

The Kingdom of God

Session 1

The Kingdom of God is really the universal sovereign rule of God. After all God created both the heavens and the earth as the first verse of the Bible tells us. Sometimes the Bible speaks of God as king over the nation of Israel. In a sense this is just an aspect of God's universal kingdom, but I think there are wider implications and we'll return to that issue in a moment. Sometimes the Bible speaks of God's kingdom as if it were a future kingdom, but I think this is because of the rebelliousness of Satan and mankind that I'm going to move onto now. I think we can take it that God's rule has been firmly established in heaven ever since Satan and his fellow rebellious angels were cast out, but God's rule has not yet been firmly established in the earthly realm because of the rebellion of mankind against God's rule usually referred to as the Fall. Currently the earth is under the rule of Satan. The re-establishment of God's rule in our earthly realm was initiated and indeed secured by Christ's earthly ministry and will be finally consummated at the second coming of Christ when "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" as John tells us in Revelations 11:15. We'll be looking at this issue more in later sessions.

The Bible actually speaks of the Kingdom of God and of the Kingdom of Heaven – but these terms are equivalent as we can see in Matthew chapter 19 verses 23 and 24 which makes their equivalence clear. The usage of these two phrases is probably explained by the fact that the Jews didn't like the phrase the Kingdom of God because they were reluctant to utter the divine name whilst the kingdom of heaven is a phrase which would have sounded odd to the Greeks. So the OT speaks only of the kingdom of heaven and not of the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, generally in this series we'll be using the phrase the Kingdom of God.

The proclamation of the kingdom of God was one of Jesus's main messages – and we'll hear more about that in later sessions. But, in order to understand the Biblical concept of the kingdom of God, we need to understand what this would have meant to the Jews in Jesus's time and we also need to understand the nature of the King – the nature of God. So we're going to focus on OT passages this morning. Let's begin by looking at Psalm 145:

"1 ¶ A psalm of praise. Of David. I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. 2 Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. 3 Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no-one can fathom. 4 One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. 5 They will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. 6 They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds. 7 They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. 8 The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. 9 The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. 10 ¶ All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you. 11 They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, 12 so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of your kingdom. 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving towards all he has made. 14 The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. 15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. 16 You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. 17 The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving towards all he has made. 18 The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. 19 He fulfils the desires of those who fear him; he hears

their cry and saves them. 20 The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. 21 My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” (Psalm 145:1-21 NIV)

Psalm 145 is the last of David’s psalms and also the last of the acrostic psalms (psalms in which each successive verse begins with successive letters of the Jewish alphabet (which has 22 letters – but there is no verse for *nun* in Psalm 145, hence the 21 verses)). David begins by praising and extolling God, he commits himself to lifelong praise v2, he says that God is praiseworthy and unfathomably great v3. His praise is inadequate, so it is to be passed on to future generations v4. God is majestic and does wonderful works vv5,6. God is good and righteous v7. He is gracious, loving and compassionate on all creation vv8,9. So his creation worships him v10., this creation, especially God’s people, tell of the glory of God’s kingdom and God’s power v11,12. God’s kingdom is eternal v13. God cares for the people in his kingdom vv14,15,16 and is righteous and loving towards them v17. He listens to his people vv18,19, but will punish the wicked v20.

The Hebrew word used for the kingdom of God in v11 *malkut* means rule, reign or dominion. As we’ve already noted, God’s rule is firmly established over the heavenly realms, but not yet over the earthly realm. A kingdom requires a king, it goes without saying that in the kingdom of God, God is king. A kingdom also needs a territory. God’s kingdom encompasses the whole of creation, both the seen and the unseen. As it says in Psalm 103: “The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.” (Psalm 103:19 NIV)

We’ve already see something of the nature of God as king over his kingdom in Psalm 145.

