

STUDY 3

They Shall Reign on Earth

Trevor Faggotter

... and you have made them a kingdom of priests to our God, and they *shall reign* on the earth (Rev. 5:10).¹

MAN IS KING

God created Man, to rule the world as King! The central theme of Jesus' preaching was the Kingdom of God. Scripture and the church through history have rightly acclaimed Jesus as: *King of kings, and Lord of lords*.² However, something within us seems to recoil at the notion of kingship, in relation to ourselves. Egalitarian Australian society has a deep aversion to it. Some so-called progressive church leaders cringe at the biblical notion of the *reign of God* (and so substitute *realm of God*).³ The biblical mandate to *have dominion over* creation has often been branded as the culprit for most of our present day environmental ills. Likewise, notions of priesthood are held in reserve for religion, and religious types. And yet, according to Scripture, genuine, lively humanity consists of Man as King, reigning under God, who is *the King*.

A royal priesthood and priestly kingdom, where *redeemed human beings* exercise dominion, is the Father's intended goal, toward which all creation moves.⁴ This is our mandate:

Genesis 1:26–28 says:

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them *have dominion over* the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens *and over* the livestock *and over* all the earth *and over* every creeping thing that creeps on the earth'. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Psalms 8:3–8 declares:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version or New Revised Standard Version.

² Mark 1:15; John 18:36; Acts 1:3; 1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 19:16.

³ God's reign or rule is the correct historical meaning of Jesus' proclamation. The term 'realm of God' is an unsatisfactory substitute. Compare G. E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, SPCK, London, 1980, p. 148.

⁴ Exod. 19:6a; 1 Peter 2:9.

They Shall Reign on Earth

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

THE PRESENT REIGN IN LIFE

The present ‘reign in life’ of human beings needs to be understood in the context of the creational mandate, the effects of sin, and Christ’s kingly victory of redemption:

- The *creational* mandate given to Adam was to have dominion over the joyful creation (Gen. 1:26–28; Ps. 8:5–8). Man was to expand the borders of Eden, to extend to all creation. This has never been revoked.
- Sin came into the world through Adam, and death through sin, and death spread to all because all have sinned (Rom. 5:12). Complexity and confusion concerning *reigning in life* is experienced daily. The god and ruler of this present world, Satan, is out to blind us from seeing true kingship—namely the glory of Christ, the true image of God (John 12:31; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 1:4). Our existential anguish bears witness to our abdication of kingship. King Saul’s dark spirit, anger, disobedience and inferiority illustrate Man’s loss and depravity (1 Sam. 15). Yet the creational mandate has in fact been reiterated subsequent to the fall (Gen. 9:1–2). The command to reign continues. It is prophetically set forth as the plan for the fullness of time (Dan. 7:13–18; 2 Sam. 7:13–19). King David’s sins were also reprehensible. Yet his throne has nevertheless been established forever. *Reigning* is the goal, faith’s charter for humanity. The infectious outworking of sin will, however, take our bodies—every one of us—down into death.
- The *redemptive* victory accomplished by Christ, the second and the last Adam, has restored and inaugurated the genuine reign of redeemed humanity over the present and, later, the regenerated creation.⁵ Humanity *through faith* and repentance is called to participate in *this* reign, together with *the* King—Jesus Christ.

FRUSTRATION AND FUTILITY

The difficulty—or rather sheer impossibility—of *fully* reigning in life now is something we experience every day, as those born into Adamic humanity. Sharks still devour unsuspecting swimmers. Viruses and violence appear and re-emerge in epidemic proportions. Cemeteries remain open for business. Genuine human weakness—that is, total reliance upon the Father—is *very good*, and truly desirable (John 5:30).

⁵ Matt. 19:28, ‘And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, *in the regeneration* when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, *you also* shall sit upon twelve *thrones*, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” ’ (NASB).

They Shall Reign on Earth

But the possibility of grand dominion has, in Adam, been wholly subverted, smashed and infected by the power of sin, death, Satan, and the curse.

The early Christians in Corinth had misunderstood the faith-quality of their present reign in life, as Kings. They had overestimated their capacity to reign. Paul's corrective criticism is caustic irony, yet with true hope in view:

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! (1 Cor. 4:8).

By contrast, Paul's perception of his own and other apostles' present reign in life was more akin to lying wounded and dying on the rubbish tip:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day (1 Cor. 4:9–11).

Nevertheless, to Paul this is not labouring in vain, but is rather all part of living in the victory, given by God, through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:57–58).

THE GIVING OF THE VICTORY

The New Testament clearly proclaims that the great victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death has been won. *We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.* Christ has abolished death. The benefits of this victory are given to all who are in union with him.⁶

In 1 Corinthians 15:57 the words: *gives us the victory*—*διδόντι ἡμῖν τὸ νίκος* (*didonti hēmin to nikos*)—are in the present continuous tense, that is, gives, and goes on giving. We are baptised into this victory now. However, it is a victory known only to the eyes of faith, and as such anticipates the day of fulfillment when faith gives way to sight. *Then*, all failure as *sinful kings* will cease. Abdication of the throne will give way to true reigning:

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:54–58).

