

Israel, the Church and the Covenant
Lecture 10: The Kingdom of God

The Restored Earthly Kingdom

The Kingdom of God

The phrase “the kingdom of God”, or more strictly “the reign of God” (in Greek – Basileia tou Theou), occurs more than 100 times in the New Testament. Mark and Luke prefer the phrase “the kingdom of God”, as in Mk. 1:15 and Lk. 4:43, whereas the first Gospel consistently speaks of “the kingdom of heaven”, or more literally in the Greek “the kingdom of the heavens”. There is no intrinsic difference between these expressions, which may have their origin in Dan. 2:44 where “the God of heaven” will set up a “kingdom that will never be destroyed”.

The kingdom is the central theme of the teaching of Jesus in the first three Gospels. Luke 4:43 tells us that Jesus’ very purpose for being sent was to “preach the good news of the kingdom of God”. From the outset of his ministry, therefore, Jesus preached the kingdom.

Mat. 4:23

“Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom...”

The Sermon on the Mount (Mt. Chs. 5-7) is the longest passage that we have in the Gospels, which records the teaching of Jesus on a particular subject, and that subject is to do with the righteous life expected of believers who belong in the kingdom. This theme is announced in the opening verses of the sermon.

Mt. 5:3,10

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Chapter 13 in Matthew’s Gospel is the great chapter on parables of the kingdom – the Sower, the Weeds, the Mustard Seed, the Yeast, the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, and the Net. They all contain “the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven: (v.11). Then there is the discourse in Matthew Chapter 24 concerning sign of the end of this present age, and is therefore about the coming of the kingdom on earth: on earth because the signs of its coming are described from the point of view of those on earth who will see it coming.

The Mismanagement of the Kingdom on Earth

Heaven is the sphere from which God rules over His universe because that is where God is, but

earth is His intended domain for the redeemed human. Earth was where God placed the first man in the beginning, and it was on the earth that Adam was intended to have a benign rule over the created.

Gen. 1:28

“God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase; fill the earth subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

The rule of Adam and all humanity should have been a caring oversight and managing of the creation, and would have been, had Adam not fallen into the sin of self-will and self-determined rule, instead of it being theocratic under the direction of God. Since the Fall, however, over a period of not more than, say 10,000 years of human history, according to evangelical creationists, the human race has to a large extent raped the earth of its resources and hunted to extinction many of its living creatures. The fossil record bears testimony to amazing diversity of animal and plant life, which originally existed on earth, and so is a silent witness to the relentless, destructive power of fallen man. Things have deteriorated to point today where are constantly being warned that the human mismanagement of the planet is threatening even its ability to sustain human life, or at least that future conditions on earth will drastically reduce the amount of living space available as sea levels rise. The resultant strife among the nations to gain the habitable parts of the earth can only be imagined. The signs are there for those who can read them that the return of the Son of Man cannot be that far away.

The Restoration of the Kingdom

The failure of the first Adam required that a second Adam should come to restore the creation to its original glory. That is something, which God has been working out through the process of salvation history as revealed in the Bible over the millennia. It led to the covenant with Abraham and his descendants, and to the theocratic kingdom of David, with its seat in Jerusalem. The complete rule of God on earth will be fully realised in the future when the Messiah, Jesus, rules there, first in the old Jerusalem for a thousand years, and secondly in the new Jerusalem for ever, when it will come down from the new heaven to the new earth.

Rev. 21:1-3

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”

The emphasis on the word “new” is important. When Adam and Eve fell from grace the whole creation fell with them. The death of Jesus on the cross, therefore, was not simply that we might be forgiven our sins. That is certainly basic to everything, but his death achieved far more, nothing less than the restoration of a perfect and flawless creation as it was before our first parents sinned.

