

Jesus the King

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. so. All right, friends, well, let's turn to John's gospel again, if we may, chapter 18.

[1 : 0 3] And I'd like to read again just two verses from that passage that we had a little bit earlier. So John chapter 18, and picking it up from about verse 36. Pilate has just said to Jesus, what have you done? And Jesus answers, my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews, but my kingdom is not from the world. Then Pilate said to him, so you are a king. Jesus answered, you say that I'm a king. For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Pilate said to him, what is truth? Well, our subject this evening is Jesus the king, or the kingship of Jesus. And what I'm trying to do in this sermon, as I've done in one or two recently, is to trace a number of significant historical themes from their Old Testament origins to their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who said of himself, I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets. All roads lead to Rome, or at least they did once upon a time. And all the great themes of the Old Testament lead to Jesus and are explained and fulfilled in him. Now I want to spend quite a bit of the second part of the sermon this evening in these verses from John chapter 18. But before we engage our brains with Pontius Pilate and Jesus, let me do two things. First, to introduce the theme, simply to get our minds into the right kind of groove. And then secondly, to trace briefly the theme of the kingship of God in the Old Testament. So first a few words of introduction.

In the burning deserts of Nevada, in the United States of America, there is a small town called Black Rock, with a population of just a few thousand people, a very little place. But every summer, for a week or two, tens of thousands of people pour into an open space, an open area, close to Black Rock, Nevada, for an event, a happening, which is called Burning Man.

Now the people who go to this event are ordinary men and women who for the rest of the year are leading ordinary lives and doing ordinary jobs in ordinary towns and cities across the United States. But at Black Rock, Nevada, for the duration of this annual gathering, they can behave in any way that they like. There are apparently no rules at this festival. So these people can do whatever they want. They can eat and drink whatever they wish. They can inhale, inject or imbibe any substances that they want to. They can wear any type of clothing or no clothing.

They can be silent or make any type of noise or combination of noises that they wish to make. Now my source of information about this was a radio broadcast a little while ago on Radio 4.

And participants in the Black Rock event were being interviewed for this radio program. And there was one woman who said, one American woman, she said, there is nothing to touch it anywhere.

[4 : 2 5] It is simply wonderful, glorious anarchy. Now the focal point of the event and the reason for its being called Burning Man is the setting alight of an enormous human figure set high on a towering platform, which they call a ziggurat.

And apparently it takes a couple of hours for this platform and the enormous model man to be reduced to ashes. But the spectacle takes place at the end of the celebrations amidst the ecstatic cheering of the massed onlookers.

Now as this broadcast unfolded, it became obvious that the anarchy was modified by a certain degree of organisation. It takes many months apparently to prepare the site and all its facilities.

People have to book in at over \$200 each. You can't just pitch up and hope to be part of it. Now that takes a bit of organising. So there must be a Burning Man office somewhere in the United States with a website and staff to organise the bookings.

Now anarchy in itself is obviously part of what it means to rebel against God. And it may be true, I'm speculating here, but it may be true that the burning of a human figure is also an act of defiance against God because men and women are made in the image of God.

[5 : 50] But what I found most intriguing about this Burning Man event was the fact that anarchy in the end had to be tempered by organisation. For this great anarchy to take place, you had to employ engineers and joiners and plumbers and electricians and office staff.

So when that particular female devotee talked about total glorious anarchy, she wasn't quite facing the facts. Her week of anarchy was the product of months of humdrum administrative work on somebody's part.

Now I suspect that we cannot simply dismiss this American extravaganza as something that bears absolutely no relationship to our own experience of life.

Because isn't it true that in your own house and your own family circle, the forces of anarchy and the forces of organisation are constantly clashing?

It's certainly true in my family. For example, I sometimes look at my youngest daughter, who's only seven years old, so young that she still can't, thankfully, be entrusted with the task of striking a match.