The prophet Ezekiel gives us a slightly different perspective:

“1 ¶ The word of the LORD came to me: 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. 6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no-one searched or looked for them. 7 ¶ "“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, 9 therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 10 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them. 11 "“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. 14 I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie

down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. 16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. 17 ¶ "As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. 18 Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? 19 Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet? 20 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, 22 I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. 23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. 24 I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken. 25 "I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety. 26 I will bless them and the places surrounding my hill. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. 27 The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them. 28 They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no-one will make them afraid. 29 I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations. 30 Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Sovereign LORD. 31 You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD.'"" (Ezekiel 34:1-31 NIV)

Here God is looking at his people Israel as one aspect of his universal kingdom. However, I think that it is a significant aspect. The Israelites have not ceased to be God's chosen people as a result of their rebellion, or even because of the New Covenant in Christ. Exactly what this means is not really clear. Paul discusses this issue in Romans chapters 9-11, but he doesn't seem to reach a clear conclusion. Nevertheless, I think the principles which apply to this part of God's kingdom apply to his kingdom as a whole. Let's return to our passage from Ezekiel and see what it tells us.

Near Eastern literature often referred to civil authorities and rulers as shepherds and we see this in scripture:

"to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd." (Numbers 27:17 NIV)

This is the case here. We see that those who were supposed to be the shepherds of the people of Israel, those who were supposed to look after them and care for them as a shepherd does his sheep, have failed in their duties vv2-7 and God says that they will be held accountable for this v10. Consequently, God promises to take on this role of shepherding his people vv10-16. God also promises to act as judge over his people v17 because they have not treated each other fairly vv18-19. God again proclaims his role as judge in v20 because of the unfairness with which their leaders have behaved vv21-23. God then speaks of a new covenant with his people vv24-25; 30-31 and making everything right under a ruler he will appoint from the house of his servant David – which I believe is an allusion to Christ. We

can see here a prophecy of the coming kingdom on earth to be established under the authority of Christ under a new covenant which Christ will inaugurate. We'll be looking at this in more detail in later sessions.

Let's now look at a passage from Isaiah:

"5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. 7 The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever." 9 ¶ You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. 12 ¶ Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? 13 Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counsellor? 14 Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? 15 Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. 16 Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. 17 Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. 18 ¶ To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? 19 As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. 20 A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple. 21 Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? 22 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. 23 He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. 24 No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. 25 "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. 26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. 27 ¶ Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? 28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no-one can fathom." (Isaiah 40:5-28 NIV)

Compared to God man is nothing more than grass or flowers v6 and these wither and fall v7 whilst God and his word endure forever v8. God is powerful, he is able to reward and judge v10. Again we have the shepherd imagery for God in v11. God is a unique creator v12 and is beyond our understanding v13. Mankind is as nothing when compared to God vv15-17. God is beyond compare v18. Compared to God we are like grasshoppers v22 and he is in complete control of all earthly rulers vv23-24. God is eternal and beyond our understanding v28.

Let's finish by looking at what Daniel reveals to us about God's kingdom:

“27 Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, 28 but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these: 29 "As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. 30 As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind. 31 ¶ "You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. 32 The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, 33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. 34 While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing-floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. 36 "This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. 37 You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; 38 in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold. 39 "After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. 40 Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. 41 Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. 42 As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. 43 And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay. 44 "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever. 45 This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. "The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy." 46 ¶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honour and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. 47 The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." 48 Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.” (Daniel 2:27-48 NIV)

You'll note that there is no mention of the gods of Babylon in this account – it's not an account of conflict between Yahweh and foreign gods, but rather an account of conflict between the worldly wisdom of Babylon and the supernatural wisdom given to Daniel. The rock that shatters the other kingdoms is probably the power and authority of God and Nebuchadnezzar's worship of Daniel is an acknowledgement of the superiority of God's wisdom over Babylon's earthly wisdom. Once again, we see that God's kingdom will be established on earth and this kingdom will endure forever v44.

In summary then, we see that God is all powerful, he made whole of creation. He rules over what he has made – his kingdom – although for the moment a part of his kingdom – earth – is ruled by Satan. Satan's rule has been decisively defeated by Christ's death on the cross and his glorious resurrection but that victory will not be completely established until Christ returns at the end of this age. God the king is good, righteous, gracious, generous, loving and compassionate. But he is also a judge who will judge and punish the wicked. God is the good shepherd who cares for his people as the shepherd cares for his flock. God promised a new covenant with his people and this new covenant has been realised in and through Christ.

Compared to God mankind is completely insignificant, we are as nothing. God is all powerful, eternal and beyond our understanding. God's kingdom will endure forever.