he would be beaten. And they don't bow down in reverence, but mock in laughter. And on the Roman cross upon which the King of Glory is crucified, it is written, "This is Jesus, King of the Jews."

This kingdom would not come by coup but by cross, for its King wished to display not only the awe-inspiring power that spoke creation into existence, but his relentless, furious, and unfathomable

love for his rebel creatures. And to finally dwell with man, indeed to *indwell* humanity, that curse of sin had to be undone. And there was only one way. His heel had to be bruised to strike that mortal blow.

The cross, the atonement, the substitution, the sacrifice, the remission of sins, then, do not diminish the kingdom-bringing work of Jesus. Nor vice versa! Cross and kingdom are not set in contrast, but in harmony. And both need to be heard at full volume. The cross was not an obstacle to be overcome to get to this kingdom; it was itself the kingdom-securing action that redeemed for the King, a holy kingdom-people. This kingdom's King was and is still a "Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (Rev. 5:6). And in the kingdom of the slaughtered Lamb, its people are made *holy*, able to dwell (*finally!*) with their Creator, dance through flaming swords, sing in the Most Holy Place, and, yes, called to live a cruciform life of suffering, sacrifice, and solidarity to their Savior.

Likewise, the kingdom is neither incidental nor secondary to the "really important" work of the cross. The joy-inspiring truth of personal salvation and the forgiveness of sins cannot be divorced from or set against the kingdom that Jesus came to bring. That salvation is unto citizenship in the kingdom, with a kingdom ethic that must necessarily concern the scope of that kingdom, namely, "all the earth."

The kingdom of both love and justice in which the "'lifting up' of Jesus on the cross is his exaltation as the kingdom-bringing"¹ King, now faces yet another dilemma: its King is crucified. Dead. Did the hope of the kingdom die with its King? What now of this inaugurated kingdom?

Resurrection and Reign

Matthew 28 contains, of course, what has come to be known as the Great Commission. In the past, as a personal confession, I've avoided this passage when teaching on mission. My sense was that it had been reduced to a proof-text for mission and I didn't want to perpetuate that. It's become, "Oh, you want to talk about mission? Well, let's see, there's Genesis 12 (the promise to Abraham), there's the story of Jonah, there's Acts 1 (you are my witnesses)." And then, of course, there's Matthew 28.

But you don't proof-text mission. You want a mission text? You start with Genesis 1 and just keep reading until you hit Revelation 22. The story of Scripture, as it reveals God's purpose and design for all of creation and all of human history, is the story of God's mission for his world. And we can't airlift *this* passage from its context in *that* story or else it becomes—if it hasn't already—a slogan by which mission is reduced to something like "marching orders" when it is so much more.

If we then approach Matthew 28 *in context*, our first of three points of introduction becomes clear. *Please take a moment to read Matthew 28 in its entirety.*

First, the so-called Great Commission is part of Matthew's account of Jesus' *resurrection*. The Great Commission is not an epilogue to the story; it's not tacked on to the end, it's woven into the story itself. Jesus is risen, he instructs the first witnesses to tell the eleven disciples to go to Galilee, and when they get there, it's *then* and *there* that he speaks these words. The Great Commission is given as the climax to the resurrection story! Before it is anything else, before it is a *mission* passage, it is an Easter story. The mission of the church is bound to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the risen King.

Second, there is a counter-mission that Matthew records in verses 11–15. While the disciples make their way toward Galilee, the guards who had been keeping watch over Jesus' tomb tell the religious authorities what happened. The chief priests and the elders tell the guards to say that his body was stolen by the disciples. *Don't tell anyone what happened!* And it says that they gave them "a sufficient sum of money" (12) as well as the assurance that if the governor found out, that they would "satisfy him" and keep them "out of trouble" (14). And here's what they wanted in return: *don't* tell of the risen Christ. *Live* as if it weren't true. *Think* as if it never happened. *Speak* as if Jesus was never risen. Be silent! Bear no witness! You see, that's a mission too. And so you have a life of safety and comfort for those who would *not* bear witness to the risen Christ.

Third, notice the community to whom Jesus is speaking. Matthew notes in verse 16 that the "eleven disciples" are making their way to Galilee and there is a certain poignancy to that word "eleven." All throughout Matthew it is the Twelve. But what happened? Matthew 27:5: "And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he (Judas) departed, and he went and hanged himself." And what of the other eleven? Matthew 26:56: "Then all the disciples left Jesus and fled." And in our passage, Matthew 28:17, when they reunite with Jesus it says, "And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted."

This is a weak, wounded, and broken community of doubting worshippers. One commentator writes, "The number 'eleven' limps; it is not perfect like twelve."² And yet, they are the ones Jesus commissions, this imperfect, broken, limping community. It is Christ's mission and he'll do it with his people, including even you and me.

Resurrection, Authority, Kingdom, Mission

So finally now, to verse 18. The disciples are reunited with Jesus, and if you notice, this encounter is narrated with a lot of restraint. He doesn't tell us what the risen Christ looked like or what the disciples said when they saw him. Matthew draws our attention to where it's supposed to be: the

focus is entirely on Jesus' words. And the *first* thing that Jesus says is this: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The first words out of Jesus' mouth are a declaration. It is an affirmation and not a command; before it is ever a commission or a mandate, it is a proclamation that all authority belongs to Jesus.

Now if you're familiar with the life of Jesus, then this statement might seem curious to you. Because all throughout the gospels, we see that Jesus *is* one who has authority. He has authority of over the wind and the waves. He has authority over sickness and disease. He has the authority to forgive sins and raise the dead. When he teaches, the refrain is that the people are astonished because he taught *as one with authority*. What is it that now leads him to declare, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"?

Here's where it's critical to see that the Great Commission is an Easter story, because the context demands that we understand this declaration in light of his resurrection. It is because he is now risen, now that he has defeated *death* itself, that he can declare "*all* authority" is now his. It's resurrection, then authority.

The Apostle Paul understood this. That's why in Ephesians 1, he prays that the church in Ephesus would know "the immeasurable greatness of [God's] power . . . that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead"—there's resurrection—"and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come" (20-22). There's authority.