[6 : 58] And yet, as I look at her with all a father's love and devotion, the word that often forms in my mind is the word anarchist. And isn't it true that even those members of St. George's Tron, that you would think of, normally, as the most sensible, quiet, modest, self-effacing and unthreatening people are at times bristling with anarchy.

So those American folk who go to Black Rock, Nevada, find themselves caught between the desire for anarchy on the one hand and the need for good organisation and good order on the other.

And even Christian people, people who have consciously submitted to the rule of Christ, find themselves, at times, wanting to rebel against their master. Isn't that right?

But friends, we need a monarch. We need a ruler. Jesus himself expressed this so powerfully, when at the end of Matthew's Gospel, chapter 9, he was churned up inside, as he looked around at all the crowds of people who were massing around him.

In his view, they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Now, a shepherd's job is to rule the sheep for their good, for their benefit, to keep them on the right path, to lead them to nourishing pastures, to set boundaries and limits to their lives, so as to stop them straying and falling into trouble.

[8 : 28] So we need Jesus to be our sovereign. Without his loving and disciplining rule, we end up somewhere between anarchy and self-rule.

And that is a bit like being somewhere between the frying pan and the fire. Well, so much for introduction. Let's now have a thumbnail sketch of the theme of God's kingship in the Bible.

From Genesis 1 through to Revelation 22, the rule of God is one of the great themes of the Bible, both explicitly stated and implicitly understood.

It wouldn't be true to say that God's rule is never questioned in the Bible. It is cunningly questioned by the devil at several points, and by certain human beings too, who have grown bitter or faithless. But it's one of the great themes of Scripture which pulsates in every artery and every vein of every Bible book. God is king. The Lord reigns.

[9 : 27] And you'll have noticed how many of Jesus' parables begin with the words, the kingdom of heaven is like a man who, or the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, etc., etc.

So the kingly sovereign rule of God is one of the great realities that is constantly pressing itself upon Jesus' mind. His mind is full of it. Think of his first recorded words that we hear in Mark's Gospel, chapter 1.

He says, The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news. Think of the moment when we say goodbye to the Apostle Paul for the last time in the New Testament at the very end of the Acts of the Apostles.

Paul at this stage is a prisoner in Rome, though he's not in solitary confinement, and the very last verse of Acts, Acts 28, 31, says, Boldly and without hindrance, Paul preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

So it's clear that preaching the gospel and preaching the kingdom of God are one and the same thing. To preach the gospel is to preach Jesus, and Jesus is the king.

[10:34] The words Christ and Messiah in Greek and Hebrew respectively mean the anointed one or the king. Now the kingship of Jesus is prepared for us right through the Old Testament from the beginning of Genesis onwards.

In the Garden of Eden, God establishes from the outset what kind of relationship he and mankind are to have together. God is the ruler, and while Adam is given great authority to cultivate the earth and to rule over the animal kingdom, he only does so under the authority of God.

Adam has no independent authority. But independent authority is precisely the thing that Adam makes a bid for as he rebels against God. Adam thinks that he's gaining his freedom, but he ends up enslaved to sin and death.

He's in bondage. And then the whole environment is involved in his rebellion. It yields thorns and thistles from now on. He begins to fight with his wife. One of his sons then murders another of his sons.

He imagined that to be free of God's kingship would be a blessing to him, but it was a curse. It was then, and it is today. And yet, throughout the centuries of Old Testament history, God begins to publish his plan of rescue, at the center of which is the figure of the king.

[12:02] There is no blessing, no salvation, unless Adam's descendants repent of their rebellion and submit to the king, who is also the gracious rescuer.

Now, the people of Israel come into being with Abraham, but it's not until Moses comes, some 500 years later, after Abraham, that God's kingly rule is published in extended written form, that is, in the form of the Ten Commandments and all the detailed law of Moses recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

That big body of law is known as the law of Moses, but it might be better to call it the law of God, because in reality, it is God's way of ruling his people. In the Old Testament law, God is saying to Israel, follow all these laws and commandments and stipulations, and you will live a holy life that is pleasing to me.

