

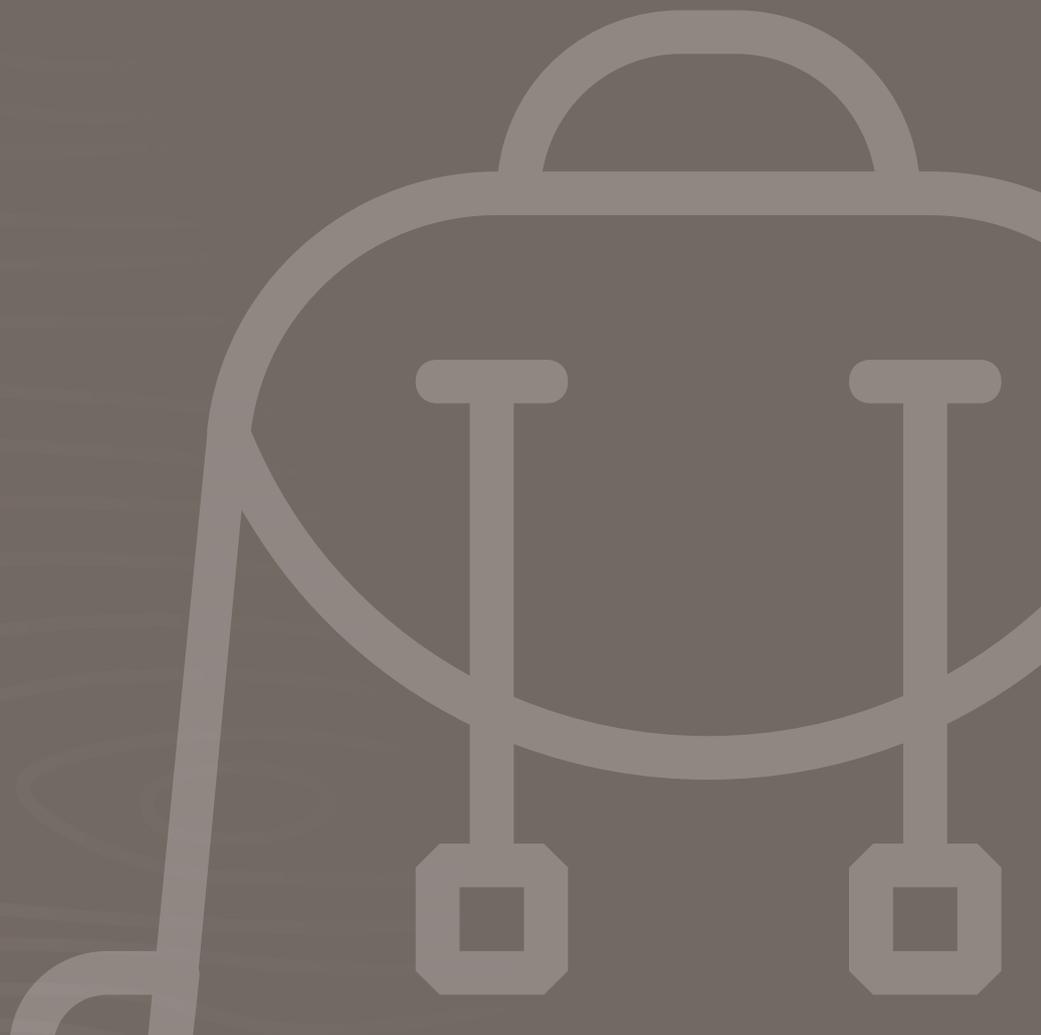
Bible

Character

Community

World

*Foundation-level*  
**Bible Truth  
in Missional  
Perspective**



## Unit 6.

# The reign of Christ in a rebellious world

## Introduction

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

We resent authority in our culture. We view it with suspicion. We have come to equate freedom with minimum intervention from authorities. State, church, family and education authorities are all viewed as threats to liberty. In this cultural context, the proclamation of God's reign as good news sounds strange and alien (Mark 1:14-15). It is difficult for people to understand how the reign of God can be good news at all. Rather, it is seen as the antithesis of freedom.

## Reflection

Think of recent examples from your own life of people rejecting authority or expressing a commitment to self-rule. Identify examples of both unbelievers and Christians.

In Daniel 7 the Son of Man comes to the Ancient of Days in heaven to receive authority:

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

The explanation is this:

But the court shall sit in judgement, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end. And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him. (Daniel 7:26-27)

The power of human kings and empires will be taken away and given to the saints. The Son of Man represents the people of God and exercises rule on their behalf. The New Testament uses the language of Daniel to describe Jesus. He is the Son of Man who represents God's people and who reigns on their behalf. At his ascension, he came on the

clouds of heaven into the presence of God, where he was given authority by the Father to reign over the earth. Jesus reigns from heaven. All authority has been given to him.

