



The Reign of the Great King

Studies in the Sovereignty of God

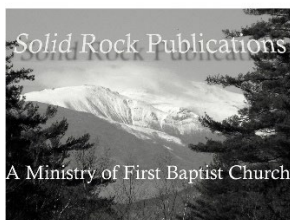


By
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Introduction

“My heart overflows with a good theme; I address my verses to the King: my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.” So wrote the psalmist in Psalm 45:1. And what a theme this is: the rulership of Almighty God – His ownership, His majesty, His reign over the universe. The theme of king and kingdom runs from the book of Genesis through the book of Revelation and incorporates all times, all events, all people everywhere. For such a huge idea, this small study is only a modest effort of thoughts and connections from Scripture, given in the hope that it might elucidate biblical truth and edify the saints.

It is not a full discourse on the Kingdom of God, nor a text on dispensationalism, not a primer on salvation issues; rather it is the hope of this author that the material contained herein will foster obedient submission to, and love for the Lord Jesus Christ, calm frayed minds, promote holy living, and help God’s children to be motivated to please Him.

By the prayers of the saints and the grace of Jesus Christ, Head of the Church and coming King,

Laurence D. Brown
North Conway, NH
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Chapter 1

God's Rule as Creator

The God of the Bible, Jehovah, is the great Lord and Ruler over all the earth and all the universe. He owns and controls all things because He designed and made all things. There is nothing that exists outside of His sovereign control. It seems unlikely that the modern idea of a “multiverse” – an infinite number of universes (a theory arising from the weird logic of quantum physics) – is an accurate reflection of reality; if however, those scientific speculations turn out to be valid, then Jehovah is the King of those realms too.

The reign of God Almighty over the heavens, the earth, and all things that exist therein is affirmed repeatedly and clearly in the Scriptures. Interestingly, the very first verse of the Bible does not present evidence for His existence and rule; rather, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” assumes His being, His capacity, and His role as Creator-King.

In this portion of our study, we are asking three questions. They are A) How “big” is God’s control? B) How “fine” is God’s control? C) What about the issue of evil and suffering? (Or, rephrased, how can a good and omnipotent God permit wickedness and pain in His domain?)

A. How big is God’s control? To what extent does He rule? What are the boundaries of His sovereignty? The short answer to these questions is that

beginning in Genesis chapter one and continuing throughout the whole Bible, God is presented unequivocally as the Creator and Ruler of all things.

Jehovah as Creator-King

Job 38 is a grand passage for examining the validity of this statement. In verse four of this chapter, God says that He laid the foundation of the earth. He laid its cornerstone (v.6), and “enclosed the sea with doors” (v.8). He also oversees and determines the water cycle, growth of vegetation, temperature, and precipitation in amount and kind. In addition, God controls the stars and the constellations (vv.31-35).

Psalms 104 is another tremendous portion of Scripture for reminding ourselves about God’s reign as Creator-King. The psalmist says that Jehovah stretches “out heaven like a tent curtain” (v.2), and He “lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters” (v.3). “He established the earth upon its foundations,” and “covered it with the deep [the ocean] as with a garment” (v.6). God is directly responsible for rain, springs of water, causing the grass to grow, and supervising the lives of animals. Verse 24 states that the “earth is full of Your possessions” – Jehovah owns everything on the planet, since He made them, sustains them, and controls them. Verse 32 has a fascinating implication: that inanimate parts of creation (the earth itself and the mountains) somehow respond to the Creator, knowing Who He is. This might be poetic hyperbole, and it might not. Remember that Jesus Christ, challenged by the Jewish authorities concerning the crowds praising Him

as He rode the donkey into Jerusalem, said that if the people were to be silent the rocks would cry out!

The uniqueness, power, and sovereignty of Jehovah are under consideration in Isaiah chapter 40. God is pictured as sitting or enthroned “above the circle of the earth,” with all its inhabitants like “grasshoppers” beneath Him. He “stretches out the heavens like a tent curtain.” Verses 25 and 26 use the stars as a marker and metric for Jehovah’s power: “ ‘To whom then will you liken Me that I would be his equal?’ says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars, the One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is missing.” Not only does God know the names of all the stars – and the number of them, because He created them; He also “leads forth their host” indicating a positive and total control over the galaxy, and, indeed, over the entire universe.

Colossians 1:16 and 17 deal with Jesus Christ’s role in creation. He was the Person of the Godhead who carried out the Father’s design for making the universe. These verses unequivocally state God’s creation and ownership of all things: “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” Thus, whether something is seen (cows, snakes, trees, water, or mountains) or unseen (gravity, angels, atomic and sub-atomic particles), all things were created by Jesus Christ. There is nothing

that exists that He Himself did not create (John 1:3), and nothing exists outside of His power and control.

This leads us to consider another relevant idea in our discussion of creation. When God spoke creation into existence, did He use pre-existing matter, or did He create something (matter) out of nothing (the term is *ex nihilo*)? While the Bible is not a scientific treatise, examining Genesis 1:1, Colossians 1:16, and John 1:1-3, leads us to understand that God did indeed create all matter out of nothing. He spoke – He alone possesses what we might call the “word of power” – and matter (quarks, bosons, neutrinos, electrons, neutrons, protons, photons, muons, and whatever other “-ons” scientists have yet to discover) was brought into existence by the Divine Word! Further, God knew before He created them what their properties would be, what forces they would generate or respond to, how atoms would bond together to form molecules, what molecules would form which compounds, and how all these bits of matter would interact and behave. While scientists are constantly amazed, stymied, and mystified by what they discover in the natural world, God is never surprised, because He made all things.

We might ponder for a moment the thought that the modern scientific quest for evidence of exotic hypotheses (such as dark matter, string theory, multiverses, and even extraterrestrial life) springs from a core assumption that leaves God out of the picture. The existence and activity of the all-wise, all-powerful God of the Bible render these theories either silly or only of minimal value. If any of these strange things do exist, they are there because God made them. God alone has the power to create; man is at his finest when he re-

creates – that is, when he acknowledges God and thinks the Creator’s thoughts after Him. Man exhibits his rebellion and his folly when he believes he can think of or discover reality apart from the Person and rule of the God of the Bible.

Revelation 4:11 is the chant-song of the twenty-four elders before the throne of the Almighty. Take note of their words: “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.” God is said to have created all things, and for this reason, He owns all things (Psalm 104:24).

How far does God’s reign extend? Astronomers guess that the universe is at least 150 billion light-years in diameter. (A ray of light, traveling at 186,000 miles per second, would take 150 billion years to cross from one edge to the opposite edge.) God is King over that entire territory.

If there are other universes (it is doubtful that this is so, since we do not seem to have any evidence of this in Scripture), then God rules them, too. While multiverse theory does not seem to be supported in the Bible, there are hints of modes, dimensions, or phases of existence other than the one we humans physically inhabit. Angels seem to have physical bodies, and may well dwell in the same space as humans, yet they are only occasionally seen or heard by humans. A possible explanation for this might be that humans can perceive only a narrow slice of the electromagnetic energy spectrum: visible light, sound and pressure waves within a narrow bandwidth. Our eyes, ears, nerves, and brains can detect and process only those stimuli within a limited range: we can sense

the difference between blue and yellow wavelengths of light, but we are not even aware of radio signals which are constantly passing through our bodies. We can tell the difference in density between air and water, but we cannot sense the distinction in density between nitrogen and oxygen. If created beings (such as angels) were to be “tuned” to a different phase or dimension, or if their bodies resonate at different electro-magnetic frequencies than we can perceive, then they could be all around us and we would never see them, hear them or be able to sense them. Ephesians 1:21 and Colossians 1:16 may refer to levels, ranks, dimensions, or phases of angelic beings; Scripture does indeed indicate that angels exist around us and that they observe us.

These are not unreasonable speculations. However, returning to biblical fact, we can assert with confidence that if there are sentient beings (or anything) in existence in some other universe or dimension, the Master of all these things is still the God of the Bible. He alone is the Creator-King of all matter, all dimensions, all energies, all beings.

The Almighty

One of the great titles which describes Jehovah is “Almighty.” It is useful to briefly examine this descriptor. In Hebrew the word is *Shaddai*, occurring about 48 times in the Old Testament. (Remarkably, 31 of these uses are in the book of Job.) The New Testament Greek word is *pantokrator*, occurring ten times.

God identifies Himself as “Almighty God” (*Shaddai Elohim*) in Genesis 17:1, and “the Almighty” or “God

Almighty” appeared in visions or personally in some way in Genesis 17:1, Genesis 48:3 and Numbers 24:4,16. The sound of the Almighty’s voice is highlighted in Ezekiel 1:24 and 10:5. God Almighty scatters kings (Psalm 68:14) and deals out destruction (Joel 1:15) but is also the source of life (Job 33:4), and of protection and comfort (Psalm 91:1).

In the New Testament, we find an informative cross-section of God’s rule and role as the Almighty. The word “Almighty” occurs ten times in the New Testament, nine of them in the book of Revelation. Revelation 1:8 reminds us of His eternality, omnipotence and that He is the source and final point of all existence: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, ‘Who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’”

1. His character as absolute holiness is emphasized by the chant-song of the four living creatures in Revelation 4:8: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty.”

2. His rule as King is celebrated in the elders’ words in Revelation 11:17, “We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because you have taken Your great power and have begun to reign...” Likewise the song of the unnumbered multitude in Revelation 19:6: “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.” This truth was the same one recognized personally by King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:34 and 35. This king – one of the greatest who ever lived (the gold head of the visionary statue in Daniel 2:36-38) – acknowledged, “He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of

the earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have you done?’”

It may well be that reigning (ruling as Creator-King over all life and matter) is not only what God *does*, but is intrinsic to His character: it is *Who He is*. He could not be other than the ultimate, absolute Master of all things. He doesn’t just do mighty things; He is the Almighty. God would not be the God of the Bible if He were not intrinsically the King, Emperor, and Ruler of all things from eternity to eternity.

3. Another aspect of God’s character and activity that is associated with His title as the Almighty in the New Testament is found in Revelation 16:7 and 14, and in 19:15 – the Judge of all the earth. His decisions – His legal and punitive judgments – are said to be “true and righteous.” The coming of Jesus Christ to earth to confront the forces of Satan at Armageddon and subsequently to set up His kingdom, as recorded in Revelation 19:11-19, is said to be done with a rod of iron, and as in “the winepress of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.” The Almighty’s justice is perfect and absolute. On that day of His holy anger against all human arrogance and rebellion, there will be no charges of unfairness, and there will be no lawyers to argue with Jehovah over quibbling nonsense: the Almighty’s justice is righteous and true!

4. These uses of the term “Almighty” make the remaining reference all the more interesting. All nine of the occurrences in Revelation use “Almighty” in association with glory, power, holiness, reigning, righteousness and judgment. But in II Corinthians 6:18, the apostle Paul uses *pantokrator*, Almighty, in his one

and only employment of the word – the only one outside of the Book of Revelation. “Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

It is remarkable that this title – *All-Powerful King* – should be used in a place full of such tenderness and familial closeness. He is the holy, righteous Ruler of the universe, yet He desires a relationship with you and me! The condition for this close communion is separation – the exclusion of sin, compromising relationships, and unholy contaminations from our hearts and lives. We can have just as close fellowship as we desire with the Almighty Creator if we separate ourselves from all forms of sin.

What God Owns

Another useful inquiry to pursue as we study God’s sovereignty and the question of how “big” God’s control is – and one which we have already touched on – is, *what does God own? What is God’s property?*

1. God owns power: He alone holds the title to all the earth. Along with other passages we have seen, Psalm 95:3-5 states, “For the LORD God is a great God and a great King above all gods, in whose hand are the depths of the earth, the peaks of the mountains are His also. The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land.” God, in speaking to Job in Job 41:11 also declares His ownership of the earth. “Who has given to Me that I should repay him? Whatever is under

the whole heaven is Mine.” And in Psalm 50:12, Jehovah says, “If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine and all it contains.” Incidentally, while we frail human beings like to think of ourselves as independent, God owns mankind, too, by the same principle as He owns all of creation: He made us. “But now, O LORD, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You our potter; and all of us are the work of Your hand” (Isaiah 64:8). Job 12:10 says that the “breath of all mankind” – even the most asinine, arrogant, evolution-saturated atheist – is in the hand of Jehovah.

2. God owns possessions and riches. The world goes crazy for gold, wealth, and material stuff. Guess what? God already owns it all. “The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine,’ declares the LORD of hosts” (Haggai 2:8).

♦ This leads to a couple of interesting conclusions. One is a general view of stewardship for the Christian. Everything we have – our bodies, our marriages, our kids, our money, our houses, our jobs and cars, and furniture – actually belongs to God. Even the money we give back to the Lord in the form of tithes and offerings was from Him in the first place. Since God is the One who actually owns these things, we ought to exercise care in our management of them for His purposes and His honor.

♦ Another point to ponder as a believer is the matter of anxiety concerning money, mortgage or rent payments, food for the family and medical bills, or gas money for the car. If we come to recognize that God owns everything and His supply is limitless; and if we recognize that He has promised to meet our needs, then we don’t need to worry about these things. The Lord

Jesus Christ told us that if we seek God's kingdom and His righteousness, He will see to it that all our needs are met (Matthew 6:33).

3. God owns sovereign principles. By this, I mean that the Lord's mastery and dominion include principles and facets of life that we sometimes desire to intrude into or to control for ourselves. Here are some of the statements about these sovereign principles in the Scriptures:

- ♦ God owns the times of our lives: the length of our days here on earth is determined by our all-wise, loving heavenly Father (Psalm 31:15). In addition, He controls the seasons of our lives (Ephesians 5:16). The Greek word used in Ephesians 5:16 for "time" (*kairos*) means not the length of time but the crossroads of time: the opportunities, the meetings, and open doors of life. For most people, though not for all, we are born, have adventures in childhood and young adulthood, get married, raise children, and then encroaching old age sneaks up on us unawares. All these seasons and opportunities of life are orchestrated by God Almighty. Don't waste time living in the past or the future: our gracious and omnipotent God has both the length and the seasons of our lives in His omnipotent hands!

- ♦ God owns the heart of the king. Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes." Christians often fret – and with seemingly good reason – over the corruption and wickedness that permeates the world system all around us. While we should pray for our leaders and be good citizens in our respective nations, we should not succumb to fear, anger, or vitriol

concerning politics and politicians. God still rules and He has the power to direct the world's kings, presidents, and prime ministers into truth and righteousness. Even when heads of state and powerful government officials seemingly operate against God and godly values, Jehovah is still the one who has put them in power, and He takes them out of power (Daniel 5:21). We should let God be King in these matters.

♦ God owns vengeance. Knowing the propensity of sinful humans to attempt to mete out ultimate and absolute judgment on persons we consider guilty, God has specifically reserved to Himself the authority to exact vengeance. Human beings are responsible for justice, truth, and punishment; but God says that vengeance belongs to Him alone (Deuteronomy 32:25; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30). If we attempt to sort out the ultimate disposition of exactly proportional, final retribution, we will inevitably get it wrong. Leave it to the Lord! His wrath is perfect, and His justice is impeccable. On the last day, all mountains of sin, evil, pride, and unfairness will be leveled before the blast of His holiness, and all valleys resulting from unjust treatment, false accusations, and malice aimed at innocence will be raised up by His justice and truth. Leave it with Him.

4. God owns people. The modern mind recoils at the idea of ownership of people (and, of course, in the growing animal-rights crowd, even ownership of animals is considered an unenlightened throwback). However, the clear and simple fact is that God owns human beings because He made us and we exist because of His pleasure. God is not the Father of all mankind, but He is the Creator of all human beings. Some particular

groups and classes of people that God owns are detailed in the Scriptures:

- ♦ He owns the nation of Israel. Leviticus 20:26 says, “Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine.” Isaiah 43:1 says, “But now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!’” The Jewish people are uniquely and personally a possession of God Almighty. Even after thousands of years of failure and rejection by them, God is still loyal to His covenant with His chosen people, and they will be the center of His program in the millennium. God owns Israel.

- ♦ A further subset of Israel is the ownership by God of the Levites. “Now, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the sons of Israel instead of every firstborn, the first issue of the womb among the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall be Mine” (Numbers 3:12).

- ♦ God owns all the saints. “Indeed, He loves the people; all Your holy ones are in Your hand” (Deuteronomy 33:3). While God does in fact own all human beings because He made them, His relationship with His own redeemed ones goes beyond simple ownership into the familial. Malachi 3:16, 17 and I Thessalonians 3:13 also indicate that the Lord claims the saints as His own.

- ♦ God owns you! I Corinthians 6:19 and 20 tell us, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.” We are

the possession of God not only because He made us, but also because He bought us. The concept we are looking straight in the face now, of course, is redemption. Jesus Christ was the price; it was His blood that paid the price for our being purchased out of sin, death, and hell and being brought into a relationship with God, our Father. If you have trusted Christ as Savior, then you uniquely and completely belong to God.

B. How “fine” is God’s control? We have established that God is in charge of all things; by dint of His role as Creator, He is the ruler of the universe. However, does this also mean that He is directly manipulating the details of the physical world and spiritual existence? In other words, we know that God is King, but is He also in command of raindrops, the genetic material in the cells of babies, the make-up and behavior of helium molecules, the meeting of people in a tube station in London, and the path of an asteroid? Just how detailed is God’s sovereignty?

A few years ago, a new theological trend was becoming popular in evangelical circles. It was called the “open view of God.” It posited that God’s foreknowledge could foresee a nexus of events – that is, where two or more chains of possible events would converge – and that He could know what lines of possible resultant events would spring from that point of convergence. However, He would not know which of several would happen. We might find an analog to this idea in the “theistic evolution” theory, which posits that God did indeed create the universe and life, but that He then flipped the switch on evolutionary processes that took

over and ran the world without God's direct control, intervention and involvement. Theistic evolution does not comport with the teaching of Scripture.

The open view of God seems to largely be a response to the vastness of the intelligence, wisdom, and power of God as presented in the Scriptures: human beings, finite creatures that we are, recoil at the enormity of the notion that God could know, indeed, that He plans *all things*. However, that is precisely the kind of God that the Bible teaches and brings into our consciousness. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God of the Bible – is the Creator-King of all things. This “all things” includes all the component parts, all the forces, and all the circumstances of both the physical and spiritual realms.

Is there biblical support for such statements? Here are some passages that contain evidence for this view. In chapter four of the book of Jonah, we find that God caused a plant to grow up over Jonah's head for shade as he sat and waited for the events at Nineveh to unfold. Then God sent a worm to kill the plant – perhaps a castor bean vine – and expose Jonah to the full force of the sun. God's sovereignty included direct control over a plant that grew up in a single night, and over a worm to kill that plant the next day. In John 19, God caused Pilate to write, “King of the Jews” on the plaque over the cross of Christ (not, “he said he was king of the Jews,” as the Jewish leadership wanted). Cyrus was appointed by God before he was born (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1); the exact time, length, and nature of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity were predicted and planned before it occurred. God “clothes” the grass with wildflowers in Matthew 6:30, and He knew and formed Jeremiah before he was born (Jeremiah 1:5), appointing him as a prophet. God the

Father revealed to Jesus Christ where a donkey and its colt – particularly, one on which no one had ever ridden – was to be found in a certain village (Luke 19:30). Furthermore, *God knew, planned, and ordained several hundred years in advance*, that specific donkey and colt would be in that position at a certain time. We know this because the book of Zechariah prophesied it (Zechariah 9:9).