Now, friends, I wonder what you make of this idea of law. Do you think of law as forbidding and stern and impersonal? Law can be very impersonal sometimes and unappealing.

Just think, for example, of going to one of our public parks. You know how you go to the park and there's a great big notice board by some parks as you go through the gate with about 173 regulations and bylaws.

[13:25] Has anybody here ever stopped and read through those bylaws? Of course not. Have you any idea what they contain? Neither have I. Quite fun to imagine what they might contain.

You shall not fire shotguns at a passing poodle. Don't push strangers into the river. I don't know what it says, but laws of that type are so unappealing, so stern-looking, that we simply pass by them and pay no attention.

But if we are aware of laws that proceed from somebody who loves us very much, it's a different thing. So at home, for example, if mother says to the children, take off your shoes at the front door, dears, so as not to bring mud onto the carpets, the children might find that a bit irksome, but generally speaking, they will obey that law because it's made by somebody who loves them very much and with whom, at heart, the children want to enjoy a happy relationship.

Now, God's kingly laws are of that latter kind. They're not impersonal bylaws. They're not some bleak moral code that has simply dropped out of a cold sky.

They're regulations for happy, joyful living which proceed from somebody who greatly loves his people and who wants them to live lives that are both holy and happy. Now, that is what the Old Testament law is like.

[14:50] And intriguingly, right at the heart of the Old Testament law in Deuteronomy chapter 17. And you might like to turn this up with me. Deuteronomy chapter 17. There's a section there.

You'll find it if you have a visitor's Bible on page 161. Page 161. And there's this section there which carefully describes the future human king or kings of Israel.

Let me just read this to you. Deuteronomy 17 verse 14. When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around you, you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose.

One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you who is not your brother. Only, he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses since the Lord has said to you, you shall never return that way again.

And he shall not acquire many wives for himself lest his heart turn away nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold. Now that first little section is the negatives.

[16:07] He mustn't do this and he mustn't do that. Become too rich and powerful and so on. Now for the positives. Verse 18. And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law approved by the Levitical priests and it shall be with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and doing them that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers and that he may not turn aside from the commandment either to the right hand or to the left so that he may continue long in his kingdom he and his children in Israel.

Now it's striking here especially in those last few verses that this king of Israel when he comes is to be a man of God's law. It even suggests that he's to write it out with his own hands.

He's to get inky fingers. No good having a scribe. He's got to actually do it himself and then read it day by day so as to fashion his life according to it. Why?

Like king like people. If the king lives by the law of God then he will rule his people accordingly. Now of course Old Testament Israel is fundamentally a theocracy which means that God is the king and ruler.

So this human king has to be seen as an integral part of the theocracy which means that his rule as king is not a contradiction of the rule of God it is to be the channel of the rule of God.

[17:40] So this king by knowing the law of God and following it himself and applying it to his people this king is to facilitate the government of God in the life of Old Testament Israel.

Now what actually happened was of course a very mixed and mostly unsatisfactory story. Saul 200 years or so later became the first king of Israel but he failed because he was repeatedly disobedient to the Lord.

David then followed and despite a particularly serious lapse he proved to be at heart a king who loved the Lord and indeed taught Israel to follow the Lord. Then subsequent kings were a mixture. Many of them were idolaters and Baal worshippers but some led the people well and were godly men. But God had solemnly promised to David and David was on the throne in about 1000 BC God had solemnly promised to David in 1000 BC that there would always be a king of his family line on the throne of Israel in perpetuity.

And yet 400 years or so after King David's death Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians 587 BC and the king of David's blood came to an abrupt and sorry end that kingly line.

[18:59] How was God now going to fulfill his sure promise to David that a king of David's line would rule over the people of God in perpetuity? Well 600 years or so later the angel said to the shepherds today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you.

