

The Government On His Shoulder

Study One — The Clash of Kingdoms

Our theme for these four studies comes from a prophecy of Christ given to Isaiah.

‘For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be on his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this’ (Isa. 9:6-7).

When a person believes in Christ, they find they have not just found a system of belief but a power (1 Cor. 4:20). They are like the man who heard that ivory came from India, went there, and found it, but discovered that it was attached to an elephant! Jesus did not come to provide an alternative religion but to assert God’s reign over his creation and to bring people into its benefits.

Jesus came to fulfill this prophecy and announced, ‘The kingdom of God is at hand’ (Matt. 4:17), or ‘has come upon you’ (Matt. 12:28) or is ‘in the midst of you’ (Luke 17:20-21). It was the subject of his teaching to the apostles after his resurrection (Acts 1:3) and the message they took to the nations (Acts 20:25). Preaching the kingdom is effectively the same as preaching that Jesus Christ is Lord (Acts 2:36; cf. Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

This announcement of Jesus and the apostles was good news for Israel but it did arouse the anger of those who were opposed to God interfering with the balance of powers they had negotiated for themselves. So, we begin this series by noting the clash of kingdoms—the reign of God being exercised by Christ, and the kingdom of this world (cf. Rev. 11:15).

The world thinks God is irrelevant, or worse, but Christian believers know he is not only relevant but in charge. It is a kingdom into which we have been transferred (Col. 1:13) so that we understand its dynamics (Heb. 6:4-5).

In these days of change we need to see ‘the Lord, high and lifted up,’ as Isaiah did after 50 years of good and settled governance by Uzziah (Isa. 6:1). We need the certainty and confidence that comes from knowing that the government is on Christ’s shoulder. It really matters who we think is in charge. To all appearances, human government and agencies like science, education, health services and welfare secure our wellbeing, and if this is all we have, we may well react with anger or despair when things go against us. But Christians believe God reigns and that he has sent his Son to establish this government. It is to him that we must look. This keeps us from despair or anger and equips us to see and to produce what is eternal in our present situations.

Is the reign of Christ a ‘spiritual’ authority operating in a different sphere to our ordinary world—a parallel universe? Jesus answers this question when confronted by Pilate. Christ’s kingship is not from (lit. ‘out of’) the world (John 18:36-37), that is, it does not rely on polls, or arise by use of force, or the maintaining of a tradition. It is valid and dynamic, effective and final because God gives him this authority, and it is the ultimate authority operating in the seen world. He says Pilate has no authority over him unless it is given to him from above (John 19:11). In other words, the kingdom is not from this world but is certainly operating in this world. All who are of the truth come to God’s King.

If we understand that the government of all things is on Christ’s shoulder, we have a magnificent vision of the world and its future. This is what we need to explore and understand and be upheld by. God is not interested in being in charge if that only means he gets his own way. His kingdom is about people knowing him and sharing with him in the project he has planned. Paul says the kingdom of God is not about minor issues like what you are allowed to do or not do. It is about ‘righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 14:17).

So how do we live in this world, governed as it is by its own passions and pride (1 John 2:16), when we live under God's greater authority? We could say that we live in the overlap of two kingdoms, the first that is seen and the other that God is building now but will be revealed later. We say 'overlap' because the powers of that kingdom are already present in this world and are the controlling factor in all that happens in this world. On the other hand, the world does not like a rival power and so moves to eradicate all evidence of the validity and effectiveness of God's reign. We turn to Daniel to see this in operation among God's people Israel.

The experience and example of Daniel

Daniel is a POW or slave in Babylon, probably a eunuch with no chance of restoration to his old life in Israel. He has already come to the attention and appreciation of Nebuchadnezzar because he can interpret dreams (2:47). Daniel has told him of the power of his God (2:28) and in some way, the king seems to have accepted this. Now, in chapter four, Daniel lets this king tell his own story, apart from the section describing his madness (vv. 28-33).

Nebuchadnezzar is the king responsible for bringing the Davidic monarchy to an end—the monarchy God has promised will last forever. Here is a 'head to head' contest of rival powers—of the God who makes promises on the one hand, with what man does in his pride on the other.

The king is comfortable or at ease (v. 4) in the world of his making. But then, he can be quickly alarmed by a dream (v. 5). He manifests a similar brittleness in the earlier story by being quickly angry when no one can tell him his dream (2:10-12). Martin Luther says,

"There is nothing smaller and more ignored than a dry leaf lying on the ground, crawled on by worms and unable to protect itself from the dust... But when the *moment* comes, horse, rider, lance, armor, king, princes all the strength of the army and all power is frightened by its rustling. Are we not fine people? We have no fear of God's wrath and stand proudly, but yet are terrified and flee before the wrath of an impotent dry leaf. And such rustling of the leaf makes the world too small and becomes our wrathful God whom we otherwise poo-poo and defy in heaven and on earth' (quoted in Geoffrey Bingham, *Sweeter than Honey*, p. 42).

