

## THE CONFLICT OF THE AGES

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Ben Janssen | **Matthew 4:1-11** | December 6, 2020

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup>And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup>But he answered, "It is written, " 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' " <sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple <sup>6</sup>and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, " 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and " 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.' " <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' " <sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup>And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, " 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.' " <sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

This advent season we are considering the subject of the kingdom of God. The angel told the Virgin Mary that the child she would bear would be given "the throne of his father David," and that he would "reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end" (Lk 1:32-33).

So the birth of Jesus Christ is to be understood as the birth of a king who reigns over an eternal kingdom. To understand the Bible, we need to understand what it has to say about this eternal kingdom. That's no easy task. But unless we can do that, so much of the life of Jesus will not be understood very well.

Take, for example, this story about the temptation of Jesus. We can analyze it in its details, but today I'd like us to take a wider glance at it and its place in the biblical story as a whole. So before we can get to Matthew 4, we need to go all the way back to Genesis. There we will see that the biblical story is framed as a battle, a conflict between the ages of light and darkness. We learn how darkness entered into the kingdom of God. Then we can see the significance of Jesus as the Light who overcomes the darkness. And then we'll begin to understand how it is that the Bible can say that this time in which we live is a time in which light reigns rather than darkness.

### DARKNESS IN THE KINGDOM

The Bible begins with the assumption that God exists, that he has always existed, and that he is the Creator of all there is (Gen 1:1), and that God's creation is good (Gen 1:31). The good creation serves God's sovereign purpose and exists to magnify his glory, which is another word related to God's sovereignty, to his reign. God's glory is an aspect of his sovereignty, his absolute reign over all there is. He is king over all. Always has been and always will be.

## **The Problem of Evil**

But there is opposition to the sovereignty of God. We only have to get to the third chapter of the Bible to find out all about it. Darkness exists in the kingdom of God. Evil exists and is a threat to the kingdom of God.

The existence of evil is one of the biggest obstacles many people have to belief in God and the Bible's story. If the God of the Bible exists, many people wonder how in the world evil can exist. If God is sovereign, if he *reigns*, how is it that evil exists? And how is it that evil has any measure of success in a kingdom over which God reigns as the Bible says he does? How can God be sovereign and evil be so destructive?

## **The Devil in the Kingdom**

The third chapter of Genesis is critical to our understanding of the kingdom of God. It tells us what is wrong with this kingdom, why it is that it doesn't at all look like God reigns, at least not absolutely.

The chapter begins: "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made" (Gen 3:1). Genesis tells us nothing more about who this serpent is, but the Bible elsewhere makes its true identity plain. Revelation 20:2 refers to "that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan."

To understand the kingdom of God we need to understand something of this devil. The Bible portrays him as the chief antagonist in the story of history. He is a formidable foe, but he is nowhere portrayed as an equal power to God. Rather, he serves God's purpose of demonstrating "the prevailing and enduring nature of God's kingdom and so of his glory" because "the stronger the enemy, the greater God's glory" is seen to be.<sup>1</sup>

So in what transpires in Genesis 3 we cannot see this as an evidence that there is some weakness, some vulnerability to God's kingdom. God, in his sovereign rule, has permitted Satan to wreak havoc on the kingdom. God, as sovereign, could have stopped him, but he did not.

## **The Weapon of Darkness**

Now, if this causes your eyebrows to raise, if it makes you question the sovereignty of God, or his goodness, then you are not alone. Again, there are plenty of people who conclude that God must not be sovereign or he must not be good or he must not exist at all simply by the fact that evil exists. But I hope you do not come to that conclusion, because that is exactly what the devil wants you to conclude.

You see, Genesis 3 does not tell us the story of evil invading the kingdom of God. It tells us the story of God's creatures rebelling against his reign.<sup>2</sup> The problem is not that Satan exists, for he is no match for God. The problem comes only when Adam and Eve believe Satan instead of God, when the goodness of God and his kingdom are called into question and the human creatures fall for it.

That's what Satan is after. He is called "the god of this world" in 2 Corinthians 4:4, not because he has dethroned God, but because he has duped God's creation. He has "blinded" their minds, "to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." According to the Bible, if you do not worship Jesus, if you do not acknowledge him as king, then you are under the thumb of Satan. It is one or the other.

