**GOSPEL AND KINGDOM SERIES**

**Part 3 THE COVENANT AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

**The covenant**

The creation of humanity in the image of God distinguished humanity from the animals. Humanity was created in fellowship with God and with dominion over the rest of the created order. There is an obviously unique relationship between God and man although humanity is never more than a creature and as such is totally dependent on the Creator. There are real limits set by the Creator. He is sovereign but He is also good, establishing His creature-man in a relationship that brings both rule and blessing. God is ultimate ruler and humanity His subject.

The heart of the problem

Humanity’s sin is his attempt to renounce His ‘creaturehood’ and to assert His independence of God, the creator. The consequent judgement (in the ‘fall’ of man) establishes a break in the relationship between humanity and God. The world becomes a fallen world for fallen humanity to live in (Romans 8:19,20). But just as a fallen creation still reflects God’s glory (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20) so humanity still reflects something of God’s image. Even in the fall, God’s grace permits the world to continue, and He sustains an order in which humanity may live and multiply.

The measure of God’s grace is not only the ‘common grace’ shown in the ongoing universe, it is seen in the declaration of the purpose to redeem a people to be the people of God. The relationship between God and humanity as it once existed in Eden provides some indication of God’s intention for His new race of people.

The covenant with Abraham

God’s promise to Abraham (Genesis 12ff) provides one of the central themes of the Bible. The form of the promise (described as a covenant) was essentially an agreement between two parties. But this is not like a human covenant involving the mutual consent of equals. This is a covenant dispensed by the gracious act of God who has been greatly offended and sinned against. The covenant is an agreement in the sense that the recipient must agree to any terms that may be proposed. The covenant flows from the grace of God, from His undeserved favour.

God’s promises to Abraham involved:

(a) a people who are His descendants

(b) a land in which they live

(c) a relationship with God in that they shall be His people

This covenant relationship meant they would be called the people of God. Every later expression of this relationship stems from the original covenant. This promise to the forefathers of Israel (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) becomes the basis of the relationship of all the people of God in the Bible. Even in the New Testament, the concept of being the children of Abraham is transferred to those who by faith embrace the gospel (Galatians 3:29). Every Christian is a son or daughter of Abraham.

**The Kingdom of God**

The content of the covenant, like the goal of redemption, is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is best understood in terms of the relationship of ruler to subjects. There is a King who rules, a people who are ruled and a sphere where this rule is recognised as taking place. Understood like this, the Kingdom of God involves:

1. God’s people
2. In God’s place
3. Under God’s rule

Even though the term ‘Kingdom of God’ does not occur in the Old Testament, the basic idea is woven through the whole of the Old Testament.

It first appears in the Garden of Eden. Here Adam and Eve live in willing obedience to the word of God and through that word, to God’s rule. In this setting the Kingdom was destroyed by the sin of man. The rest of Scripture is about the restoration of a people to be willing subjects of the perfect rule of God.

The promise to Abraham

In Genesis 12:1-3 God promised the patriarchs that their descendants (God’s people) would possess the Promised Land (God’s place) and be the people of God, under His authority (God’s rule). He would do this through a great redemptive act by rescuing Israel out of captivity in Egypt.

The Monarchy

Israel’s ‘golden age’ came with the period of the Monarchy when northern and southern kingdoms were still united as one nation. The political, economic and religious achievement of the kingdom of David and Solomon fulfils in a very tangible way the promises to Abraham. This kingdom is not perfect but it displays all the elements of the Kingdom of God.

A pattern is emerging: the revelation of God’s Kingdom begins with a very basic promise to Abraham and then moves through a process of fulfilment which includes a redemptive experience (the exodus) and climaxes in a fulfilment (the monarchy).

The prophetic Kingdom

Solomon’s kingdom fails and this serves to underline that the historical process from Abraham to Solomon always fell short of the glory of God’s true Kingdom, even though it revealed the nature of that Kingdom. In the face of the judgement on Israel’s sin (climaxing in the destruction of the nation and deportation to Babylon), the prophets continued to restate the promises of the Kingdom as something to be fulfilled in the future.

The return from the Babylonian exile failed to produce the Kingdom foretold by the prophets (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel). The post-exilic prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, continued to direct the eyes of God’s people away from present history to the great future day when the perfect and everlasting Kingdom of God would be revealed. The Old Testament ends on the note of expectation and promise.

But there is no fulfilment in sight as the Jews enter nearly 4oo years of prophetic silence between the two Testaments. The Jews developed a variety of solutions to this time of silence. Amongst other groups, the Pharisees arose in this period with a strong message of a return to the monarchy and the freedom of Israel from continuing foreign oppression.

The gospel Kingdom

Jesus declared ‘*The time has come. The kingdom of God is near’* (Mark 1:14), thus introducing the gospel as the bringing near of the Kingdom. What it means for the Kingdom to be ‘near’ rather than fulfilled, will emerge as the New Testament expounds the gospel. Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises, but at this stage, the fact that God’s Kingdom will triumph can only be received by faith. When Christ appears at His second coming, the saints of God will appear with Him and the eternal Kingdom will be made plain (Colossians 3:4).

So we have:

The Kingdom **established** in **Eden**

Broken by **the Fall**

God’s redemptive act: Noah

The Kingdom **promised** through **Abraham**

God’s redemptive act: the Exodus

The Kingdom **foreshadowed** through **David and Solomon**

God’s redemptive act: prophetic promise of salvation

The Kingdom **at hand** in **Christ**

God’s redemptive act: Christ’s life, death and resurrection

The Kingdom **consummated** through **the return of Christ**

The history of redemption is more than a gradual unfolding of the truths of the Kingdom. It is a series of stages in which the Kingdom and the way into it are revealed. In each stage all the essential ingredients of the Kingdom are given expression, with each successive stage building on the former until the full revelation of the gospel is achieved.

This study is essentially a summary of ‘The Covenant and the Kingdom of God’ by Graeme Goldsworthy in ‘*Gospel and Kingdom’* (The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1987)