To the *risen* Christ, all authority in heaven and on earth is given! He is over every created thing, *far above* all power and dominion and above every name that is named. He is over every injustice, over every form of suffering, over every dark corner of this world, over even death itself. All authority in heaven and on earth is his! And you know what that means? The risen Christ is King. Death—even death!—could not subvert, would not hinder, did not thwart the coming of the kingdom! And the resurrection of Jesus would both secure and signal the resurrection of all those who would put their faith in him. In this kingdom of life and love there would be a redeemed people, made holy and made new, who would declare in every tongue, "Salvation belongs to our God!" But only because Christ is risen.

And the question facing us is: Do we believe it? Do we actually believe that? And here's how we know. This is Christ's own logic. The risen Christ says, "All authority is mine"—*therefore*—go and make disciples of all nations. Therefore. The logical, necessary, inescapable consequence of the resurrection—of the kingdom that is now here—is *mission* to all nations. That's how we know.

Mission is more than simply a command to be obeyed. The Great Commission is not *at first* even a commission! They are not the marching orders of a militant church, and it's not a slogan. It is what happens when the community that bears Christ's name believes that Jesus is the resurrected King. It is the "so what?" to the resurrection of Christ our King!

The most pressing, the most urgent question that we face when it comes to mission then is this: *do we actually believe that Christ is risen from the dead?*

Mission then is not something to add to your calendars and datebooks. It is a way to understand that for which your calendars and datebooks exist. If your life is caught up in God's story—*and it is*—then let *all* of your days be lived as if the resurrection happened—*because it did!* It's resurrection, authority, kingdom, and so, mission.

Now, finally, how is this to be done? How will it go to the ends of the earth? I mean, this is a pretty daunting call, isn't it? I can imagine the disciples thinking, "All nations? How about just Galilee? How are we going make disciples of all nations? It's too big!"

And to this Jesus says: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus gives a promise. He doesn't give them a strategy or a game plan; he gives them himself. And that's how it will happen. It's not too big.

It will happen by Jesus' own presence with his people. It is an enduring presence. He will never leave or forsake us, "even to the close of the age." It is a comforting presence. Here is the answer to our fear. It is an empowering presence. And so goes our sense of inadequacy. It is an emboldening presence. If the risen Christ is with us, who can be against us? And finally, it is an indwelling presence. As we go into our city and to the ends of the earth, we go as bearers of the presence of Jesus—the presence of the resurrected King! The resurrected and ascended Jesus is with us even to the close of the age.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Colossians 1:13–20.

1. What do these verses teach us about Jesus? What is the Paul’s main point?

Jesus is King (13).

In Jesus we have redemption and forgiveness (14).

Jesus is the image of the invisible God (15).

Jesus is the firstborn of all creation (15).

Jesus created all things (16).

Jesus is before all things (17).

Jesus sustains all things (17).

Jesus is the head of the church (18).

Jesus is the beginning (18).

Jesus is the firstborn from the dead (18).

Jesus is preeminent (18).

Jesus is God (19).

Jesus reconciles (20).

Jesus makes peace through the cross (20).

Paul’s main focus here is the pre-eminence and supremacy of Christ over all creation. He is before all things. He is King. He is Creator and Sustainer and so all things, in heaven and earth, things visible and invisible, even thrones and rulers, are all subject to him! He is also the head of the church, whom he has redeemed, forgiven, and reconciled to himself.

2. What is the significance of Paul juxtaposing Christ the creator (15–17) and Christ the redeemer (18–20)? What is ironic or surprising about *how* Christ the redeemer is exalted?

Here, Christ is pre-eminent both as creator and as redeemer. And just as Jesus acted in creation (“by him,” “through him,” “for him”), he acts also in reconciliation (“in him,” “through him,” “to him”).

The parallelism suggests that the redeemed church indeed represents a new creation. The redemption and reconciliation of the church then intimates the purpose of creation: God will have his kingdom and his kingdom people. God the Son, in mission, is sent into the world

to redeem for himself his people and to claim his kingdom (13–14). Christ the King is to be exalted for his work in creation and in new creation.

The irony of the coronation of Christ the redeemer is that the cosmic Christ who is above all things, who created all things, who sustains the universe, is exalted as redeemer by the spilling of his blood: “making peace by the blood of his cross.” *That* Christ, who reigns over all thrones and dominions and rulers and thrones, spilled his blood for you and for me. The high and lofty King suffers pain and sheds blood.

3. Read Colossians 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:20–23. What is the significance of Christ being the “firstborn from the dead” or “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” as it relates to the kingdom of God and new creation?

Jesus is first said to be the “firstborn of all creation,” a phrase Paul employs to establish Christ’s pre-eminence over all created things (and not to imply in any way that Christ himself was created!). Similarly, Jesus is said to be the “firstborn from the dead.” Paul is here now speaking of the church and Christ’s supremacy as the crucified and *resurrected* King. He is now first, pre-eminent, among all those who will be raised from the dead, his church. His supremacy by virtue of his crucifixion and resurrection extends now to the new creation community, who also will be raised from the dead because they are united to Christ, their head.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches that because Christ has been raised from the dead (as “firstborn from the dead” or as “firstfruits” in the passage at hand), all who are in Christ will also be raised from the dead. This new creation community is the kingdom people that Christ secured through the blood of his cross. And just as Christ is over all created things, he too is over all of his new creation by virtue of his crucifixion and resurrection.

4. What do these verses teach about us? As his church? See 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. What are some of the implications of our new identity?

We are delivered from the domain of darkness (13).

We are transferred to the kingdom of Christ (13).

We are redeemed (14).

We are forgiven (14).

We are created by him and for him (16).

We are his body and he is our head (18).

We are reconciled to him (20).

As his new creation and as ones now reconciled, we are bequeathed a ministry of reconciliation. We are now ambassadors for Christ, and the creating and reconciling King makes his appeal to others *through us!*

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Matthew 28:18–20.
- **Read** “God the Spirit and the Presence of the Kingdom.”
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Matthew 28:18–20

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

LESSON 8

God the Spirit and the Presence of the Kingdom

Overview

Key Concept: The Holy Spirit | **Bible Study:** Selected Passages | **Memory Verse:** Acts 1:8

Objectives

- To explore the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the kingdom
- To see how the Holy Spirit is foretaste, guarantee, and seal for the future kingdom

God the Spirit and the Presence of the Kingdom

Ascension and Absence?