An additional line of reasoning which supports this view of God's sovereignty is the simple fact of our trust in Him expressed in prayer. Christians who are growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and who are walking with Him instinctively ask the Father for help with all kinds of things – assisting loved ones with getting over an illness, giving comfort to the grieving, building up those who need strengthening: in effect, intervening in numerous individual situations. What are we asking God to do, and believing that He can do, if not to get involved with the details of life? This, of course, is exactly what we are requesting of Him; and this is precisely the kind of calling upon the Lord which the Word of God exhorts us as His children to engage in continuously. In other words, our doctrine of prayer hinges on the reality that God is the Sovereign of the details of life as well as Lord of the universe.

One of the more interesting studies is to ponder the nature of miracles recorded in the Scripture. They can be classified in several different ways: for example, miracles of transformation (the water into wine in John 4); miracles of multiplication (the feeding of the 5,000, the widow's jars of oil); miracles of nature (the gourd that grew up over Jonah, the withering of the fig tree, the

stilling of the storm on Galilee, the shadow regressing for Hezekiah, etc.); and miracles of healing (numerous).

An avenue of investigation that can shed some light on God's sovereignty revealed through miracles is the following: What is involved in a miraculous healing – say of the centurion's slave? There is no physical manipulation of the sick person's body, no administration of medication – in fact, Jesus was not even near the man. So what was it? We, with our finite perspective, cannot hope to fully grasp the mechanism, even if God were to reveal it to us. However, here are some thoughts. Could it be that God can communicate his wishes to directly to microbes (viruses, bacteria, or parasites), and to the organs, tissues, cells, and intracellular structures within the sick person's body? Not only can He communicate His desires to the body, but the body is able to respond to the Creator's will. I am not suggesting that these micro-organisms are sentient; but that by virtue of their having been called into being by the Creator, they respond to the fiat decrees of the Creator.

Perhaps even more astonishing to our minds is the concept that not merely cells, organisms, and microbes “hear” and respond to the Master, but also inanimate forces of nature – like wind currents, water, solid objects – all things in creation “hear” and obey the command of Jehovah. The creation knows and responds to the will of the Creator at the macro level, the molecular, atomic and subatomic levels. Jehovah is Lord of all!

C. What about evil and suffering in God's dominion? The presence of wickedness, suffering, and death within the universe, God's realm, has been a puzzle to thinkers and theologians for millennia. If God is good, and if He is sovereign, then how can these negative things exist? It is a legitimate question, and it is a question which the Scriptures answer.

The problem of evil is often thought to be a major stumbling block to the Bible's presentation of the all-wise, all-good, omnipotent Jehovah. However, the apparent legitimacy of such a stumbling block is directly proportional to one's careful and normal reading of the Bible. What I mean by this statement is, if one reads and thinks about the Bible as if it were really true, then most of the problems disappear.

For example, if you accept what the Bible presents, then the causation of evil is not to be laid at God's feet. He did not create evil, He did not desire evil, and evil is contrary to His character and will. Sin, evil, and disorder came into the universe through Satan's rebellion; it entered the human race through Adam's sin. Suffering, pain, and death are the outcome of sin. God being God, however – meaning that He is the God of the Bible, and He is both grace and truth personified – He can take suffering and evil and use them as tools for His own holy and good goals and plans.

There are many passages of Scripture that we can use as a lens through which to view truths that help us to answer the question of evil. We will look at three of them. They are the book of Habakkuk; the book of I Peter, and Romans chapters 1 through 5.

Habakkuk was a prophet of Jehovah who lived in the years before the collapse and destruction of the kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C. His cry to God begins with the question of “How long, O Jehovah?” (Habakkuk 1:2). His question has to do with how long God will tolerate the wickedness, injustice, and egregious sin he sees all around him in the Jewish people – God’s own, chosen nation. He is calling out for God to punish, deal out justice, and cleanse the filth from His people. The response that God gives shocks Habakkuk to the core.

The Lord reveals to Habakkuk that He is preparing a punishment for Judah in the form of a nation which will swallow up the Jews: the Chaldeans (Babylonians) (Habakkuk 1:6). The Babylonians are fast, warlike, aggressive, and arrogant. They reduce fortifications and nations, not to mention nobilities and royalties, to rubble. They care nothing for established norms and status: they will destroy the nation.

Here is where Habakkuk’s discussion with God begins to help us. Habakkuk responds to God’s revelation with a question: How can You, the pure, holy God, use such wicked people as the Chaldeans? As Habakkuk puts it, “Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor. Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?” (Habakkuk 1:13.) In other words, how can God use a dirty tool without getting His own hands dirty?

God’s response to this query is found in Habakkuk 2:2 and following. (Actually, He hinted at the core of the answer in 1:11: “But they will be held guilty, they whose

strength is their god.”) Most of the second chapter of this book seems to be a song about the coming collapse of the Babylonian empire. The coming zenith of the Babylonian kingdom will see its power hold sway over the entire Middle East, swallowing up the entire territory of what was once Assyria, some of the Hittite lands, Israel, Lebanon, even Egypt. However, in only a few generations, this entire massive structure will collapse under the onslaught of the Persians – God’s judgment on the Babylonians. For more details on this, read the book of Daniel.

The chief point relevant to our discussion is that God has the right to use any tool He wants, and He is entitled to direct what events He wants to occur, but He is not responsible for the evil perpetrated by those instruments. He is the cause of punitive calamity, but He is not the cause of wickedness. Here is how it is explained in Habakkuk 2:8-14:

“Because you [Babylonia] have looted many nations, all the remainder of the peoples will loot you – because of human bloodshed and violence done to the land, to the town and all its inhabitants. Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house to put his nest on high, to be delivered from the hand of calamity! You have devised a shameful thing for your house by cutting off many peoples; so you are sinning against yourself. Surely the stone will cry out from the wall, and the rafter will answer it from the framework.

Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and founds a town with violence! Is it not indeed from the LORD of hosts that peoples toil for fire, and

nations grow weary for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”

Observe that the accused has looted many nations, is guilty of human bloodshed and violence and has built a city on the foundation of bloodshed and suffering. This entity is now being held responsible by God for its crimes. This reality is found not only here and in multitudes of other places in the prophets, but also in the historical books. Remember how God told the Israelites that they were to exterminate several nations of Canaanites who were singled out as especially wicked? The guilty will be held to account for their sins! The conquest of Canaan by the children of Israel was the blessing and provision of Jehovah for the Jews and it was simultaneously the wrath and doom of holy Jehovah upon the unrestrained wickedness of the Canaanite peoples (see, for example, Deuteronomy 7:1,2).

This truth dovetails with the principle taught throughout the Scriptures that each soul is accountable before the Almighty for his own sins. We can see this in God’s pronouncement, “the soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4). In fact, the entire chapter of Ezekiel 18 constitutes God’s explanation that neither the father is accountable for the wickedness of the son, nor the son for the father, but that every person bears his own responsibility. Another text that confirms this truth is Revelation 20, where every person standing before the Great White Throne is accountable to God for his own deeds. This point is emphasized and brought out in relief in that passage.

Another and final truth from Habakkuk should be noted: while the Babylonians were so arrogant and so self-aggrandizing as to assume that their power and glory would fill the earth, God declares that this is delusional. It is the knowledge of His glory that will ultimately fill the earth (Habakkuk 2:14). The seeming triumph of evil, pain, injustice, and grief is only temporary (see Psalm 73). God allows evil and suffering as part of His plan so that when all is fulfilled, His glory will be known and acknowledged.

Another great place to study the truth of why God allows suffering and evil in His creation is Peter's first epistle. The theme of the book is, in fact, Christian suffering. The core of the letter is focused on the suffering of Jesus Christ and uses that fact as a lens to illuminate what it means for believers to suffer for God.

Notice in I Peter 1:6 and 7 that Peter comments on his audience having been distressed by various trials, and that the ultimate outcome of their faith and patient suffering will be praise, glory, and honor in the coming revelation of Jesus Christ. Peter additionally enjoins his friends to endure unjust suffering because this is God's grace (NASB translates the Greek word *xaris* as "favor" in 2:19 and 20). This is another major piece of understanding how evil and suffering fit into a good God's plan for the world: it pleases, honors, and glorifies God when His children undergo suffering for the right reason, with patient endurance.

How can this be? Why would a loving God so arrange the lives of His people that suffering, hardship, deprivation, and injustice would be a part of their

experience? I Peter 1:21-24 leads us towards an answer. Peter writes:

“For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth, and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.”

This paragraph gives us insight into a key element of this discussion. Jesus Christ is the ultimate representative of someone who suffered without deserving it. He never sinned; He never lied; He never disobeyed the Father. Yet He endured some of the cruelest torture that human beings can inflict upon one another – and more than that, He was the object of God the Father’s wrath for sin. Yet He bore all this without complaint, with implicit and complete trust in the Father, and for the purpose of rescuing sinners from Hell. When Christians suffer like that (trusting the Father, relying on His grace, without grumbling), we are following His perfect example. Following Christ’s example – both responding to life’s situations as He did, as well as becoming like Him in character and conduct – is a grace from God and is the ultimate objective of sanctification (Ephesians 4:13-16).

You might be able to see a thought running beneath the surface of I Peter: enduring suffering and evil is not only a part of our sovereign God’s plan for us, it is an

ennobling and high privilege. When we face trials, behaving as our Savior did in going through the greatest hardship anyone has ever faced in the history of the universe, we not only glorify and please God, but we also rise to a higher level of Christlikeness and virtue. This truth is borne out in I Peter 4.

I Peter 4:1,2 says this: “Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.” Suffering as believers is intended by God to help purge us from sin; it is designed to help us lift our eyes from the temporary to the eternal, from the material to the spiritual.

Another helpful paragraph is I Peter 4:12-19. I’ll quote it in its entirety here:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evil-doer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do

not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.”

There is an additional, corollary principle that runs through these texts concerning suffering and evil. It has to do with an eternal outlook. Paul addressed this concept in II Corinthians 4:16-18: “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

Suffering is, in part, designed to lead the child of God to contemplate and focus on those things that will last – eternal things. While we’re in the moment of pain, or debilitation, or humiliation, we have trouble thinking about anything but what we’re going through right then. However, if we can in faith turn to the Lord and ponder His grace, power, and sovereignty, then we can refocus our attention on eternity. Even while the body is sick, or dying, or in pain, we can think about the glories and joys of being in the presence of Jehovah forever, and the fulfillment of all His promises to His children. We can meditate on the amazing character of God and His awesome power. Momentary “light” affliction, Paul called it. Certainly, the record of what Paul endured for the sake of Jesus Christ is not what we would consider “light.” It seems pretty heavy when we read II

Corinthians 6:3-10 or II Corinthians 11:23-28. But that is exactly the point: considered in the context of everyday human life, our troubles, trials, and suffering seem huge; put into the context of the eternal plan God has set in motion “so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7), our heartaches, bodily pains, weaknesses, and trials are a temporary condition allowed by God to function in our lives for an eternal goal.

Toward what eternal values do suffering and pain lead? What is God doing when He allows these things in His children’s lives? Scripture gives us insight into several goals. First, suffering can make us more like Jesus Christ (Romans 8:18-29). The duplication of Christ’s character in us is one of the chief goals, or the chief goal, of a believer. Second, God can use the testimony of a suffering saint to point believers and unbelievers to Christ (Philippians 1:12-20). Third, the troubles and trials of children of God are part of an unseen warfare in which the steadfastness of God’s people, our perseverance in loving Him and trusting Him, is a weapon in God’s hand against Satan and his forces of darkness (Job 1 and 2, Ephesians 3:10). Fourth, trials are a part of the basis which God will use to reward His children for faithfulness at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Revelation 2:8-11).

It can be very helpful to the child of God going through suffering to recognize that God knows all about our sufferings (Psalm 56:8; Malachi 3:16), and that He cares. Indeed, it is often in the most acute suffering that we know the sweetest joy of our Father’s personal interest and presence through the Spirit (Isaiah 43:1-3).

Chapter 2

The Name of the LORD

The name of the only true and living God is Yahweh (in Hebrew, YHWH). This name has been brought into the English-speaking world (influenced along the way by Latin) in its well-known form, Jehovah. There are dozens of titles and descriptors attached to Jehovah in the Bible, and several of them are prominent, both in import and frequency of use; however, Jehovah (or Yahweh) is His only name. This can be verified in several passages.

In Exodus 3:14, 15, God is speaking to Moses at the burning bush. He declares, “I AM WHO I AM,” and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God furthermore said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’” This is my name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.” The NASB has here followed traditional English Bible translation convention by using the phrasing “The LORD” in capital letters to designate the Hebrew name, Yahweh. So, to clarify, in Exodus 3:15, God says to Moses, “Tell the Israelites, ‘Yahweh has sent me to you.’ And this – Yahweh – is My name.” This passage also points out the chief semantic load of the word. As highlighted in many of our English versions, Exodus 3:14 emphasizes the phrasing, “I AM WHO I AM,” and “I AM.”

Jehovah has to do with existence: specifically, self-existence. All other entities in the universe are created.

Whether one is discussing matter, energy, states of being that are both energy and matter or neither, sentient life, or any other thing, all else has been created and is dependent on the will of the Creator. Only one entity is entirely uncreated and not dependent on anything else for the sustenance of life or existence. That would be Jehovah, the I AM. This name may also suggest eternality and immutability since He is forever in the state of being which He has always occupied. He never becomes, He never develops or grows, He cannot change in any way: He is and always has been the perfect, changeless, and only wise God.

We have trouble reconciling the immutability of Jehovah with the reality that He is a Person, and not an energy field, force, or the amalgamation of laws of physics. That is, while He is unchanging, He is a Person: He thinks, acts, communicates, experiences emotions, establishes and maintains relationships. For us, our experience as personalities is largely about change. Throughout our lifetime, our intellect, character, and behavior grow and change; over the course of a day, we learn new things, change our emotional responses and views about people and things and so on. God, as the ultimate Person, has similar emotions but does not change in His character, patterns of behavior, or principles of relationships.

This truth, incidentally, is one of the reasons that John 1:14 is so striking, so universe-bending: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” How can God *become* anything? He is already perfect, already the Alpha and Omega of all creation. The incarnation of the Son is indeed the

harbinger of the great unveiling of God's plan for redemption, the fulcrum of the ages.

Another point to note concerning God declaring His name – a point that is relevant to contemporary culture – is the concept of self-definition. We live in an era in Western civilization when the hubris of humanity has reached flame-out proportions: some human beings believe that individuals can declare themselves to be whatever gender they imagine in their minds, whatever “identity” they choose, whatever construct they imagine in their brains – and by simply declaring it to be so, it is so. A biological male, on the basis of his feelings or desires, can declare himself to be female, and society is supposed to accept it as so. You can see the folly of it: “professing to be wise, they have become fools.” Not only in denial of biological and historical fact but also in rebellion against the authority of God Almighty, these people have taken on the role of God. God alone has the right to declare Who He is; He alone has the right to declare who we are. He says, “I am who I am;” we don't get to do that. Instead, He tells us, “I am your Creator and your God; you are the creature that I have made.” We don't get to make God after our own imaginations, nor do we have the authority to self-declare or self-define. We instead must bow to the Creator's naming and describing us.

God is the One, alone, Who can call into being that which does not exist (Romans 4:17); Who can declare something and it is so (Genesis 1:9); Who can name something and that name is what that thing is (Genesis 1:5; Matthew 16:18; I Corinthians 1:2). God alone possesses the word of power – the word of creation, of naming, of ultimate designation, of causation. We

human beings are at our best when we think God's thoughts after Him, when we acknowledge and affirm those names, designations, and natures which the Almighty has established. True science is the effort to understand what God has named, declared and designed, and how the various parts of His creation interact with each other. "Science" which leaves out the declarative and controlling power of God is bound to lead to false conclusions (Mark 12:24). Adam's naming of the animals (Genesis 2:19,20) is man's acknowledgment and affirmation of the creative work that God has already done, based on Adam's understanding of the nature of that creature in God's design. Genuine science has the same function as Adam's naming of the animals.

Hosea 12:5 says, "Even the LORD [Yahweh], the God of hosts, the LORD [Yahweh] is His name." Here is another clear statement that God's name is not El or Elohim or Shaddai or Adonai, but rather Yahweh. Those other descriptors are titles, not names. He is the Leader and Ruler of "hosts" or armies, likely referring to the unguessed numbers of angels who are His servants and messengers.

Looking at a few contexts where God's name – Jehovah – is used can help develop our understanding of the connection between His Name and His character. Psalm 48:10 says, "As is Your name, O God, so is Your praise to the ends of the earth; Your right hand is full of righteousness." This verse affirms that God is as worthy of worship and honor as His name would suggest: that He alone is the almighty, perfect, self-contained Creator. Additionally, the psalmist connects the character of God's name with other traits: He is praiseworthy and

righteous. This is an important aspect of God's sovereignty to consider – that His power is also coupled with His moral attributes of righteousness, holiness, grace, and so on.

Another verse to think about is Psalm 138:2: “I will bow down toward Your holy temple and give thanks to Your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth; For You have magnified Your word according to all Your name.” Here there is an association of God's name with the characteristics of lovingkindness (Hebrew, *chesed*) and truth (Hebrew, *emet*). Additionally, there is the statement here that God has magnified, elevated, and focused attention on His Word in a way that is in keeping with the majesty, power, and character of His Name. Perhaps we might paraphrase this as, “Jehovah has infused His Word with similar efficacy and traits as His character possesses.”

What else is involved in the name of Jehovah? The first two verses of Psalm 93 say, “The LORD [Yahweh] reigns, He is clothed with majesty; The LORD has clothed and girded Himself with strength. Indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved. Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting.” While reigning is not necessarily intrinsic to the semantic value of YHWH, this psalm does connect the name of the Lord with the concept of ruling. Reigning as king is normally thought of in a theological framework as something that God does – one of His works or functions. However, I would suggest that ruling as king is not only one of His works; it is part of who He is, just as much as righteousness, holiness, or grace are part of His essential character. Ruling as king is who God is. I derive this from the second verse of Psalm 93 above,

which says, “Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting.”

We might think that God’s throne – His rule – dates to the moment in time when He created the world (Genesis 1:1) so that He had something over which to rule. How can someone be king without a kingdom? The answer is twofold. First, we don’t know if anything existed before God’s fiat creation of the universe we inhabit; or, if something did exist, what it might have been. We can only affirm that if there was anything that existed in eternity past, God was king over that. Second, a king is a king even if he has no kingdom, if it is in his nature and character to be king. That is, if a person has met all of the qualifications for being king, then he is a king. Biblically, a king is a king by dint of character and right as well as by doing kingly things.