In the context of the New Jerusalem coming down from the new heaven Jesus says, “I am making everything new!” and that includes a new earth (Rev. 21:5). The apostle Peter understood from the prophets that Jesus would restore the original creation. He said as much to the Jews in His address to them at the temple gate called Beautiful, after the healing of the cripple.

Acts 3:21

“He (Jesus) must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”

The apostle Paul similarly refers to the renewal of the whole creation as a necessary part of God’s act of redemption.

Rom. 8:19-24

“The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.”

All the apostles knew that this work of restoration would also involve the reconstitution of the kingdom on earth under the rule of Jesus. That is why they asked Jesus if this would happen at the time when they were to be baptised in the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:5-7

“For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.” So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.”

What the apostles got wrong was not that the kingdom would be restored to Israel on earth; they were mistaken about the date for its inception. Their assumption about the kingdom and reply of Jesus in v.7 strongly implies that he had taught them to expect a future earthly kingdom, and this would have been in line with Jewish expectations generally. Simeon praised God as he held the child Jesus in his arms, for he had been “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Lk. 2:25); that is to say, the rebirth of Israel’s kingdom in the person of the Messiah, who would sit “on the throne of his father David”, as the angel Gabriel said to Mary (Lk. 1:32). The first century Jews understood the kingdom in terms of the fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham and David. This was the Messianic hope of the Hebrew prophets and was carried over and echoes in the words of John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, Paul and others in the Greek Scriptures.

As pointed out in lecture 4 this expectation of a future, ideal Son of David was a belief, which grew in Old Testament times. It is expressed mainly, but not exclusively, in the Psalms and the prophetic writings. We also saw in lecture 6 that the speeches in Acts constantly refer to the resurrection of Jesus as proof that in him the promises to David concerning the kingdom were fulfilled. The first generation of Jewish believers could not have understood any of this except in terms of an earthly kingdom. They would have been astonished could they have known that the future Christian church would translate the kingdom to a heavenly realm.

The Future Earthly Kingdom

It is necessary to stress the earthly nature of the coming kingdom because of the false concept, which most Gentile believers have persistently entertained about it being situated in heaven. The idea that we are all going to heaven is deeply entrenched in the minds of most Christians. The spiritualisation of the kingdom has led to a complete mental whiteout as to its real nature, even

to the point of the apocryphal, or maybe not the apocryphal, story about the lady who apparently asked a preacher whether we would recognise one another in heaven. His reply was, “Madam, I don’t expect to be any more stupid up there than I am down here.” The future kingdom has been allegorised away into the clouds and has consequently been atomised! It has become faint and misty and the butt of worldly ridicule. We are not going to sit on clouds strumming harps, neither are we looking for “pie in the sky bye and bye, according to the old Communist gibe.

The reason why Gentile believers reject an earthly Messianic kingdom is not just because of an otherworldly mindset. They are convinced that a belief in a future heavenly bliss – which is so vague as to be approaching the concept of something like the nothingness of Nirvana – has Scriptural backing. It is pointed out that the spiritual nature of the kingdom was emphasised by Jesus when he said to the nature of the kingdom was emphasised by Jesus when he said to the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God is within you” (Lk. 17:21). It is true that Jesus said this because the religious leaders seemed to be concerned only with anticipating the joys of the externals of the kingdom, whereas they lacked the internal reality of it in their hearts. We do need to have that spiritual experience of the kingdom within ourselves in this present age if we are to know the blessings of the kingdom to come. But the present, spiritual reality of the kingdom within does not discount the future earthly kingdom without. Besides which, the Greek of Lk. 17:21 may be rendered, “The kingdom of God is among you”, or “in the midst of you”, because the Greek adverb *entos* has that latitude of meaning. This would mean that Jesus was saying to the Pharisees that the kingdom was among them in that he himself was in their midst.

Perhaps the Scripture most often quoted to support the belief that the kingdom is a heavenly one is where Jesus tells Pontius Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world.