## Understanding the kingdom of God

The Greek word for 'kingdom' refers both to the 'rule' and to the 'realm' in which that rule is exercised. Jesus uses the word 'kingdom' in both senses, both as an activity and as a realm. It is where God's will is actively exercised and willingly obeyed. In its fullest sense, the kingdom of God refers to the future rule of God over a new humanity in a new creation. However, when people respond to the gospel and submit to the rule of God, they enter the kingdom in the present — and, moreover, they also experience a foretaste of the blessings of his future reign ahead of time through the Holy Spirit.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry by announcing the coming of God's kingdom and calling upon people to repent (1:14–15). Mark shows us the authority of Jesus over people (1:16–20), in teaching (1:22), over evil spirits (1:23–27) and over sickness (1:29–34). Jesus even claims authority to forgive sins (2:1–12). He exercises authority over the natural world (4:35–41) and over death (5:21–24, 35–43). But in Mark 2–3 we are given a different series of stories: a sequence which describes the opposition and rejection that Jesus faces. The teaching of chapter 4 takes place "on another occasion" (4:1). In other words, it is linked with chapters 2–3 not chronologically, but by the theme of the kingdom of God. The teaching of chapter 4 explains the events of chapters 2–3. The stories of chapters 2–3 are stories of rejection. The Jews expected the Messiah to come in power and glory. So if the message of Jesus is rejected, how can it be right when he proclaims the coming of God's kingdom?

### Exercise

Read Mark 4:1-34. How does the kingdom come? How will the kingdom come?

## The kingdom comes secretly

The answer is that the kingdom comes secretly. The Jews expected the kingdom would come in triumph. God would sweep away his enemies in a blaze of glory and power. In reality, the secret of the kingdom is that even though this has not happened, the kingdom has come. The coming of the kingdom is a secret given only to some (Mark 4:11). It has come in a hidden way. In Mark 4:30–31 Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. A mustard seed was the proverbial epitome of small. In the same way, the kingdom of God appears small and insignificant. Furthermore, it is not simply the case that the kingdom comes secretly: it is actually *opposed*. That is the exact opposite of what we expect. We expect the kingdom of God to come in glory and triumph, but here the kingdom is despised and rejected. In a sense, though it is hidden, it is revealed in persecution, opposition and rejection. It is seen in an opposite form: in the form of rejection.

## The kingdom comes graciously

Mark begins his Gospel with a quote from Malachi. It speaks of a forerunner who will prepare the way for the coming of God. This is what it says in context:

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. (Malachi 3:1–2)

The people complain: “Where is the God of justice?” (Malachi 2:17). Malachi says: God is coming, but when he comes, who can endure his coming? When the God of justice comes in triumph and judgement, he will come down your street. He will judge you, and who can stand? This is the dilemma of God’s people: we long for God to intervene in justice and establish his rule. However, his coming will be *our* defeat and *our* judgement. God’s solution is that the coming of God’s kingdom takes place in two stages. He comes first secretly and graciously. There is judgement, but the King is the one who is judged. Judgement takes place at the cross and it falls on the King. He dies in our place. The kingdom comes first in grace.

John the Baptist announced that “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matthew 3:10). Yet when Jesus comes, the axe does not fall. John is not vindicated, but imprisoned. So John the Baptist sends messengers to Jesus to ask if he is truly the Christ. Jesus responds by saying: “And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”” (Matthew 11:4–6). Jesus’ response is an allusion to Isaiah 35:4–6 and 61:1–2. Jesus is portraying himself as the fulfilment of the messianic promises. His miracles demonstrate that he is the one who brings God’s promised future. Interestingly, Jesus has edited his sources. Both passages in Isaiah speak of judgement, but Jesus does not mention God’s coming “with vengeance; with the recompense of God” (Isaiah 35:4), nor “the day of vengeance of our God” (Isaiah 61:2). The kingdom has come, but not the day of vengeance — not yet. John the Baptist had said that the coming Christ would come with “his winnowing fork is in his hand ... the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:11–12). But first the kingdom comes graciously.

## **The kingdom comes through God’s word**

As Jesus is opposed by the leaders of Israel and his own family (Mark 3:20–21), he chooses the twelve apostles to form a new Israel (matching the twelve tribes of Israel). In 3:31–35 Jesus calls into being a new family — the new family of God. In the midst of this opposition and rejection, a new community is born. The kingdom comes through a new community, a new people, a new family. However, notice that what forms this new community and what marks them out is the word of Jesus — the gospel: “For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” (3:35). The sower in the parable of the sower sows the word (4:14). This is how the kingdom comes: through the word of God. This is how the kingdom is advanced: through the sowing of God’s word. The growth of the kingdom comes when people “hear the word” of God and “accept it” (4:20). The new family is built around those who do God’s will. The new Israel is constituted by the preaching of the gospel (3:14). The kingdom grows when people hear and accept the word of God. Think of Mark’s readers. Jesus is gone, ascended into heaven, and so they are asking themselves, “How is the King present?” Mark’s response is this: through his word.