Indeed, to take it a step farther, the universe has been embedded with a moral framework because Jehovah, the Creator-King, is the one who made it: the cosmos could not have been constructed in any other way than the one in which it was. The universe could not exist within an amoral framework, because the character of its Creator-King is righteous, holy, and good. The function of the universe as the domain of God follows the fact that God is king. This concept is also found in Deuteronomy 6:4, 5, the famous “Sh’ma Yisrael:” “Hear, O Israel! The LORD [Jehovah] is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The fact of Jehovah – that He exists, that He is who He has revealed Himself to be, that He is the King and Ruler of all things – demands a response, and the only logical response is to love Him with all of one’s being. The

reason we are to love God is that He alone (II Samuel 7:22) exists as the Lord of all (Acts 10:36). The command to love God with the totality of one's being is predicated on, and connected to, the fact of His existence (Mark 12:28-34).

Nebuchadnezzar seems to have seen and acknowledged the eternal nature of God's reign when he said, "May your peace abound! It has seemed good to me to declare the signs and wonders which the Most High God has done for me. How great are His signs, and how mighty are His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, And His dominion is from generation to generation" (Daniel 4:1-3). He followed the narrative of his own humiliation with the record: "But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. (Daniel 4:34). Observe that Nebuchadnezzar states that God's reign is an eternal one. These truths, collected and assembled, seem to point to the principle that ruling as the ultimate King is not only something that God does; it is bound up in the character of God as Who He is.

There is another aspect to grasping the fullness of God's name. A few moments ago, we pondered His self-revelation: the reality that He has defined for us Who He is – His self-definition. While the semantic load of YHWH does not include moral attributes, there are places in the Scripture record where God does tie together His eternal, self-existent sovereign existence with His personal attributes. So, we get a glimpse into

His compassion, mercy, and faithfulness at the burning bush, when He tells Moses that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (with whom He covenanted a relationship and to whom He made promises). Furthermore, He tells Moses that He has seen and heard the burden of the Jewish people in Egypt, and is aware of their suffering (Exodus 3:6,7).

Even more clearly, in Jehovah's passing in front of Moses in the cave in Exodus 34, He proclaimed His name and His character: "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6,7). Here it is easy to recognize the connection between God's name and His self-described character. He is compassionate, gracious, and true. (There is some scholarly debate over the meaning of the Hebrew word *emet*, translated "truth" in v.6. Some scholars feel that its semantic value is closer to "faithful;" however, the best translation is still probably "true" or "genuine." The Septuagint's translation is *alethinos* – "genuine, authentic."). Jehovah is also holy and righteous. There is a clear connection between the name of God (Jehovah) and His character: that name cannot describe anything or anyone other than what and who He has revealed Himself to be. What we are looking at is the difference between the "definition" of His name and the "description" of His character – and we are finding that the line between the two is fuzzy. That is to say, while YHWH denotes "the self-existent one," that

Name has been permanently and indelibly imprinted with the moral character and unchanging attributes of the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the only uncreated, true and living Creator-King of all things.

Chapter 3

God's Sovereignty in Salvation

One of the most hotly debated doctrines in all of orthodox Christianity is God's role in salvation. The nature of this debate is not whether or not Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did actually and vicariously pay for sin on the cross and complete the victory over sin, death, and Satan through His resurrection. If one does not believe those scriptural truths, he is not a Christian. Rather, the debate is over how much of a role God has played in salvation before anyone believed – before, in fact, anyone existed. We are talking about what we might label the “pre-work” of salvation: God's election, foreordination, predestination, and foreknowledge.

Much of the history of this dispute revolves around two sets of arguments; one might be called the “free moral agency” branch (i.e., “Arminianism”), and the other the “sovereignty of God” branch (i.e., “Calvinism”). This examination is not going to address the relative merits of those arguments, much less their historic content. Where the Scripture comes into contact with these ideas – whether to confirm, negate, or adjust them – those contact points will be noted.

Three word-families in the Scriptures are helpful to think about, and together to use as a guide for studying this matter. They are: foreknow/foreknowledge; choose-elect/choice; foreordain/foreordination (in some English translations there is a second set of words, predestine and predestination, but in the Greek original there is only one set).

1. What exactly does it mean that God thinks, plans and decides? What exactly is God's foreknowledge?

There are several New Testament occurrences of this word family:

The verb: *proginosko* (to foreknow)

Acts 26:5	Romans 11:2	II Peter 3:17
Romans 8:29	I Peter 1:20	

The noun: *prognosis* (foreknowledge)

Acts 2:23	I Peter 1:2
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In the case of humans, we know that we desire to reach a certain objective, collect information, ponder various ideas and plans, and then make a decision on the method to achieve that goal. If we make God's foreknowledge merely a quantitative function – that is, God knows in advance what is going to happen because He is older, wiser, smarter, more observant, and retains knowledge better than humans do, then God is just a sort of super-human in His knowledge, thinking and planning. But God's decision-making is qualitatively different than ours. He knows all things, including all pieces of information and how every moving part will impact every other moving part in any plan. He never needs to learn something new; in fact, He cannot "learn" anything, because He already knows all things, and there has never been a time when He did not know all things. He declares the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). Furthermore, while with us there is a process, moving from the collection of data through the maturation of

motive and purpose into the final decision to act, with God the knowledge and the plan seem to be the same thing.

So, in Acts 2:23 we find these words from Peter: “this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.” In the Greek language of the first century A.D., there was a grammatical technique called the Granville Sharp rule (named after an English biblical scholar of the 1700s). This rule states that when there is the specific sequence (definite article-noun-conjunction [”kai”]-noun), then the two nouns are very closely related (much like an appositive in English grammar), or very nearly identical. In Acts 2:23, the “predetermined plan” and “foreknowledge” are the two things that overlap or share a great deal of the same characteristics. God’s predetermined plan **is** His foreknowledge. He knows what will happen because He planned it. In this specific passage, the foreknowledge of God (His predetermined plan) was that Messiah would be crucified.

This relationship between “knowing” someone and “choosing” can be seen in Amos 3:2. In this verse, God is speaking to the Israelites when He says, “You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” The word which the NASB translates as “chosen” is actually the word “known” – but in this context, the two ideas overlap. For God to “know” someone in this fashion is for Him to “choose” that individual or nation.

God’s foreknowledge is intimately tied to His planning and ordering of events in advance of their

execution. In fact, Acts 2:23 would support the concept that His foreknowledge and His predetermination are the same thing. God knows what will happen because He planned what will happen. Applied to the matter of the eternal salvation of sinful humans, this would mean that God knows who will trust in Christ not only because He is omniscient, but because He planned for them to do so.

Additional support for this truth is found in I Peter 1:20. Speaking of the blood of the spotless and unblemished lamb, Jesus Christ, Peter says, “For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you.” A significant question that helps in our discussion here is, *What does the ‘foreknown’ mean here: is it merely that God knew in advance that His Son would die, or did He plan it?* If He planned it, then His foreknowledge and His plan are opposite sides of the same coin. The obvious answer to the question is that God determined, decreed, and decided before the foundation of the universe that the Son would be the sacrifice for sinful humans. He knows in advance because He planned in advance.

Incidentally, Acts 2:23 also addresses human responsibility; God plans and thus knows the future, but that does not remove accountability or guilt from human actions. Peter notes that the Jews “nailed [Jesus the Nazarene] to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”

I Peter 1:1 and 2 are a microcosm of the whole debate concerning God’s role in choosing to salvation. Here’s what Peter writes: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and

Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: may grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.”

This wording, “who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,” could be interpreted as “God chooses those who will be saved based upon His advance knowledge of who will believe in Jesus as Savior.” This is, indeed, what the Arminian camp does with this whole doctrine. However, as we have seen, God’s foreknowledge is not merely His knowing in advance; it is His *planning* in advance.

2. What is God’s election or choice?

The term “election” or “choose” (the word family in Greek is built on the *eklego/eklektos* base) occurs about 51 times in the New Testament, including uses as noun, verb, and adjective.

New Testament occurrences of the verb *eklegomai* (to select, choose, pick out):

Mark 13:20	John 15:19	Acts 15:25
Luke 6:13	Acts 1:2	I Cor. 1:27 (2x)
Luke 10:42	Acts 1:24	I Cor. 1:28
Luke 14:7	Acts 6:5	Ephesians 1:4
John 6:70	Acts 13:17	James 2:5
John 13:18	Acts 15:7	
John 15:16 (2x)	Acts 15:22	

Of the above 21 uses of “to select” (Greek *eklegomai*), one is in reference to Mary, sister of Lazarus; one is to the Pharisees; one is to the apostles; three are to actions of the early church in choosing deacons or messengers. The remaining fifteen occurrences are to God the Father or God the Son selecting something. Of particular interest in this discussion is any information in the listed texts that would shed light on the reasoning behind God’s election, the nature of this election, or the methodology of this choosing.

John 15:19 records Jesus saying to the twelve, “I chose you out of the world.” Neither His motivation nor His rationale for His choice is in view in this context; the result, however, is that because of His choice, “the world hates you.”

Acts 1:2 simply notes that Jesus had previously chosen the apostles. Also in this context, Acts 1:24 indicates (through the prayer of the eleven apostles) that they believed that God had already chosen a replacement for Judas.

I Corinthians 1:27-29 says that “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.” Some of God’s logic or motivation may be in view here: that He seems to delight in using what the world does not value or count as significant. Verse 29 here tells us, “so that no man may boast before God.” God alone receives the honor for using weak,

unimportant, and insignificant instruments in His almighty and eternal plan. This can be applied to our study of salvation because Paul introduces this thinking in verse 26 with the words, “For consider your calling, brethren...” The “calling” here is the calling, designation, or naming to salvation. No one is called to become a child of God because he or she is an indispensable part of God’s program; God needs no one. Nor is He impressed with our abilities or innate character qualities: He gave them to us! Salvation is all of God’s grace and none of our worthiness in any respect.

James 2:5 says, “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” This admonition occurs in the section of James dealing with favoritism and preferential treatment. The statement indicates that God has indeed chosen certain people to be “rich in faith and heirs,” but this is not an iron-clad affirmation nor rebuttal of the doctrine of election to salvation.

A verse that does give information about the doctrine of election is Ephesians 1:4: “Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.” This passage would seem to be obvious support for the doctrine that God does choose some individuals for salvation, especially when it is read in context with the following verse: (“He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will”). Indeed, I believe this is the true understanding of this passage. However, it must be acknowledged that it is grammatically possible to argue that the function of God’s choice here results in a set of

believers becoming “holy and blameless before Him.” In other words, the election or choice of God is that some or all believers have been previously chosen to be ultimately perfectly sanctified.

I disagree with that interpretation, because of other statements about the sovereignty of God in salvation elsewhere. God has ordained that His children will be wholly and perfectly sanctified ultimately (when we are in His presence in our glorified bodies, sin natures excised [Hebrews 12:23; I John 3:2; Romans 8:29,30]). But He has also, as a precondition to that outcome, ordained those who would trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, based solely on His gracious desire and design (Ephesians 1:5; II Thessalonians 2:13).

So let’s move on to the uses of “elect, chosen ones” as a noun.

New Testament occurrences of the adjective or noun *eklektos* (chosen [one/s], picked out, selected):

Matthew 20:16	Luke 18:7	I Peter 1:2
Matthew 22:14	Luke 23:35	I Peter 2:4
Matthew 24:22	Romans 8:33	I Peter 2:6
Matthew 24:24	Romans 16:13	I Peter 2:9
Matthew 24:31	Colossians 3:12	II John 1
Mark 13:20	I Timothy 5:21	II John 13
Mark 13:22	II Timothy 2:10	Revelation 17:14
Mark 13:27	Titus 1:1	

There are several facts or principles we can extract right away from these passages:

- There are people who are called “the elect” in the tribulation period (Matthew 24:22,24,31; Mark 13:20,22,27; Luke 23:35).
- The elect have special advocacy and protection from God (Romans 8:33).
- “Elect” can be used as a commendatory word – “choice” as employed for Rufus in Romans 16:13.
- Evidently some angels – we deduce that they are the good angels – are considered “elect” in I Timothy 5:21.
- Paul says that he endures all things for the sake of the elect in II Timothy 2:10.
- Paul says that he is a bond-servant of God and an apostle for “the faith of those chosen of God” in Titus 1:1. His ministry is literally “according to the faith of the elect.”
- In I Peter 2:4, Peter describes Jesus Christ as the “choice [elect] and precious living stone.” This description is based on the quote Peter uses in 2:6, which is from Isaiah 28:16.
- Peter uses the term “elect” or “chosen” in 2:9, another allusion to the Old Testament (cf. Isaiah 43:20).
- John addresses his second letter to “the chosen lady” referring either to a female believer or to a local church in II John 1. He uses similar wording in verse 13 – “your chosen sister.”

Colossians 3:12 is interesting. Paul connects the fact of God's choice of certain people for salvation with a set of expectations that He has for their character, behavior, and relationships. There are two additional descriptors given to the "chosen" in this verse: "holy" and "beloved." Being chosen by God for eternal life means that He sees us as set apart from sin, consecrated and sanctified for Him alone. The Christian life is supposed to be a life of holiness – this is supposed to be a defining characteristic of the child of God. Observe also that the context of Colossians 3:12 is dealing with the principle of the old nature and the new nature (vv.5-11), and the characteristics that are "put off" in contrast to those that are "put on" in Christ. In other words, this "holy" label that we are designated in verse 12 is a position that we occupy, a label that we have acquired from God: it is positional sanctification, the way that God sees us in Christ. However, it also phases into progressive sanctification since this passage also points toward a commanded and expected manner of life.

The second descriptor in verse 12 is "beloved" – we are the object of the intense, sacrificial, and world-bending love of God. Since He has chosen us, we are assured that whatever He is doing is for our ultimate good and benefit.

The succeeding verses (Colossians 3:12-17) further describe what God expects of His elect since He has chosen us and redeemed us through the blood of the Son.

3. What is God's predestination or foreordaining?

The Greek word *pro-orizo* means to mark the boundaries of something ahead of time, to determine [something] beforehand.

It is used as a verb in the following passages:

Acts 4:28	Romans 8:30	Ephesians 1:5
Romans 8:29	I Cor. 2:7	Ephesians 1:11

Acts 4:28 is the apostles' prayer acknowledging that various parties were gathered in Jerusalem "to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." This verse supports that God's predestination applies to people, locations, events and that God actively weaves all these for His purpose or decree (*boule* in Greek).

Romans 8:28-39 is a wonderful and encouraging passage of Scripture. The fact of God's overarching sovereignty (He works *all things*) is tied together with His innate goodness in verse 28. The wording here is literally "into good" or "resulting in good." He pulls together people, experiences, circumstances, sorrows, trials – all things – with the ultimate endpoint of that which is good. Good is that which is righteous, glorifying to Him and beneficial to His child.

Observe that Paul seems to set out a logical sequence for the intervention of God in sinful human lives. Since God's knowledge, foreknowledge and decision-making is perfect and immediately fully developed, the sequence described here is for human

benefit, and not an exact description. It is more like a breakdown of all the activities encompassed by God's gracious salvation-decision at once.

In verses 29 and 30, we see foreknowledge → predestination → call → justification → glorification. All of the main verbs are in the aorist tense, meaning they are seen as in the background and likely as (in some sense) already having happened. An argument could be made that Paul is seeing much or all of this in a "positional truth" matrix. If so, then God sees His children as already glorified, even though we know from this same chapter (Romans 8:18-25) that our glorification is still future.

Taken as a package, all the verbs and participles here in verses 29 and 30 lead the believer to understand that God has taken care of every detail of our salvation, from start to finish, from inside to outside, from before time began to eternity future; no contingency has been overlooked, no part is left unfinished. The sum total of this is captured in Paul's rhetorical question in verse 31: "If God be for us, who is against us?" Since we have the clear factual teaching of Scripture indicating God's great and gracious sovereignty deployed to secure our salvation and our eternal, secure benefit, what possible enemy or bad outcome could there be? The answer is "none."

Another interesting point in this passage is the use of the term "call/called" (Greek: *kaléo*). The New Testament use of the word "call" is very much stronger than our normal English understanding of the word – we often see it as another word for "invite" or "request." The term is more like "designate" or "appoint," and it

may very well be analogous to the term “draw” used by Jesus in the Gospel of John.

The salvation-work of God is so secure in Romans chapter eight that even harsh personal experience (as quoted by Paul from Psalm 44 in Romans 8:36) does not negate nor cancel the plan and power of God Almighty for the security of His beloved children. This security is so impregnable that it makes the jump from future abstract to present practical living for the Christian in verses 37-39. No matter what experience we are currently enduring, the reality of God’s love and eternal gracious plan remain undefeated and in full force at any given hard moment. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ!

Ephesians chapter one is a goldmine of deep theological truth and a blessed encouragement to the child of God. In this classic Pauline benediction of God, the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit is highlighted in reference to the position the believer occupies in Christ.

Starting in verse 3, Paul writes a magnificent praise-blessing about God and His work on behalf of the elect. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, and all these benefits are located in the sphere of Jesus Christ. He then begins to lay out for our insight and meditation what some of these blessings are. First on the list is “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (v.4). Later in the book, we find that we never would have chosen Him because we in our sinful, lost condition were without God (2:12), futile in our mind (4:17), darkened in understanding (4:18), excluded from the life of God (4:18), callous to spiritual

things (4:18), corrupt (4:22), and we were even called “darkness” (5:8).

With these characteristics, it is no wonder that Paul’s description of the sinful state of the human soul is “separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:12). We were entirely without God and without spiritual life – what Paul calls “dead.”

But God intervened! He chose us! He chose us, not based on knowing who would believe in Christ – because no human being in sin is capable of choosing Christ – but rather, He chose us according to the kind intention of His will, and out of the motivation of His great love and mercy (2:4).

It is useful to notice the various words which Paul uses to explain the reasons for our praise to God. He chose us “in Him” in verse 3. The choice that we would be sanctified ultimately as the final stage of our development as His children also necessitates that He chose us to have a relationship with Him through faith in Christ. He also predestined us to be adopted as His own children through the person and work of Jesus Christ (v.4). The result of this work is that we would be “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (v.6), and that we “would be to the praise of His glory” (v.12).

Salvation is by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and salvation is of the Lord.

Another passage that is helpful in this regard, although it does not use any of our keywords, is Acts 13:48. It says, “When the Gentiles heard this, they began

rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” The last clause is relevant to our study (in Greek, *καὶ ἐπίστευσαν ὅσοι ἦσαν τεταγμένοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον*.) The participle “appoint” (Greek: *tasso*) means to place in order, to arrange, to assign a position. It is here in the passive voice, meaning someone else (God) did the appointing. It is in the perfect tense, meaning that it lies in the background; from other passages (e.g., Revelation 13:8) we know that God’s appointing to eternal life was done “before the foundation of the world.”

An additional instructive passage is II Thessalonians 2:13, again using a different word than is found in our “key words” index. “But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.” (In Greek, *Ἡμεῖς δὲ ὀφείλομεν εὐχαριστεῖν τῷ θεῷ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν, ἀδελφοί, ἡγαπημένοι ὑπὸ κυρίου, ὅτι εἶλετο ὑμᾶς ὁ θεὸς ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς εἰς σωτηρίαν ἐν ἀγιασμῷ πνεύματος, καὶ πίστει ἀληθείας*.) This verse indicates that God has chosen (Greek: *aireo*) the outcome (salvation), the location of that working “in sanctification of spirit,” and the means of that outcome “faith upon the truth.” No one receives the gift of eternal life apart from faith in Christ, but all whom God has chosen will believe. In other words, God has chosen both the end and the means to the end.

