

Your Kingdom Come: The Doctrine of Eschatology

LESSON
ONE

THE GOAL OF CREATION



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Your Kingdom Come: The Doctrine of Eschatology

Lesson One

The Goal of Creation

INTRODUCTION

Nearly every follower of Christ is familiar with the Lord's Prayer and how it teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." But as familiar as these words are, their significance often escapes us. In these petitions, Jesus summarized God's goal for history and creation. He explained why we live on this planet, and why he came as our Redeemer. And the reason is simple: God is turning the entire earth into an extension of his heavenly kingdom. When he's finished, his will *will* be done on earth just as fully as it's already being done in heaven. But in the meantime, it's our job to pray for and to work toward the consummation of the kingdom of God.

This is the first lesson in our series *Your Kingdom Come: The Doctrine of Eschatology*. In this series, we'll explore several aspects of God's earthly kingdom in Christ, with a particular emphasis on its final or completed state. We've entitled this lesson "The Goal of Creation" because we'll be looking at how God's plan for history leads to the ultimate goal of completing his kingdom.

Before we begin, we should call attention to the technical term that describes this area of study, namely, "eschatology." The word eschatology comes from two Greek words: *eschatos* (ἔσχατος), meaning "last" or "final"; and *logos* (λόγος), in this case meaning "study." So, "eschatology" is "the study of last things" or "the doctrine of last things." Broadly understood, eschatology covers the entire period of the last days that began with Jesus' life and ministry, and that will be completed when he returns.

Our lesson on "The Goal of Creation" will focus on two historical periods. First, we'll consider the Old Testament expectations for the end times. And second, we'll contrast those with their New Testament realizations. Let's begin with the Old Testament expectations for the end of history.

OLD TESTAMENT EXPECTATIONS

In the Old Testament, God's kingdom was expected to unfold in three phases: the initial creation of the universe and its creatures; a long period of redemption necessitated by humanity's fall into sin; and finally, the everlasting eschaton — the ultimate state of the universe, after redemption is complete, when God's heavenly kingdom fills the earth. Just like the term "eschatology," the theological term "eschaton" comes from the Greek word *eschatos* (ἔσχατος). So, naturally, the events we study in eschatology are the ones that take place during the eschaton.

In line with this Old Testament understanding of history, we'll explore the Old Testament expectations for the culmination of God's kingdom in three parts. First, we'll mention the plans God revealed at creation. Second, we'll talk about the hopes he revealed throughout the history of redemption. And third, we'll consider some prophetic pictures of the eschaton. Let's look first at the plans God revealed at creation.

CREATION

Most Christians are familiar with God's work of creation detailed in Genesis 1, 2. Genesis 1 teaches that God created and ordered the heavens and the earth. He created all the realms within the universe, such as the waters, the dry land, and the heavens. And he created all the creatures that inhabit these realms, such as fish, land animals, and birds. And of course, he created human beings to rule over and administer the entire creation, including both the earth itself and all its creatures. Listen to what Moses wrote in Genesis 1:27-28:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:27-28).

In the vocabulary of the ancient Near East, God intended humanity to be his "vassals" or servant kings. Our job was to rule over creation on behalf of God, the great "suzerain" or emperor. This idea is strengthened by the fact that human beings were created "in the image of God." In the ancient world, kings often set up statues and other images of themselves throughout their kingdoms. It was a way of indicating *their* authority and rule over the land and its people, and a way of bringing themselves honor and glory. So, when God created human beings in his image, he indicated that his plan was to create an earthly kingdom. We know that God was pleased with this initial arrangement of the world, and with the role he'd given to humanity, because in Genesis 1:31, he said that everything he'd created was "very good." But, he had plans to make it even better. Look at Genesis 1:27-28:

God created man in his own image ... and said to them ... "[F]ill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:27-28).

God didn't want just one couple that would merely manage the things he'd created. Rather, he wanted them to populate the world and to turn it into his earthly kingdom.

Theologians generally refer to these verses as the "cultural mandate," because they require humanity to build culture throughout the whole world. That means not only reproducing to create enough people to fill the world, but also creating human culture

throughout the world — things like families and governments, farming and animal husbandry, and even arts and sciences.