The king dreams about his own greatness (vv. 10-12)—a benevolent, protecting greatness, but still, full of pride. Ezekiel speaks in similar terms to the king of Egypt (Ezek. 31). In contrast to this, Jesus uses this same picture to describe the true protective canopy that is created by the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:31-32). It is a matter of public record that the attempts of world power to care for their subjects do not necessarily remain benevolent but often become self-serving. Jesus' use of this image tells us that God's reign is the true provider for the world.

Here in the West, we have numerous community 'assets' that can be traced to Biblical teaching and Christian altruism. Among them are a reason to value every person, a model of sacrificial service, a law that is above all governance, a sense that we are heading somewhere and have a reason to live, and many more. Even some secular or atheistic thinkers have seen the difficulty we have placed ourselves in.

"When George Orwell pondered the loss of religious faith in Europe (which he had once applauded), he rued the results: "For two hundred years we had sawed and sawed at the branch we were sitting on. And in the end, much more suddenly than anyone had foreseen our efforts were rewarded and down we came. But unfortunately there had been a little mistake. The thing at the bottom was not a bed of roses after all it was a cesspool full of barbed wire.... It appears that amputation of the soul *isn't* just a simple surgical job like having your appendix out. The wound has a tendency to go septic'" (quoted in Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace*, p. 145).

More recently, Tom Holland, a humanist historian, writes: "Today, even as belief in God fades across the West, the countries that were once collectively known as Christendom continue to bear the stamp of the two-millennia-old revolution that Christianity represents. It is the principal reason why, by and large, most of us who live in post-Christian societies still take for granted that it is nobler to suffer than to inflict suffering. It is why we generally assume that every human life is of equal value. In my morals and ethics, I have learned to accept that I am not Greek or Roman at all, but thoroughly and proudly Christian" (<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/religion/2016/09/tom-holland-why-i-was-wrong-about-christianity>).

A friend quipped, 'We now trying to live in the shade of a tree we have cut down!'

Nebuchadnezzar's dream foretells his temporary insanity (vv. 13-16) and his learning that God rules all things and delegates authority to rulers (v. 17). 'The Most High rules the kingdoms of

men.' We may compare the prayer of Psalm 72 where Israel's king asks that his dominion may simply reflect all that God is to his people. This is the true role of human governance.

Daniel bears witness to God truth (v. 19-27), with respect (perhaps a touch of fear), and what appears to be genuine concern. He keeps himself out of the discussion by insisting that it is the decree of the Most High that reveals this, and the Most High whom the king must acknowledge as the source of his power. We must not let the clash of kingdoms become a 'them and us' fight even though the world will see it this way. There is only God, and humanity. Of course, God has owned his people and we are identified with him, but the battle is never between them and us. It is God the unbelievers hate.

Daniel says the reversal will be temporary. He uses this opportunity to urge the king to repent of his pride and avoid this judgement. He tells the king what he has himself learnt: to see his life in this world as under the hand of God before being under the hand of man; he is a servant of God, not a victim of Babylon. God does as he wills and so Daniel is where he needs to be. The kingdoms of this world cannot destroy his 'opportunity' in life, or that of any who are transferred to God's kingdom.

The king ignores the warning and suffers for 'seven times'—perhaps months or years, or just a perfect time determined by God.

Nebuchadnezzar is king of Babylon, a name that becomes a biblical image of all that opposes God. This king is set here at the beginning of this identification as a prophetic word to all human authority—business, parental, community or national.

Nebuchadnezzar looks up to God and regains his reason (vv. 34-37). That is the order in which he experiences this change. His reason consists in knowing that God reigns—absolutely, and over him in particular. God has been good to him in giving him a period of insanity. From this reign of God, and our acknowledgement of this, flows the good that he desires for his creation.

The world needs to know that God reigns. Believers in Christ know that he reigns because they have been secured and are being kept by the powerful actions of Christ as King, and we will look at this in coming studies. The world is ignorant of this, and, in fact, wants nothing to do with it, but we are sent into the world to be servants of the Most High God, as was Daniel.

*But we must search until we find
What our vocation is,
For all of us are called to live
For God—this world is his.
The people who retreat from life
Are hostile to their God,
And welcome life's unfriendliness
As a useful alibi.*

*The failure of the many gives
No cause for us to wait,
For Jesus blazed a trail of love
Through envy, pride and hate;
And by his work has shown to us
The Father's kingly plan
In which we live as his own sons
Within a rebel land.*

*We are now responsible
Under Christ as Lord,
To fill the earth with useful works
His gospel to adorn.
And this no longer seems too hard
For we have been made one
With the Father and with all his saints
In the kingdom of his Son.*