

THE KINGDOM OF GOD – PART ONE

- The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

- A. So far in our curriculum, we have discussed what is involved in our becoming like Christ. We also discussed why it is the case that anyone who is right-thinking will want that for themselves.
 - a. But Who is this Person that we are striving to become like?
 - i. We are now going to take some time and carefully consider who, in fact, Christ really is, and what He saw Himself as accomplishing while He was on this planet.
 - ii. And that will give us the correct context to understand what Jesus taught His followers. With that context in place, the teachings of Jesus will be the next discussion topic.
 - iii. Finally, after exploring the teaching of Christ, we will then conclude this curriculum by coming to understand what it means for us, today, to live the way of Christ.
- B. In order to start this entire process, we are going to spend the next several talks exploring the topic of the Kingdom of God.
 - a. In order to understand why we are spending so much time in this curriculum on the specific topic of the Kingdom of God, I want to stop for a moment and give you the big picture of this curriculum. The goal of this curriculum is for us to gain a new set of spectacles. What I mean is that if we read the Bible through the wrong set of lenses, the things we find in it will be distorted, blurry.
 - b. Now, the only way we can work on our spectacles is if we have an idea what the right way of seeing these things is. Here is the right way of seeing things: We need to see the story of the World and of humanity the way that Jesus did.
 - c. And do we see the world the way that Jesus did? Well, one way of summing up the entire Bible that we often use when talking with others, is in terms of the good news, or the gospel, that we tell them. We use that word, gospel, a lot. But what, actually, is our gospel? What is the good news that we are telling people? What was Jesus's gospel? Is it the same as ours?
 - i. Here was Jesus's gospel: "Hey everyone...Listen up...Believe in me that I died on the cross for your sins! Then you can be forgiven of your sins, have a relationship with God, and go to Heaven when you die." No, actually, that was not Jesus's gospel. When Jesus shows up on the scene of human history, that is not what He is recorded as announcing. It's not that none of those things we just said are true. Actually, each of those things is true, in its own way. The issue is that this gospel that we just outlined is much too narrow and misses the overall point of the Bible. Instead, this is the gospel that Jesus announced: "*The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the gospel!*" *Mark 1:15*
 - ii. Jesus saw everything, and everyone, on planet Earth in terms of their relationship to the Kingdom of God.

C. And what is “the Kingdom of God?”

- a. We are not so familiar today but Jesus’s hearers knew what he was talking about when He used that term. Because the Jews of Jesus’s day had learned about the Kingdom of God from their Scriptures, the Old Testament.
- b. In fact, for us to understand the Jewish idea of the Kingdom of God, we need to start back at the very beginning of the story. Back at Genesis chapter 1, verse 1.
- c. Here, we see that the first thing that occurs in the Bible is that God creates and orders everything. It follows from this that God is therefore the sovereign Creator and rightful Ruler of everything and everyone. The King of the universe.
 - i. But as we will see shortly, not everyone is interested in acknowledging God’s authority. And so, to the Jews, **The Kingdom of God** came to refer to the part of the universe where God is rightfully served and acknowledged as King. The Kingdom of God is the part of reality which is under God’s rule. Now, at the very beginning of things, the part of reality that was under God’s rule, was all of reality.
 1. And one quick side note on terminology. If you read through Jesus’s teachings, you might be confused to find the terms, “the Kingdom of God” and “the Kingdom of Heaven” used interchangeably. The reason for this is that pious Jews avoided speaking God’s name aloud as a sign of reverence...they didn’t want to be flippant with it. So, Matthew typically used the Kingdom of Heaven instead of the Kingdom of God.
 - ii. But let’s look a little more closely at how the Jewish story begins. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth. Genesis 1:1*
 - iii. The story begins with God creating “the heavens”.
 1. And why does it say that God made “the heavens”? Why not “God made Heaven”? Because, for the ancient Jews, there was more than one **Heaven**.
 - a. The First Heaven was the stuff around your head and the air and whatnot where the birds fly around.
 - b. The Second Heaven was the area above the sky, where the stars and other celestial objects were.
 - c. And the Third Heaven was the domain of God, and the unseen realm of spirits.
 2. The first two Heavens are familiar to us. But let’s talk about this Third Heaven, which from here from on out, we will simply refer to as, “Heaven.” **Heaven** is an invisible part of the universe. God is present there. And other invisible beings, of different types, who God has created, are also present in Heaven. This would include things like including angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim. These are persons. They think, act, and feel. And they serve God. Now, because God is obeyed and acknowledged as the rightful ruler in Heaven, this means that the Kingdom of God includes Heaven.