The implications of the cultural mandate become clearer in Genesis 2, where God planted a garden in the land of Eden. In particular, the garden exemplified the perfection God wanted the world to reach under humanity's leadership. As we read in Genesis 2:15:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15).

Humanity's job was to cultivate the garden. But the word pair Moses used here — “work” and “take care” — was technical language. Moses used the same word pair in Numbers 3:8 to describe the priests' work in the tabernacle.

So, the combined picture of humanity's role as servant kings in Genesis 1, and as priestly workers in chapter 2, tells us that human beings are God's royal and priestly images. Our job is to extend his rule until it fills the world, and to cultivate the whole earth until everything resembles the Garden of Eden. And this role for humanity provides the Bible's first glimpse of eschatology. It indicates that God plans to fill the earth with images that serve and honor him by ruling over creation on his behalf.

Having considered some of the Old Testament expectations for God's kingdom that were established at creation, let's turn to expectations associated with the history of redemption.

REDEMPTION

All Christians should know the story of humanity's fall into sin recorded in Genesis 3. God put Adam and Eve in the garden to work it and to take care of it. But Satan spoke through the serpent in the garden. He tricked Eve into eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God had forbidden. Then Eve gave the fruit to Adam and he ate it, too. Because of this sin, God cursed all humanity, and the great hope of his eschatological kingdom appeared to be lost. But God mercifully introduced a plan of redemption that would rescue individuals through personal salvation, and would restore the hope of his great messianic kingdom on earth.

This plan of redemption was first introduced in Genesis 3:15 when God said this to the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).

Theologians call this offer of redemption the *proto-euangelion* or “first gospel,” because it's the first offer of salvation after humanity's fall into sin.

You know, some Bible teachers believe that Genesis 3:15 may be the most important verse in the Bible because there we receive a promise

immediately after the Fall that God is going to send a deliverer to deal with our sin problem. He tells the serpent and the woman that there will be hostility between their two seeds. The serpent will bruise the seed of the woman's child, but that child is going to crush the head of that serpent. And basically, the rest of the Bible unfolds the grand redemptive story of that head-crushing that ultimately took place on the cross at Calvary, a head-crushing we share in based upon Romans 16:20.

— Dr. Danny Akin

When God promised that the seed of the woman would defeat the seed of the serpent, he indicated that humanity would be redeemed from the curse of sin. And throughout the long period of redemption, God continued to affirm this expectation through his redemptive acts — especially those acts associated with his covenants.

In the Old Testament, God made five major redemptive covenants, beginning with his covenant with Adam.

Adam

After Adam had sinned against God in the Garden of Eden, God offered him salvation through the *proto-euangelion*, or “first gospel.” This created the expectation that God’s plan for his worldwide kingdom would eventually come to pass. But its growth would be characterized by strife between the children of the serpent and the children of Eve. In fact, Genesis 4, 5 indicate that the descendants of Adam and Eve’s faithful son Seth were in constant tension with the descendants of their murderous son Cain. From the very beginning, the entire human race has been divided between those who serve God’s purposes and those who rebel against God.

Many generations after Adam, God made his second major redemptive covenant with Noah.

Noah

Genesis 6–9 records the flood that destroyed the world in Noah’s day. Within this account, Genesis 8:21–9:17 explains the covenant God made through Noah. In the context of promising not to flood the earth again, God also established the broader stability of nature. He did this to enable humanity to serve his purposes of filling the world with images of God and ruling over creation. And this created the expectation that humanity’s growth, and therefore the growth of God’s kingdom, would proceed without further global catastrophes. But listen to Genesis 8:22, where God added this qualification:

As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Genesis 8:22).

The stability of nature was guaranteed only “as long as the earth endures.” That is to say, only until the end of the present order of creation. This established the expectation that the present natural order will be replaced when humanity completes its task of building God’s kingdom on earth.

Long after Noah, God made his third major redemptive covenant with Abraham.