4. Does God “override” the will of a human being? Or, put another way, is God’s grace “irresistible?”

Certainly, there are many places in Scripture where we see people “fighting” against God or resisting Him. Both

Cain and Nimrod in the earliest history of humanity are presented as rebels against Jehovah. Balaam the prophet wanted his way, not God's. The Israelites of the Old Testament are frequently reprimanded for being "stiff-necked" and "hard-hearted." What is Jonah's attempted flight to Tarshish from Jehovah's call to preach to Ninevah, but rebellion? Or what is Pharaoh's obtuseness towards Moses and Aaron but a battle against the sovereignty and power of Jehovah? Looked at in this light, we might correctly identify the fact that man is born a rebel against God: resisting God is our natural fallen state. Further, God can and does allow human beings to continue in sin – at least until they come up against the hard stop of His holy righteousness and His immutable decrees of judgment.

However, putting the question in a slightly different form might yield more helpful answers. So let's try this: In the ages-long battle between the rebellious heart of sinful humans and God's sovereign grace, who eventually always wins?

Psalm 117 is a delightful and profound little song – only two verses. Here it is in the NASB95:

Praise the Lord, all nations;
Laud Him, all peoples!
For His lovingkindness is great toward us,
And the truth of the Lord is everlasting.
Praise the Lord!

Here it is in the English Standard Version (ESV):

Praise the Lord, all nations!
Extol him, all peoples!
For great is his steadfast love toward us,
And the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord!

Both the NASB95 and the ESV are worthy translations. However, Rotherham is the most unvarnished and faithful of all English translations in terms of translational technique (albeit often a challenge to work with in terms of readability). Here is Rotherham's very literal rendering:

Praise Yahweh, all ye nations,
Laud him, all ye tribes of men;
For his lovingkindness has prevailed over us
And the faithfulness of Yahweh is to times
age-abiding.

The lovingkindness (ESV, "steadfast love") here is the Hebrew word *chesed*, which is a full-orbed term encompassing mercy, faithfulness, loyalty, and a covenant relationship all in one. Notice that the psalmist casts this word as the aggressor in the poem: it is God's grace that has gone to war with us! This war, however, is not to destroy us (which we deserve), but rather to win us! Our sinful, prideful rebellion eventually loses to God's mercy. Even experientially, we know in our own lives and those of other brothers and sisters that individuals may resist God for a long period of time, but He eventually always wins. This is true not only in terms of salvation but also in the realm of our relationship to

God as our Father. Christians may resist the lordship of Jesus Christ for a time, but in the end, they will submit, whether they want to or not. A believer may serve Christ willingly and faithfully, or he may not be very productive for God, or he might even be disciplined by God to the point of physical death (I John 5:16,17). But ultimately every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

Psalms 117 also helps dispel a myth about God's sovereignty: that God's authority and might in choosing some to receive His gift of salvation turns God into a moral monster. The argument is something like this: If God is the One who chooses who will be saved, and that choice is not merely a function of His seeing who in the future will trust in Christ, but rather His choice is based on His plan and desire (Ephesians 1:4,11), then God must be evil because He could have chosen every human and He didn't.

There are two major flaws in this logic, each intertwined with the other. The first is this: human beings, because of sin, are incapable of choosing God. This doctrine is what orthodox Christianity calls "total depravity." While some believers hold that unregenerate sinners are capable of choosing to believe God, because they possess "free will," the biblical evidence points toward the fact that the will of the creature is bound to its nature. That is, an unregenerate soul can choose what color socks to wear, or whether to have his coffee black or with cream, but in spiritual matters, because he has a sin nature and is a sinner, he cannot – and never will – choose God.

The doctrine of total depravity does not suggest that every human being is as evil as he or she could possibly be – that description is reserved for the Devil. But it does mean that sin has affected and infected every area of the spirit, soul, mind, and heart. The emotions, will, affections, thoughts, desires, relationships, priorities – every part of man has been infected by sin. In fact, the concept of “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) entails the inability of the sinful soul to understand spiritual truth apart from the supernatural work of the Spirit of God (I Corinthians 2:14). So if God were to wait for an unsaved person to turn in faith to Jesus Christ, it would never happen: it must be God who takes the initiative: His grace goes into battle to win us.

The book of Romans is a repository of great truths regarding the condition of man, the grace of God, and the mechanics of salvation. Romans 3:10,11 says, “As it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.’” When we try to understand what the Bible says about someone “seeking God,” or “understanding spiritual truth, we find that “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (I Corinthians 2:14). It is not a matter of intelligence or cognitive acuity – it is a function of the presence of the Spirit of God in someone’s soul to be able to understand spiritual truth. I myself have witnessed this phenomenon on more than one occasion. Having shared the gospel as clearly and pointedly as possible over a lengthy period, an individual simply is not able to comprehend the meaning of the words “grace,” “faith,” “eternal life,” “gift,” “punish-

ment,” and so on. It is as if I were speaking in a foreign language. The individual could give back to me the facts of the Bible as written on the pages, but he could not process the truth of those statements. Total depravity means that apart from a supernatural work of the Spirit of God in my heart, I will never understand spiritual truth, never choose God, because I am incapable of those functions.

My seminary apologetics professor used an illustration that vividly portrays this condition. Many Christians assume that witnessing to an unsaved person is like seeing an apple tree that has diseased, unhealthy fruit on its branches. So, in conversation with this person, he wants to argue with you about creation versus evolution issues. Therefore, you assemble all your best scientific and logical points and “prove” that a creationist view is the right one. Then you proceed to prove the proper outlook on the historicity of the Bible, the existence of God, the nature of God, the evil of abortion, swearing, and so on. The assumption is that once you have corrected all the wrong views the sinner holds to be valid, he will get saved – he will believe. In other words, pick off all the rotten fruit from the tree, and the tree will be good!

The flaw in this reasoning, however, is that it is not merely the “fruit” of the apple tree that is bad; the tree itself is bad. Sin has taken hold in the very nature of the being, and no amount of careful, logical argumentation will solve that problem. It is a spiritual coming to life, a supernatural intervention from God that is required in the sinful soul, that is necessary. Thus, the Spirit of God gives life, and apart from this work of God, there is no life, only blindness, darkness, and death.

Secondly, the view that a sinner can choose God does not grasp that human beings have already made their choice – we already exist in a state of judgment (John 3:18). We are condemned already, and our condition is accurately stated as dead in sin; our trajectory is on a one-way path towards Hell; our relationship to God is one of animosity.

So, can man choose for himself whether to believe the gospel and receive eternal life as the gift of God's grace? The biblical record is this: after the fall of Adam and Eve, sin took hold of the human heart. Genesis 6:5 says, "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Observe that the wickedness was characteristic of "the thoughts of his heart" – the core of the being, not merely external behaviors; and note that the nature of man's thoughts was "only evil continually." A follow-up question to ask from this verse would be, "Does the Bible indicate that human nature has improved since Genesis chapter six?" Perhaps we might see a corollary to this spiritual condition in one of Newton's laws of physics: "An object at rest will stay at rest unless acted upon by a force." The application to human beings would be unless a spiritual entity (i.e., the Holy Spirit) acts upon a fallen, sinful human heart, that heart will remain and continue in its sinful condition.

We might take this question – *Does God ever "override" a person's will?* – to another level by applying it to believers. As our Creator and Master, the Lord God of the Bible certainly has both the authority and the power to do whatever He wants, with any piece or part of His creation that He wants. It would appear that God

“forcing” His will on a human or other sentient being (i.e., angels) is relatively rare. We do, however, find that He “took over” Saul when Saul was hunting David and caused him to prophesy and to lie down naked all night (I Samuel 19:23,24); He told Jeremiah that he had been predestined to be a prophet long before he was born, and even Judas is said to have been pre-ordained to become a traitor. God also took over Balaam as he was attempting to curse Israel, preempting the curses and transforming them into blessings.

As we saw in our investigation of God’s sovereignty and salvation in Psalm 117, the Scripture certainly paints a picture of God overcoming our rebellious, stubborn, and sinful resistance to His grace.

Another piece of this answer, however, is that God seems to delight in His children who willingly accede to His desire. He is especially pleased with the sentiment expressed by David (and Jesus Christ) in Psalm 40:8: “I delight to do Your will, O my God.” Since the proper goal of the believer is not merely the glorification of God, but beyond that, to please God (Ephesians 5:10; II Corinthians 5:9), our joyful, willing obedience is highlighted as the premier way of loving Jesus Christ (John 14:21). The New Testament teaches that, while God’s decrees will never be thwarted, what He wants for us and from us is our cheerful cooperation. Paul notes that he is “working together [with God]” in II Corinthians 6:1. While God has both the power and the authority to overrule a human’s will, apparently generally He allows us to follow our own volition.

5. Is God's election to salvation a "deadening" doctrine or one that should cause doubt and fear?

Some Christians respond to the doctrine of God's choice of individuals to salvation by saying that it removes the motivation for evangelism and missions. After all, the logic says, if God has already determined who will believe, then we don't need to tell people that Christ died for sin – those whom God wants to believe will believe whether we give them the gospel or not.

This reasoning is flawed in two big ways. First, the New Testament clearly and forcefully commands believers to witness about Jesus Christ and life in Him. Matthew 28:18-20 would be a premier passage about making disciples of all nations. This necessarily begins with telling people about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15:1-4). The New Testament is loaded with the principle that we must tell unsaved sinners at every opportunity about the eternity-changing reality that faith alone in Christ alone results in everlasting life by His grace alone. To not evangelize is to disobey God.

The second major flaw is the truth that God uses people to spread the gospel. I have been privileged to observe several dozen people over the years come to saving faith in Christ. Only one of them testified that she did so simply by reading a gospel tract and reading her Bible. This experiential observation would align with the Scriptures' presentation of evangelism. It is through the vector of Christians' lives, testimonies, words, sacrifices, trials, and even martyrdom that unsaved souls come into contact with the gospel. God can inject Himself into a human being's life by any means He wants, but it is

nearly always through people (see the ministries of Stephen, Phillip, Peter, Paul, and Apollos in the book of Acts). God uses people to tell other people about their need for faith in Christ.

Among those who have trusted in Christ as Savior, the Bible's teaching on election can sometimes cause fear and doubt. This is very sad, because the intent of Scripture is the polar opposite. My first reaction to learning the implications of the biblical truth of God's predestination was exactly that - great fear and doubt. What if I'm not one of the elect? I asked myself. I trusted Christ when I was 5 years old; I have been mostly faithful to Christ (with many flaws and imperfections) for most of my life. I believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and desire to please Him by life or by death. These things have, by God's infinite grace, characterized my life as the result of the Spirit's power, the Savior's blood, and the Father's love. And yet, I was taken aback at the thought that the Bible seemed to be teaching that God had chosen me. What if He hadn't?

Contrary to the idea that the election of God is a fearful and terrorizing doctrine, it is, in reality, a beautiful truth of great assurance. Here's an illustration that I have used for many years. (I think that it is original to me, although I have used it for so long it is possible that it might have come from a book I read or a sermon I heard.)

Imagine a high school freshman gym class. The coach says to the boys, "We're doing flag football today, guys. Dino, Mike – you're the captains. Pick your teams – Dino – you're blue team: pick your guys."

In high school, I weighed about 140 pounds soaking wet. Some sports (baseball, volleyball) I did pretty well at; at others – well, let’s just say neither Dino nor Mike picked me first. I wasn’t heavy enough or strong enough to be a lineman; I wasn’t fast enough to be an end or halfback; I certainly didn’t qualify as quarterback. So I was among those in the class that the captain picked last.

Although I don’t think it ever happened to me, you can perhaps picture a scenario in which one of the more athletic, taller, stronger, faster guys says to me, “Laurence, you can’t run, you can’t catch, you can’t throw, and you sure can’t block. What are you doing on this team?

I have only one answer. “Dino’s the captain, and he picked me.” It’s the only answer that’s legitimate. Dino – the captain, the ultimate football player, the one who picks who’s on his team – he chose me. I don’t have any qualifications. I don’t bring any special skills or assets to the team. The reason – the only reason – I’m on the team is because Dino picked me.

You see, election is a beautifully comforting doctrine because it elevates God in our thinking and in our hearts to where He needs to be: at the top – the great Decider, Chooser, Creator, Redeemer, Rescuer, Life-Giver, and King. He, the One Who Chooses, chose me. And it’s surely not because He needed me or thought I could contribute something to His program. On the contrary, I was a rebel against His will; I was an enemy of His rule. His choice of me was solely and completely an act of His grace. But His choosing me is my assurance. I know I don’t have anything to offer Him, but He chose me anyway, simply because He loves me.

How can a believer know if God chose him or her? If you have believed that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for your sins and rose again from the dead, then God picked you.



One of the best summary statements about God's role in the rescue of humans from hell is also the simplest. David, in Psalm 3:8, says, "Salvation belongs to the Lord." From start to finish, from initiation to complete execution, God ordains and carries out the exquisite and mighty program of salvation that He alone designed because of His love. Jonah is apparently quoting or alluding to David's statement when he prays his prayer of penitence from the belly of the great sea monster: the conclusion of his prayer of repentance is, "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9).

Chapter 4

The Kingdom of God

It is not an overstatement to say that the kingdom of God is one of the top three or four most significant themes in the whole Bible. The glory and holy character of God, the excellencies of Jesus Christ, and the plan of redemption are certainly big-picture truths that run through the Scriptures; yet even these are tied in with the coming kingdom in which the God-Man King will reign. A full-orbed understanding of God's purposes as revealed in the Bible must include the kingdom.

It is also not an overstatement to say that the nature and timing of Christ's kingdom is one of the more hotly debated issues in evangelical Christianity. Is the kingdom spiritual, and in effect right now? Is the church the same thing as the kingdom? Is the kingdom entirely and only the thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem? These are important questions. This chapter will not cover every detail of kingdom-related study, but hopefully will answer some basic questions.

It is not our intent here to discuss and defend a dispensational hermeneutic; we will leave that for the better-equipped and more eloquent to handle. Nonetheless, the approach we are espousing here is firmly within the dispensational matrix, including the pre-tribulational rapture of the Church and the physical, pre-millennial second coming of Christ to the earth.



It is important to grasp a critical fact as we begin to discuss kingdom issues. God is, and always has been, the ultimate Ruler and King over the universe. We have dealt with this truth at some length in the preceding material. There is no other; there is no force, entity, “law” of nature or physics, being, quantum probability or any other thing that has had control over all things from eternity past. God alone reigns; He always has, and always will.

However, in the world as we know it – beginning with the creation of planet Earth in Genesis chapters one and two – God set in motion a great plan that incorporated the concept that man would exercise rule over the earth, under the overarching kingship of God. You can see this in Genesis 1:26-28: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

You can clearly see the idea of dominion, of rulership that God entrusts to mankind here. But we all know the reality that apparently only a very short time later, Adam and Eve rebelled against God’s command regarding the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and plunged the human race, and the world, into a sin-twisted domain. God is still Ruler over the universe,

but His plan for man to rule the world has been delayed by the onset of sin.

In many ways, the whole Old Testament is the story of the search for the perfect king – the one who is qualified by his complete obedience to God’s will and commands, by his perfections of character and work – and the continual falling short of this ideal. For example, you might note that in the Pentateuch and in the books of Judges and I Samuel there appears to be a sampling, a “trial” of men from every tribe of Israel, from Levi to Benjamin, to see if any tribe can produce the ultimate godly leader. They all fail; some miserably, some less so, but because of sin, every potential human leader is found wanting.

Even David himself, the man after God’s own heart and the antidote for the madness of King Saul, came up short with both grievous sin and wrong thinking and behavior (e.g., pride, adultery, murder, instances of injustice, polygamy).

By the end of the Old Testament, we are feeling wretched and lost, because, as God says in Isaiah 59:16, “And He saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no one to intercede.” The program of God for man to rule over the earth would appear to be hopelessly and permanently broken, smashed beyond repair. However, woven into the fabric of the Old Testament are clues, hints and foreshadowings that become increasingly more focused as time moves on: God’s over-arching sovereignty has taken into account the sin and brokenness of humanity, and has indeed planned an astounding rescue.

The sin of humans must be reckoned with before man can rule. And there is only one way that problem can be overcome: the sacrificial payment of sin's wages by the perfect sacrifice. Thus we have the greatest rescue operation ever planned and executed: "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption the forgiveness of sin" (Colossians 1:13,14).

The sin issue must be addressed before God's great program of man's rule on the earth can resume, and Jesus Christ is the answer, the long-planned sacrificial Lamb to deal with the sin problem. Incidentally, God's plan involved the Son earning the right to rule as King. We often think that because He is the Son of God, He would automatically and inevitably be the King. That is true, but it is only half the story. The other half is that, as a human being, Jesus Christ so relied on the will of the Father and the power of the Spirit that He met the qualifications for King of the world. Listen to what Hebrews 1:9 says about Christ: "You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness above Your companions."

This theme is explained further in Hebrews 2:7-10: "You have made him for a little while lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, and have appointed him over the works of Your hands; You have put all things in subjection under his feet.' For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and

honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.”

Observe that it is “because of the suffering of death that Christ is crowned.” Additionally, Hebrews 5:8 states, “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.” Christ’s path to the throne lay through suffering, atonement, obedience, and death. And since He did fully execute the Father’s plan, He is qualified to be the King – the ultimate King who has earned His crown and His throne.

God’s plan from before time began has always been that man would rule – and under the scepter of righteousness wielded by Jesus Christ, the God-Man King, man will rule: “...and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4). “And they [His bond-servants] will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:5). “ “If we endure, we will also reign with Him” (II Timothy 2:12a).

In the current disposition of the world, until the final battle of Armageddon, Satan wields great influence. He is never called “king” – he never has been and never will be a king. But he is called “the prince of the power of the air” in Ephesians 2:2. Satan has great power under the rule of God to influence, damage and distort the rule of things here on earth for now; evidently more so as time goes on – and particularly in the coming Tribulation period when the Church is removed from the earth, his power will expand exponentially.

But ultimately the King will come! For uplifting and shocking material about His arrival, read Matthew 24 and 25, Zechariah chapter 14 and Revelation 19 and 20.

So, keep in mind as we proceed in this discussion that God is over all, He is and always has been the King; right now His plan allows the evil of satanic influence and the wickedness of the human race.



When John the Baptist, and later Jesus Christ, began preaching the kingdom of God, the Jewish people who heard that message did not express puzzlement or confusion about that message. The presentation of the coming kingdom seems to have been expected by the Jews. In fact, the Old Testament led the Hebrew people to anticipate a coming kingdom whose king would be the Messiah (in the line of David). This King's reign would be a physical one, His character would be one of truth and righteousness, and He would ensure political stability, enforcement of justice, and peace. The Jews fully anticipated this kind of kingdom. In the context of the Roman occupation and domination of the Mediterranean world, the advent of the kingdom applied to the first-century world would necessitate the removal of the Roman military and political apparatus from Israel, as well as the re-installation of the Davidic line to the throne. These are logical thoughts concerning the kingdom, building on and applying Old Testament statements.