3. These other spiritual beings are depicted in the Bible as having two roles.
 - a. One role is the doing of God's work in Heaven. To be clear...God is ruling and running the show there. But He is not doing everything with His own two hands. Instead, He has given these people positions of authority, jobs to do, and they are active in their appointed roles and responsibilities.
 - i. We will soon see that this same theme, the act of delegation, is repeated when God comes to make the Earth.
 - b. In addition to their work in Heaven, these spirits work on behalf of God here on Earth. Of the various invisible beings, angels, in particular, seem to be the ones appointed to work with humans. As the book of Hebrews says, angels are *ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation. Hebrews 1:14*
 - i. And so, angels interact with our World in different ways. And at various times and in various ways, Heaven, this unseen realm of persons, made its presence clearly felt in the experience of the Jewish people. This was an extremely rare occurrence. It was always terribly shocking when Heaven broke through into their reality. People would usually do something like tremble or fall to the ground. The angels, when they appear, often immediately need to tell people, don't be afraid! The Jewish people had these experiences of Heaven here and there, and there came to be an understanding on their part that another reality was always there just beyond the visible eye, a different unseen World all around them.
 1. An example of this is when Jacob has his dream with the ladder. The curtain is pulled back, and when he wakes up, he says, "*Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.*" *Genesis 28:16.*
 2. Another example is when Elisha and his servant take a look around one morning and find out they have been surrounded by a hostile army. And his servant says, naturally, "WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?!" "*Don't be afraid,*" the prophet answered. "*Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.*" And Elisha prayed, "*Open his eyes, Lord, so that he*

may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. 2 Kings 6:16-17.

- ii. It is absolutely crucial to fix this idea in your mind. That we are at all times surrounded by the invisible part of reality which is composed of persons, some of whom are acting to help us, and some to harm us.
 - 1. Seems like an unusual arrangement, when you stop and think about it? Couldn’t God just make this unseen World visible to us? Yes, he could. But it is to the benefit of humanity that God currently remain hidden, and that He hide the indisputable parts of spiritual reality. Why that is, we will discuss later on in the curriculum, in much detail.
 - 2. For now, as Paul puts it, *we see darkly, as through a glass (1 Corinthians 13:12)*. But he also goes on to note that it’s not always going to be like that.
- iv. So, we have said a few things about the Heavens. What next? *In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth*. Let’s next say a few things about the Earth.
 - 1. God is good, and so everything that He makes? Also, good. And so, over and over again we read, “*It was good (Genesis 1:4, etc)*,” of each new thing that God creates on Earth. The World was orderly. Beautiful. Magnificent. Complex.
 - 2. Please note that the Kingdom of God at this point, includes both the Heavens, and the Earth. He made both of them, and is ruling both of them. Which is to say that the Kingdom of God is present on Earth.
 - 3. And the next thing that we read is critical to carefully ponder. Because here God’s grand intention for humanity is clearly spelled out. We have somehow gotten terribly confused on this point, to our great loss. But here is God’s grand intention for us: the next thing that happens in the story is that the King gives the keys to part of the kingdom away. He delegates the rule and the care of Earth to Adam and Eve.
 - a. *Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the Earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Genesis 1:28*
 - i. Does God tell Adam and Eve, “Go and have non-stop Bible studies, and life groups and church services”? No. Instead:

- ii. *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to **work it and take care of it.** Genesis 2:15*
 - b. And unlike plants, rocks, animals, or anything else in the physical World, humanity were specifically equipped to rule the world.
 - i. Now let's stop and acknowledge for a second that sounds like a truly enormous responsibility. Ruling over the whole World with justice and insight. Ordering it appropriately. It would take deep wisdom and significant power. But make no mistake, that is what we are hardwired for. In fact, it is impossible to comprehend how magnificent a thing a human being is. Your brain, for instance, is the most complex thing in the entire physical universe, by far.
 - 1. It is composed of billions of cells, of thousands of different types. And each cell itself is composed of innumerable tiny interconnected components.
 - 2. And these billions of cells are intricately interwoven into trillions of complex connections, continuously carrying all kinds of information, sensation, thought, and emotion rapidly along sophisticated electrical and chemical pathways.
 - ii. And our imaginative, moral, relational, creative, and spiritual faculties are just as amazing as our rational faculties. Genesis says that humanity was made "*in God's likeness*" and "*in God's image.*" Breathtaking. Awesome. God's project in humanity is utterly marvelous.
 - c. *What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?
You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
and put everything under their feet.
Psalm 8*
4. Now, how was humanity to rule? However, they felt like? No. The idea is that humanity would rule the way that God would rule if He were running things. With wisdom, sacrificially, and to enable ever increasing flourishing, beauty and order in His creation. And they would have God's personal assistance running things. God was to participate in His creation through and in the free decisions of His human representatives.

- a. Heaven and Earth were meant to embrace each other in a hug. Humanity would serve as a connection point, the overlap, between Heaven and Earth.
 - i. N.T. Wright compares God's plan for His image-bearing humans to an angled mirror: we were made to reflect God's wise and loving rule downward into the world, AND reflect creation's grateful worship upward to God.
 - ii. We are to be *a royal priesthood*, says Peter (*1 Peter 2:9*). Royal means ruling. Priesthood means worshiping.
- b. And please also note that God put Adam and Eve in a garden and commanded them to multiply. And to spread out from there. Humanity was to *fill the Earth*. To expand their dominion far and wide, filling the World up with the more and more persons, each one a wonder and a treasure. Each person a crucial part of the whole enterprise. With a unique personality, interests and skills, each person would have a unique role to play.
- c. Each person would reflect their own unique personhood into their own little corner of responsibility in the created order.
 - i. It would be like when you walk into a house and "Oh, I love how you decorated that, Sue, that is so YOU!" No one else would have done that bit just like that, is the idea.
 - ii. The Earth would be a complex reflection of the many unique persons ordering and ruling it, just like it was a reflection of the unique Person who created it.
 - iii. We were created to be little creators. Created to make good things. To do beautiful things.
- d. What we can see here is that the idea was not that God would dictate to us exactly what to do all the time and humanity should do exactly that.
 - i. If God wanted robots, He would have made robots. He could have saved us and Himself the trouble in that case and just made us without billions of brain cells or things like wills of our own.
 - ii. Did God tell Adam what to name the animals? "HEY! Don't call that a "Zebra!" What kind of name is that? Come on, man!" No. He said "you name them Adam. You're a pretty smart guy, I will leave it up to you. Ruling the earth is your responsibility, after all."
 - iii. We can see that God wanted real otherness on Earth. Other ideas, other opinions and input, other wills, other

people. Quite profound to consider that God went and made other someones.

- iv. This is still the way it is today. God is not interested in dictating every aspect of what happens down here. Or of your own life. He created you to be something much more wonderful than that. Sometimes people get so hung up on trying to discern exactly and precisely what God wants them to do in every situation. They agonize if each decision they make is “in His perfect will for them.”
 - 1. But that whole idea of “God’s perfect will for you” is deeply problematic. I once heard a pastor make the analogy that God’s will for your life is like our choosing one of many reasonable spots in a parking lot, versus speeding down a highway where we may be missing critical turns at any moment.
 - v. In making a decision, you can be sure that God wants you to do something good, something meaningful, something in line with the kind of life described in the Bible, and something reasonable. And God will always be in the background, arranging things right along with and through the choices you and others are making, and directing your path to a good end. But He will not remove the responsibility from you of making real decisions, of running your own life, of running your little corner of the world.
5. A wonderful setup. But we all know what happens next. Tragically, humanity fails in their role as God’s noble rulers.
- a. And there is that strange story with a snake and an apple in there. What is that about? It is about **the Great Lie**.
 - i. “Eat the apple. You will get the knowledge. Come to understand things for yourself. You don’t need to do things the way that God does things. There is a different way, a better way. Your way.”
 - b. Now, when they fail does God take away the rule of the Earth from humanity? No. You see, the delegation, the responsibility, was a real thing. It really was up to humanity, the way the World would go. If the moment they chose wrong, God stopped them, people would not be free. They would not be writing the story. Instead, they would be acting in someone else’s story. They would be puppets.