Abraham

According to passages like Genesis 15, 17 and 22, God called Abraham and his descendants to serve him in a special way. It remained all humanity’s task to fill and subdue the earth. But from this point forward, Abraham and his descendants played a central role in bringing God’s eschatological kingdom to earth. In particular, they were chosen as the special nation through whom God would extend redemption to the rest of humanity. This began as God established his kingdom presence in the Promised Land. And it continued as Abraham, and later the nation of Israel, stretched the borders of the Promised Land toward the ends of the earth. As God told Abraham in Genesis 22:18:

Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed (Genesis 22:18).

God’s covenant with Abraham created the expectation that God’s earthly kingdom would not consist of a single nation or people. Instead, it would eventually include members from “all nations on earth.”

Many centuries after Abraham, God made his fourth major redemptive covenant with Moses.

Moses

Moses wrote about God’s covenant with him in many places. Several times, he confirmed that the Mosaic covenant incorporated and continued the early covenants with Adam, Noah and Abraham. But he also revealed a new dynamic that created additional expectations for God’s earthly kingdom. In passages like Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 4, 30, God revealed that his special covenant people wouldn’t always be faithful to him. As with prior covenant administrations, the Mosaic covenant mentioned God’s commitment to bringing the covenant blessings to pass. But if his people disobeyed him, he would punish them. Listen to what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 4:27-31:

The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive ... But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your

soul... [T]hen in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers (Deuteronomy 4:27-31).

The worst covenant curse would be exile from the Promised Land, with God's people being scattered among the peoples or nations. But God's mercy wouldn't allow him to abandon his people forever. When they repented of their sin, and sought him with all their heart and soul, he would restore them to his favor. Moreover, Moses wrote that God's mercy would accomplish this "in later days."

The Hebrew expression Moses used for "later days" was *bayahariyt hayyamim*. This expression frequently was a simple reference to the future. But in Deuteronomy 4, Moses created an expectation of a future age when God would fulfill all of his covenant promises of blessings for his people and judgment against his enemies.

The Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek in the work we call the Septuagint. The translators understood Moses' words *bayahariyt hayyamim* as a reference to the future eschaton. So, they rendered the Greek translation as *ep eschatō tōn hēmerōn* (ἐπ' ἐσχάτῳ τῶν ἡμερῶν), meaning literally "at end of days." You'll recognize in this phrase the word *eschatō* (ἐσχάτῳ). This is a form of the word *eschatos*, from which we get the terms "eschaton" and "eschatology." The later biblical authors also understood Moses' words in this same way. And they continued to think of the "later days" as the future and final age of blessing after Israel's return from exile.

There are times where you see the phrase "latter days" used, say, in the Pentateuch. One example is at the end of Deuteronomy 4. Now, we need to be careful when we see the term "latter days" that we don't automatically jump ahead to the final, ultimate end of things, such as the eschaton. But in that context, what Moses is warning Israel about, as they're about to enter the Promised Land, that when they get into the Promised Land, he says that if they disobey God and don't follow what's expected in the Sinai covenant that ultimately they could get kicked out of the Promised Land and sent into exile. So, what Moses is warning or speaking about is once they've been kicked out of the land, are in exile due to disobedience, what he says though, is there's still hope for those people who have been kicked out of the land, that in the "latter days" they can turn to God and call upon him and bring them back. And of course this is a wonderful glimpse of our God who is willing to not give up on his people, but bring them back and restore them, which lays a great theological basis for who God is, a God who restores, a God who redeems even after sin. That provides a basis for understanding God's later acts in the person of Jesus Christ and what he will do in the end ultimately.

— Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.

Near the beginning of the tenth century B.C., God made the fifth and final major redemptive covenant of the Old Testament with David.

David

The historical record of God's covenant with David is mentioned in 2 Samuel 7. And many more of its details are recorded in Psalms 89, 132. From the perspective of eschatological expectations, the most important detail of this covenant was that God would establish the house of David as the permanent dynasty ruling over God's earthly kingdom. Listen to God's words in Psalm 89:34-37:

**I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered...
[David's] line will continue forever and his throne endure before me
like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful
witness in the sky (Psalm 89:34-37).**

Some theologians have said that when the Old Testament refers to God's rule as king, its primary focus is on his active, abstract reign. It's not an *actual* kingdom with territory and citizens. Now, it's certainly true that God's kingdom includes his reign. But it's not just an abstraction. Adam was to fill and subdue the earth. Noah was promised stability in creation. Abraham was chosen as the father of the nation that would save all nations. Moses focused on the Promised Land. And David was assured that his dynasty would rule over God's earthly kingdom forever. God's kingdom is a real place, populated by real people. And the great expectation of the Old Testament covenants is that *that* place and *those* people will live in perfect harmony with God forever.