What most Jews in Jesus' day did not appreciate was the reality that the kingdom did have a spiritual dimension as well as a physical and political dimension. This issue of a spiritual component of the kingdom is potentially challenging to dispensationalists, since we see a clear distinction between Israel and the Church, and between the current Church Age and the coming Millennium. Dispensationalism is distrustful of labeling the Kingdom "spiritual," because it sounds like we are saying it is only spiritual, or that we're in the Kingdom now. We must go where the Scriptures take us; however, affirming a spiritual component to the kingdom does not have to contradict a dispensational view of the millennium, as we'll see. The Jews of Jesus' day, as a nation, did not understand that the Messiah's purpose was two-fold: He would first die as the perfect atonement for sin (and rise victorious over sin and death), and then, subsequently, He would become King physically, politically and militarily. The Jews were mostly focused on the political and military (vis-à-vis Rome) aspects, without grasping the greater need for dealing with the sin problem first.

1. What was the Old Testament view of God as King, and of His kingdom?

- Exodus 19:5,6 "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the people, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."
- Numbers 24:7 Balaam's vision of Israel: "Water will flow from his buckets, and his seed will be by

many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.”

- Deuteronomy 33:5 “And He was king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people were gathered, the tribes of Israel together.” (A possible antecedent for “He” is in verse 2: “The LORD came from Sinai...”)
- I Samuel 12:12 “When you saw that Nahash the king of the sons of Ammon came against you, you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ although the LORD your God was your king.”

God’s kingdom (of all things – the universe) is an eternal one and one that cannot be shaken or threatened. And God was king over Israel, in a unique way that was not true of other, Gentile nations, previous to the nation’s existence (I Samuel 8:5-7; 12:12). In addition to His special relationship to Israel, His rule extends to the whole earth (Exodus 19:5). God’s kingdom manifests itself on earth both in His sovereign rule over all the nations (Jeremiah 10:7,10) and in His particular covenant relationship with Israel. Thus, God speaks of “My King” installed in Zion (Psalm 2:6), even while David calls God “My King” (Psalm 5:2; 68:24). Israel as kingdom is thus the chief representation or manifestation of God’s kingdom on earth. For most of the Old Testament, the “kingdom” is a Jewish one, yet it has a relationship to the nations as well.

In the time of the united monarchy, God revealed that the throne of Israel belonged exclusively to the line of David: a descendant of David would always

legitimately sit on the throne. The seat of government is properly Jerusalem (Psalm 48:2) – the place where Jehovah caused His name to dwell.

Individual Old Testament saints, in addition to David, called God “my King” – such as Asaph (Psalm 74:12) and the sons of Korah (Psalm 44:4; 84:3). Isaiah mentions “the King” in reference to Jehovah in Isaiah 6:5 and “our King” in Isaiah 33:22.

Which member of the Trinity exactly is “the King of Israel” – the Father or the Son? Jeremiah uses wording that is enlightening and intriguing: “As I live,’ declares the King, whose name is the LORD [Jehovah] of hosts...” (Jeremiah 46:18; 51:57). The “Lord of hosts” (more literally, *Yahweh of armies*) is a phrase that shows up numerous times (about 229 occurrences) in the Old Testament. Tracing the identity of the Person of the Trinity of this One is challenging, but three OT passages are helpful.

Here is Psalm 89:5-8. I have modified the NASB95’s rendering to reflect the actual Hebrew [i.e., Jehovah/Yahweh for “Lord”].

The heavens will praise Your wonders, O Yahweh;
Your faithfulness also in the assembly of the holy
ones.

For who in the skies is comparable to Yahweh?
Who among the sons of the mighty is like
Yahweh?

A God greatly feared in the council of the holy
ones,

And awesome above all those who are around
Him?

O Yahweh God of hosts, who is like you, O mighty Yah?

Observe the underscored references to the assembly of the holy ones, the sons of the mighty, and so on. These persons are evidently the angels of God. The apparent location of this scene is “in the skies,” and the reference to the “council of the holy ones” brings to mind the second passage – the vision of Micaiah the prophet who relayed his warning to Ahab, Jehoshaphat and Zedekiah. Here is II Chronicles 16:18-22:

“Micaiah said, ‘Therefore, hear the word of the LORD [Yahweh – and as always, throughout the passage], I saw the LORD sitting on His throne and all the host of heaven standing on His right and on His left. The LORD said, “Who will entice Ahab king of Israel to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” And one said this while another said that. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’ And the LORD said to him, “How?” He said, “I will go and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” Then He said, “You are to entice him and prevail also. Go and do so.” Now therefore, behold the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of these your prophets, for the LORD has proclaimed disaster against you.”

This text certainly raises interesting and profound questions. Jehovah, who is sinless and pure beyond compare, can authorize His angels to tell a king what that king wants to hear without compromising His own holiness. In the context of our discussion, this “council meeting” appears to be that of God’s angels, or at least the topmost echelon of His angelic servants, gathered

around the throne of the Almighty. But is the Jehovah in this passage the Father, the Son or the Spirit?

Here is the third OT text that helps answer this query: it is Zechariah 14:4,5.

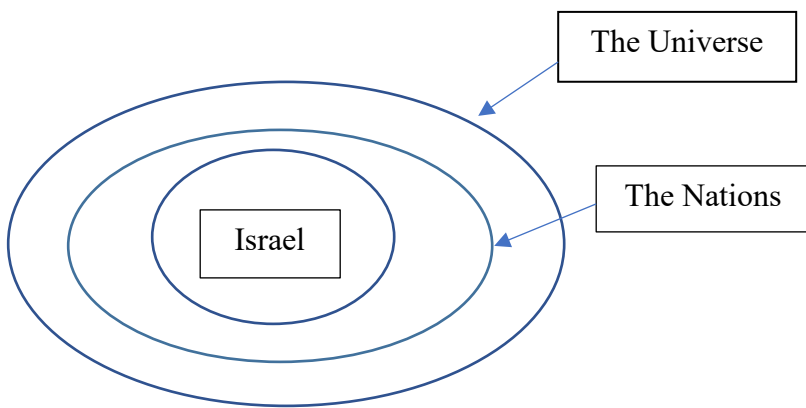
“In that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south. You will flee by the valley of My mountains, for the valley of the mountains will reach to Azel; yes, you will flee just as you fled before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then Jehovah, my God, will come, and all the holy ones with Him!”

This passage is a prophecy of the great and tumultuous battle we know as the Battle of Armageddon, described in Revelation 19 and with supporting material elsewhere. The holy ones accompanying Him, from all the evidence, are angels. Therefore we can identify “the Lord of hosts” (Hebrew: *Yahweh Tzva’ot*) or “Jehovah of angel armies” with the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son.

Incidentally, Paul and James both use this title, Lord of hosts, in their writings (Romans 9:29 and James 5:4) to impart particular gravity – referencing Jesus Christ’s role as the Commander of the armies of the angels of heaven (Joshua 5:13-15) – to their discussion of God’s sovereign authority, judgment, and the reverence due Him.

Furthermore, this connection verifies that the Son of God is the King. Zechariah 14:9 says, “And the LORD

will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one.” So, the King of Israel, and the King in general terms in the whole Old Testament, is none other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God.



In the diagram above, God is seen as King over “heaven and earth” – in other words, the created universe. God’s absolute rule over all things is supported throughout Scripture. For example, Psalm 113 speaks of Jehovah “high above all nations; His glory is above the heaven. Who is like the LORD our God, who is enthroned on high.” Psalm 10:16 says, “The LORD is King forever and ever.” A subset of this domain would be “the nations” – all human civilization and collective organization. A subset of the nations would be “Israel.”

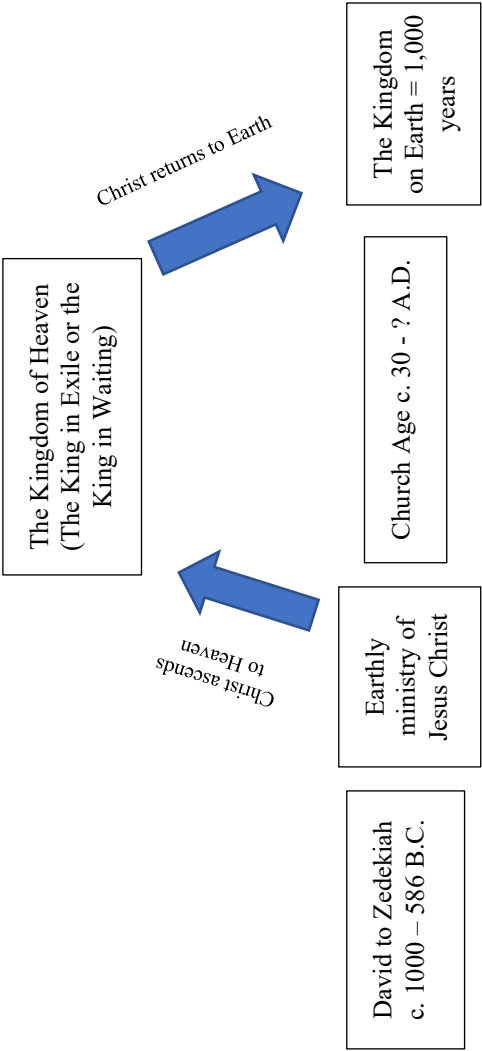
In several ways this visualization does not do justice to the Old Testament teaching on the Kingdom, since God’s relationship to Israel is so unique, so preeminent,

and so emphasized throughout the Old Testament, that it cannot accurately be included on the same scale as God's reign over the nations. While God did choose Cyrus to be the king who would decree Israel's return to Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1), we do not find evidence of God especially announcing a royal dynasty for any other nation as He did for David and the throne of Israel. Certainly, the Messiah was to come through the Davidic line and no other.

No other nation in biblical history was called "My people" by God, and no other people group was given the revelation of the divine name, divine character, and divine law. Israel is unique among all nations for all time.

Another way of thinking about the Kingdom that would take into account both the Old Testament realities of Israel as God's particular domain, as well as her being set aside because of disobedience to the covenant, would be the following diagram:

The Kingdom of God



God's kingdom (of Israel, the covenant people) began with the anointing of David and continued to the point of the dissolution of Israel in 586 B.C. (the Babylonian conquest and destruction of Jerusalem). There was a hiatus (or perhaps a kingdom without a king) until the arrival of Jesus Christ. The kingdom at that point was said to be "at hand" or "near" in the form of the physical presence of the King, Jesus Christ. *It is important to note, however, that the physical kingdom of Jesus Christ was never inaugurated.* Although announced by John the Baptizer and Christ Himself, it never actually started either when Jesus was physically present on earth or subsequently in the church age. It had been presented to the Jews in the form of the physical presence of the Messiah, but when Jesus returned to Heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father, the Kingdom became a kingdom "in exile." That is, the proper head of government, the King (Jesus), is not physically on earth. During this period of time, the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of this age, has been granted some license to influence, damage, and attempt to cause ruin to the program of God here on earth. Of course, the ultimate truth is that Satan can only do what God allows him to do; and while it might seem that the powers of darkness are invincible, that is a mistaken view. Even those actions in which Satan seems to overcome good with evil will ultimately be seen to be a part of God's much bigger and absolutely good rule.

An analogy might help us grasp this concept. During World War II, as the German Wehrmacht rolled across Europe and the Luftwaffe controlled Europe's airspace, many nations were steamrolled into what Adolf Hitler decreed was the "Third Reich." In most of the occupied

countries, the Nazi Party set up puppet governments that were largely extensions of the German government and policy apparatus in Berlin. Austria, Czechoslovakia, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Denmark, Luxembourg, Albania, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia were all invaded or annexed by Germany, and to various degrees were controlled by German civilian or military authorities. In several of these nations, the heads of state (monarchs, presidents, or prime ministers) fled their homelands and set up governments-in-exile. Several went to London; at least one went to Canada. The puppet governments installed by the Germans were not seen as legitimate by the majority of the occupied nationals; rather, their loyalty remained with the king, queen, or other head of state, even though that legitimate head of state now resided and worked in a foreign country.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the one and only King who rightfully can sit on the throne of Israel (and of the world). Yet He is currently not physically here on earth; He is in heaven at the right hand of the Father. He is legitimately the King; however, He has yet to return to His kingdom and initiate His reign physically.

Another way of looking at it would be to think about a king-in-waiting. A king in waiting is one who has fulfilled all the requirements to sit on the throne and rule, but who is waiting for the exact proper moment for his reign to begin. That moment is often following the death of the previous king. In the case of Jesus Christ, it is the sounding of the seventh trumpet (Revelation 11:15ff) and the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 19:11-19).

So, is Jesus Christ King right now? After all, we're told that He has authority – He is seated at the right hand of the Father. Paul says in Ephesians 1:19-23, “These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

This passage clearly says that Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand, the position of authority and execution of the patriarch's will. It also says that Jesus Christ is far above all rule, authority, power, dominion, and name. This is true – and here's a point to note – “*not only in this age but also the one to come.*” So the Bible does say that Jesus Christ occupies a position of authority and dominion – right now. However, what it does not say is that He currently has the title of “King.” Rather, this passage, along with Colossians chapters one and two calls Jesus “the Head” – and specifically, the Head of the Church. There is no New Testament passage wherein Christ assumes the title of “King” in the church age. The appropriate title for Jesus Christ right now is not “King,” but “Head.”

Furthermore, the Ephesians passage and others (Acts 7:56, Hebrews 1:3; e.g.) do say that Jesus is “at the right hand” of the Father – and not on the throne itself. Christ has not yet taken up the title and role of King: that event – the coronation of the God-Man as King – is still future to us.

2. What is the Nature of the Kingdom Now?

The Kingdom of God is directly connected to the person of the King. This is why both John the Baptizer and Jesus (as well as Paul) preached “the gospel of the kingdom.” It is why an important point of that message was, “the kingdom of God is at hand.” The kingdom was near while Jesus was on earth; the seat of government, as it were, is wherever the King is located. This seat of government has since relocated to heaven. It is possible that Matthew’s use of the term “kingdom of heaven” as opposed to the more widespread term “kingdom of God” highlights this truth. The earthly kingdom will be inaugurated, or “re-engaged,” or perhaps “brought to its final form” when Christ returns to the world at the battle of Armageddon.

But then is there no aspect of the kingdom that is relevant in the church age? There is evidence that the kingdom, while by no means the same thing as the church, is in existence now, and that it exists as a spiritual entity in the current dispensation. It also exists as a kingdom in which the King has not yet taken the throne or been crowned.

In Colossians 1:13 we find “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” This passage is about the believer’s salvation and resultant current position; the wording is literally, “and transferred us *into* the kingdom of His beloved Son.” That is, we were placed inside of an entity or sphere or realm which is labeled as “the kingdom of His beloved Son.” This passage indicates that the kingdom currently exists – in some form.

Romans 14:17, in which Paul is addressing matters of Christian liberty, conscience, and sensitivity to others' consciences, says this: "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." To paraphrase, the kingdom of God is about more than food, drink, or other physical things: it involves spiritual issues, virtues, and characteristics.

This thought – that there is a spiritual component to the kingdom – meshes well with God's very first biblical discussion of a "kingdom" in Exodus. "Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the people, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5,6). There was to be a spiritual, and not merely a national or physical, component to the Old Testament kingdom of Israel. This verse is alluded to in the context of New Testament believers as well. This passage (I Peter 2:9,10) especially targets non-Jewish believers of the new dispensation ("you were once not a people") and names them a "royal priesthood" – a use of the Exodus 19 passage.

To the above texts, we could add several passages in the Gospels. For example, the well-known command of our Lord in Matthew 6:33: "But seek His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Christ is probably not saying, "Pursue the millennial reign of the King" – that reign will happen, and will happen on God's timetable. Rather, He is enjoining a heart and soul attitude, along with accompanying behaviors, of prioritizing and submitting to Christ's lordship. This will engender Christ-honoring

goals, Christlike behaviors, and a Christlike mentality. The kingdom is spiritual in its essence – right now.

Another helpful exercise in this connection is to look at the time-markers which the gospel writers used in discussing kingdom issues. Comparing these time-markers in various contexts can help us see more clearly what the reality is about the nature of the kingdom now, as well as its future character. So we find “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is *at hand*” (John the Baptist, in Matthew 3:2). Then “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Jesus, in Matthew 5:3). Notice that both of these use the present tense – at that time; the kingdom is, at the moment, near (because the King is near), and the kingdom of heaven is in the possession of the poor in spirit at that time.

But now observe, “Not everyone...*will enter* the kingdom of heaven...” (Jesus, in Mathew 7:21). This is future: the kingdom has an “entrance” and it is future from the point of view of Jesus in this passage. Or this one: “...Many *will come*...and recline with Abraham...in the kingdom of heaven...” (Jesus, in Matthew 8:11). Again, we see a future aspect or manifestation of the kingdom.

Six times in the mystery parables of the kingdom we find Jesus using the present tense: “The kingdom of heaven is like...” (Matthew 13:31,33,44,45,47). Now it could be argued that this is merely a convenient literary way of conveying information about the kingdom without a definitive statement about time. However, Jesus uses nearly identical language in Matthew 25:1, except there He changes the verb tense: “Then the kingdom of heaven *will be* comparable to...” This is

future tense: the kingdom in the future will be what Jesus is about to describe.

The kingdom in its “mystery form” – undisclosed to Old Testament saints, but revealed in the New Testament – is the kingdom administered from heaven, but without the crowned, enthroned King officially installed as Sovereign God-King in Jerusalem. It is right now spiritual, not political, not cultural, not military in nature. It is not a physical kingdom. A physical kingdom, ruled by its King, Jesus Christ, the God-Man, is just as necessary as a physical resurrection. But right now this Kingdom is not here: it has not yet been inaugurated. That will happen in its fullness only when Jesus Christ returns to earth at Armageddon, defeats the forces of Satan, and begins to rule for a thousand years. Perhaps we could distinguish between these two phases by calling the one “the pre-Kingdom period” or better, “the church age,” and designating the other “the Kingdom” (capitalized) or “the Millennial Kingdom.”

It is important to note additionally that the character of the time we are in right now versus the character of the Kingdom does not consist of merely physical differences (e.g., the presence of a physical throne, the physical presence of Jesus Christ, the physical security of the Jewish nation) because in the Kingdom there will be profound and extensive spiritual changes in the rule of the world, and in the thinking, character, and behavior of people in the world. It doesn't do justice to the biblical doctrine of the Kingdom to say that what we're in right now is the spiritual kingdom, and what comes at Christ's return is the physical kingdom. This is true because, as just indicated, the coming Kingdom will be both spiritual and physical, and

because the terminology “spiritual kingdom” is frequently used by those who mean that the church is the same as the Kingdom, and that the kingdom will always be merely and only spiritual. Those ideas about the age we are in now, and the coming Kingdom, are mistaken.