Jesus, having come to bring God's long-awaited kingdom, having been raised from the dead, having now all rule and authority and power and dominion, appears to his once-beleaguered disciples who naturally ask with a renewed confidence and hope, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The question is pregnant with expectation and, as was often the case, Jesus is expertly indirect: "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The answer to their question about the kingdom involves the coming of the Holy Spirit. Then, "as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). And just like that, their King is gone.

Now wait a minute, Jesus! You just promised us on that mountain in Galilee, "I am with you always, to the end of the age. When you told us to make disciples of all nations, remember?" But Jesus leaves.

What then becomes of the kingdom that Jesus came to bring? If the kingdom is "indissolubly connected with the person of Jesus Christ" and Christ's presence is withdrawn, then what happens to the kingdom of God upon Christ's ascension? Is the kingdom also withdrawn? How is Jesus

able to say without duplicity that he will always be with his disciples even as he leaves them? The answer recalls that most intimate discourse, set in an upper room, on the eve of unspeakable suffering and a promise of unfathomable wonder.

The Spirit and the Presence of Christ

On the night of his betrayal, Jesus assures his disciples: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:16–18).

Jesus’ bodily presence was about to be withdrawn from the disciples, and yet Jesus assures them that his presence, fellowship, and companionship would remain: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” And how is he able to give that assurance? How is he able to make good on this promise in light of his coming departure? It is by the coming of the Spirit who would be with them forever, who would dwell *with* them and *in* them. Forever.

Yes, I will go away, but I will never leave you. The answer to the paradox, the reason Jesus is not duplicitous in promising his forever presence even as he leaves in body, is that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and in the life of the church mediates the very presence of the resurrected Christ. As one writer puts it, “The Spirit, then, is the ‘vicar’ of Christ . . . so much so that his presence in the church is, vicariously, the presence of the ascended Jesus.”¹ That Spirit dwells with us and in us, uniting us to the risen King. By the Spirit, we have the presence of Christ.

And so Paul can write, “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, *if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you*. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. *But if Christ is in you*, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. *If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you*, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies *through his Spirit who dwells in you*” (Rom. 8:9–11). Paul writes freely of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us—three times, in fact, in the space of these three verses. But he is able to speak of Christ dwelling in us too. He isn’t confused about the Trinity. He understands that “Christ is in you” if in fact “the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

As bearers of the presence of Christ through the indwelling Spirit, it is not just that we are now temples of the living God; it is not just that we bear the fruit of that Spirit such that we grow in ever-increasing likeness to him; it is not just that we are conferred gifts to edify the body of Christ; and it is not just that we are thereby united to Christ himself. There is still more glory! The presence of the Holy Spirit, because it is the presence of the risen Christ, confers to us the presence of the

kingdom of God here and now. The kingdom Christ came to inaugurate by his bodily presence is not *withdrawn* at his ascension; it is *conferred* to the new creation community by virtue of the sending of the promised Holy Spirit.

Presence and Foretaste

One of the most profound words Paul uses to speak of the Holy Spirit is *arrabon*, which signifies a guarantee or down payment. This is Ephesians 1:13–14: “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, *who is the guarantee of our inheritance* until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” It shows up again in 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul speaks of our heavenly home, “a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1). We anticipate this home because “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, *who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee*” (2 Cor. 5:5).

The Holy Spirit is given as a deposit, as a first installment, that we possess now as a down payment that guarantees the fullness of all that which is still yet to come. The fullness is yet to come, yet we experience it in part by the presence of the Holy Spirit now. The down payment is no less real; it’s just that there is so much more on its way! In this way, the Holy Spirit mediates, here and now, the presence of the full and future kingdom that is yet to come. That’s why Paul can speak of the kingdom of God as a matter of present “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). We experience that now. We live it out now as citizens of the kingdom of God because the presence of the risen King dwells in us and with us.

Now there’s another metaphor that Paul uses to convey this thought, and it’s that of *firstfruits*. Firstfruits is an agricultural term that referred to the first produce that was collected from the coming harvest. It was the beginning of the harvest and it was a sign of things to come, specifically that there would be much more produce coming. It was invested with hope and anticipation. And here’s where it’s applied to the Holy Spirit: “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23).

We have the firstfruits of the Spirit and we have it now—the harvest is real and has begun—but there is so much more to come! Yes, we are adopted and we are redeemed, and we experience that today and every day because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. But—*but!*—we long and wait and groan for our adoption and our redemption, because the full harvest is still coming, isn’t it? And so fittingly, the Spirit comes at Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, referred to in the Old Testament as the “day of firstfruits” (Num. 28:26).

So when we put these two images together, here's what we find. The kingdom has come and is still coming. It is the Spirit that both confers the presence of the kingdom now and guarantees the fullness that is to come. And so the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church confers to the community of faith the very real presence of the kingdom of God here and now. That future kingdom—when everything will be made new and when things are the way they're supposed to be—we get to experience in part now because the Spirit of the risen King dwells in us. We are a new creation *now*, even as we await the day when all things will be made new. That's foretaste.

So recall that Jesus' presence, the presence of the King, marked the coming of the kingdom of God. With Jesus having ascended, where in this world do we experience the kingdom that was ushered in by Jesus? Where do we see God's rule and reign, even if it's in mustard seed form? Where and how is the kingdom known and experienced?

The answer is in the church, in the life of the community of faith, insofar as the Holy Spirit dwells within the church. And that makes sense, doesn't it? Because we said that the Holy Spirit mediates to us the presence of the risen King. The church is, in and to the world, a demonstration community of the kingdom of God—the kingdom that God the Father spoke into being; the kingdom that Jesus the Son came to bring through incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection; and the kingdom that God the Spirit confers by his presence here and now even as we wait for its glorious fullness!

One writer put it this way: “The gift of the Spirit is related to the coming of the kingdom as cash in advance is related to the full settlement of an account. The Spirit is a foretaste of the messianic feast. The presence of the Spirit is a real presence of the love, joy, and peace that belong to God's perfect reign, but it is not yet the fullness of these things. It is the sign that the last things have begun (Acts 2:17); consequently it both assures us of their coming and makes us hope more eagerly for their full fruition. It is in this way that the presence of the Spirit brings a powerful witness to the reality of the reign of God to which the world is otherwise blind.”²

Presence and Witness

There are countless corollaries to bearing the presence of the living God by the indwelling Spirit—profound implications to living in the kingdom of the risen Christ that is both here now and still to come. We are entrusted with gifts by that Spirit to edify the community to which we are now irrevocably united. We are said to exhibit fruit of the Spirit whereby we actually personally change and transform, not into better versions of ourselves, but toward increasingly greater likeness to Christ. The Spirit makes us like Him! But there is something else that necessarily happens when the Spirit comes to dwell in us, both personally and corporately, and it is that the Holy Spirit makes us witnesses.