- c. We are not puppets. And the angels are not puppets either. That is why He doesn't, for instance, zap the angels into oblivion, or even force them to obey Him, when they start making trouble.
 - d. The Earth is ours, an irrevocable gift. And our domain has recently expanded a little way out with a few space stations and what not. Despite the horrors we have so often brought to bear, humanity is, and always will be, in charge of this little corner of creation. That is the beauty and the majesty and the dignity and the wonder of a human being.
 - i. Who are we? Why are we here? The truths expressed in these early chapters of Genesis are so profound. In each and every human life, in many different forms, you will see those two basic human instincts still at work, ruling and worshiping.
 - ii. Having departed from the true path, human ruling and worshiping often come to expression in distorted and damaging ways. But who we are has never changed. And will never change.
- v. And at this point in the story, a major misunderstanding arises for many people.
 - 1. We tend to talk as though Plan A failed. And so, now, God has moved onto plan B. Plan B is that God sent his Son. He did this so that whoever believes in Jesus can get zapped up to Heaven, before God nukes the whole creation into oblivion, and sends everyone else to Hell.
- vi. But that is not what is going to happen. In fact, God has not moved on to a plan B at all. The Bible is quite clear that God is still on plan A. To sum up the rest of the Bible in one sentence: God is working through history in order to heal humanity and restore them to their designated role of ruling and reigning over His creation. Humans were made for greatness. And God has not forgotten that. He is going to fulfill, He is fulfilling, His original purpose. God will dwell among humanity, as we reign over His creation.
 - 1. Here is how Paul puts it in Romans.
 - a. *For if, by the trespass of the one man [Adam], death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!*
Romans 5:17
- vii. And how, exactly, is God salvaging plan A?
 - 1. In order to understand this, we must appreciate that humanity's embrace of the Great lie has resulted in a horrific disaster. The Heaven/Earth connection has been fundamentally ruptured.

- a. Now, this does not mean that the Kingdom of God has “floated back up into the sky.” Remember, God is not floating up in the sky somewhere. After all, God does not have a body. But this Heaven being above Earth type of language is useful for purposes of illustration. So, I will be talking like that.
 - i. Basically, humanity has told God, “Get out of here!” We will not have You for a king. We will have no king. We will be the kings and queens.”
 - ii. And God, not desiring to force Himself or His rule on us, left. The Kingdom of God left Earth. Went back up into Heaven. Humanity was now in charge, on their own terms, down below.
2. But there is an interesting twist here. Humanity thought with God out of the way that they had set up their own kingdom. They thought that they were the one’s ruling. But they were not. Because secretly, their rule had been stolen from them...by Satan.
 - a. Remember that Satan is an intelligence, a mind, a spirit. He is not visible to human eyes, nor does he want to be. When came to dominate humanity, he did not come knocking at the door, pitch fork in hand. Instead, things would be much better for him if he could do his work unnoticed.
 - i. So, he came unseen, like a thief.
 - ii. This is how it happened: Satan introduced certain ideas to the human’s minds. Or to look at it from the human perspective, certain ideas came to mind. They were evil ideas, and people knew this deep down. But they suppressed what they really knew, and chose to believe the evil ideas, and to act on them, because Satan had made the evil ideas appear tempting and good. That was the way Satan, unknowingly to them, influenced what they did.
 1. And that is still the case with how Satan is working today, secretly.
 - a. *The secret power of lawlessness is already at work*, we read in 2 Thessalonians. (2 Thessalonians 2:7)
 - iii. Now, all along God also was at work, reaching out to people, all over the world, in different ways, drawing them into relationship with Himself. And people, being made in God’s image and having some residual love of the good, would at times resist Satan’s ideas, which would throw off his control. But on the whole, this proved too difficult a task for humanity to do with

consistency. He was just too clever, too persistent for them to deal with on their own, without God at their side.