Hebrews 2:5–9 indicates that it is in the *coming world* that we shall see everything in subjection to *them*, that is, human beings:

Now God did not subject *the coming world*, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere, 'What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you

⁶ Rom. 6:9; 2 Tim. 1:10; Rom. 6:5.

They Shall Reign on Earth

care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet.’ Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, *we do not yet see everything in subjection to them*, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Sight sees *death* reigning. Faith sees Jesus reigning. And we are in him. In *the coming world*, all things shall be subject to human beings! We occupy such a reality in the Risen Christ (Eph. 2:6–7), *so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*. It is now all of faith, and all of promise, though fully assured and guaranteed, through the fulfilment of Christ’s ministry. It is worthy of note, that the writer of Hebrews has in his first chapter selected six Psalms (110; 2; 89; 104; 45; and 102) to exalt the *royalty* of Jesus. Later, his emphasis is upon the significance of *priesthood* according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:11). Surely, these themes have issued from the Risen Jesus opening to the slow of heart a Christological view of himself—in *all the Scriptures*⁷ (Luke 24:27, 45; also Acts 1:3).

THEY SHALL REIGN

Regular preaching of a realised eschatology in the finality of Christ’s cross is at the heart of our message.⁸ *Our faith is not that one day we shall see all things put under us, but that now we see Jesus*. Even so, our many activities—God being our helper—and our focus on *things present* may have inadvertently dulled our senses concerning the high quality of, and anticipation of, *the future reign* of Man as King.⁹

Romans 5:17 and Revelation 5:10 both indicate that it is in the future—in the age to come—that we shall fully reign on earth, and that we shall express ‘the truly kingly life’¹⁰ purposed for us by God. Not all translators reach this conclusion. The following details seem to confirm the point, however:

⁷ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *God and Man in the Mission of the Kingdom*, Redeemer Baptist Press, North Parramatta, 2003, pp. 89–93.

⁸ A realised eschatology is well expressed in the following passage:

God’s participation in man’s affairs is much more than that of a fellow-sufferer on a divine scale, whose love can rise to a painless sympathy with pain. He not only perfectly understands our case and our problem, but He has morally, actively, finally solved it. The solution is for ever present with Him. Already He sees, and for ever sees, the travail of His soul and is *satisfied*. All the jars, collisions, contradictions, crises, pities, tragedies and terrors of life are in Him for ever adjusted in a peace which is not resigned and quietist, but triumphant and exultant; and nothing can pluck us from His hands. All history, through His great act at its moral centre, is, in God, resolved into the harmonies of a foregone and final conquest. And our faith is not merely that God is with us, nor that one day He will clear all things up and triumph; but that for Him all things are already triumphant, clear, and sure. All things are working together for good, as good is in the cross of Christ and its saving effect. Our faith is not that one day we shall solve the riddles of providence, and see all things put under us, but that now we see Jesus; and that we commit ourselves to one who has both the solution of every tragic thing and the glory of every dark thing clear and sure in a kingdom that cannot be moved, and, therefore alone, moves for ever on.

See P. T. Forsyth in *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood, (1910) 1984, pp. 61f.

⁹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Future* (Macmillan, London, 1953, p. 252) says: ‘It is because the church has more or less banished from its belief the near expectation of the End that biblical eschatology has become remote and has completely lost ethical power’.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1956, p. 14.

They Shall Reign on Earth

Romans 5:17

The RSV translates Romans 5:17 as:

If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more *will* those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness *reign* in life through the one man Jesus Christ (RSV).

The NRSV prefers the phrase, 'exercise dominion', rather than 'reign':

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.¹¹

We are asking of the text: *Do we reign in life—now? If so, in what capacity?*

C. E. B. Cranfield claims that Paul is referring to our future reign:

The tense of βασιλεύουσιν is to be noted: the reference is to the eschatological fulfilment. Not yet do the recipients of God's grace reign: to suppose that they do is the illusion of a false piety (cf I Cor 4.8). But to recognize this is not to belittle the splendour and the wonder of what they receive even now.¹²

Having said this, Cranfield turns his attention to the present participle λαμβάνοντες (*lambanontes*) which refers to the occasion of our receiving 'the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness' and acknowledges that this, too, *could be taken* as referring to our future reign, but that it is *best taken* as referring to now. So then Cranfield is saying, *we have received and are receiving*, the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness, now, and we *shall* reign, through the one man Jesus Christ (in the future).