Jesus declares, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). It’s not that we are *to* witness, it’s that we *are* witnesses. We are changed. We are made witnesses by the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And so as we saw earlier, the Great Commission does not exist without the promise of Christ’s presence which would be conferred by the Spirit, “and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Likewise, that’s why the sending of the disciples in John unfolds in this manner: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21–22). The commissioning, the sending, is irrevocably linked to the presence of the Spirit. And the converse can be said to be true. The presence of the Spirit is irrevocably linked to commissioning and sending. It’s not just that we need the Spirit to empower our witness when we happen to go; it’s that if we have the Spirit, we will necessarily go.

And the logic is self-evident. The Spirit himself bears witness and so we as bearers of his presence cannot but do the same: “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, *he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness*, because you have been with me from the beginning” (John 15:26–27).

The Spirit bears witness to Christ, then the disciples in whom the Spirit dwells bear witness to Christ. And the order is important. God the Spirit goes first. In this way, the church is invited into God’s mission and not the other way around. Newbigin writes, “Mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church in its missionary journey . . . the church’s witness is secondary and derivative. The church is witness insofar as it follows obediently where the Spirit leads.”³

This is indeed what we see when we read Acts in this way. The primary actor in a book about the early church is of course the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2, the promised Spirit comes with power at Pentecost; in Acts 6, the seven deacons are filled with the Holy Spirit to serve the church; in Acts 8, the Holy Spirit leads Philip to the Ethiopian official; in Acts 9, the Holy Spirit prepares Ananias to receive Saul as a brother; in both Acts 5 and 13, the Holy Spirit executes the judgment of God; in Acts 13, the Holy Spirit speaks in commissioning Barnabas and Saul for the work to which they were called; in Acts 15, the Holy Spirit directs the church in the Jerusalem Council concerning the admission of Gentile believers; in Acts 16, the Holy Spirit directs Paul’s missionary journeys; in Acts 20, the Holy Spirit is said to have appointed elders of the church.

God the Spirit is acting, enacting, speaking, working, calling, empowering, directing, bestowing gifts, changing hearts, opening eyes, and bearing witness to the risen Christ and his kingdom. God is on mission for the sake of his creation and all the nations. God sends. We follow.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and in the life of the church, then, is the indwelling presence of the living God and the risen Christ. It confers the presence of the kingdom both now and future as foretaste and guarantee, and it does one more thing: it necessarily makes us witnesses. Where the Holy Spirit is, there is both kingdom and witness.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read the selected passages from the book of Acts.

- 1. Read Acts 1:1–5. In what ways does Luke signal to us the basic continuity of the work of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the work of the early church? See also Acts 8:12, 19:8, 20:25, 28:23, and 28:31.**

In his introduction to the Book of Acts, Luke places the events he is about to describe squarely in the context of the work of Jesus. He writes that in the first book (The Gospel of Luke), he “dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach” (1:1), implying that here in this present volume he will tell of what Jesus continues to do, now through the Holy Spirit and his church. “For the contrasting parallel he draws between his two volumes was not between Christ and his church, but between two stages of the ministry of the same Christ.”⁴

Remember as well that it is Jesus who promises the coming of the Holy Spirit. We recall the Upper Room Discourse in John 14–16 as well as the sending of the disciples in John 20. Here in Acts, they are reminded again: “And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’” (1:4-5) The Holy Spirit would come, promised to them by the Father, relayed to them by the Son. What is about to unfold is the natural expression and extension of the work and mission of God.

Finally, we are again reminded of the basic message of Christ’s ministry: the gospel of the kingdom. While on earth, Jesus spoke repeatedly of the kingdom of God (recall Lesson 6). Here, post-resurrection, what does Jesus do? We find him again “speaking about the kingdom of God” (1:3).

As Christ’s faithful witnesses, this is indeed what we see is on the mind and lips of the early Christians. Philip “preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (8:12). In Ephesus, Paul “entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God” (19:8). In his farewell address to the elders at Ephesus, he grieves that “none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again” (20:25). In Rome, “From morning till evening, [Paul] expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God” (28:23). And finally, in the final verses of Acts, we read about Paul: “He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and

welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:30–31).

The mission of God in Christ continues through the Holy Spirit and his church who bear the presence of the risen Christ by that same Spirit. Again, continuity is not equivalence. To suggest that we participate in the mission of God for his world does not mean that we have some role in the atoning cross work of Christ or even in the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, both of which should be viewed as unique redemptive-historical events that could be accomplished only by the Godhead. Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God, and by the Spirit, we have and experience that now. We do not build the kingdom of God. Jesus did that. But as the verses above indicate, we preach it, we proclaim it, we testify to it. We are witnesses to what God has done and so participate in God’s mission for his world.

2. Read Acts 1:6–11. Is Acts 1:8 a command or a promise? Is the distinction significant? Why or why not? What is the significance of Acts 1:8 as a response to the disciples’ question about kingdom?

The construction suggests that it is a promise. It can perhaps be argued that the promise contains an explicit command, but insofar as Acts 1:8 serves as a description of what actually unfolds in the remainder of the Book of Acts, it takes on the character of a promise. This is what will happen. The Holy Spirit would come in the very next chapter at Pentecost and they would immediately witness to the work of Christ, beginning in Jerusalem and on outward until we find Paul in Rome at the book’s close.

The distinction suggests that mission-witness is not simply a command (one of many) to be obeyed. Instead, witness appears to be something belonging to the category of property rather than command. It is something that is intrinsically true of the kingdom community by virtue of the Spirit’s empowering presence. It is not just that we are to witness; we *are* witnesses. Witness to Christ is what the Spirit does and so all who bear the Spirit will also necessarily witness to Christ and his kingdom.