- iv. In aligning ourselves with the anti-God impulse, we unknowingly aligned ourselves with the dark, destructive and chaotic forces at work in the universe. And with the chief adversary of God.
- v. But Satan is not interested in allies. He is interested in slaves. And as we discussed in our talk on knowledge, people always become progressively dominated by sin, enslaved to sin.
- b. What this all worked out to was that, on the surface view, humanity was ruling the earth. But the underlying reality was that the Devil had arranged things so that they were running it the way that he wanted.
- c. And so, humanity ended up without any kingdom at all. They ended up losing the rule of the Earth to Satan, who set up shop as acting ruler of this World.
 - i. *The whole World is under the control of the evil one. 1 John 5: 19*
 - ii. *2 Corinthians (4:4) describes Satan as “The god of this age”*
 - iii. *And Luke 4 (verses 5-6) reads,*
 - 1. *The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the World. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; **it has been given to me,** and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.”*

(END OF AUDIO SEGMENT ONE)

(START OF AUDIO SEGMENT TWO)

- d. And so, we find humanity is enslaved, brutalized, and deceived. Something needed to be done. In order to re-enter human history and set things right, God needed to find people willing and able to partner with Him in the re-establishment of His kingdom on Earth. To help God bring Heaven and Earth back together again. God choose Abraham and his decedents, the Jewish people, for this task.
 - i. When the right time had at last arrived, God touched down in human history in a definitive way through this entry point, the Jewish people. And in their midst, a special interface point between Heaven and Earth was established. This was the tabernacle temporarily, and then the temple more permanently. The plan was that from that single Heaven-Earth contact point would outflow

God's presence and activity into the Jewish people, healing and empowering them. And out from the healed and empowered Jewish people, would flow healing and flourishing to the World.

- ii. And there was some success in this regard. There are a lot of amazing people in the Old Testament. Some of these people were heroes of the faith. And many of their victories were difficult, costly. We owe a debt of gratitude to them. Abraham is an example. *Abraham is the father of all who believe. Romans 4:16.*
- iii. And yet, while there were bright spots here and there, on the whole, sadly, when we read the Old Testament, we see that the Jews failed in their task. They neglected justice and mercy. They oppressed the poor and the marginalized, foreigners and widows. They worshipped other gods. Incredibly, they eventually reject God's offer to serve as their immediate King and Protector, and instead ask for a powerful human king, being fearful of their neighbors who have a similar setup.
 1. Israel suffers as a result. The World suffers as a result. God is grieved, pained. And so, He sends messengers from Him, prophets, asking Israel change, but Israel refuses. He forgives, He overlooks, He tries to woo them, He tells them in poems and songs how much He loves them.
 - a. *For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live! Ezekiel 18:32*
 - b. *I have loved you with an everlasting love. Jeremiah 31:3*
 - c. *"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Isaiah 49:15*
 2. But this does not work. And so, God warns them, rebukes them sternly. This does not help either.
 3. There are occasional successes, but the overall project is a failure. *[God's chosen people] are hard hearted, their ears are closed up, as Isaiah (6:10) put it.*
 4. And so, out of love for His special people, and the World, God does something that pains Him greatly. He disciplines Israel. Now, often the punishments, the disasters, are not anything He really sends or enacts in any special way. Instead, He simply allows the naturally consequences of their poor choices to work themselves out. And by the way, mostly, that is the form God's discipline takes today, for us, as well.
 - a. We see God allow just the amount of pain that Israel needs in order to get the motivation to change their ways. And this painful discipline often works. But then? In no time at all, they turn back to old habits, old ways of thinking. And so, discipline must occur again. And we see the

sin/suffering/repentance cycle repeat, over and over, with no overall improvement.