Satan tempts people to sin, but sin is primarily a matter of the heart and only secondarily a matter of morals.<sup>3</sup> The problem in the Garden of Eden was not primarily eating fruit but doubting God's goodness (*He's keeping me from what's good!*) and questioning his sovereignty (*I can be like God!*). The chief weapon of the enemy is darkness, a *blindness* to the glory of God, a questioning about the goodness of God's kingdom, of his reign, and of his sovereignty.

If Satan can get you to question that, he has you right where he wants you.

### **LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS**

Satan *has* gotten us all to question God and his kingdom like this. His success with Adam and Eve was his success with us all. Their rebellion is our rebellion. Satan didn't get some of God's kingdom to rebel. He got all of it to rebel. The consequences of this rebellion are universal.

But still, God is sovereign. There's not handwringing for God. Even as God confronts the rebellion, dealing with both the humans and the serpent, it is clear that he is completely in charge. It is God who announces the devastating consequences that have come upon his kingdom. But it is also God who announces a hopeful promise. Just as darkness has come into the kingdom, so light will shine in the darkness and eventually completely overcome it.

### **A Promise of Kingdom Restoration**

So, in Genesis 3:15, God says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Here we have God announcing a coming "battle of champions,"<sup>4</sup> a coming "offspring" of the woman who will deliver a fatal blow to the serpent's head.

Now we know this refers to Jesus, but don't get there too quickly. The hope of the entire Old Testament hangs on this promise of God and the expectation of a king who will triumph over the devil, eliminating all doubt about the goodness of God, and thereby restore the kingdom of God on earth. And all throughout the Old Testament, God is faithful to preserve for himself a remnant, offspring of the woman, who do not yield to Satan's lies. They believe in the goodness of God and his sovereignty. But none of them are able to deliver the fatal blow to the serpent. One by one they die. We wonder if the kingdom will ever come. How long will the darkness persist?

### **The King Has Come**

The first book of the New Testament is the Gospel of Matthew, which begins, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1). The name "Jesus Christ" or "Christ Jesus" is a royal name, essentially "King Jesus." It occurs 227 times in the New Testament,

but only five times in the four Gospels. In Matthew, it occurs only in the first and eighteenth verses of the first chapter, but it is Matthew who speaks of the kingdom of God more than any other single New Testament book. So while Matthew and the other Gospel writers make it plain who they understand Jesus to be, the long-awaited King, they also want us to see how he has come, and how his kingdom comes.

It does not come as we might expect. His humble birth is described briefly at the end of the first chapter. The King of the Jews arrives without the nation even knowing it; it is certain *magoi* from the east, Gentile enchanters, who announce that the king has been born (Matt 2:1-12). The horrific infanticide of Herod (Matt 2:16-18) to try to eliminate the promised king is clearly not merely the act of Herod alone but the same sinister serpent from the Old Testament.

Clearly, it's game on. The Light—that's what John's Gospel calls Jesus (Jn 1:10)—had invaded the darkness.

### **The Kingdom Is at Hand**

Now in chapter three, we encounter the mysterious man, John the Baptist, who came preaching this message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2). To talk like this is to talk like a doomsday prophet, announcing the end of the world. There's a new king in town. Repent, or else! As John says, in Matthew 3:11-12:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

What would you expect to see when this king arrives? Let me put it to you this way, Christian. What will you expect to see when Jesus returns, when he comes to judge the living and the dead? What will that day be like? Whatever you have in your mind, it is probably pretty close to what the Jews were expecting to see in the first century.

But from the first appearance of Jesus in Matthew, he surprises. He is not what anyone expected, not even John the Baptist. We read in Matthew 3:13-15,

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

Why was Jesus baptized? John the Baptist didn't expect that. This is the King after all? And what does the King mean when he says his baptism was necessary to "fulfill all righteousness"?

Coming up out of the water, there can be no doubt that Jesus is the king, for the Spirit of God descended on him and a voice from heaven announces that this is God's Son, the legitimate heir to the eternal kingdom of God. But his kingdom has not come quite the way we would expect.

Why? What is going on? The light has come into the darkness, but this is a strange way for the kingdom to come. Until we recall who the enemy is, and what has to be done to defeat him.