So far, we've considered Old Testament expectations stemming from creation and the history of redemption. So, now we're ready to turn to prophetic descriptions of the eschaton.

ESCHATON

During David's kingship, the nation of Israel was well established in the Promised Land. And during the reign of his son Solomon, the boundaries of the kingdom reached even further. Sadly, in the generations that followed, God's people rebelled against God, and fell into rampant idolatry and sin.

During the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam, in 930 B.C., the nation was divided in two. The northern kingdom retained the name "Israel," and the southern kingdom took the name "Judah." Neither kingdom was terribly faithful to God, but Israel was markedly worse. By 722 B.C., Israel had rejected prophetic warnings to repent for around two hundred years. So, God sent the Assyrians to defeat Israel and carry many of its people into exile. The prophets then exhorted Judah to repent in order to avoid Israel's fate. But ultimately, Judah continued in sin. So, in 586 B.C. God sent the Babylonians to destroy Judah's capital city, Jerusalem, and to take many Judahites into exile, too.

The prophets explained that these horrific events were God's covenant curses, resulting from Israel and Judah's persistent and flagrant rebellion. The people had broken God's covenants, and they received the great covenant curse of exile — just as Moses had threatened. But the prophets also remembered Moses' promise of restoration after exile. So, they continued to reassure God's people that in the last days, or eschaton, God would grant them repentance. He would forgive them, return them to the Promised Land, and culminate history in his perfect worldwide kingdom. Listen to Isaiah's words in Isaiah 2:2-4:

In the last days ... Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Isaiah 2:2-4).

Notice that this picture of God's completed earthly kingdom was to be realized "in the last days," after Israel's return from exile. The same use of this phrase appears in places like Micah 4:1 and Hosea 3:5.

In Hebrew, Isaiah's phrase "in the last days" is *bayahariyt hayyamim* — the same words that Moses used in Deuteronomy 4:30. And it refers to the same eschatological kingdom that Moses had in mind. But what kinds of hopes did this prophecy create?

One hope Isaiah mentioned was that after Israel's exile had ended, God would rule over the whole earth from his throne in his temple in Jerusalem. Another was that every nation on earth would eagerly serve as part of that kingdom. The people would want to learn God's law so that they could obey him rightly. Another hope was that God's rule would include his righteous judgments. Another was that every nation would live in such unshakeable peace that they would actually get rid of their weapons. And one of the greatest expectations for God's eschatological kingdom is hinted at in Isaiah's final words. Listen again to what he wrote in Isaiah 2:4:

Nation will not ... train for war anymore (Isaiah 2:4).

Here, Isaiah implied a *permanent* end to war. In other words, God's kingdom would establish *peace forever*. Or as Daniel 2:44 tells us:

The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will ... endure forever (Daniel 2:44).

But perhaps the greatest prophetic expectation for God's eschatological kingdom is that a particular descendant of David would be its king. You'll recall that in the Davidic covenant, God promised that David's house would rule over his earthly kingdom permanently. Well, one way the prophets built on this expectation was by emphasizing

that *one* descendant of David would reign forever. There wouldn't be a perpetual line of kings; there would be one king that ruled forever. As Isaiah 9:7 teaches:

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever (Isaiah 9:7).

The prophetic vision of God's eschatological kingdom was so wonderful that in places like Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, the expected kingdom was called a "new heavens and new earth."