It is telling that this is not simply an unsolicited word from Jesus to his disciples, but rather a response to a question about the kingdom. The Spirit is central to the kingdom that Jesus came to bring, secured by his death, resurrection, and ascension. As the kingdom is indissolubly linked to the presence of Jesus, the kingdom is present on earth now by virtue of the presence of the Holy Spirit who mediates the presence of the risen Christ. As well, witness to the ends of the earth recalls the dominion mandate of Genesis 1. Our role in the kingdom is to witness to its reality and presence and to proclaim it and its King to the ends of the earth.

3. Read Acts 2:1–13. What allusions to the Old Testament do you see in the account of Pentecost? What is the scope, or for whose sake, does the Spirit come at Pentecost?

The Feast of Pentecost, also called the Feast of Weeks, was the second of the three major feasts of Israel, the others being the Feast of Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. It is celebrated fifty days after the Feast of Passover, and as the Passover commemorates Israel's deliverance from Egypt, Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Torah to Israel at Sinai and in some respects, the birth of the nation insofar as their "constitution" was ratified or adopted. As alluded to in the reading, at the Feast of Pentecost, also called the "day of the firstfruits" (Num. 28:26), worshippers were to bring to the temple the firstfruits of the wheat harvest. Recall, that Jesus was crucified at Passover and appeared to his disciples following his resurrection for forty days (Acts 1:3). Fifty days following Passover came Pentecost (Acts 2).

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was a loud, awe-inspiring (and perhaps fear-inspiring!) event. "And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them." It is interesting that the giving of the law is celebrated at Pentecost as the giving of the law at Sinai was—attended by loud thunder and trumpet blasts and God coming in fire (Exod. 19:16–18). And if the nation-state of Israel is birthed in the giving of the law, the church as kingdom community is birthed in the giving of the Spirit. It is further interesting that the law is contrasted so pointedly with the Spirit in the New Testament. As an example, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal. 5:18). Or again, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1–2). And if Israel is distinguished in the Old Testament from all other nations by the law, then the church is distinguished in the world by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit-wind connection is perhaps peripheral and unintended but may also be explored. The Hebrew *ruah* is sufficiently broad to signify both "wind" and "spirit." The wind-spirit of Genesis 1:2 is one example. Some interpret this to signify the Holy Spirit's creative activity in the beginning, as it is rendered by the English Standard Version, "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." In Acts 2, the Spirit comes with a sound "like a mighty rushing wind." The creative Spirit of God is then active again here in new creation—the creation of the people of God who are what they are by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Some have also observed a connection with the sin at Babel. Again, the intent cannot be definitively discerned, but at Babel we see judgment for sin and the divinely appointed unintelligibility of tongues. This is followed by the promise to Abram that all the families of earth will receive

blessing. Here, we see the divinely appointed intelligibility of tongues among “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians . . .” (Acts 2:9–11). And by the coming of the Spirit and the witness of the church to the work of Christ, we see the actualization of that promise.

Pentecost too was for the nations. The great harvest that would follow the firstfruits of the Spirit would include those from every tribe and nation. The giving of the Spirit, the birth of the church, the witness to the work of Christ, is all for the salvation of the nations—so all would be “amazed and astonished” (2:7) and hear in their own tongues “the mighty works of God” (2:11).

4. Read Acts 2:14–17. How does Peter interpret Pentecost? What is the immediate impact of the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost?

Peter interprets Pentecost as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. See Joel 2:28–29 and Acts 2:17–18. The “last days” that would be marked by the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh regardless of gender, age, or social status are here now, marked by the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. A new age has been ushered in by the event complex: Incarnation-Crucifixion-Resurrection-Ascension-Pentecost (2:22–36). Peter “closely conjoins, in sequence: resurrection—ascension—reception of the Spirit . . . Pentecost is coordinate with the other events, conjoined with them in an especially intimate way . . . [constituting] a unified complex of events, a once-for-all, redemptive-historical unity, such that they are inseparable . . .”⁵ I would add to this, that Peter here also speaks to Jesus’ earthly ministry in verse 22 and crucifixion in verse 23. In this way, “The significance of Pentecost is primarily redemptive-historical, not experiential . . . the Spirit’s coming on Pentecost is as climactic an event, and as essential to the messianic work of salvation foreseen in the Old Testament, as are Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension.”⁶

The immediate impact of Pentecost, the impact of the coming of the Spirit, the impact of the witness of the church, is that many come to saving faith: “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). And again, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:47).

Discussion Questions

Refer to this week's reading, "God the Spirit and the Presence of the Kingdom."

- 1. What is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the kingdom of God? What is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the church's witness? What is the relationship between the mission of the church and the kingdom of God?**

- 2. How does the forever presence of the risen Christ in you and with you give you comfort today?**

- 3. In what ways do you see the kingdom of God evident in the life of your church?**

- 4. Share with your group how you experienced the work of the Holy Spirit this past week.**

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Acts 1:8
- **Read** “The Kingdom Community of the Triune God.”
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

LESSON 9

The Kingdom Community of the Triune God

Overview

Key Concept: Church | **Bible Study:** Revelation 4–5 | **Memory Verse:** Revelation 21:3–4

Objectives

- To encounter the missionary nature of the church as a sent community
- To explore how we live as a sent community

The Kingdom Community of the Triune God

We have explored *mission* in the context of the Trinity and the sending action of God himself. We have looked in turn at the sending of God the Son by the Father, and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and Son. It is from here that mission is derived and finds its meaning. Today we will look at the next and final sending movement: the sending of the church by the Triune God.

As well, we have explored the mission of this sending God, namely the establishment of his kingdom for his glory and for our good. God the Son is the promised, long-awaited King sent by the Father to bring God's kingdom to earth, to secure its ultimate victory through the cross, and to have dominion over all things by virtue of his resurrection. In so doing, Jesus fulfills the Old Testament promises as the seed of the woman who defeats the serpent, the Son of Abraham who brings blessing to all nations, and the Son of David, as heir to an everlasting throne. Jesus ascends to heaven but sends the Holy Spirit, who mediates the presence of the risen King to his people, indeed dwelling within them, and thus conferring to them a foretaste of the coming kingdom here and now. The kingdom is here and is still to come.

Now God's church, as bearers of the presence of the Spirit and thereby the community of the kingdom, is not an insular repository for that presence to enjoy the blessing of this kingdom in some static homeostasis. Rather, they who are united to Christ by the indwelling Spirit are sent into the world by the sending God: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,

‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21–22). The presence of that Spirit makes them witnesses to the kingdom and the risen King. And so the church is a missionary community not simply by command but by constitution; it is a matter of identity, and not obligation.