And just in case these shepherds had a query about this saviour's identity the angels added he is Christ the Lord and the shepherds knew then because they understood that the Christ was the king of David's line.

Jesus the Christ then is the promised king of Israel and his role is to rule the people of God according to the law of God channeling God's law into their lives so that they can live a life that is holy and happy and pleasing to God.

Now the question is what kind of kingdom is Jesus' kingdom? So here we turn to John chapter 18 verse 36 I'll just read these key words again Jesus says to Pilate my kingdom is not of this world he defines it negatively there my kingdom is not of this world I'd like in the rest of our time this evening to try to unpack a little bit of the meaning of that tremendous sentence when we use the word kingdom we generally use it in a geographical and political sense so we talk for example of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia or the kingdom of the United Kingdom meaning a defined piece of land with its monarch and its people now that is not the way that Jesus uses it here in John 18 this word translated kingdom in verse 36 carries the sense of regal authority or kingly power he's talking here about his position as king rather than about some geographical area my position as king he's saying my kingly authority is not given to me by any worldly institution now Pontius Pilate the Roman governor is worried by Jesus very worried he knows that Jesus is known as the king of the Jews but Pilate can only think in terms of military and political power he has no conception of

God or of heaven so when this Jesus is brought into him as a prisoner Pilate has only one concern on his mind he's saying to himself is this man a threat to the Roman Empire is he raising an army with the intention of liberating Israel from its Roman masters am I the governor going to have to send to Rome for reinforcements in order to quell some messy uprising those are the kind of questions that are worrying Pilate so in verse 36 Jesus is immediately setting Pilate's heart to rest on that score no he's saying my kingdom is not that kind of kingdom and look how he goes on in verse 36 if it were my servants would be fighting to prevent my arrest by the Jews but now my kingdom is from another place so Pilate is baffled in one sense no doubt he feels relieved to think that Jesus is not about to start some military uprising and yet

[22 : 31] Jesus is still claiming to be a king so what kind of a king is this who has neither soldiers nor arms at his beck and call let's look under this now look at this under three headings first this world doesn't understand or recognize the kingdom of Jesus the way Jesus phrases his first sentence in verse 36 is very telling my kingdom is not of this world this world and my kingdom are chalk and cheese oil and water they're different entities all together this world cannot understand the kingdom of heaven now we need to grasp what the phrase this world means in the mouth of Jesus he means by this world the totality of human life as organized without reference to God you might say unbelieving human society now many people who live in this world do recognize the kingship of Jesus obviously every Christian recognizes his kingdom and his kingship but Jesus is not talking about Christians here by this world he remains he means everybody else the remainder of human society now this means that we if we're Christians we mustn't be surprised if when we talk to our friends about Jesus we're often met with blank incomprehension when we talk about Christ to friends who are not Christians have you noticed that very often they want to be friendly to us and so they will talk about the trappings of religion but they will avoid at all costs talking about the kingship of Jesus particularly as applied to themselves so you might spend five minutes or ten minutes talking to your friend maybe giving your testimony telling your friend about what it means to you to live under the kingship of Jesus and your friend might reply do you have a mother and toddler group at your church or they might say you know