## THE REIGN OF THE LIGHT

The fourth chapter of Matthew is critical to understanding the kingdom of God. Notice that immediately after his baptism, and the declaration from heaven that he is the king, Jesus goes right after the real enemy. The Light that has come into the darkness declares war against it. The Light goes to battle against the darkness of the devil.

### Conquering the Devil

According to Matthew 4:1, “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” *Led by the Spirit*. The temptation of Jesus is not Jesus on the defensive. He is on the offense. He is going after the enemy.

Again, there is no dualism here. No hint of the possibility that the devil might take Jesus down. Nevertheless, it is the devil’s temptations that are his chief weapons, temptations that are primarily aimed at the heart to get us to doubt God’s goodness and to rebel against his sovereignty.

So the first temptation, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (Matt 4:3), only makes sense in light of Jesus’s response, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” In other words, for Jesus to do as Satan has suggested would be for him to put self-gratification over God’s priorities for his life.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the second temptation, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down” from the pinnacle of the temple (Matt 4:5-6), was the temptation to demand that God do what we want him to do—putting God “to the test” (v. 7)—rather than maintaining the proper attitude of a king’s servant who is to seek to do what God commands. It’s a question of who is sovereign, who gets to make the commands, God or us?

When we get to the third temptation (vv. 8-9), Satan tempts Jesus by offering him “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.” As the god of this world, Satan offers to give up the battle once and for all. Jesus can reign uncontested—if only he will “fall down and worship” the devil! But of course this is the same trap that Adam and Eve fell for, the idea that by doing what the Serpent suggests they can reign like God himself.

Jesus fends off the attack and drives the devil away. He has won precisely where Adam and Eve failed. He is the king. He has defeated the enemy.

### The Kingdom Has Dawned

And what that means for us humans is that the kingdom of God has come upon the earth. Matthew says in verses 14-16 that it is the fulfillment of what Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 42. For those who have been dwelling in darkness, “on them a light has dawned.”

In other words, the age to come has irrupted on this present evil age of darkness and defeated it. The Light is not just here. It shines. Do you see the Light? Do you recognize the true King?

Verse 17 says, “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” Repentance here cannot be, “Stop doing bad things.” It has to be, “Stop believing the Serpent and trust me.” To repent *because the kingdom is at hand* is to acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the promised King, and to follow his lead into the Promised Land of the kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup>

## The Time Between the Times

But we are not there yet. The kingdom has come already, but not yet in its fullest. The kingdom is present, but it is also future. So now what? What does that mean for you and me?

That’s an important question, because Christians struggle to agree on how we ought to live in the already/not yet of the kingdom of God. So let me end today with a couple of things for our consideration.

R. T. France observes that “there is general agreement” that the kingdom of God in both the Old and New Testaments refers to “the dynamic concept of ‘God ruling.’” We should think of it primarily as a phrase in which it is “God” not “kingdom” that is the subject.<sup>7</sup> So for all we will see in our Bibles about the kingdom of God that perplexes us, one thing should command our attention if we believe that the kingdom of God has dawned, and that is the King of the Kingdom. It is Jesus Christ, Jesus the King, that should occupy our minds when we consider the kingdom of God. You cannot stand against the lies of the devil without looking to Christ. It is in Jesus that we see the indisputable evidence not only that God exists, but that he is sovereign over all, and that he is fundamentally good.

It is interesting that what comes next in Matthew 4 is Jesus forming a community of disciples around himself and promising to make them “fishers of men.” To be a disciple of Jesus is to learn how we are to live in this time between the times, “to live in the ‘already’ in light of and governed by the ‘not yet.’”<sup>8</sup>

Christians do not always agree on how we are to live as citizens of a kingdom that has come but is not yet fully realized. But one thing is clear: we must take our queues, not from the opinions of one another, but from the instructions that our Lord—our King—has given to us in his Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament: Definitions and Story,” in *The Kingdom of God*, Theology in Community, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [53](#).

<sup>2</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 1, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), [72](#).

<sup>3</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), [31](#).

<sup>4</sup> Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), [94](#).

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<sup>5</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), [131](#).

<sup>6</sup> “Jesus is not so much a new Moses as a new Joshua . . . who leads his people into [the Promised Land].” D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), [117](#).

<sup>7</sup> France, *Gospel of Matthew*, [102](#).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, “The Kingdoms of God: The Kingdom in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” in Morgan and Peterson, *The Kingdom of God*, [45](#).