- iv. God cannot allow this cycle to go on forever, and He warns Israel of such. He warns them that if they do not definitely change their ways once and for all, a terrible fate awaits them. But they do not. And so, God allows the enemies of Israel to completely overtake them. Their most intimate connection to God, the temple itself, is destroyed by Israel's enemies, and they are exiled from the land God gave them, foreigners in captivity. Devastated.
- v. And again, we see that the discipline works. Years later, finally, their exile is ended, and they move back to their own land. Surely, they have learned a lasting lesson? At first it would appear so. The temple is rebuilt. Heartfelt corporate prayers and resolutions are made. But these prove to be of no avail. With the passing of time, Israel falls again, into the allure of darkness.
- vi. Due to their continued rejection of Him, Yahweh ever so slowly transitions from interventionist to absentee as the Old Testament progresses.
- vii. But amazingly, even in their darkest times, and in their profound alienation from God, this special group of people never let go of hope. Because they had not forgotten that they had been chosen. They had an irrevocable promise from God that they would serve their given function. That they would reintroduce the Kingdom of God on Earth.
- viii. They knew that God would not finally abandon them. They recalled their great hope, foretold by the prophets. A prophecy that God would decisively intervene on their behalf and rescue them to their original vocation. This would come to pass through the activity of a unique divine representative, a Messiah. And so, they wait. In their pain, they cry out to the Lord. Send help!
- ix. But the help that is sent often has a message that they don't want to hear, and is rejected. The prophets themselves are often persecuted, and even killed. Eventually, the prophets drop off entirely. And we see Israel again fall under foreign power, now in the form of Roman rule. A brutal government, grinding them into submission. Messiahs come and go. Uprisings come and go. Rome crushes these. Radio silence from upstairs. For hundreds of years.
- x. It appears to many that this is the end. Israel has not been successful as God's servant in facilitating the re-entry of the Kingdom of God in human history, and the restoration of justice and order of the World. God seems to have given up on His human project. Israel was supposed to be *a light to the nations* says Isaiah, (*Isaiah 49:6.*), but he notes that, *God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.* " 52:5
- xi. And why was it that Israel simply could not succeed in its vocation? That God's extreme patience, His seemingly unending second chances, His wooing, rebuking, punishing, and pleading were all useless?
 - 1. On the surface it was never obvious, but for those who carefully studied and observed, the fundamental issue became clear. The

problem that was never resolved and continually undermined the whole process was the problem of the human heart. It was evil. Destructive. Held in captivity to darkness, by the adversary.

2. This was the wisdom of the prophets. *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9-10*
- xii. We are at the lowest point in the human story. The gentiles were utterly lost. And despite God's best efforts, the Jews were no better. Satan hasn't just set up shop as the acting ruler of Earth; he seems to be here to stay.
- xiii. However, we are not at the end of the story. And you and I know what happens next, Jesus bursts unto the scene. But before we discuss Jesus's work on behalf of the Kingdom of God, we need to stop and address some confusion that commonly arises when people hear this first part of the story.
 1. People hear all of this and tend to think: "what a gigantic mess! Why did God do it like that...using these people that He knew would mess everything up and fail in the end?" "Why choose Israel?"
 - a. The answer is that, despite appearances to the contrary, the project of Israel was not, in the end, a failure. Israel had a purpose. And its purpose was fulfilled. God fulfilled his purposes for Israel in Jesus, the Jewish messiah.
 - b. "Well, given all the ongoing chaos and loss, why didn't God just send Jesus earlier?" Because humanity wasn't ready yet. *At the right time, God sent His Son, says Galatians (4:4).* "Well, what was so special about that particular time?" Probably a variety of things.
 - i. But especially, this was the right time because the Jews had finally been adequately prepared to receive their Savior. The hard hearts had been softened by millennia of pain. Softened by the countless cycles of sin, misery, turning back, forgiveness, and then more wickedness. The long years of the brutality of failure, of loss. Exile and disappointment. This had all driven home their utter and complete hopelessness to, on their own merits, act as God's representatives. They had finally come to see the absolute futility of their own efforts in righteousness, of living according to the flesh. They could no longer deny *the deceitfulness and desperate sickness of the human heart*. Of their hearts. They were desperate, open, willing to listen to alternatives.
 - c. And so finally, the last crucial preparation step is undertaken. Jesus's cousin John the Baptist is sent, and prepares Jesus's way. "God has heard your cries, and is coming to the rescue! Prepare yourselves to receive your long-awaited Messiah, folks,

He is coming at last.” And when the truth, and the challenge to their hearts, came in the person of Jesus, the soil was ready. Israel had been so extensively humbled, that now at least a few of them were just barely able to start to hear at least some of it...