The “Missional” Church

It has become popular to speak of the “missional church.” One of the more recent popularizers of the phrase, Darrell Guder, explains what is intended by the phrase: “By adding the suffix ‘al’ to the word ‘mission,’ *we hoped to foster an understanding of the church as fundamentally and comprehensively defined by its calling and sending . . . as God’s witnessing people to all the world. We were obviously engaging in a polemic endeavor. We were critiquing theologies of the church which neglect the church’s essentially missionary nature. We were critiquing reductions of mission to one of several clusters of activities that are proper to the church: worship, fellowship, service . . . and, in some cases, mission.*”¹

For Guder and others, mission was not simply one of many activities the church was to do; it was rooted in the church’s essential nature. The church then is not primarily a “place where” certain activities happen, that is, the place where “the gospel is rightly preached, the sacraments rightly administered,”² etc. It certainly is not a place where religious goods and services are offered to discerning consumers or even a place where a community may or may not engage in mission. The church is not a “place where” (defined by activity), but a “people who” (defined by ontology).

The Missional Church as Sent Community

The church in mission then is not a sending community; it is a sent community, sent by the sending God himself. It is not a *place where* “mission” happens, but a *people who* are sent on mission as witnesses to the sent and risen Christ. The mission of God the Father in the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, proceeds through the life and witness of the sent church in which the Holy Spirit remains dynamically active to bring all things to their destined end.

The church is a sent people, a community of witnesses, a people in whom the presence of the sending God dwells. It is a people who experience the foretaste of God’s kingdom and are sent to proclaim the reality of that kingdom to the ends of the earth. The church’s call to mission then lies in its essential identity: the people of God, united to Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, sent as God himself sends.

The Missional Church as Kingdom Community

If there is a basic continuity between the mission of the Triune God and his church through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, and if central to that mission is the kingdom of God, inaugurated

and secured by Christ and present here and now by his Spirit in the life of the church, then what is the relationship between the church and the kingdom?

The kingdom is most consistently spoken about as a something to be *entered* (Matt. 7:21; 21:31; 2 Pet. 1:11), *inherited* (Matt. 25:34; James 2:5) (or forfeited as an inheritance [1 Cor. 6:9–10, 15:50; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5]) or *given* and *received* (Matt. 21:43; Mark 10:14; Luke 6:20; 12:32). Luke writes, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to *give* you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). And again, “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not *receive* the kingdom of God like a child shall not *enter* it” (Luke 18:17).

This challenges our understanding of the role of the church in mission to be one of building or extending the kingdom: “The verbs to build and to extend are not found in the New Testament’s grammar for the reign of God. The announcement of God’s reign nowhere includes an invitation to go out and build it, nor to extend it. These are not New Testament ways of speaking about the reign of God. The words most often used evoke quite a different spirit and, therefore, a very different missional identity and engagement.”³ If not build or extend, then what? We proclaim with our words and our lives the gospel of the kingdom, that Jesus the King has come to save us from our sins and to rule over us with grace and in love.

The kingdom of God is the great all-encompassing work of the Triune God to which the church is graciously invited to enter and receive, by virtue of God’s election, Christ’s sacrifice, and the Spirit’s indwelling presence. The church participates in God’s mission as the community sent by God to corporately proclaim and manifest the presence of God’s reign here and now, as both foretaste and witness. So what does that look like?

Marks of a Missional Community: Walk, Work, Witness, Worship

If the church is missionary by its very nature, if it is indeed a “missional” community of the kingdom, then living out its fundamental calling in and for the world to which it is sent is by nature missionary activity: “[The church’s] basic identity is to be found not in what it does but in what it *is* . . . the world does not know of any other Christ except the Christ that is embodied in the church. Thus *to be the church* is the greatest mission to the world.”⁴

This of course does not mean that we reduce mission to what we happen to be doing—to slap the label of mission as it were on our activities and proclaim we are now “missional.” No, it means that God’s mission to redeem for himself a kingdom people from all nations will inform all that we do. Making disciples of all nations, bearing witness to the kingdom for the sake of the nations will not be a department of our churches, will not be one priority of many, will not be what we do next

summer for one week overseas in some exotic locale; it will be the reason for which our planning meetings and agendas and small groups exist.

So how do we live out our identity as a sent community? This is by no means a comprehensive treatment of the church's calling, but here's a start.

Walk. The church is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, which necessarily makes it a temple: "For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor. 6:16). Paul writes of our being temples again in 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 6:19, and Ephesians 2:19–22. It is both personal and corporate, but we are the people in whom the holy God dwells. As we saw in *Gospel and Grace*, if we were to survey these passages, here is what Paul is addressing: divisions in the church (1 Cor. 3:16); sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:19); marriage to non-Christians (2 Cor. 6:16); and the inclusion of the Gentiles. It's divisions in the church, sexual immorality, marriage ethics, and racial discrimination.

As a community on mission, it matters how we live! The kingdom community presents in its communal life an alternative, set-apart manner of living that subverts dominant cultural idols while providing a compelling way forward by modeling God's good intentions for humanity. This presupposes engagement with, not withdrawal from, the public square as well as the priority of discipleship and disciple-making. We are a missional church insofar as we live out kingdom values and teaching not simply unto personal piety but as witness to a watching world.

Work. By work, I mean more than a place of employment, but rather, one's vocation and calling. The church is not just a temple for the Holy Spirit, but is also referred to as the body of Christ. We are members of a body living together in vital, organic, and irrevocable union with one another and with Christ our head. Paul employs the metaphor of the body in speaking about gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4–11).

The presence of the Holy Spirit within the diverse community of believers is such that he sovereignly and freely bestows upon all individuals various gifts that are to be employed for the edification of the community and unto the mission of God. It is far too easy to focus primarily on the gifts themselves or on those to whom the gifts are given, but our attention to the spiritual gifts must have a Godward orientation: They are given by God to God's people for the building up of God's community as they are engaged in God's mission, all unto God's glory: "The truth we must grasp here is that our exercise of spiritual gifts is nothing more nor less than Christ himself ministering through his body to his body, to the Father, and to all mankind."⁵ God has a church for his mission that is not only empowered by his presence but gifted to fulfill its calling.