The Old Testament prophets conceived of God's end time kingdom, his eschatological kingdom, in several ways: One ... the kingdom is going to arrive all at once. It's not going to be staggered. Secondly, it's going to be very physical, very political; it's religion and politics in one. Thirdly, it's going to happen through the Messiah... So the Messiah's going to usher it in, he's going to lead the revolt. Lastly, there's going to be a considerable amount of bloodshed, because Israel is going to have to completely dominate the surrounding neighbors and bring everybody into subjugation around them... But what's also attached to this... I mean, this is part of God's larger program. It's not just the kingdom that is coming in, it's God's Spirit is coming down, there's forgiveness of sin, there's resurrection, there's the new heavens and new earth. It's part of a larger program... It's kingdom and everything is working together, which is part of God's larger program, which will obviously climax in the new heavens and new earth.

— Dr. Benjamin Gladd

Ultimately, the prophets expected God to fulfill the plans he had laid at the beginning of creation, and had elaborated throughout the history of redemption. Creation would become a perfect extension of God's heavenly kingdom, ruled and cared for by perfected, redeemed human beings. It would fulfill every promise made in every redemptive covenant, including the utter defeat of God's enemies and the immeasurable blessing of his people. And the great Son of David, who came to be known as the Messiah or Christ, would rule forever from the restored throne of David in Jerusalem.

So far in our lesson on "The Goal of Creation" we've looked at the Old Testament expectations for the end times. Now, we're ready to turn to our second major topic: the New Testament realizations of those expectations.

NEW TESTAMENT REALIZATIONS

Understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ is foundational to understanding the New Testament. And this is particularly true when it comes to God's earthly kingdom. The New Testament *insists* that Jesus brought the kingdom of God to earth, and that he rules over it as its king. At the same time, the New Testament is very aware that we don't currently experience all the kingdom blessings described in the Old Testament. So, how do we deal with that tension? Well, one way is to learn more about what Jesus really came to do, and what he continues to do, and what he plans to do in the future.

We'll consider the New Testament realizations of Old Testament expectations in three steps. First, we'll summarize some theological developments that flowed from Old Testament expectations. Second, we'll look at some historical complications faced by the New Testament church. And third, we'll explain their adjusted expectations in light of those complications. Let's begin with some theological developments that took place between the Old and New Testaments.

THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

In the centuries between the close of the Old Testament and the coming of Christ, rabbis and other Jewish theologians developed a view of eschatology that gained wide acceptance. In its simplest form, Jewish eschatology held that world history could be divided into two great ages. They called the first age "this age" — or *olam hazeh* in Hebrew. It was characterized by sin, exile, suffering, and death. "This age" started when Adam and Eve fell into sin, and it corresponds to the age of redemption we identified earlier.

Jewish theologians called the second age "the age to come" — or *olam haba'* in Hebrew. This was the future eschaton, when God's kingdom would fill the earth. It would be characterized by forgiveness, righteousness, peace and eternal life.

In the first century, Jewish sects had varying ideas about the transition between the ages. But most agreed there would be a catastrophic war, leading to an abrupt transition. They believed the Messiah or Christ would lead an army of angels and faithful men to victory over Israel's enemies. After that, as heir to David's throne, the Messiah would restore the kingdom to Israel. From then on, all the Old Testament expectations for God's kingdom would be fulfilled, and God's people would live in peace forever.

The connection between the Messiah and the kingdom of God for the Jews of Jesus' day was largely political. This is because through the Old Testament the Messiah, or the anointed king, led a nation that was a political entity in space and time — the nation of Israel — and Israel did battle with her enemies, neighboring nations and people groups and so on and so forth. So, after the fall of Israel and after Israel has gone into exile and then comes back, but under Roman occupation and Roman rule, the hope for Israel is that another

political Messiah or king will lead Israel out of bondage, out of slavery and back into her former glory or even greater glory. So, it's perfectly understandable, therefore, that when Jesus comes on the scene and people begin to wonder whether he is the Messiah, they have certain political expectations about what he will accomplish, but we find out from him that his kingdom is not of this earth.

— Dr. Constantine Campbell

You'll recall that in 722 B.C. the northern kingdom of Israel went into exile in Assyria, and that in 586 B.C. the southern kingdom of Judah was exiled to Babylon. So, by the time of Jesus' ministry in the first century A.D., they had been living in exile under foreign domination for many centuries. They had been ruled by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Nevertheless, many of God's people were also hopeful. They believed his promises about the last days. Many even thought that prophecies like the statue in Daniel 2, and the beasts in Daniel 7, referred to the kingdoms that had dominated them, and indicated that their oppression was about to end.