I think back to my young days and I used to love going to the cathedral for carol service at Christmas and you think to yourself these are the trappings of Christianity but it's not what I've been talking about at all now let's not be taken aback or surprised when we meet that kind of incomprehension after all friends we were all like it ourselves once upon a time and it's no credit to us that we came to Christ the Lord who opened our eyes is in the business of opening eyes and we can pray for our friends and ask the Lord to bring them under his kingly rule so this world doesn't understand or recognize the kingdom of Jesus many folk who are outside there on the streets now if they were to come in here and look at us now they would shake their heads in amazement secondly the kingdom that we preach is an unseen kingdom when we preach Jesus when we explain to our friends what it means to be a Christian we're inviting our friends to become subjects of the unseen kingdom and members of the everlasting kingdom of heaven now we will see the king and the kingdom with our own eyes in the end and our eyes at last shall see him through his own redeeming love so we will see him but while we're still living on earth we can't and don't so we're asking our friends who are not Christians to believe and trust and serve an invisible king now the problem with that is that we can feel certain pressures from our friends who are not Christians like Pontius Pilate they're baffled at the idea that there might be an unseen kingdom so whether they mean to or not they can put us under pressure to change the gospel message so that it is presented in terms that this world is able to understand or to see let me give an example of this in religious broadcasting now thankfully one does sometimes hear faithful and good presentations of the gospel on radio and television but I wonder if you agree with me when I say that the majority of radio and television broadcasting in the name of Christianity broadcasts a message which is compatible with the agenda of this world

I don't know if you perhaps you folk are all off to work very early in the morning but do you ever listen to Thought for the Day on Radio 4 at about quarter to eight on a weekday morning now sometimes Thought for the Day which lasts for about three or four minutes is presented by representatives of Islam or Sikhism or Judaism and therefore you wouldn't expect to hear the gospel from such speakers but most of the speakers I should say three out of four roughly are members of the Christian churches and yet nine times out of ten possibly nineteen times out of twenty they allow the world's concerns to shape the content of their broadcast so they will speak

typically about environmental concerns pollution and global warming and so on or economic problems the divide between north and south or between rich and poor or perhaps medical ethical questions questions of social justice and so on now don't misunderstand me I'm not saying that such questions have no place in Christian thinking nor am I saying that the Bible doesn't address them it certainly does the Bible of course speaks to those questions with greater weight than any other authority we need to think about them because the Bible teaches us to but even more important in the Bible's view are the questions that concern the kingdom which the world cannot see questions about salvation and judgment about heaven and hell about repentance and faith about sinners in need of rescue from the judgment of God what it means to be a Christian what it means not to be a Christian and yet those questions are very rarely addressed in that kind of religious broadcast because

I think the reason is that the speakers feel if I address that kind of thing millions of fingers all over the country are going to be switching for the off button on the radio and people are going to say I don't want to listen to that sort of stuff it doesn't engage with real life it's pie in the sky but in truth the kingdom that is not of this world is the most real reality that there is that is the kingdom that remains when London and Glasgow have become dust and ashes we preach an unseen kingdom it was a formative moment for me about 15 or 20 years ago I was down in London at a conference very similar to the one we've just had here in the last few days conference for ministers and I was listening to Dick Lucas preaching on 1 Timothy and he said it was a kind of throwaway remark almost in brackets he said of course the focus of Paul's gospel is primarily eschatological meaning beyond this world beyond the end of this world the focus of Paul's gospel is primarily eschatological now that shaft went into my heart

I really felt the force of it it's equally true of Jesus' gospel as it is of Paul's the gospel is God's good news announcement that there is eternal salvation in heaven for all who submit to the rule of King Jesus now of course this gospel has massive implications for medicine and politics and economics and environmental studies and much else but at heart it is a summons to membership of the eternal and unseen kingdom my kingdom says Jesus is not of this world so the kingdom that we preach is an unseen kingdom now third and last we need therefore to train ourselves in what membership of this kingdom means one of the problems that Christian people face is that while we're destined for heaven we're still living very much in this world and this world's standards are rubbing up against us day after day and are constantly trying to insinuate themselves into our thinking this is why for example

[30 : 53] Paul has to say to the Colossians in chapter 3 set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God set your minds on things above not on earthly things now the plain fact is that you and I have to engage with this world and its ways of thinking every day and we have to put a lot of mental energy into our dealings with this world we have to if we're to survive we have to think about things like shopping and running the car and keeping the house in good repair when the water starts coming down through your roof you have to do something about it we have to think about money and the education of our children we even have to buy clothes that's a very gruesome way of any person spending their time but it has to be seen to doesn't it and as we engage with the world day after day inevitably the world's values are battling with the values that the Bible is growing inside our hearts and minds so the result is that we can quickly forget that we belong to the unseen kingdom we're members of the unseen kingdom if we're Christ's but we live in the all too visible kingdom of this world and sometimes the way of life we live is hardly distinguishable from the way of life of people who are not Christians