- i. Jesus could have come earlier. But probably no one would have listened to Him. They were not ready to listen yet.
 - ii. It seems likely that the Jews were the only people who were able to endure all of this, and finally arrive at that point of readiness. And that is why they, in particular, were chosen to re-establish the Kingdom of God on Earth.
- 2. Now, after hearing the story so far, some people might be asking the question in a different way. Instead of asking “why did God choose Israel?” ...They might be asking, “Why, in the first place, did God chose humankind to be His representatives on earth, given the spectacular failure that resulted?”
 - a. After all, Israel was not the only one to fail. Adam and Eve failed. The gentiles failed. Everyone failed.
 - b. But the key thing is to understand that none of this failure surprised God. In fact, God had incorporated these failures into His plan. Just like He had incorporated the victories into His plan.
 - c. God allowed all this sin and folly, all these wrong turns in the road, because He knew that He could have His cake and eat it too. God knew He could have His creation beautiful, perfect AND He could have it ruled by a free humanity. But that is not possible you say, because humanity invariably rules poorly resulting in in evil and disorder. Think again, because God had a secret. No one knew it, but there was a conspiracy about. The Divine Conspiracy, is what Dallas Willard called it. Yes, things had started off on the wrong foot, but God was working out a grand rescue plan for both the World and for humanity. No one could have guessed, no one saw coming, but He was all the while getting things right back where He wanted them. He had been covertly working out a plan in the background. An ingenious plan, long in reaching fruition.
 - d. The book of Romans is so special because in it, Paul carefully traces out the Divine Conspiracy from beginning to end. He reviews the entire story of the world and especially of Israel, carefully tracing out the finger of God through history, often hidden, but always at work. And when He sees the entire

scope of God's great rescue plan, the brilliance of it, the goodness of it, the beauty of it, Paul just breaks out into this ecstatic poem:

- e. *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!*
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?"
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11: 33-36)
- f. What Paul is so excited about here is this: Human decisions are free and uncoerced. And so, humanity really is writing the history of the world. But working through their free decisions, God is actually the one guiding history. He is in control. And He is leading everything to a wonderful, glorious end. Paul saw that not only the good, but also the wicked actions of God's creatures were consistently getting turned in on themselves. Incredibly, even the vilest evils were being used by God to achieve something beautiful and excellent. And, praise God, we, who were the whole problem in the first place, are, by the mercy of God, the benefactors of this whole plan! And so, Paul pens this poem of celebration, which says basically "this is the greatest possible news! Thank God for His providence!"
- g. God's providence is the basis of our indestructible confidence and hope for our own lives and for this World. Evil, folly, and sin are in every instance undermined by God, no exceptions. Peter Kreeft makes the point that God is the perfect judo wrestler. Through His wisdom and power, evil is turned back on itself. It defeats itself. Evil is always redirected, by God, to a good end.
 - i. It reminds me of the climax and ending of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In the decisive moment, the hero of the story Frodo, as well as the tragic figure of Gollum, find that everything is on the line and squarely up to them. But they both fail in that critical moment and rather than destroying the evil ring of power, they lay claim to it. And yet, as it happens, through these very terrible choices themselves, in a twist of circumstance, the ring does, in fact, end up

destroyed. That is the kind of thing we see as we notice how God acts in human history.