From creation onwards, God has ruled through his word. And today he continues to rule through the word of the gospel. Through the gospel we call on people to submit to the rule of God and his Messiah. As the Great Commission makes clear, the rule of Christ is exercised through the gospel.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

All authority has been given to Christ and so he sends us into the world to call the nations to obedience. It is through the preaching of the gospel that Jesus is wielding his sceptre in the world. Through the gospel we command people to submit to Jesus. Through the gospel judgement is passed on people who continue to reject him. We are ambassadors bringing a pronouncement from the coming King. We are like heralds going to the citizens of a country to announce that a king is coming who rightly claims their allegiance. Those who currently rule them are tyrants and usurpers. If they acknowledge Christ’s lordship over them, they will experience his rule as blessing, life and salvation. If they reject him, they will experience him as their conqueror and judge. We must deliver this message graciously and gently: we cannot manipulate or force anyone to repent (1 Peter 3:16), but one day all people will bow the knee before Jesus and confess him as Lord (Philippians 2:9–11).<sup>33</sup>

## **The kingdom will come in glory**

So far we have seen that the kingdom of God comes secretly. It is hidden. The Jews expected the kingdom to come in glory, but in Jesus it comes in a hidden way, a persecuted way. The Jews expected the kingdom to come in power and judgement, but in Jesus it comes in a gracious way through the gospel. It comes as the gift of salvation and the call to repentance. But the Jews were not wrong in their expectations. The kingdom *will* come in glory and power and judgement. We should not think the secret, gracious presence of the kingdom means the kingdom will not come in triumph. Despite the ordinariness of life, the “harvest has come” (Mark 4:26–29). Once the seed is sown, the harvest will come. Life goes on. Day follows night. We sleep, we get up, we get tired and go to bed again. Life just seems to go round and round. Yet all the time we can be sure of this: God’s kingdom is coming, and *the harvest will be great* (4:30–32). Despite its small beginnings, the harvest will be great. The kingdom may be secret. It may be hidden. It may be opposed, but make no mistake: it will come in glory. It will fill the earth. It will offer refuge to people throughout the world. It will triumph. The kingdom is secret and concealed, but one day it will be revealed and disclosed (4:21–22). One day it will come in glory and power. So, says Jesus, get ready by hearing and accepting the word — the gospel of the kingdom (4:23–25).

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<sup>33</sup> See Chester, T., *From Creation To New Creation: Understanding the Bible Story* (Paternoster, 2003), 93-131

## Reflection

Suppose a well is dug in a village bringing clean water for the first time, or a drug addict is rehabilitated in the context of a loving community.

- Is this an advance of the kingdom of God?
- Is it an act of divine salvation?
- Does it make a difference if the drilling team or the drug addict's community are Christians?

Or suppose an oppressive regime is toppled or a piece of legislation is passed that improves the lot of the poor. Can we say that God's kingdom has come in some way?

The kingdom of God cannot be separated from the gospel. The Spirit mediates the coming reign of God through the gospel so that Christ rules now by his word of promise. Two major documents reflecting on the relationship between the gospel and social engagement are the Lausanne Covenant and the Grand Rapids Report. As the Lausanne Covenant says, political liberation is not salvation.<sup>34</sup> The Grand Rapids Report speaks of salvation as “new life ... new community ... new world”, but the new community is the church and the new world is spoken of only in future terms.<sup>35</sup> Although the Report acknowledges that some found the use of salvation language appropriate for the emergence of justice and peace in the wider community, it continued, “most of us, however, consider that is more prudent and biblical to reserve the vocabulary of salvation for the experience of reconciliation with God through Christ and its direct consequences”.<sup>36</sup> John Stott insists that “the kingdom of God in the New Testament is a fundamentally *Christological* concept, and that as such it may be said to exist only where Jesus Christ is consciously acknowledged as Lord”, although “the righteous standards of the kingdom ... may to some extent spill over into the world as a result of Christian influence”.<sup>37</sup>

We must not confuse the ultimate hope of a new creation with proximate hopes: hopes of change in our neighbourhood, society or world. Too often the language of Christian hope is used of hopes for change in history. Christians are people of hope, it is said, and such hope can energise movements for social change. However, this confuses biblical hope for a new creation with hope for a change in society. It cannot be sustained in the light of the biblical evidence. The eschatological future hope is certain and arises from the promise of God. It does not disappoint us (Romans 5:5). Historical hopes *are* susceptible to disappointment.

God is sovereignly working throughout the world. This is what the Reformed tradition calls ‘common grace’. “so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes

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<sup>34</sup> The Lausanne Covenant, ‘Paragraph 5: Christian Social Responsibility’ in Stott J., (ed.), *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974-1989* (Paternoster, 1996), 24

<sup>35</sup> The Grand Rapids Report, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment* (Paternoster, 1982), 28

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 29

<sup>37</sup> Sider, R., and Stott, J., *Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice* (Grove Books, 1977), 23

his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:45). Because God is active in the world, we can attempt social reform, but society will not be redeemed until Christ returns.

Some Christians see advances in social justice in history as the coming of God’s kingdom, but in the New Testament the kingdom comes through the gospel as people submit to God’s word. God’s kingdom will be supreme over all things when Christ returns, but in the meantime it comes secretly and graciously through God’s word. The social dimension of salvation is anticipated in history in the life of the Christian community.



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