So, for example, Zechariah 14:16 says, “Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem [after the Tribulation/Armageddon] will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths.” Such widespread worship of the Lord Jesus Christ is unthinkable in the current state of godless rebellion that exists in the world.

Another context in the ministry of Jesus Christ dealing with the kingdom is Pilate’s conversation with the Lord about the phrase, “The King of the Jews.” When asked about this, Jesus responded, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). This explanation is helpful. There are three truths here that require attention. First, Jesus says that His kingdom “is” – it currently exists. He does not say that it will come into being, because at the moment He is speaking with Pilate it already exists, at least in some way. Second, He tells Pilate that His kingdom is “not of this world.” The preposition He uses is the word “ek” – out of the source or location of something. His kingdom is not sourced out of the world. It does not draw its essence or operating principles or power or authority out of the source of the world system. Third, Jesus uses a time-marker to identify the current situation in distinction from what will be in the future or

what has been in the past. He says, “as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” The word translated by the NASB as “as it is” is literally “now.” Jesus seems to be indicating that right now the kingdom cannot be characterized as having anything to do with the world or belonging to this realm (Greek: *enteuthen*). However, the use of the word “now” points out the reality that at a later date the situation could change.

When might that be? Revelation 11:15, containing the words of the “loud voices in heaven,” is helpful in this regard. The voices say, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign for ever and ever.” This announcement, coming in the period of time we call the Tribulation Period, after the rapture of the Church, heralds a great change in the administration of the world. “Has become” marks a transformation; it demarcates the absorption of the world’s system and governmental structure into the rule of Jesus Christ. This world-changing transformation is future to us; it has not yet happened.

Incidentally, you might have noted that Jesus’ words to Pilate in John 18 explained that if His kingdom existed in an earthly, worldly matrix, then His servants would have been fighting. His explanation showed that since His servants were not fighting, the kingdom He spoke of was not out of the source of this world. However, we know that there will be war just before the inauguration of the millennial Kingdom – in that cataclysmic battle or campaign we identify as the Battle of Armageddon (Zechariah 14:3-15; Revelation 19:11-21).

3. So is the Kingdom the Same Thing as the Church?

That there is a relationship between the church and the kingdom is clear from the book of Acts and the epistles. Paul preached “the kingdom” (Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31) while establishing local churches in his missionary travels. He discussed kingdom issues in letters to local churches (I Corinthians 4:20; 6:9,10; 15:24,50; I Thessalonians 2:12; and other locations), and he mentions his “fellow workers for the kingdom” Mark and Justus (literally, “fellow-workers into the kingdom”) in his letter to the Colossian church (4:11).

The preceding remarks demonstrate that there is such a thing as a kingdom right now: however, it also shows that the kingdom is a spiritual entity, with its headquarters in heaven, and that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church but not yet the King of the world. There are two key passages that address inheriting the Kingdom (I Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 5:21) in the future tense. There are also passages that address it in the present tense (Ephesians 5:5 and Hebrews 12:28).

Perhaps one of the best places to go to seek clarity on the relationship of the church to the Kingdom is Revelation 5. In the praise-song of the twenty-four elders, they say: “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (Revelation 5:9,10). (The word “reign” is simply the verb form of “kingdom.”)

This song contains precious and thrilling truths. Notice that the setting for this is after the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation chapters 2 and 3) and before the breaking of the seven seals (Revelation chapter 6). The great multitude is resurrected church-age believers: the Church. The song states the fact that Jesus Christ has made them a kingdom and priests. The tense of the verb “made” is aorist – pointing out that the action of “making” is seen as a unit, and is in the (past) background. The tense of the verb “they will reign” is future – still future at the beginning of the tribulation period.

So what does this mean? It means that believers in the church age are indeed a part of the kingdom right now – but it exists only in a spiritual form, not a physical one. The ruler of the kingdom in its present form is God the Father, not Christ the Son; the Church (over which Christ is Head) is a part of the kingdom, but the kingdom right now also contains unbelievers and the rival wicked organization of the Devil (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). The actual initiation of the physical Kingdom is still future: all creation awaits with bated breath the physical Kingdom over which Jesus Christ will rule (Romans 8:19-22), and the saints of the church age will assist in His reign. That Kingdom, prophesied from at least 3,000 years ago, will not occur until after the tribulation period.

4. The Coronation Day of the Great King

In the message known as the Olivet Discourse in Matthew chapters 24 and 25, there is a great deal of material pertaining to the tribulation period, the Jewish

nation, and the second coming of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 25:31 and 32, our Lord said, "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." There is a day coming for the coronation of the great King. The world will see the multitudinous ranks of His angels, and He will take His seat, officially, as King of the world.

This is probably what Jesus meant when He taught His disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The administration of God, in the form of Jesus Christ, will descend to earth and take over the rule of all nations and everything associated with the world.

What else do we know about Christ's coronation day? Daniel 12:11,12 is a very intriguing pair of verses. Like other passages in Daniel, this one contains time markers for future events. Here's the passage: "From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. How blessed is he who keeps waiting and attains to the 1,335 days!"

The reference to the "1,290 days" is probably referring to the length of time from the antichrist declaring his supposed deity and demanding worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, until the Battle of Armageddon. These 1,290 days equal three and a half (Jewish) years; thus the second half of the seven-year tribulation period. But what then is the 1,335 days, and

why would the person be blessed who waits and attains it?

I'm going to speculate for a moment, but I think there are good grounds for this. If we can draw a line from Daniel 12:12 to Psalm 47, it is possible that we can see a snapshot of Christ's coronation day. If my hypothesis is right, then there will be forty-five days from Christ's arrival on the Mount of Olives, riding a white war stallion to execute and win the battle of Armageddon, to the actual beginning of the Millennial Kingdom.

Psalm 47

O clap your hands, all peoples;
Shout to God with the voice of joy.
For Jehovah Most High is to be feared,
A great King over all the earth.
He subdues peoples under us
And nations under our feet.
He chooses our inheritance for us,
The glory of Jacob whom He loves. Selah
God has ascended with a shout,
Jehovah, with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth;
Sing praises with a skillful psalm.
God reigns over the nations,
God sits on His holy throne.
The princes of the people have assembled
themselves as the people of the God of
Abraham,
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
He is highly exalted.

I believe that this is the coronation song of Jesus Christ: it is the song that not only will be sung at His coronation as King, but it is also a description of the events of that ceremony.

Picture this in your mind: there is an assembly of the representatives of all the nations of the earth gathered in Jerusalem in the square in front of the steps leading up to the entrance portico of the rebuilt temple – the very temple in which a little more than three and a half years previously the antichrist had declared himself to be God. Arranged on the staircase and all around the vast square are the Jews who have come through the Tribulation period: they are believers in their Messiah, and it is by His grace that they have survived the horrors of the last seven years.

Also there in the square are representatives of all the Gentile nations of the earth: they, too, are believers in the Son of God. Not very long before, perhaps about two months, the nations they represent had been involved in an all-out attempt to utterly exterminate the Jewish people. At the last hour, even as Jerusalem's inhabitants teetered on the brink of annihilation, the Lord Jesus Christ, riding a white war stallion, appeared out of heaven. Following Him were the redeemed saints of the church age, as well as the hosts of heaven: the angelic armies. Rank upon rank of angels with flaming swords and glowing robes descended upon the earth following their divine Commander. Jesus Christ landed on the Mount of Olives, which split open, and there followed a dramatic, cataclysmic battle, with the forces of the antichrist being not only defeated, but utterly destroyed, dying where they stood.

Now, 45 days after the events of that day of doom and glory, the square in front of the cleansed temple is packed with people.

Suddenly, all around the square, singing and clapping break out with thunderous effect. The walls and parapets echo and resound the tumultuous noise. At the eastern side of the square, the crowd opens up to make room for the glowing form of the Son as He walks into the huge space. All around Him, the people bow in wonder, worship, and obeisance. His face is gloriously bright, His look one of pure, holy, dominion, but not without love as He scans the bowed heads all around Him. As He walks through the enormous throng, those behind Him stand to their feet once again.

As He reaches the bottom of the long staircase, a blast of trumpets – silver cornets and ram’s horn shofars – bursts from the white-robed trumpeters standing on each of the steps leading up the entrance to the temple. The sound reverberates off the stone battlements and walls, as all eyes are drawn upward. There, at the top of the steps, is a throne of gold with golden lions upholding the arms. As the Son of God reaches the top step, an involuntary shout “Hallelujah!” erupts with enormous power and volume from the assembly.

The white-robed trumpeters lower their instruments and begin to sing the most glorious, loudest “Alleluiah” song in history, with the assembled thousands joining in – a paeon of praise to the God-Man, the victorious Lamb-Lion King. It is so sweet, so loud and so full of worship, the very stones of the walls seem to be singing.

As Jesus Christ turns around to face His adoring people, a crown appears on His head. He seats Himself upon His glorious throne, and as He does so, the entire, vast assembly bows again to the ground before Him. All around the plaza, all the Gentile lords and princes, nobles, kings, commanders, and generals lay their shields – the ensigns and markers of their various nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues on the ground in worship and obeisance to Jehovah.

The Millennial Kingdom has just begun!



5. The Interregnum

If our approach to this matter of the nature of the kingdom now and its coming transition to the physical, earthly kingdom of the Millennium under the righteous rule of King Jesus is accurate, then it has an interesting analog in a period of time in Israel's ancient history. David was a shepherd boy when Samuel anointed him in I Samuel 16. He became Saul's armor-bearer, harp-player, and champion Philistine-slayer. However, Saul's sin-warped mind eventually broke because of his failure to repent, and he mistakenly viewed David as his ultimate nemesis. Because of his failure to turn back to the Lord, Saul was reduced to chasing David up and down the length and breadth of Israel, looking for a chance to kill him.

The kingdom of Israel during this time – likely about ten years in duration – was probably quite dysfunctional. And what was happening to God's

promise that David would rule His people? During this time while David was essentially an exile in his own country, what was going on, and what connection might there be to our situation and the course of God's plan in the church age?

In I Samuel 26:6, we learn the names of some of David's band of warriors during his "refugee" years. I Chronicles 12 also contains an extensive listing of men who gathered around David during his time of waiting for God to fulfill His anointing. There are more than forty men listed by name in that catalog; for many of the entries, there is a note that they represented many more soldiers under their leadership. Additional remarks highlight special characteristics, skills, and details about their oaths of loyalty to David. Many of these would eventually become members of David's court – advisers, generals, heads of government departments, and leaders of David's administration.

The years of trials, hardship, patience, and trusting God were a test platform – a period of seeing who would be most faithful, most loyal to the king even before he officially was crowned king. Those men who displayed persistence, faithfulness, and obedience were later rewarded with positions of leadership and significant opportunity as servants of King David. Do you see the connection? Our lives here – right now – function in part as a testing ground in which the King is looking for those who are faithful, patient, loyal, and obedient. When He is crowned, we get to serve Him in a greater way!

This is exactly what Paul says in II Timothy 2:11-13: "It is a trustworthy statement: for if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also

reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” This poem consists of four pairs or couplets, each of which contains a conditional threshold and a consequence or result. The first “if” statement – if we died with Him – is stated by Scripture to be met by all those who have trusted in Christ as Savior (Romans 6 and 7; Colossians 2:20, 3:3). So the result is that we are promised that we will live with Him: we have eternal life. The second condition is “if we endure.” The protasis (condition) here is one in which in we are currently engaged: it’s our life right now. If we endure – continue, persist, faithfully discharge our duties of love and loyalty to our Master, then the result will be “we will reign with Him.” In the Millennial Kingdom, there will be many servants of the King who simply were faithful to Him during their earthly lives.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Gospel of the Kingdom

Not every reference to “the gospel” in the New Testament has to do with salvation resulting in eternal life through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. There are several references to a truth known as “the gospel of the kingdom.” The two gospels are related, and even intertwined, but not synonymous.

1. The Two “Gospels”

The Gospel of the Kingdom was the first “Gospel” preached in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:1,2; Mark 1:14,15). That the Gospel of

the Kingdom was the first good news brought to the Jewish nation is entirely appropriate and expected, since the revived rule will indeed be the throne of David: the theocracy of Jesus Christ ruling from Jerusalem. What exactly is the “Gospel of the Kingdom?” Matthew 24:13 and 14 are helpful in answering this question. Note the word “this” in verse 14: “This gospel of the kingdom” (Greek: *touto*). But what is “this” referring to? In the preceding context, Jesus has been explaining about the final phase of the Tribulation Period, the great terror and horror of the last days before He will return in glory to the earth. And then He says, “But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.” In fact, in this same discourse – the so-called “Olivet Discourse” – the Lord Jesus uses four parables to convey the urgency and the significance of being prepared for the Second Coming. The parable of the fig tree, the parable of the faithful and sensible slave, the parable of the ten virgins, and the parable of the talents all point to serving the Lord with what He has entrusted to us in general terms, and to the priority of serving Him in the tribulation period particularly.

In this context, the Gospel of the Kingdom is summarized as, “The true King (Jesus Christ) will rule and reign in righteousness here on earth for a thousand years, bringing justice, peace, and joy to the world, and especially to the nation of Israel; those who are diligent, faithful and enduring in serving Him will have special roles to play in His kingdom.”

But we find a different definition of the Gospel of Grace or the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can look at a number of passages for this synthesis, but let’s choose I Corinthians 15:1-8. It is summarized as, “Jesus Christ

died for our sins, just as God promised in the Old Testament, was buried and rose again, as God promised: those who believe in Him have eternal life.” (See also Galatians 2:14-16.)

The Gospel of the Kingdom is concerned with righteousness, proper behavior, proper relationships, justice, and the sovereignty of the Messiah. But the Gospel of Christ is concerned with grace, payment for sin, eternal life, and a right relationship with God.

2. Responding to the Gospels

The proper response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is simply to believe. This is the “faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone” message of salvation. This is clear, for example, in Ephesians 1:13: “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise.”

However, the proper response to the Gospel of the Kingdom is to repent and bring forth fruit fitting for repentance (Matthew 3:1,2,8). Repentance is different from believing. It is a spiritual and mental change of direction in thinking and life. It acknowledges error and recalibrates to God’s viewpoint about sin, about who is the Master, and about what is appropriate in attitudes, priorities, behaviors and motivations. Repentance is one of the proper results of being born again, not a requirement for the new birth.

3. “Intertwining” or “Joint Presentation” of the Gospel of Christ and the Gospel of the Kingdom

Sometimes the two gospels are presented together or intertwined: we find this in Mark 1:14,15; Acts 8:12,13; and Acts 28:31.

“Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” (Mark 1:14,15)

“But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.” (Acts 8:12)

“[Paul] preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.” (Act 28:31)

These passages demonstrate that the two gospels are related and are not at odds with one another. So what is the connection between these two pieces of good news?

The point of contact shared by the two gospels is the person, work, and office of Jesus Christ, the King.

- **The Person:** Jesus Christ, Son of David, Messiah, King of the Jews, Savior, Son of God
- **The Work:** Atonement, Example, Teaching, Cornerstone, Head of the Church, Ruling as King
- **The Office:** Lamb of God, Prophet, Priest, Teacher, Servant, Shepherd, Bishop, King

- The Jews as a nation generally failed to recognize the atonement, example, and church-cornerstone work of Christ: they were so focused on His role as King that they (mostly) failed to see His role as Lamb of God.

The Gospel of Christ	The Gospel of the Kingdom
Focus: The atoning work of the Son of God, and the resulting eternal life for those who believe in Him as Savior.	Focus: Christ is coming back to rule as King of Israel and of the world. Those who are faithful to Him will serve Him in roles of significant authority in the Millennial Kingdom, and perhaps on into eternity.

4. Is the Gospel of the Kingdom Relevant to the Church Age?

The Bible does not teach “Replacement Theology:” we are not in the Millennial Kingdom right now and the Church is not Israel! Neither the local church nor the universal church has any scriptural mandate to become involved in politics or to engage in cultural or political argumentation. (This would not preclude local churches and their pastors from taking a stand on relevant issues of the day, nor would it prevent individual Christians from being politically active; even seeking political office, if they are so led by the Lord.)

We are not told anywhere in the New Testament that we are “advancing the kingdom” or “bringing in the

kingdom.” (Church age saints, however, can be said to be “workers for the kingdom of God” [Colossians 4:11]). We are not currently advancing the Kingdom. There is no biblical evidence to support the idea that human beings will, or are capable of, causing the Kingdom to expand its rule or influence. We are not in the Kingdom, and if we were, it would be the King’s power, majesty, and sovereignty which would be advancing His rule, not ours. (Intriguingly, Isaiah 9:7 does say that “there will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace.”)

The current time period is the dispensation of the Church, not of the Kingdom. But in the following passages, all in the Book of Acts, we see Paul addressing kingdom truth in various church age settings:

- Acts 8:12,13 “But when they believed Phillip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike...”
- Acts 19:8,9 “And he [Paul] entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.”
- Acts 20:25 “And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.”
- Acts 28:30,31 “And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who

came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.”

5. Practical Applications from Differentiating Between the Gospel of the Kingdom and the Gospel of Christ

- The New Testament acknowledges the related but distinct content of these two messages of good news.
- It is legitimate to talk about the future in evangelistic settings.
- There must be clarity concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ: the only gospel that can impart eternal life through faith in its content.
- The Church should not shy away from declaring the whole purpose of God, which includes the preaching of the kingdom of God.

The Nature of the Millennial Kingdom

There is a great deal of material in the Bible about the prophesied one-thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Psalms, the Minor Prophets, along with portions of the Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation all contain information both in broad outline and in some detail concerning the Millennium.

The Kingdom of Jesus Christ, the Millennium, will last for one thousand years (Revelation 20:2,4,6,7). We understand this number to be literal, not symbolic or

figurative. The Millennial Kingdom is presented in Scripture as the pinnacle of human existence on earth: a near-approximation of the characteristics of the Garden of Eden. While sin and the effects of the curse will not be completely annulled, they will be ameliorated to a significant degree.

The greatest single feature of the Millennium will be the physical presence and rule of Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of God (Matthew 25:31; Isaiah 9:6,7; Daniel 2:44,45).

Because Jesus Christ will be the King on earth, the Kingdom will be based on God's principles of justice, righteousness, peace, and personal responsibility. Israel will be seen as the "hub of the world," to the extent that Gentiles will wish they had been born as Jews, so as to enjoy the privileges and benefits of being in physical proximity to the King and covenant relation to Him. The nations will bring tribute and service to Israel. There will be no warfare, no weapons of war, and no armies; all the productive and creative potential of humanity will be unleashed and directed towards producing food and the betterment of society. We can speculate that the Millennium will be an unparalleled time of invention, artistic achievement, and God-honoring aesthetics in the arts, industry, and architecture. The work of human beings will be satisfying, good, productive, and meaningful.

Criminal activity will be held in check. People born during the Millennium will still have a sin nature and adamic guilt: they will need to trust in the work of Jesus Christ – His death, burial, and resurrection for atonement for their sins – to receive eternal salvation.

The means of salvation has been constant throughout all the ages of humanity.

Mankind will flourish in every way. Health, well-being and lifespans will increase dramatically, and we can only begin to guess at the splendor, creativity, bounty, and peace that will prevail for a thousand years.