Not surprisingly, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament also spoke of "this age" and "the age to come" as the two major eras of history. And they largely agreed on the way other Jewish theologians characterized these ages. They taught that the Messiah would end this age of sin and death and usher in the age to come with all its blessings. Listen to what Jesus said in Mark 10:29-30:

I tell you the truth... no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age ... and in the age to come, eternal life (Mark 10:29-30).

Jesus distinguished "this age" from "the age to come," just like his contemporaries did. And he made it clear that blessings would come to those that followed him. In Mark 10:29, Jesus indicated that he was the Messiah that was expected to bring the transition from this age to the age to come. He did something similar in Matthew 12:32, where he used the term "Son of Man" to refer to himself as the Messiah. And listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 1:20-21:

[God] seated [Christ] at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come (Ephesians 1:20-21).

Like Jesus, Paul distinguished between this present age of evil and the blessed age to come, and he associated the triumph of the age to come with Christ, that is, with the Messiah. Paul used similar language in 1 Corinthians 2:6-8; 2 Corinthians 4:4; and 1 Timothy 6:17-19. These and many other passages show that Jesus and his apostles and

prophets agreed with most other Jews in their day about the basic structure of the eschaton.

Having considered New Testament realizations in terms of theological developments, let's address some of the historical complications faced by the New Testament church.

HISTORICAL COMPLICATIONS

It was clear to everyone in the New Testament era that Jesus didn't meet all the expectations of Jewish theologians. He didn't lead God's armies to victory over their enemies. He didn't restore David's throne in Jerusalem. And his faithful people were still struggling with sin, pain, sickness and death. In short, he didn't *end* this age, and he didn't appear to bring many of the glories of the age to come. For this reason, the majority of Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah. So, why did the church accept him? Given these historical complications, why did the church continue to believe that Jesus was the Christ?

Our discussion of the historical complications faced by the New Testament church will divide into four parts. First, we'll look at the unmet expectations related to the coming of God's kingdom. Second, we'll explore prophetic mystery as an explanation of these unforeseen circumstances. Third, we'll consider covenantal conditionality as a component of the explanation. And fourth, we'll mention divine freedom as another aspect of our explanation. Let's begin with the early church's unmet expectations.

Unmet Expectations

During his life and ministry, Jesus didn't fulfill *all* of the contemporary expectations for the last days. And this sometimes created tension and confusion in his earliest followers. They had to wrestle with three truths that were hard to reconcile. First, they believed the Old Testament teaching that the Messiah would end this age and usher in the age to come. Second, they were committed to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. But third, they recognized that Jesus hadn't done what they expected. He hadn't ended this age or completely ushered in the age to come.

It shouldn't be hard to understand why the early believers might have struggled with these facts. Without a doubt, Jesus affirmed the Old Testament teaching that the Messiah would bring the earthly kingdom of God. He taught this before his crucifixion, and the apostles continued to teach this after his ascension. And he and his apostles also maintained that Jesus really was the Messiah or Christ. But since these truths were unquestionable, why hadn't Jesus, the Messiah, fulfilled their expectations of the age to come?

It's very likely that, following his resurrection, Jesus spent time explaining why he hadn't done everything his followers expected. Luke wrote that after Jesus rose from the dead, he spent forty days teaching the apostles about the kingdom of God. This would seem to imply that Jesus put a lot of effort into reconciling these truths. But even at the

end of the forty days of training, the apostles still didn't understand everything clearly. Listen to Luke's account in Acts 1:4-6:

On one occasion ... [Jesus] gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised ... in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:4-6).

This question made sense to the apostles because the Old Testament says that in the last days God will pour out his Spirit on all his people. In Ezekiel 39:27-29, and in Joel 2:28-3:2, God explicitly associated the pouring out of his Spirit with the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. So, it was natural for the apostles to wonder about this connection. But the Old Testament never said these two events had to be simultaneous. As Jesus told the apostles in Acts 1:7-8:

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you (Acts 1:7-8).