- h. Now we don't always know the specific reasons for God allowing the various particular bad things that happen. But the amazing thing that we see in those few rare times in the Bible when a character gets a peak behind the curtain of their own story is that actually, when they see the whole picture, God has worked everything out for their own good, painful parts included. When Joseph gets this peak behind the scenes, and he sees all the chess pieces of his own life coming together, he tells his brothers, *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.* Genesis 50:20. What a thing to know!
 - i. Please be encouraged to know that it is the same with our lives. Romans says, *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* Romans 8:28. The Bible insists that God is ordering each and every human life. And for anyone who loves and obeys God, their life is going to end up simply marvelous, stupendous, fantastic.
 - j. Even the most horrible and damaging evils cannot get in the way of God's providence. Consider the cross. The cross is the supreme example of God's subversion of evil. The cross was the greatest evil that ever occurred in human history. But out of the cross came the greatest good to ever occur for humanity. And in the end, things didn't turn out too bad for Jesus either, did they? After all, He's doing pretty good up in Heaven, last I heard.
 - k. This is big talk, and exciting. But do we really, deep down, believe this about the human story, I wonder? About our own individual stories? "He's got the whole world, in His hands", as the children's song goes. Sometimes it sure doesn't look that way, when we turn on the news, does it? But look beyond the headlines. Trust the finger of God always at work, never to be bested.
 - l. Nothing that has happened to you, or that will happen to you, good, bad, or otherwise, surprises God. It was all taken into account ahead of time when He made His wonderful plan for your life. The plan that He is right now working out, through the free decisions that you make.
3. But, you say, "hold up there Paul, doesn't that just let everyone off the hook? After all, who cares what we do, bad or good, if God will work it all out in the end?!"

- a. No, God's providence does not let everyone off the hook. Here is why. Adam and Eve didn't have to fail. The Jewish people did not have to fail. Remember that He had asked them not to. He was not depending on their failure. Their failures caused enormous pain and suffering that need not have occurred. Instead, they could have succeeded. And that would have been good. If that had been the case, their success would have been a part of God's plan. The history of the World would have been different. It would have been good.
- b. So, don't give up and think, who cares how I act, God will use it in His plan anyway. Logically, that doesn't follow. The story of Israel that we just went through was not an arbitrary game. These people were not puppets.
- c. Here is Jesus holding both human responsibility and God's providence in tension when discussing Judas. *The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! Matthew 26:24*
 - i. We can see that God knew the evil was coming and He did work it out to a good end, but that doesn't mean Judas was off the hook.
 - ii. Our choices matter. There is a war going on. Things are at stake. We can be part of the Divine Conspiracy, His Grand Plan of healing and restoration, or we can be an agent of profound harm and loss in this world. That is the significance and the responsibility of each human life.

D. Let's summarize this talk.

- a. We discussed that we must read the Bible through the correct set of lenses in order to understand it correctly. The correct set of lenses is the way that Jesus saw things. And He saw humanity and the world in terms of their relationship to the Kingdom of God.
- b. In this talk, we traced out the activity of the Kingdom of God in the Old Testament.
- c. We discussed the humanity was given the unique and spectacular role of ruling over God's good creation. That Heaven and Earth were meant to embrace each other in a hug. And that humanity would serve as a connection point, the overlap, between Heaven and Earth.
- d. We saw that humanity was deceived by Satan and did not rule wisely on God's behalf. Instead, they went at things their own way, with disastrous results.
- e. God chose the Jewish people to re-introduce His Kingdom on Earth. However, they failed to fulfill their vocation, being lured by evil and rebellion. Nevertheless, God accomplished His purpose for Israel in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.
- f. We discussed that this is one example of the fact that God's providence always thwarts evil and folly, without overriding human freedom or responsibility.

- g. And that this means that our lives will work out wonderfully in the end, whatever harm or evil befalls us, if we will step under the care and direction of God.

Father, we thank You that You have assigned us such a Nobel and exciting task of ruling over your good creation. And then, even when we were unfaithful in this, You never gave up on us. But in Your great mercy made a way for us to be restored to everything You intended.

We are so grateful.

Amen

Reflection

- What was God's grand intention for humanity? Has His original intention for humanity changed?
- By what method did Satan achieve his rule of Earth?
- What did Israel accomplish that was necessary for the reintroduction of the Kingdom of God on Earth?

Why is it important that we strive for good and fight against evil, even if God will turn all evil toward a good end?