Jn. 18:36

“Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

Here Jesus was pointing out that his kingdom had nothing to do with armed resistance against those who took him captive, because he was not a political revolutionary, and so he was denying the charge of terrorism which the Jews had brought against him. In other words, his kingdom was of a completely different nature to kingdoms of this world, but that does not imply anything as to its future locality. Similarly, the refusal of Jesus to allow the crowds in their enthusiasm to make him their king after the feeding of the 5000 (Jn. 6:15), says nothing about a future heavenly kingdom. He had to resist the popular notion of that time among the Jews that the Messiah would lead them in revolt against the Romans. At least they had the right idea that the Messiah’s kingdom would be earthly, but they were mistaken as to its nature. Such Scriptures have to be interpreted according to their immediate context and not used as a means to support a view of the coming Kingdom that is not Scriptural.

The Eternal Nature of the Kingdom

The Old Testament prophets show us that the coming earthly kingdom will be eternal in its nature. God speaks through Ezekiel about “David my servant”, who will be “their prince for ever”, which is a clear reference to the future Messiah-King ruling forever.

Ezek. 37:24-28

“ My Servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there

forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’ “

Similarly the Lord says through Micah that the Lord will rule in Mount Zion “for ever”.

Mic. 4:7

“I will make the lame a remnant,
Those driven away a strong nation.
The LORD will rule over them in Mount Zion
From that day and forever.

Such Scriptures takes us beyond the millennial reign of Christ on the old earth to his eternal reign on the new earth.

To quote just one other Scripture, this one placing an emphasis on the inclusion of Gentile believers in the kingdom –

Zech. 2:10-12

“Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the LORD. “Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you. The LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem.”

The Millennial Kingdom

The question as to whether the coming kingdom will be on earth or in heaven is a very controversial matter among Christians, as is the meaning of the 1000-year reign of Christ in Revelation Chapter 20.

Over the years many books have been written about the millennial kingdom, detailing the three basic interpretations and their variations, along with the many Bible references, which are used to support them. Our present aim, however is to explain with as few complications as possible the nature of the kingdom in connection with its fulfilment concerning the promises which God made to the patriarchs. And so only a brief sketch of the main millennial ideas is provided in this lecture.

Premillennialism

This is the view, and the correct one, that Jesus is coming to reign over the earth in terms of real history for a thousand years, after which the eternal age to come will be inaugurated. This understanding of the Scriptures is called “premillennialism” because it is the belief that Christ will return before (pre-) His thousand-year reign on earth. This is the most natural interpretation of Revelation Chapter 20, and though this is the only place in the Bible, which explicitly teaches a thousand year reign of Christ, that in itself is not an objection to believing it. The truth that planet earth will be the scene of the coming kingdom is consistent with the whole sweep of the Bible revelation about redemption history. That history will culminate in an earthly event known in the prophetic books as the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord and Israel’s role in it is shown in a relatively uncomplicated way in the Old Testament prophets, while in the New Testament it is revealed as a complex event. It is preceded by Israel turning to the Lord in the last days of this

age, then the coming to earth of the Son of Man, the resurrection of the righteous, the destruction of Messiah's enemies, the 1000-year reign of Christ on earth with his people, the resurrection of the wicked and their judgment, and the establishment of the eternal kingdom on a new earth – all in that order.

The Old Testament has nothing to say about the redeemed participating in the kingdom in some otherworldly sphere called "heaven", but it does speak of the Messiah and a spiritually revived Israel ruling on earth, along with the redeemed among the Gentiles. It would be surprising, therefore, if the New Testament did not envisage this same Day of the Lord in similar earthly terms. The natural milieu of the teaching of the prophets, of Jesus and the apostles is a kingdom on earth. It is all very Jewish and un-Gentile-like.

Rev. 20:1-15 underlines this realism.