Jesus insisted that the timing of the kingdom hadn't been revealed to anyone. In fact, in Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32, he even said that it hadn't been revealed to him! — from the perspective of his humanity. Now, that's not to say that the Old Testament didn't talk about the timing of the events of the last days. But the Old Testament never guaranteed that these events would occur in precisely the way the early church expected them to happen.

So far in our discussion of historical complications, we've introduced the early church's unmet expectations. Now, let's consider prophetic mystery as part of the explanation of these unforeseen events.

Prophetic Mystery

Biblical prophets rarely explained the fulfillments of their prophecies in detail. And they always left at least some gaps in the information they provided. As a result, there was always a range of ways their prophecies could be interpreted.

Some of the prophecies that we read in the Old Testament Scriptures are very specific, so we learn, for example, that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem — that's really specific, a particular town — but most prophecies in the Old Testament are not like that. They are prophecies of coming judgment or of future blessing, and they're fairly nonspecific. Some people might even think they're vague. They're certainly very general prophecies. And I think there's a lot of wisdom in that in the purpose of God and in the mind of the Holy

Spirit in how these prophecies were given... There's something about the open-endedness of biblical prophecy that makes it relevant and applicable to the people of God in any place at any time.

— Dr. Philip Ryken

Paul talked about intentionally vague prophecies in Romans 16:25-26, where he mentioned,

the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God (Romans 16:25-26)

The mystery Paul mentioned here was related to the large-scale extension of salvation to the Gentiles, which he had previously explained in Romans 11. This mystery had originally been hidden in the Old Testament prophetic writings. But Jesus taught the apostles to understand these prophecies in ways that revealed the mystery.

As we pointed out earlier, despite the messianic expectations of the early church, Old Testament prophecies don't say that God's eschatological kingdom has to come all at once. In fact, one of the main goals of the New Testament seems to be to help readers understand those aspects of God's kingdom that were mysterious to earlier audiences.

We can think about God's mysterious timing by comparing Old Testament eschatological prophecies to a view of two mountains in the distance. From the perspective of the first-century audience, the "mountains" appeared to be close together. So, they expected the events of the last days to happen around the same time. But as history progressed and the mountains come into closer view, it became apparent that they were actually very far apart. So, later audiences were able to understand the previously hidden mystery, specifically, that the events introducing the eschaton would take a long time to unfold.

Now that we've looked at historical complications in terms of unmet expectations and prophetic mystery, let's turn to covenantal conditionality.

Covenantal Conditionality

As we saw earlier, God's covenants with his people had conditions. If his people obeyed the conditions, they'd be blessed. But if they disobeyed, they'd be cursed. For example, their disobedience had gotten them exiled from the Promised Land. And because prophecy was fundamentally a tool God used to motivate his people to obey his covenant, it was also fundamentally conditional. In other words, the prophecies about Israel's restoration were conditioned upon Israel's repentance and renewed covenant obedience.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah explained this fundamental conditionality in Jeremiah 18. In that chapter, he described his visit to the potter's house, where he saw the potter shaping clay. When the vessel didn't turn out the way the potter wanted, he

reshaped the clay, according to his own preference and discretion. Listen to what God said about the potter's work in Jeremiah 18:6-10:

O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does? ... If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (Jeremiah 18:6-10).

Here, Jeremiah indicated that prophecies are fundamentally conditional, just like the covenants they represent. This is true even when the prophecies concern the nation of Israel, and even when the kingdom they refer to is God's kingdom.

Of course, when we talk about God altering prophetic fulfillments, we have to be careful. When God swears, or takes an oath, or makes a covenant, those promises are *absolutely* sure. But not everything God says is a promise. And when prophecies don't include promises, their fulfillment isn't guaranteed.

The patriarch Abraham clearly understood this. In Genesis 15:7, 8, God said that Abraham would possess the Promised Land. But that wasn't enough to convince Abraham that it would necessarily happen. So, Abraham asked God to turn his prophecy into a covenant promise.