This view has some support from John Murray, who says:

It is likely that the reign in life has in its purview the consummated order. But the future tense 'will reign' need not confine the reign to the future. It can be interpreted as expressing the certainty and security of the reign in life rather than its futurity. But the implication of the certainty and security is that it will continue for ever and, in accord with the apostle's teaching, come to its fullest realization in the future.¹³

Karl Barth also highlights the future aspect of this reign:

The fact that those who receive abundance of grace *shall reign* reminds us, however, that the identification of the old with the new man has yet to be fulfilled (ii. 13, iii. 20, v. 20); that we have as yet only been declared free; and that our actual redemption cannot be identified with any concrete happening in history. Here too, men do not pass beyond the threshold of the Kingdom of God, which is the Kingdom of the free and of the freed. Yet they do stand hopefully on the threshold; and because they have hope, they do not wholly lack the anticipatorily present reality of what is hoped for.¹⁴

¹¹ Robert Young, *Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* (Guardian Pr., Grand Rapids, [1898] 1976, p. 109) indicates the tense of the phrase—ἐν ζωῇ βασιλεύουσιν (*en zōē basileusousin*)—in life shall reign:

... for if by the offence of the one the death did reign through the one, much more those, who the abundance of the grace and of the free gift of the righteousness are receiving, **in life shall reign** through the one—Jesus Christ.

¹² C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, ICC, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1975, p. 288.

¹³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, TNICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1965, p. 198.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford University Press, London, (1933) 1968, p. 180.

They Shall Reign on Earth

Revelation 5:10

... and you have made them a kingdom of priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth (Rev. 5:10).

This verse is also speaking of the future destiny¹⁵ of God's priestly kings—the new humanity in Christ.¹⁶ This, briefly, is the context: John wept *much* in deep distress, when he saw the impossibility of opening up the scroll of the events of history, and the inability of any creature to have control over these events. No one had the integrity. Perhaps John even doubted Jesus had the capacity to match it with the strong powers at work in history.

Then he was told to look up and see the Lion. And he saw a Lamb, standing as though it had been slain. And he was worthy... (In the weakness of the cross, victory!)

In Revelation 5:9–10 the angelic leaders take up a *new song*. In the Psalms, a *new song* occurs when there is a new festival, a celebration of God's mercies, or his deliverance from distress. In Isaiah 42:10 it relates to a new and greater deliverance, which the Lord is about to make in the earth. The final revelation of Christ in his kingdom takes place at his Parousia (Rev. 1:7). The future reign is on the doorstep.

The full exercise of our royal priesthood belongs to the time of the final triumph. It is not insignificant, surely, that universal praise breaks forth—'*every creature* in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb . . ."' (Rev. 5:13). *Every creature!* (Rom. 8:22; Ps. 8).

THE FUTURE REIGN

This *new song* tells us we shall reign *on earth*. It is for this purpose that God has been working in history to undo the deceits of Satan—so that a man will reign as King.¹⁷ The reign of the first Adam was protological of the future reign of Man, through the victory of the last Adam, Christ. Kingship is one element of the *imago dei*,¹⁸ as sons in *the Son*.

Jesus Christ is King, and his kingship is human, as also divine. As those who are being conformed to Christ's image, we too *shall*, and do, participate in this royal priesthood.

Scripture shows us much: as the last Adam walks and talks, eats and drinks, works and sleeps, suffers and dies, and rejoices on his way through Palestine and beyond, he gives us a foretaste of what true humanity actually looks like. Though he comes in the

¹⁵ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (New Century Bible, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1974, p. 128), notes that while some available manuscripts use the present tense ('they reign . . .'), the future tense is much better attested.

¹⁶ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, NCPI, p. 63 says: 'We are apt to think the saints will reign only in heaven, and be only in heaven, but here is Divine nationhood operating on earth, even if its seat and throne is in heaven?'

¹⁷ Bingham, *God and Man in the Mission of the Kingdom*, p. 88.

¹⁸ The image of God—a much debated topic—includes elements which are:

- i. Physical—relational, freedom as male-female with mind, body, memory and understanding;
- ii. Moral—(not moralistic), including goodness, love and holiness; and
- iii. Functional—or vocational, that is, reigning, serving, liberating, extending Eden's borders.

They Shall Reign on Earth

likeness of sinful humanity, he comes to serve, and to give his life in love—serving both God and Man, and all creation. A royal body of glory is quite something to anticipate, as is life fully reigning within the renewed heaven, and renewed earth:

It could be that Jesus' so-called 'nature miracles'—his power over wind and waves (Mark 4:35–41), over the process of water becoming wine (John 2:1–11), and over the harvest of the waters (Luke 5:1–11; John 21:4–11) and the multiplication of food (Mark 6:34–44; 8:1–9)—may be seen in part as the expression and anticipation of his true human ruling over the created order that was to culminate in the new creation.¹⁹

Looking to the interests of others, with the same mind as we find in Christ, we proclaim God's message, share in his goal and participate in his mandate, by faith, under the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

¹⁹ Martin Bleby, *God Speaking*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2006, p. 150.