The missional church celebrates, equips, and engages the gifts of its people. Every member of Christ's body, not just the clergy, is bestowed with gifts to be offered and employed in service to God's mission. This is not to diminish the call to ordained ministry in the least, but mission is not to be delegated to the clergy with the laity mere consumers or admirers of their services. Is there a robust understanding and practice of lay ministry that honors the missionary nature of the church?

Witness. As we noted previously, the presence of the Holy Spirit necessarily makes us witnesses. And because it is God's mission, the Holy Spirit leads and empowers the church in its witness. That is why when Jesus sends the disciples, he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21–22). It is why he says to them, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And it is why Jesus promises, "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, *he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning*" (John 15:26–27).

The Spirit cannot but witness to Christ, and so it is with the people and community in which he lives: "The real presence of God's own life lived in their common life will be the evidence, the witness to all the nations, that the full reality of God's victorious reign is on the way. What is given here (and this is vital for true missionary thinking) is not a command, but a promise. The presence of the Spirit will make them witnesses."⁶

And witnesses to what? To the glory and wisdom and power of God who sent his Son into his world in love. To the promise-fulfilling, kingdom-bringing work of Christ and to the reign of the risen King. To the miracle of salvation, the wonder of grace, and the offer of life to all who would believe, conferred and confirmed by the indwelling Spirit of God. And to the kingdom that is here now and still to come. That is what we proclaim through our words and our lives, to every nation.

"[Mission] is the whole way of living, acting, and speaking that arises from the fact that we have already received the first installment of the promised treasure, the firstfruit of the promised harvest, and can therefore work and wait with both eagerness and patience for the fullness of what God has promised for his whole creation...it is not a light that we kindle and carry, shielding its flame from the winds; it is the light that shines on us because our faces are turned toward the radiance that is already lighting up the eastern sky with the promise of a new day."⁷ It is not our light; it is the light that shines on us. It is not our mission; it is the mission of the sending God. It is not our kingdom to bring or build; it is the kingdom with a resurrected King that is already here and that we proclaim to the ends of the earth.

Worship. In our walk, our work, and our witness, we bear witness to the kingdom of God as the sent community on mission with the sending God. But finally, the missional community is a worshipping community; the worshipping community is a missional community. One cannot be sustained without the other. We remember, “Above all, the public worship of the mission community always leads to the pivotal act of sending. The community that is called together is the community that is sent. Every occasion of public worship is a sending event.”⁸

And that sending is unto the worship of the God among all nations: “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.”⁹

So it is come full circle, back to the Sabbath principle, where all of creation is called to worship the enthroned King of the world; where God will finally dwell with his people; and where God’s kingdom is come in all of its fullness and glory. Then and there, that “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes” will cry out, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9). And finally it will be declared, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3–4).

But until then, we live as the kingdom-community, sent on mission, standing ever between Christ’s commissioning and his coming again; between the kingdom that is here and that is yet to come. And here, our missionary identity is inescapable. God’s love for his world, Christ’s sacrifice and reign, and the Spirit’s forever presence with us and in us, compel us to go. Peace be with us. As the Father sent Christ, so he sends us, with his Spirit, to the ends of the earth.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Revelation 4–5.

1. **Read Revelation 4:1–11. Here we encounter John’s vision of God’s heavenly throne room. What strikes you about John’s vision? What is God like?**

Once John finds himself in the heavenly throne room of God, his eyes are immediately drawn to the One sitting on that throne. John struggles to describe what he sees. In verse 3: “. . . he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. . . .” And that’s it. That’s all he’s able to say about the One sitting on the throne. And can you blame him? Even if you were brilliant enough to describe the grandeur of the Grand Canyon to a friend born blind, how will you *begin* to speak of the splendor of the One who spoke it into existence?

And so because John is unable to describe the majesty of God himself, he instead begins to describe what he sees *around* the throne. In the rest of the chapter 4 all he can say is “*before* the throne,” “*from* the throne,” “*on each side* of the throne,” and three times, it’s “*around* the throne,” but even then, the reflected glory is too much to bear.

Verse 3 tells us that “around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.” And this is a picture of the resplendent beauty and light that emanates from the throne of God.

But it’s not simply beauty that is in view here. There is a sense of transcendence and power that evokes fear and awe. In verse 5, “From the throne,” there are “flashes of lightning,” “rumblings and peals of thunder,” and before the throne is this vast “sea of glass.” Remember at this time, the lightning and the thunder are pretty close to the most frightening natural phenomena known to John’s readers. And the foreboding, untamable sea? A symbol of chaos and mystery? Before *that* throne and *that* King, its raging is stilled, tranquil as glass.

John then sees, on either side of the throne, four creatures, again beyond his ability to describe. He simply says that they are “like” these animals that I know. And these creatures “all day and night” and then again in case we missed it, “never cease to say”: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” (4:8). They *never cease* to say it.

Finally, John describes these elders, twenty-four of them seated around this throne, clothed in white, bearing golden crowns. And they are said to fall down in worship “whenever the living

creatures give glory. . . .” But we just read that the creatures *never* cease to worship, so the elders too worship in perpetuity. It never stops.

And these elders, whomever they are meant to represent, like kings, sit on twenty-four thrones, but they keep leaving those thrones to fall face down in worship before the God who lives “forever and ever.” And they have these golden crowns, but they cast them down before the throne of God. These kings have a King. And there’s only One who’s worthy.

Indescribable beauty. Transcendent holiness. Unceasing worship. Our God is on his throne.

2. Read Revelation 5:1–4. Why does John weep?

In Revelation 5:4, John weeps. And it is not just sadness; it says in verse 4 that he “weeps *loudly*.” Literally, that he “kept on shedding many tears.” This is the only moment *tears* and *heaven* are pictured to co-exist. So why does he weep? Why such dejection?

We learn in verse 4 that he weeps because no one is found worthy to open the scroll. The scroll became the focus of John’s attention in 5:1. The scroll is noted to be in the right hand of the One seated on the throne. And it is sealed with seven seals, signifying both the authenticity and the gravity of its contents; it can only be opened by one authorized to look into it. The scroll was written on “within and on the back.” Now this wasn’t too common because the back of the scroll was not typically smooth and didn’t lend itself to writing, but this particular scroll carried a message so urgent and so comprehensive that it required both the front and the back.