"And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog – to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

The basic details are:

Satan is locked up in the bottomless pit for a thousand years (vv.2, 3);

Those raised in the first resurrection reign with Christ (vv.4, 6);

The first resurrection precedes the millennium (v.4);

The second death cannot touch those raised in the first resurrection (v.6);

The second resurrection does not take place until the end of the millennium (v.5);

Satan will be loosed for a while after the thousand years reign of Christ (v.7);

Satan will stage a last ditch attempt, with his armies, to overthrow the Messiah's kingdom (vv.7-9);

They are finally destroyed and the devil is cast into the lake of fire (vv.9, 10);

The wicked are resurrected and judged (vv.11-13);
And they are consigned to the lake of fire, which is the second death (vv.14. 15; 21:8).

This chapter represents John's clear understanding of end-times events, with two distinct resurrections separated by the millennial reign of Jesus on earth. It reads as historical narrative and not theological symbolism. The old planet earth is shown to be the scene of the final battle between God and Satan, but we should note that the final judgment takes place after the old earth and the sky have fled from the Messiah's presence (verse 11); so we must assume that the "great white throne" is set up in the old heaven, and that the wicked will be judged before the Son of Man in all his glory – a frightening prospect for them!

After the last judgment and the banishing of the wicked to hell, the new heaven and the new earth, without any oceans (providing a huge amount of living space!), are created (21:1). The New Jerusalem then descends from the new heaven to the new earth (21:2), and its dimensions are vast, being some 1,400 miles not just square but cubed, in all three dimensions (21:16 NIV footnote).

The fact that many, if not most, non-Jewish Christians cannot accept the obvious meaning of Revelation Chapter 20 is an indication of a problem mentioned in previous lectures. The Gentile way of thinking leans towards a preference for the spiritualisation of the Scriptures. This is totally opposed to the Jewish realism, which underlies the chapter. The premillennial view of the kingdom requires a grammatical, historical, and a literal interpretation of the Scriptures, not least the chapter in question, which is the only passage in Scripture which offers a full chronological outline of the last-days events. What Jesus said about the signs of the end of the age (Mt. Ch.24) is not so much an analysis of these events as a description of conditions as they will be shortly before he returns to earth. We should, therefore, understand the last days according to what John unequivocally tells us and interpret other Scriptures in the light of this, rather than use less definitive Scriptures to impose an unnatural interpretation on what is abundantly clear in Revelation Chapter 20.

To understand we must realise that it does not stand on its own, and, of course, we should remind ourselves that there were no chapter divisions originally. Yet it has been the habit of the Christian church to isolate this passage from its context, even though Chapter 19 also is to do with the second coming of Jesus. Both chapters deal with the destruction of the Messiah's enemies. Chapter 19 describes Christ's victory over the antichrist. The Messiah is seen to be a warrior riding into battle. The beast and the false prophet are thrown alive into a lake of fire that burn with brimstone.

Rev. 19:20

"But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshipped. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulphur."

John then turns his attention to Christ overcoming the power behind the antichrist – Satan. He is first seized by an angel, bound with a great chain, and cast into a bottomless pit (Rev. 20:3). As we have seen, Satan is locked in the Abyss for 1000 years, and then follows all the events already considered. If the first resurrection is given a symbolic meaning in terms of being born again (Jn. 3:3-8) – a meaning for the meaning for the word "resurrection not used anywhere else in Scripture – what else in Revelation Chapters 19 & 20 should be treated in the same way? Should the return of Christ itself be seen as an allegorical event? There is no shortage of liberal theologians who think so.

In passing we should mention the dispensational version of premillennialism, which is popular among some Christians, especially in the “Bible Belt” of the southern states of America. This is the belief that Israel and the Church are two separate and distinct peoples with two different destinies. The millennium is primarily for the Jews. Israel must be restored to the Promised Land. The temple will be rebuilt and the Old Testament sacrificial system will be revived. At this time all of the Old Testament prophecies about Israel as a nation will be fulfilled literally. This means that God’s program for Israel is theocratic and earthly, whereas his purpose for the church is universal and spiritual.