It is possible that David will have a role to play in the Millennium: while the context is difficult, David might be the Prince or Governor of Jerusalem, while His great-great (many more times great) grandson, Jesus Christ will be the High King (Ezekiel 34:23,24; 37:24,25).

The rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem will be the center of revived Jewish worship of the King, complete with Levitical priesthood, feast-days, and animal sacrifices. The sacrifices have the appearance of being literal animal offerings; they apparently will have value for the Jewish nation as memorial and pictorial representations of the already completed and efficacious work of the Lamb of God. Just as the church has had nearly two millennia to practice the ordinance commemorating the work of Jesus Christ (the Lord's Supper), the Jews will have a thousand years to commemorate the slain and resurrected Messiah in their own Jewish way.

The Millennial Kingdom as Incentive for Believers

While there are many aspects of the coming reign of Jesus Christ that we do not know about, there is a known, repeated theme that we can identify in the New Testament. It shows up in Christ's teaching, His parables, in the epistles, and in Revelation: those

believers who are faithful and enduring in their loyalty and service to Christ right now will be rewarded with roles of enhanced service in the coming Kingdom.

There are several parables in the body of Christ's teaching that point to His coming earthly reign as a great motivation for holy living and Christ-focused attitudes in God's people right now. The story of the vineyard owner and the workers (Matthew 20:1-16), the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), the parable of the dinner guests who excused themselves (Luke 14:15-24), and the parable of the minas (Luke 19:11-27) are all examples of the Lord Jesus' instruction regarding the Kingdom. Additionally, there are several direct teaching texts in the Gospels. Chief among them would Matthew chapters 5-7 (the "Sermon on the Mount"); Matthew 13; Matthew 18:1-11; and Mark 10:13-31.

There are four verbs used in New Testament texts with reference to the Kingdom. These are: "see the kingdom" (John 3:3), "enter the Kingdom" (John 3:5), "receive the kingdom" (Hebrews 12:28), and "inherit the kingdom" (I Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5). These passages point out that there is a spiritual component to kingdom truth, and that being born again is necessary to even comprehend that there is such a thing as a kingdom of God. Additionally, the terminology used suggests a progressive intensification. To see the kingdom is not the same thing as going into it; entering it is not identical to "inheriting" it. Probably the inheritance of the Kingdom is analogous to Paul's statement in II Timothy 2:12 that "if we endure, we will also reign with Him."

To be given the privilege of participating in Christ's reign is one of the greatest and most meaningful honors that can be imagined. We struggle to comprehend how we might be capable of such service, and what that kind of role might entail. But the same Spirit of God Who empowers and enables the children of God here in this earthly life will continue to enable and equip us in our resurrection bodies to serve God effectively in whatever roles Jesus Christ appoints for us. Imagine! Being a part of serving the God-King and having a job to do in His Kingdom!

Specific characteristics and behaviors that Jesus Christ is looking for in those who will help Him administer His Kingdom include humility (Matthew 19:14; Matthew 5:3); holiness (Ephesians 5:5); obedience (Matthew 5:19); faithfulness (Luke 19:17); and endurance (II Timothy 2:12).

The opportunity to serve the King of kings in a role of significance – as a greater demonstration of our love for Him and acknowledgment of His love for us – should be a premier motivator in our lives as God's children. Just as a child who is told he can help his daddy eagerly looks forward to even a little job, so we can seek to serve our great and loving Heavenly Father with excellence now so that He will trust us with bigger and better roles in the next phase of life.

Chapter 5

Responding to God's Sovereignty

Because an understanding of Jehovah as Creator and Ruler is built into the revelation of His character, believers in God have always realized that there is an appropriate and necessary response to His name and His sovereignty. A very helpful and beautiful lens through which to look at this response is the Book of Psalms. For the first part of our work in this chapter we are going to briefly look at four psalms which contain the phrase “the Lord reigns” (Psalm 93, 96, 97 and 99), as well as the great nature psalm, 104. We'll briefly look at another passage, Isaiah chapter 40, for insight into the sovereignty of God relating to the children of God. Following that exercise, we'll summarize a biblical response to the sovereignty of Jehovah.

Psalm 93

This short song emphasizes God's eternal rule, and calls particular notice to the ocean as an analog or comparison for God's power. Here it is in the NASB95:

The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty;
The LORD has clothed and girded Himself with
strength;
Indeed, the world is firmly established, it will
not be moved.
Your throne is established from of old;
You are from everlasting.
The floods have lifted up, O LORD,

The floods have lifted up their voice,
The floods lift up their pounding waves.
More than the sounds of many waters,
Than the mighty breakers of the sea,
The LORD on high is mighty.
Your testimonies are fully confirmed;
Holiness befits Your house, O LORD,
forevermore.

Here is the same Psalm translated by Joseph Rotherham (I have taken the liberty of modifying his archaic pronouns and verb forms – Rotherham is in the public domain):

Yahweh has become king
With majesty is he clothed –
Clothed is Yahweh
With strength has he girded himself,
Surely he has fixed the world,
It shall not be shaken.

The floods have lifted up, O Yahweh,
The floods have lifted up – their voice,
The floods have lifted up – their dashing waves.
With the sounds of many waters
Majestic are the breakers of the sea,
Majestic on high is Yahweh.

Your testimonies are strongly confirmed
To your house befitting is holiness,
O Yahweh – to length of days.

The general theme of this Psalm is Jehovah's great majesty and might: He is worthy of worship because He reigns. His eternality, creative power and holiness are all highlighted. God is worthy of worship because of who He is: He is the Ruler of all things.

An interesting device in this Psalm is the author's use of the "floods" – probably a poetic rendering of the Mediterranean Sea – as a marker or analog for God's power. Think of a storm surge in a hurricane, or a gale driving the tide against a seawall, causing it to collapse and be obliterated. Imagine the noise the ocean makes when it is surging against the rocky coast of Maine. (Incidentally, there are a few places in the Bible where the voice of God is said to be like "the sound of many waters," such as Ezekiel 43:2; Revelation 1:15; see also Psalm 29.) The implication is that Jehovah, the Maker of the sea, is greater by far in power than the sea which He created. He is "on high" – analogous to Jonah's "Jehovah, God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9).

Very clearly in this psalm, Jehovah is presented as immortal and eternal, as Ruler above His creation, as majestic and powerful.



Psalm 96

This psalm also has the phrase, “The Lord reigns.” Here it is in the NASB95:

Sing to the LORD a new song;
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, bless His name;
Proclaim good tiding of His salvation from day
to day.
Tell of His glory among the nations,
His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.
For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.
For all of the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the LORD made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before Him,
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name;
Bring an offering and come into His courts.
Worship the LORD in holy attire;
Tremble before Him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns;
Indeed the world is firmly established, it will not
be moved;
He will judge the peoples with equity.”

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
Let the sea roar, and all it contains;
Let the field exult, and all that is in it.
Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy
Before the LORD, for He is coming,

For He is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
And the peoples in His faithfulness.

And here is Rotherham's translation:

Sing to Yahweh, a song that is new,
Sing to Yahweh, all the earth;
Sing to Yahweh, bless all you his Name –
Tell the tidings from day to day of his salvation:
Recount Among the nations, his glory
 Among all the peoples, his wonders.

For great is Yahweh and worthy to be praised,
To be revered is he above all gods;
For all the gods of the peoples are things of
 nought,
But Yahweh made the heavens,
Praise and majesty are before him,
Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Give to Yahweh, ye families of the peoples,
Give to Yahweh, glory and strength;
Give to Yahweh, the glory of his Name,
Bring a present and enter his courts;
Bow down to Yahweh in the adornment of
 holiness,
Be in anguish at his presence all the earth!
Say among the nations,
 Yahweh has become King
 Surely he has fixed the world

It shall not be shaken,
He will judge his people with equity.

Let the heavens rejoice, and the earth exult,
Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof;
Let the field leap for joy, and all that is therein,
Then shall all the trees of the forest shout in
triumph.

Before Yahweh, for he is coming,
For he is coming to judge the earth –
He will judge the world in righteousness,
And the peoples, in his faithfulness.

This Psalm seems to be built around a triad of triads: observe the three parallels of the command to “sing” in verses 1 and 2; the triple parallel of “ascribe” in 7 and 8; and the triple command to elements of creation to express their response to the Creator in 11 and 12.

This Psalm adds to our understanding of who Jehovah is and His rule over all things by weaving in notes on “salvation,” on His relationship to other entities called “gods” (Hebrew: *elohim*), and the fact that He is the ultimate Judge. There is even a prophetic element: Jehovah is “coming to judge the earth,” and He “will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His faithfulness.”

Also mentioned here are the truths of God’s glory – His glory is part of His character, since it is intrinsic to His name, as well as His holiness: proper worship demands “holy attire” (v.9). A crucial element of this psalm is once again the recognition that God made the

heavens and rules over all things. He also intervenes in human life and history: there are “wonderful deeds” which He has done among the peoples.

Certainly we are seeing that a part of the proper response to God is praise and worship. Worship is an enormous concept. A condensed understanding of this idea would be something like this: worshipping God is humbly submitting to His rule and authority, acknowledging the worth of who He is and of His words and actions, goals and methods, praising and thanking Him for His character and grace and willingly seeking to obey Him. Worship is a deliberate focusing of the mind and heart of the creature upon the holy, good and omnipotent rule of the Creator, and an expression of gratitude to Him for His working in the universe and in the personal life and experience of the individual.



Psalm 97

The third of “the Lord reigns” psalms is Psalm 97. Here is the NASB95 translation:

The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;
Let the many islands be glad.
Clouds and thick darkness surround Him;
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of
His throne.
Fire goes before Him
And burns up His adversaries round about.
His lightnings lit up the world;
The earth saw and trembled.

The mountains melted like wax at the presence
of the LORD,
At the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.
The heavens declare His righteousness,
And all the peoples have seen His glory.

Let those be ashamed who serve graven images,
Who boast themselves of idols;
Worship Him, all you gods.
Zion heard this and was glad,
And the daughters of Judah have rejoiced
Because of Your judgments, O LORD.
For You are the LORD Most High over all the
earth;
You are exalted far above all gods.

Hate evil, you who love the LORD,
Who preserves the souls of His godly ones;
He delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
Light is sown like seed for the righteous
And gladness for the upright in heart.
Be glad in the LORD, you righteous ones,
And give thanks to His holy name.

Here is Psalm 97 in Rotherham's translation:

Yahweh has become king,
Let the earth exult,
Let the multitudes of coastlands rejoice.

Clouds and thick darkness are round about him,

Righteousness and justice are the establishing of
his throne.
Fire before him proceeds,
That it may consume, round about, his
adversaries.
His lightnings have illumined the world,
The earth has seen and has trembled;
The mountains like wax have melted
At the presence of Yahweh,
At the presence of the Lord of all the
earth.

The heavens have declared his righteousness,
And all the peoples have seen his glory.

Let all who serve an image be ashamed,
They who boast themselves in things of nought,
Bow down unto him, all you gods.

Zion has heard and rejoiced
And the daughters of Judah have exulted
Because of your righteous decisions, O Yahweh:
For you Yahweh are Most High over all the
earth,
Greatly have you exalted yourself above all gods.

All you lovers of Yahweh! Be haters of wrong,
He preserves the lives of his men of
lovingkindness,
From the hand of the lawless will he
rescue them.
Light is sown for the righteous one,
And for the upright in heart rejoicing:

Rejoice all you righteous, in Yahweh,
And all of you give thanks at the mention of his
name.

Even more than in Psalm 96, Psalm 97 highlights the distinction between the false gods, the “things of nought” (nothing), as Rotherham translates the word, and the only true and living Jehovah of the Scriptures. He alone is King, Creator, Ruler and Lord of all, and any other entity, real or imagined, does not and cannot compare or compete with Him in majesty, sovereignty, authority, power and deed. Nothing else in heaven or earth, in the seas or under the earth, can even register on the scale of God’s wisdom, supremacy, beauty, and holiness. He alone is God.

This psalm is partly a creation psalm, but it phases into a praise psalm as well. Note that while mentioning islands, clouds, lightning, mountains, heavens, and earth, it also does so in a poetic style: fire goes before Him; the earth trembled, the mountains melted like wax, and so on. God’s glory is brought into focus, along with His divine, righteous vengeance on His foes. There is rejoicing on the part of His people both in His character and in His deliverance. Once again the holiness of His name is highlighted, as it was in Psalm 96:8 – His absolute distinctiveness from sin and evil, His uniqueness is bound up in His personality.

The responsiveness of creation to the presence of Jehovah is a theme that runs throughout Scripture. As we have noted previously, this might be hyperbole, and it might not. “The mountains melted like wax” is poetic and colorful imagery, but it might also point to the truth

that He has ultimate lordship over even things that we consider to be inanimate or non-sentient. Since He made them, they belong to Him, and they respond to Him. Certainly the world was re-arranged in a dramatic way in Noah's flood; just as certainly it will be re-made after the Great White Throne (II Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 21:1). The universe responds to the presence and will of the Creator.

Additionally and intriguingly, Psalm 97 also introduces another aspect of the believer's response to God's sovereignty that is worth pondering. "Hate evil, you who love the LORD," is what the psalmist says in verse 10. There is to be a recognition of God's holiness, and a corresponding application of His holiness to the believer's life and soul (I Peter 1:14-16). But observe also the descriptor of His people in this phrase: "...you who love the LORD." The revelation of Jehovah in all His fullness – a multi-faceted, mature and well-developed comprehension of His sovereign character – is supposed to result in our *loving* God.



Psalm 99

The final "The Lord reigns" psalm is Psalm 99. Here it is in the NASB95:

The LORD reigns, let the peoples tremble;
He is enthroned above the cherubim, let the
earth shake!
The LORD is great in Zion,
And He is exalted above all the peoples.

Let them praise Your great and awesome name;
Holy is He.

The strength of the King loves justice;
You have established equity;
You have executed justice and righteousness in
Jacob.

Exalt the LORD our God
And worship at His footstool;
Holy is He.

Moses and Aaron were among His priests,
And Samuel was among those who called on His
name;

They called upon the LORD and He answered
them.

He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;
They kept His testimonies
And the statute that He gave them.

O LORD our God, You answered them;
You were a forgiving God to them,
And yet an avenger of their evil deeds.

Exalt the LORD our God
And worship at His holy hill,
For holy is the LORD our God.

Here is Psalm 99 in Rotherham's translation:

Yahweh has become king
Let the peoples tremble,
He is enthroned on the cherubim
Let the earth shake.
Yahweh in Zion is great,

And high is he over all the peoples.
Let them thank his Name – high and reverend,
Holy is he!

Yea with the strength of a king – justice he loves
You have established equity,
Justice and righteousness in Jacob you have
wrought.

Exalt Yahweh our God
And bow down at his footstool,
Holy is he!

Moses and Aaron were among his priests
And Samuel was among them who were calling
upon his Name,
Who were calling upon Yahweh, and he used to
answer them;
In the pillar of cloud used he to speak unto them.
They kept his testimonies, and the statutes he
gave them.

O Yahweh our God! You answered them,
A pardoning God You became to them,
Yet one bringing vengeance on their deeds.

Exalt Yahweh our God
And bow down towards his holy mountain,
For holy is Yahweh.

This short but striking song has a singular thread as its theme: the holiness of Jehovah. The refrain “Holy is He/Holy is Jehovah our God” is a profound

counterpoint to the many actions and characteristics of God that the psalmist mentions. God's greatness, His supremacy over the cherubim (a new element in His descriptions in these "reigning" psalms), His justice, righteousness, forgiveness, retribution, His revelation of Himself, His answers to prayer, His intervention in people and events, and His giving of statutes are all part of who God is and what He does. But the great thread of continuity in this psalm is that He is holy. He is completely set apart from anything wicked, corrupt, evil, or wrong. As John says, "God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5).

The holiness of God is absolute and ultimate; it may well be the most defining characteristic of God. It is not merely in His behaviors, it is tied up with His being. This is what God has called His children to emulate and incorporate into their own souls (I Peter 1:16). We are not merely to do holy things, but we are to be holy in our character.

God is sovereign and God is holy. The appropriate response to this truth is to "exalt Jehovah our God and worship" Him. The right response to this revelation of Jehovah's character is to magnify His holy and omnipotent Person, and to focus praise, honor, and glory upon Him.



Psalm 104

Turning from the “Jehovah reigns” psalms, let us next consider a favorite psalm of many believers: Psalm 104. Here is NASB95’s rendering:

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
O LORD my God, You are very great;
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,
Covering Yourself with light as with a cloak,
Stretching out heaven like a tent curtain.
He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the
waters;
He makes the clouds His chariot;
He walks upon the wings of the wind;
He makes the winds His messengers,
Flaming fire His ministers.

He established the earth upon its foundations,
So that it will not totter forever and ever.
You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
The waters were standing above the mountains.
At Your rebuke they fled,
At the sound of Your thunder they hurried away.
The mountains rose; the valleys sank down
To the place which You established for them.
You set a boundary that they may not pass over,
So that they will not return to cover the earth.

He sends forth springs in the valleys;
They flow between the mountains;
They give drink to every beast of the field;
The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell;
They lift up their voices among the branches.

He waters the mountains from His upper
chambers;
The earth is satisfied with the fruit of His works.

He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
And vegetation for the labor of man,
So that he may bring forth food from the earth,
And wine which makes man's heart glad.
So that he may make his face glisten with oil,
And food which sustains man's heart.
The trees of the LORD drink their fill,
The cedars of Lebanon which He planted,
Where the birds build their nests,
And the stork, whose home is the fir trees.

The high mountains are for the wild goats;
The cliffs are a refuge for the shephanim.
He made the moon for the seasons;
The sun knows the place of its setting.
You appoint darkness and it becomes night,
In which the beast of the forest prowl about.
The young lions roar after their prey
And seek their food from God.
When the sun rises they withdraw
And lie down in their dens.
Man goes forth to his work
And to his labor until evening.

O LORD, how many are Your works!
In wisdom You have made them all;
The earth is full of Your possessions.
There is the sea, great and broad,
In which are swarms without number,

Animals both small and great.
There the ships move along,
And Leviathan, which You have formed to sport
in it.

They all wait for You
To give them their food in due season.
You give to them, they gather it up;
You open Your hand, they are satisfied with
good.
You hide Your face, they are dismayed;
You take away their spirit, they expire
And return to their dust.
You send forth Your Spirit, they are created;
And You renew the face of the ground;

Let the glory of the LORD endure forever;
Let the LORD be glad in His works;
He looks at the earth, and it trembles;
He touches the mountains, and they smoke.
I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have my
being.

Let my meditation be pleasing to Him;
As for me I shall be glad in the LORD.
Let sinners be consumed from the earth
And let the wicked be no more.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.
Praise the LORD!