A “*strong* angel” proclaims with a “*loud* voice” (5:2): “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break the seals?” And there is a creationwide search, but verse 3 says that “no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth”—now remember that phrase—but *no one* “was able to open the scroll or to look into it.” The strong angel can’t do it. The four creatures can’t do it. Not the elders, not John. *No one* is found worthy to approach *that* throne, to break *those* seals, to look into *that* scroll, from *that* King sitting there on the throne. There’s no one.

And so John weeps.

So what does this scroll signify? Let me suggest that the scroll signifies the fullness of God’s revelation, the fullness of God’s purposes and decrees for human history that have yet to come to pass. It’s all there on that one scroll.

I believe John weeps because the prospect that the purposes of God might not be known is unbearable for John. That his will for humanity might not come to pass, that there might be

no respite for the suffering, no relief for the pain, no justice for the exploited, no right for wrongs—this he could not bear. And so John weeps. Because there is no one worthy.

3. Read Revelation 5:5–8. What revelation causes John to stop weeping? What is ironic, even startling, about the vision?

In the midst of his loud weeping, *and ours*, comes one of the elders—and this elder knows something that John doesn't—and he says to him: “Weep no more!”

And the weeping softens enough for him to hear the elder say, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that *he* can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5). Hope now begins to rise for John as he recalls the promises. Both “Lion of Judah” and “Root of David” are messianic titles, Old Testament promises that one day, there would be a King from the line of Judah and of David whose throne would endure forever, who would reign in righteousness.

The loud weeping now gives way to hopeful silence and anticipation—all of creation through John holding its collective breath. John looks up through his still-drenched eyes to behold this promised King, who carries with him the hope of the world, and it is an image both jarring and unexpected that he describes: “And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw *a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain*...and *he* went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne.” (6–7).

The conquering King, the “Lion of the tribe of Judah,” the only one who can approach *that* throne in all its splendor, the only one worthy to take and open the scroll sealed with seven seals and who alone can *end* loud weeping, is “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain.” It's Jesus Christ.

It is this Lamb that Mary held in her arms; this King that cried for hunger in that manger. Attended not by heavenly creatures or enigmatic elders but by nameless shepherds and a frightened young couple, glory came down with a skull that could be crushed and a belly that could ache, the tears of a weeping world to be forever consoled by the tears of that baby. The most terrifying glory and the most tender grace lay wrapped in swaddling clothes.

And he, who was resplendently beautiful beyond our ability to describe, we are told by the prophet Isaiah,¹⁰ had an appearance “so marred” he was “beyond human semblance.” And from this Lion, with all his power and strength, there was no roar. Isaiah tells us that “he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” He was “wounded for our transgressions,

crushed for our iniquities”—slain, for your sins and for mine, so it can be declared to you today, “weep no more.”

4. **Revelation 5:9–14. What is the conclusion to this unfolding drama?**

Now, all *worship* the Lamb. See, the slain Lamb is standing! He’s risen and he’s alive. And the creatures and the elders—they begin to sing a new song, because by his blood, verse 9, he has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” There will be a day, with people from every tribe and language and every people and nation, and they will *all* be able to agree on this: Jesus Christ is worthy to be praised. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess. And every language will have the words to say, “Salvation belongs to our God!”

In verse 11, it says that John “looks” but he doesn’t tell us immediately what he sees, right? Instead, he tells us what he hears: “Then I looked, and I heard. . . .” It’s as if he is overwhelmed *by this sound*, this heavenly chorus that floods his senses. And it is the voice of the living creatures, the elders, and angels “numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” and “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” Remember that phrase? From verse 3? Those were the unworthy ones—those unworthy to approach the throne and to look into the scroll and to break those seals. And now? They’re the choir. The unworthy ones sing.

Weep no more. Now we sing. It is to *this* scene, that the creatures in verse 14 declare finally and decisively, “Amen!”

At Home After the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Revelation 21:3–4.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Revelation 21:3–4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

The Final Meeting

Congratulations on completing *Kingdom and Mission!* We encourage all groups to gather informally over a meal for a final meeting, to reflect back on your time together and to give thanks for the ways in which God is at work in each of your lives. The following is provided simply as a tool that may be helpful for guiding that time.

Looking Back

In what area of your life has this study had the greatest impact?

In ways have you noticed growth in one another's lives?

Is there a lesson that you have found yourself returning to?

What practices have "stuck," if any?

Looking Ahead

Are there people whom you would like to lead through Kingdom and Mission?

Will you consider meeting over *Culture and Context*, Volume 3 of Grace, Kingdom, Mission?

Prayer

Close the time with a moment of prayer, giving thanks to God for the ways in which he is working in each of your lives.

Memory Verses

- Week 1** **John 20:21–22** | Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”
- Week 2** **Psalms 8:1** | O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.
- Week 3** **1 Peter 2:9** | But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
- Week 4** **Romans 6:23** | For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- Week 5** **Galatians 3:13–14** | Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.
- Week 6** **John 1:14** | And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- Week 7** **Matthew 28:18–20** | And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
- Week 8** **Acts 1:8** | But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Week 9 **Revelation 21:3–4** | And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Notes

Lesson 1 | Rediscovering Mission: Three Movements

1. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).
2. Ibid, 23.
3. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), 1.
4. Ibid, 381, clarifications mine.
5. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 62.
6. Kevin De Young and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 42.
7. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 382, 284.
8. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 36.
9. Ibid, 63–4.
10. Ibid, 29.

Lesson 2 | The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 1

1. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 1991), 83.
2. John Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 147–8; 151.
3. Ibid, 151.
4. Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park: Two Age Press, 2000), 38.
5. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, 148.
6. Walter Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 38.

Lesson 3 | The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 2

1. Graeme Goldworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1981), 47.
2. Greg K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 89.
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About the Author

Albert Shim and his wife Tina served with Mission to the World from 2012–2016 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, together with their three daughters. There, he served as co-team leader and co-regional director for Southeast Asia. Albert is a physician, board certified in internal medicine and pediatrics, having received his M.D. from the University of Southern California and his B.A. in English literature from the University of California, Berkeley. Albert is ordained as a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church in America and served on the pastoral staff of his church in Los Angeles, where he had the opportunity to exercise his passion for teaching and writing.

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