I sometimes picture my mind which I guess is an ordinary mind like yours I sometimes picture my mind as having a dial inside it with a pointer a pointer or measuring finger which moves backwards and forwards from left to right and at one end of the dial there are the values of Jesus' kingdom and at the other end of the dial there are the values of this world and my mind is constantly going backwards and forwards from one to the other and I'm sometimes shocked at how quickly the pointer can move from the right end of the dial to the wrong end of the dial for example I can be out at a Christian meeting a really good uplifting Christian meeting where I've been greatly encouraged I've perhaps heard some great preaching I've been praying with others and singing and we've been encouraging one another and thinking gospel thoughts and then I hop into the car and drive away or walk down the street away from it all and in less than five minutes

I'm thinking road rage thoughts as somebody cuts across me in front or if I'm walking down the streets here I start thinking greedy thoughts as I look into all the shops with all their goodies spread out in front of me and as I see all the people walking up and down the street this happened to me just this last week I'd been at a terrific meeting here at the minister's assembly I walked out of the back door and there I was in Buchanan Street and I thought to myself as I looked at the depressed faces the unhappy faces of thousands of people I thought how can these folk ever become Christians what a faithless thought that was so the dial on my mind had gone straight over like that in just a moment swinging from the values of the Lord Jesus to the hopelessness of worldly thinking now I don't assume that I'm alone in this experience what is the answer the answer must be to see ourselves as being constantly in training our nature is always going to take us back to the world because the world is very much inside us it isn't just out there it's in our own hearts and our own nature so daily almost hourly we need to make use of the methods and means that will bring that mental pointer back to the values of the kingdom of Jesus so we need friends if possible to be in touch with other Christians every day because their friendship is such a spur to godly living Hebrews 3.13 encourage one another daily do you know that great verse it means that God doesn't trust us to go for 24 hours without encouraging each other we need each other's encouragement the idea of going for a whole week and not seeing any Christians is not what we were made for praying that's something we could do not simply daily but many times during the day even if some of those times are very brief as we're doing other things and let's remember that this world can never teach us about the unseen kingdom this world can only teach us what godlessness is like to learn about the kingdom which is not of this world we need information that comes to us from outside this world namely the scriptures which come to us from heaven and drinking in those scriptures thirstily will keep our pointer moving over to the right end of the dial so two final very brief things first it's a wonderful thing a wonderful thing to be reigned over by King Jesus to be a part of his kingdom to be lifted out of that cocktail of anarchy and self-rule which characterizes the unregenerate world so friends let's prize his kingship tremendously in our lives let's exult in it develop its reach and joyfully go about our daily business as subjects of the unseen kingdom and secondly let's keep on praying and trusting praying faithfully for our friends and our loved ones who are not yet believers that they too will become members of that great eternal kingdom my kingdom says Jesus is not of this world let's bow our heads and we'll pray all glory be to you Lord Jesus that God the Father has entrusted you with this role as the king indeed all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to you and our prayer dear Lord Jesus is that you will help us to welcome your kingly rule in our hearts and lives more and more help us especially dear Lord in those parts of life where we wrestle with the the temptations of the world most severely and we pray that you'll help each of us to make growth and development and to see your power being expanded into those parts of our hearts and lives where it needs to be and our prayer is that more and more you will be pleased with us as a result and we pray that the effects of your kingly rule may be more and more clearly seen by those who are not yet believers and that you will bless us and the ministry of our church and many churches in reaching out to those who are not yet part of your kingdom and all these things we ask for your dear name's sake

[37 : 55] Amen Amen