Here is Psalm 104 translated by Stephen Brown:

Oh my soul, bless Jehovah!
Jehovah my God You are mightily great!
Of splendor and majesty You are girded!
Robing Yourself with light as with a cloak,
Stretching forth the heavens as a curtain,
Who joins the beams of His upper-chambers
among the waters,
Who appoints the clouds to be His chariot,
Who rides forth on the wings of the wind;
Makes His angels to be winds,
His messengers to be a flaming fire;
Has established the earth on its foundations -
It will not waver for ever and ever -
The deep covered it over like a garment:
On the mountain the waters were standing;
From Your rebuke they do fly,
From the voice of Your thunder they do hurry
away,
The mountains rise, the valleys have sunk down,
To the place that You established for them:
A border You have appointed - let them not
indeed cross over,
Let them not indeed return to cover the earth;
Who sends springs in the ravines, which do flow
between the mountains -
They water all the living animals of the field:
Wild donkeys quench their thirst,
Over them fliers of the heavens do dwell;
Between the branches they give forth their voice-
Waters the mountains from His upper
chambers,
The earth is full of the fruit of Your works;

Makes the grass grow for the cattle,
And greenery for Man's labor, to bring bread
from the ground,
And juice which gives happiness to Man's heart;
Making the face bright more than from oil,
And bread which sustains Man's heart –
The trees of Jehovah are ever full,
The cedars of Lebanon which He planted:
For there the birds make their nests,
The stork, her home is in the fir tree,
The high mountains are for the wild goats,
The rocks are a refuge for the rock-badgers;
Has made the moon for the appointed times,
The sun knows when to set;
You appoint darkness and it is night,
In which all the life of the forest creeps,
The lions go roaring in pursuit of prey,
And to seek their food from God,
The sun rises, and they certainly withdraw,
And surely stretch out in their dwelling places,
Man goes out to his work and to his labor until
evening;
How Your works are multiplied, Jehovah!
You have done all of them in wisdom,
The earth is full of Your possessions:
There is the sea, great and wide all about,
There are numberless creeping animals,
Numberless living things, the small with the
great,
There the ships do sail about,
Leviathan which You have made to play in it;
All of them, Jehovah, do wait for You,
For You to give each its food in its time:

You give to them, they do glean,
You open Your hand, they are certainly filled
 with good;
You hide Your face, they are certainly dismayed,
You gather their spirits, they certainly perish,
And back to their dust they certainly return;
You send Your spirit, they certainly are created,
And You renew the face of the soil –
Let the glory of Jehovah be forever!
Let Jehovah rejoice in His works! –
Who gazed down at the earth and it begins to
 tremble,
Touches the mountains, and they begin to
 smoke,
I shall sing to Jehovah during my life,
I shall make music to my God as long as I
 continue on!
May my meditation be pleasing to Him; as for
 me, I shall rejoice in Jehovah!
Let sinners be done from the earth, and the
 wicked no longer be.
Oh my soul, bless Jehovah!
Praise Jehovah!

This marvelous song is filled with wonderful imagery and powerful statements about the rule, care, and providence of God over creation. There are fascinating details about God's control over creation, as well as appropriate responses to this revelation of His character and power.

Psalm 104 begins with the declaration of His majesty and greatness (v.1); as in other psalms, the writer uses the imagery of God clothing Himself with “splendor and majesty.” Jehovah inhabits heaven and “establishes” the earth so that it will never wobble. (Incidentally this motif [see Psalm 96:10] might point to the earth being a permanent part of God’s plan for creation.) The creation of the world, and specifically the great Flood are also evidences of God’s vast and fine control over the forces of nature and of nature itself.

Turning from the creation of the world and the cataclysm of the Flood, the psalmist notes how God watches over, cares for, and rules the details of systems (the water cycle, the rising and setting of the sun, the animals that inhabit the world) on the earth. The language employed here does not sound like God simply wound up a great clock and then set it ticking on its own energy reserves. Rather, He is actively and with direct interest involved with His creation in detail and in real time.

The writer’s technique is to mention a habitat or feature of creation (springs between mountains, trees, high mountains) and then to note certain creatures that live in that kind of habitat (wild donkeys, birds, wild goats). This psalm uses language that points to the direct, cause-and-effect of God’s control over the elements of nature. For example, “You appoint darkness and it is night,” and “You gather their spirits, they certainly perish.” God’s rule is both omnipotent and finely-tuned to each part of His creation and the interactions of each element with all the other elements in His universe.

As far as the response to the truth of God's sovereignty as seen in Psalm 104, there is an acknowledgement that the glory of God is transcendent and eternal (v.31). There is also the recognition that God is the great Worker (v.24), that all that He has done and decreed is in wisdom, and that the earth is full of God's possessions (also in v.24).

A proper response to the truth of God's rule also includes a determination to praise God and sing to Him (v.33). Additionally, the soul that sees the truth of who God is will also desire for his thoughts and motivations to be pleasing to Him (v.34).

One final point should be highlighted here: the last verse of this psalm applies the holiness of God to the inhabitants of the world. Since God is the Creator-Ruler of all, and since He is righteous, holy and just, then sinners must be "consumed from the earth." The fact of Jehovah's existence requires sin to be judged.



Isaiah 40

Another very profitable passage to meditate on in terms of the response of the believer's soul to the revelation of God's sovereignty is Isaiah chapter 40. Here is the NASB95 rendering:

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.
"Speak kindly to Jerusalem;
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,
That her iniquity has been removed,

That she has received of the LORD'S hand
Double for all her sins."

A voice is calling,
"Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God
Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
A voice says, "Call out."
Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"
"All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the
flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.

Get yourself up on a high mountain,
O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily,
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
Lift it up, do not fear.
Say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
Behold the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him

And His recompense before Him.
Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His
hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span,
And calculated the dust of the earth by measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance
And the hills in a pair of scales?
Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,
Or as His counselor has informed Him?
With whom did He consult and who gave Him
understanding?
And who taught Him in the path of justice and
taught Him knowledge
And informed Him of the way of understanding?
Behold the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales;
Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust.
Even Lebanon is not enough to burn,
Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering.
All the nations are as nothing before Him,
They are regarded by Him as less than nothing
and meaningless.

To whom then will you liken God?
Or what likeness will you compare with Him?
As for the idol, a craftsman casts it,
A goldsmith plates it with gold,
And a silversmith fashions chains of silver.

He who is too impoverished for such an offering
Selects a tree that does not rot;
He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman
To prepare an idol that will not totter.

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
Has it not been declared to you from the
beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of
the earth?

It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,
And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.
He it is who reduces rulers to nothing,
Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless.
Scarcely have they been planted,
Scarcely have they been sown,
Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither,
And the storm carries them away like stubble.
“To whom then will you liken Me
That I would be his equal?” says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high
And see who has created these stars,
The One who leads forth their host by number,
He calls them all by name;
Because of the greatness of His might and the
strength of His power,
Not one of them is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord,

And the justice due me escapes the notice of my
God”?

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the
ends of the earth
Does not become weary or tired.
His understanding is inscrutable.
He gives strength to the weary,
And to him who lacks might He increases power.
Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly,
Yet those who wait for the Lord
Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary.

This rich portion of Isaiah’s prophecy is a call to Israel from Jehovah to cease their doubting about God’s ability to fulfill His promises to them in the future, and to rest fully in His sovereign and beneficial capability.

In Isaiah 40, God has said that in the future He will restore and bless His people; there will be comfort, peace and fulfillment for the Jewish people as Jehovah carries out His desire for their spiritual and physical blessing. One of the chief shortcomings of the Jews in the Old Testament was their perpetual propensity to compare God to other “deities” of the nations around them. The powerful and masterful imagery employed here demonstrates how silly the entire concept of comparing God to anything else. Jehovah is, by definition, incomparable. He has “measured” the entire contents of planet earth’s oceans, lakes, rivers, and clouds in the

palm of His hand; He regards the entire achievement of human civilization as a “drop from a bucket.” Jehovah sits above the circle of the earth: He is over it, alone, and is Ruler of all.

Any attempt to generate a comparison between God and anything else that would stand in His place is not only wicked, but foolish to the extreme. Furthermore, grasping this reality, that God – the One who promises grace and blessing to His people, the One who rules and overrules the self-important pomposity and seeming grandeur of the earth’s potentates – offers a relationship to lowly humans through faith, is staggering. Think of Sargon, of King Nebuchadnezzar, of the Emperor Xerxes, Frederick Barbarossa, and Kaiser Wilhelm. Think of the self-aggrandizement of Adolf Hitler declaring a thousand-year Reich. And yet God has merely to “blow” on these apparently invincible constructs of human power, and they wither and drift away on the wind. All the appearances of human permanence and grandeur are exactly that – only appearances of power and longevity. Only God is eternal; only God rules.

Jehovah is the Creator of the stars and all other celestial bodies (as well as of the particles, waves, properties, and minute composite sub-items of the entire universe). He directly controls and rules the position of each of them; in fact, He has given names to every one of them.

The Jewish people, in the declining days of their national existence before the Babylonian exile, questioned whether their God knew or cared about their sorrows, fears and the centuries-long oppression they

had endured. They wondered if the looming threat of the Assyrians, and the Babylonians queued up behind the Assyrians, was something that Jehovah knew about and was concerned for. Isaiah responds to this not with a word of comfort as we would think of comfort; rather he challenges the Jews' view of God. A starting point for answering the question, "I feel very alone and weak; does God know about my troubles? Does He care about me and what I'm going through?" A starting point, I say, for answering this question is: God is God. Jehovah is who and what He has said He is – the Creator, the King, the Master of all.

Isaiah goes on to remind his hearers, "The Everlasting God, Jehovah, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired." Sometimes our burdens – our lives – become a weariness. We become worn out by the cares of life, the heartaches, the physical suffering, the challenges that sap our joy and our spirit. But we are to lift up our eyes and focus on the One who never becomes weary; He never loses His energy; He never gets discouraged. He is the source of our strength; He gives endurance and stamina to His children when we cry out to Him.

Not only that, but observe that His understanding is inscrutable. Our own insight is so limited, so finite. We have difficulty connecting the dots of events and circumstances in our lives for a single day: how could we possibly understand the weaving of thousands of points of contact and connections over a lifetime? Yet God knows because He planned it all.

God graciously and faithfully gives help to His children. Isaiah informs us, “He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power.” Even those whom we expect to be able to carry the load – the young and the strong – have limits, as we all know too well. The vigorous will sooner or later begin to stumble because their strength and stamina has been exhausted.

But those who depend on God (“wait on the Lord” – not merely doing nothing, but doing what we know pleases Him in the moment, while trusting Him for what’s next) will gain the ability to go on. God gives strength to the weary, and there is no limit to His strength. Because our sovereign God’s strength is unlimited, so is ours.

What does God’s rule mean for the child of God?

The fact of God’s sovereignty is indisputable. He is Creator, Lord and Master of all things. How should the child of God respond to this truth?

Before we even begin to address the practical application of the Bible’s teaching on God’s sovereignty, we need to recognize that Jesus Christ is Lord, and He doesn’t need us to “make” Him Lord or “allow” Him to be Lord. He is not yet King of the world, but He is God, He is the Head of the Church, and He did purchase us with His blood. It is true that what He most wants is our trust, our willing obedience and our joyful faithfulness to Him. It is also true that ultimately every knee will bow to Him and every tongue will confess that He is Lord. But what brings Him the greatest pleasure is when we

joyfully, simply, and sincerely obey Him, love Him and lean on Him because we want to, not out of obligation, duty, or tradition. This can be summarized in the statement that Paul used in Philippians 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord!”

The wording here calls attention to the essence of Christ’s mastery and ownership, to His control and leadership over us. We rejoice that He bought us, redeemed us, rescued us and lovingly brought us into His family as His beloved ones. Furthermore, we rejoice that He is the Master – that He owns us and we belong to Him alone: we leap for joy at the thought that He gives us commands and we gladly jump to immediately respond. He is Lord, and we delight that it is so! You can see this pictured in the scene just before the battle of Jericho in Joshua chapter five, when Joshua confronts a man he doesn’t recognize with the query, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” The Lord (the pre-incarnate Christ) answers, “No; rather I indeed come now as the captain of the host of the Lord.” Joshua’s response to this One is exactly what we need to joyfully, heartily replicate: “And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down, and said to him, ‘What has my lord to say to his servant?’”

That is the right response!

Three times in the book of Isaiah God uses the analogy of a potter and clay to convey the presupposition that He alone is the Master of all things, and that He alone possesses the inherent right to do with His creation as pleases. Isaiah 29:16 says, “You turn things around! Shall the potter be considered equal with the clay, that what is made would say to its maker, ‘He did

not make me'; Or what is formed say to him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?"

Isaiah 45:9 says, "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker – an earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands'?"

The final use of this illustration in Isaiah gives the correct mentality – the one that we should have as we view the sovereignty of God not just in theoretical terms, but in practice in our lives. Isaiah 64:8 contains an acknowledgement of truth:

“But now O LORD, You are our Father,
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all of us are the work of Your hand.”

Moving into the practical adoption of biblical responses to God's rule, let's pursue thinking through these matters along these lines:

1. First of all, as we come into contact through the Scriptures with the truth of God as Creator, Ruler, Owner and Lord of the universe, we see the appropriate response is to worship Him. Observe the reaction of Moses at the burning bush, the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, Isaiah and the vision of Jehovah in chapter six, John on the Isle of Patmos in Revelation chapter one, and many more. The fact that God has made all things stands as a keystone truth throughout Scripture and sets Him apart from all other so-called “gods,” natural principles, personalities and entities – everything in the universe, in fact, since He is over the

universe. As Jonah succinctly told the Phoenician sailors, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear Jehovah God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land” (Jonah 1:9). Unregenerate astronomers, physicists, biologists, chemists, and mathematicians stand in awe of forces of nature, laws of physics, equations and molecular principles that seemingly order the known universe; but Bible-believing Christians know and fear the God who made and upholds the universe and its operating principles.

In this arena, it is proper and good to acknowledge that God is big and we are small. We are not that important, and yet God has included us in His great plan. This is what David was getting at in Psalm 8: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man, that You care for him?” God alone has power (capability) and authority (jurisdiction) to create, to judge, to designate and appoint, to annihilate, to rescue, and to overcome death, hell, and sin. He is worthy of worship. We spent a little time in Psalm 104 above. That creation psalm invokes a response of worship on the part of the believer, highlighting as it does the mastery of the Creator over all creation.

The proper response of the Christian to the truth of God as Creator is to worship Him.

2. Second, the revelation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Jehovah, as disclosed in the Bible) entails that He is the eternal sovereign God – that He alone has been ordering, planning and executing His plan from eternity past. Pondering this truth, the

Christian is led to trust God. Among many principles derived from the truth of God's mastery over all things which can edify and nurture the believer, the sovereignty of God means that there are no tragedies for the Christian. If God is good (and He is: Mark 10:18; Psalm 25:8; 34:8; et al), and if He is Ruler over all things (and He is: John 1:3; Psalm 97:1), then the only-good, all-powerful Father is working out His perfect design in all of His creation and in us and for us as well. He is doing this in spite of, and perhaps especially while we are experiencing pain, trials, and heartaches.

The name of God, Jehovah, and the truth of His fatherhood of believers are inextricably linked to His identity as sovereign Master of all (Isaiah 64:8).

The child of God, in response to the reality that God is sovereign, is supposed to live an anxiety-free life. If God is who He says He is – the everlasting, all-wise, all-powerful Ruler of all things, and our loving Redeemer – then we have no cause for worry (Matthew 6:25-33). There is literally nothing that should get us worked up into a froth of anxiety because God is running the big things, the little things, and the infinitesimally small details of life.

Additionally, if God is who He says He is – the Creator-Sustainer, Ruler, Redeemer, and Lord who has paid the ultimate price for us and thus demonstrated His love and power – then the believer should live a life free not just from worry, but from every form of fear (Romans 8:28-39).

A particular manifestation of the believer's trust in the Lord would be a vibrant, active, growing prayer life. Rather than giving in to fear, doubt, dismay and

confusion, the child of God should seek the face of his loving Father in continuous, sincere prayer, thanksgiving, and petition (Philippians 4:6.7; I Thessalonians 5:17; I Timothy 2:1).

The appropriate response to God as the Sovereign Lord of all is to trust Him, without anxiety or fear, in all things at all times.

3. Third, as we grow in our Christian lives, learning more about our God, we come to understand in an increasingly personal way that He is not only the Creator and Sovereign, but that He is also loving, merciful, compassionate, and gracious. God delights in blessing His people, both the Jews of the Old Testament and the Church of the New Testament. As a tender-hearted Father, He cares for His children, gives them gifts, encourages them, nurtures and builds us up, promises us future joy, and delights in our willing obedience. He is love personified and is the definition of grace. Not only do we have a God who is almighty; we have the Jehovah of the Bible who loves us with a love that surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:19). Growing in our realization of what this eternal love means is supposed to cause a response in us.

The appropriate response to the gracious character and work of Jehovah is to love Him. Because He is our gracious Father, Redeemer, Provider, and Friend, and because He orders all things for our good, the Bible commands that we respond to His grace by loving Him. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

I John 4:19 says, “We love Him because He first loved us.” This truth is supposed to grow in us the more we learn about the magnitude of God’s love to us. Rather than our love toward God growing cold, ordinary and dull as the years of our Christian life roll by, our love towards God is supposed to flourish, blossom and get richer (Revelation 2:4). Christianity without the crucified and risen Christ is an empty husk (I Corinthians 15:19), and a Christian without genuine love for God is a hollow shell (I John 4:19).

The proper response to God as Gracious Sovereign is to love Him with all of one’s heart, soul, mind and might.

4. Fourth and finally, we find that the call of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church and the Coming King, to follow Him in discipleship, to willingly obey Him so that He might reward us with future roles of service to Him – this lifelong call is supposed to motivate us to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

Without grumbling, or pride, or comparing our lot in life with those around us, we are supposed to delight in patiently, faithfully enduring for His honor. The world despises faithfulness; it sneers at patient suffering and simple, subservient, long-term obedience. The culture of the world looks at submission to God as a strange and horrible thing. But God values it (Revelation 2:10,13)! Jehovah, the One who redeemed us, the Source all that which is true and genuine, has said that simple, faithful obedience is very precious to Him. The promise of Christ is, “if we endure, we will also reign with Him” (II Timothy 2:12).

The opportunity to have a future role of increased capability to serve the Lord of lords and King of kings – both in the Millennial Kingdom and beyond – is designed in Scripture to be a key motivator for faithful, godly living. God wants us to endure for His Name's sake; He eagerly wishes to reward us with particularly blessed roles of service on into eternity.

The proper, biblical response to Jesus Christ as the Master who calls us to faithfulness is to joyfully, obediently endure for Him.

In summary,

- ❖ The response to God as Creator is to worship Him.
- ❖ The response to God as Sovereign is to trust Him.
- ❖ The response to God as Gracious Sovereign is to love Him.
- ❖ The response to God as Gracious Sovereign who offers us the opportunity to serve Him in the Kingdom is to faithfully, obediently endure.



Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,
and to make you stand in the presence of His glory
blameless with great joy,
to the only God our Savior,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, dominion and authority,
before all time and now and forever.
Amen.

Jude 24 & 25



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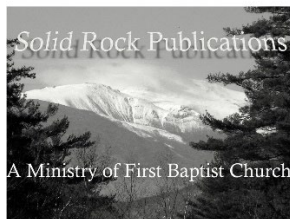
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