While the Scriptures reveal a future earthly kingdom they do not support the idea of two distinct covenant peoples but only one redeemed people in Christ; also the belief in a re-constituted sacrificial system in a rebuilt temple flies in the face of the finished work of Jesus on the cross – a point strongly emphasised in the Letter to the Hebrews.

Postmillennialism

There are those Bible scholars who cannot accept “the first resurrection” as a physical rising from the dead because they believe that the “thousand years” is a symbolic expression of the victorious mission of the church in the world in this present age. During this ‘millennium’ of the church age the church preaches the gospel and society is transformed while Jesus remains in heaven. The “first resurrection” is explained as being the spiritual rebirth, which takes place when sinners believe on Jesus. Though it is conceded that there are still obvious evils in the world, it is maintained that the world is actually getting better and better(!). This view has been held in times past by many scholars, although it is a minority view today. It is called postmillennialism because the second coming of Christ to bring in the new age will occur only after (post-) the church’s millennium reign on earth.

Some charismatic believers, hold to a triumphal version of postmillennialism in that they believe the church is building the kingdom now in this present age through a demonstration of Holy Spirit power. Some of the songs they sing claim that they are taking the world for Jesus. When the church has got the world good and ready Jesus will be invited to return. But this is against the whole emphasis in the Scriptures that it will be Christ who will bring in the kingdom and no one else. The church does not usurp the authority of its Redeemer. This is clear in Revelation Chapters 19 & 20 taken together.

Amillennialism

This view is defended by many evangelical Christians. It is the belief that there is no literal millennium in the future, and so it is called amillennialism, the “a” signifying a negation of a literal millennium. It is argued that Revelation Chapter 20 must be interpreted in the light of other Scriptures. The thousand years must be understood spiritually as being equivalent to the church age.

This view takes two forms. In one version Rev. 20 is seen as a prophecy of the fate of the martyrs who have been slain by the beast. Instead of really dying when they were martyred, in reality they live on after death, sharing Christ’s victory and His reign in heaven. Satan can no longer hurt them; he is powerless. But a more popular amillennial interpretation is that the thousand years is synonymous with the church age on earth and pictures the spiritual reign of Christ in the world in and through his church. This is close to the postmillennial view, the difference being that in postmillennialism the reign of Christ through his church on earth is not just spiritual; it actually transforms the secular, political order, so that it really does become the kingdom of God.

The Scriptures which are lined up to support amillennialism certainly contain a real truth in terms

of believers reigning spiritually with Christ now. Spiritually, we have been raised from the dead, and lifted up to heaven itself where we have fellowship with Christ and share his rule at the right hand of the Father.

Eph. 2:5-6

“(God) made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.”

But acknowledging the truth of our present spiritual communion and reign with Christ in heavenly places does not automatically require us to believe that heaven will be our future eternal abode in the form of a heavenly kingdom.

Our Entry and Standing in the Kingdom

By nature all of us are covenant-breakers. That is the very essence of our sin. That means we cannot enter the kingdom of God through self-effort. The only condition for entry into the kingdom is that we have a living faith, not just a belief, in the shed blood of Jesus, our Messiah and Saviour. This faith involves repentance, or a turning away from our old life, and a turning towards God in obedience to His will with regard to living and righteous life according to His commands.

Though entry into the kingdom of God is through faith in Jesus, our standing in the kingdom will depend on the quality of our lives as Christians in the here and now, as mentioned elsewhere in this lectures. We are expected to be overcomers, live as Jesus taught we should live, and serve the Lord. Those who do will be given positions of honour and glory in the kingdom. Jesus clearly taught about rewards for faithful followers. This is borne out in His parables and other Gospel passages. For example He told the disciples that they would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Lk. 22:28-30

“You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

The judging which Jesus seems to have in mind here is not the one-off event of the last judgment but an ongoing and authoritative rule.