The prophet Daniel also understood this principle. Around a generation after Jeremiah's ministry, Daniel ministered to God's people that were living in exile in Babylon. They'd been exiled, of course, because they'd ignored Jeremiah's warnings and refused to repent. Daniel observed that their exile *might* be coming to an end. According to Jeremiah 25:11, 12, the exile was supposed to last 70 years. So, when those 70 years had passed, Daniel prayed for God to restore their kingdom. But, as we read in Daniel 9, the people were still breaking God's covenant law. Daniel knew that God might have mercy on them despite their sin. But he also feared that God might choose to *extend* their covenant punishment. Sadly, his fears were well founded. Rather than ending the exile, God multiplied it *seven times* — extending it another 490 years!

This extended exile was nearing completion in the days of Jesus. God sent his own Son as the messianic king and tasked him with preaching repentance so that the kingdom would be restored. Mark 1:15 summarizes Jesus' preaching this way:

“The time has come,” [Jesus] said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

Having considered the historical complications surrounding unmet expectations, prophetic mystery, and covenantal conditionality, we're ready to look at God's divine freedom.

Divine Freedom

God's freedom is emphasized throughout Scripture. And it's particularly evident when people question the fulfillment of relatively straightforward prophecies. For instance, when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and Bathsheba became pregnant, the prophet Nathan prophesied that her son would die. But David didn't believe this was a *necessary* outcome. He knew that God was free to withdraw the threat to the child's life. So, David repented and humbled himself. After his son died, David had this to say in 2 Samuel 12:22:

While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, "Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live" (2 Samuel 12:22).

David asked, "Who knows?" because he knew that God was completely free to save the boy or let him die.

The English words "Who knows?" translate the Hebrew phrase *mi yodea*. This same phrase appears in Joel 2:14, where Joel encouraged repentance as a way to avoid a prophesied judgment. In Joel's case, we don't know how God responded. But the prophet's understanding of his own prophecy is clear: God had prophesied judgment against his people. But he was still free to withhold that judgment, and even to bless the people instead.

We also see the phrase *mi yodea* in Jonah 3:9. In this case, Jonah proclaimed that Nineveh would be destroyed. So, the king of Nineveh ordered his entire city to repent of its sins, hoping that God would spare them. Here, *mi yodea* expressed the king's hope that God would show mercy to Nineveh. And in this case God did; he relented of the judgment Jonah had prophesied.

God isn't bound to act according to our expectations, even when we do our best to base those expectations on his Word. In the absence of a promise, God is free to fulfill prophecy in whatever way seems best to him. So, when first-century Jewish theologians were asked when and how the Messiah was going to restore the kingdom to Israel, they probably should have said, "Who knows?"

Whether we conceive of Old Testament prophetic expectations in terms of mountains in the distance, clay in a potter's hands, or divine freedom, one thing is clear: God didn't complete his eschatological kingdom during the first century. For hundreds of years, God's people had expected that when the Messiah came, all would be right with the world. But instead, the Messiah was crucified, and his people suffered persecution. Thankfully, as we've seen, the Bible provides many ways to reconcile these realities.

Now that we've looked at the New Testament realizations related to theological developments and historical complications, let's explore the early church's adjusted expectations.

ADJUSTED EXPECTATIONS

Jesus and his apostles disagreed with Jewish theologians about the transition between this age and the age to come. As we've seen, Jewish theologians expected a sudden, violent transition that rapidly ended this age and brought the kingdom of the age to come, or eschaton, all at once. But this expectation wasn't based on covenant or prophetic promises. And as things turned out, it was wrong.

In contrast to Jewish expectations, Jesus and his apostles taught that the transition between the ages would *not* happen quickly. The age to come began with Jesus' life and earthly ministry, but this age hadn't ended yet. In other words, Jesus instituted a period in which the ages *overlap*, prolonging the full realization of the eschaton. As a result, we suffer the hardships of this age at the same time that we enjoy the initial blessings of the age to come. This is the view that the church adopted. It's often called "inaugurated eschatology" because it acknowledges that God's eschatological kingdom has begun, or has been *inaugurated* in Christ. But it hasn't yet come in all its fullness.

One of the most important frameworks in understanding the Bible is what we sometimes call technically, "inaugurated eschatology." When we hear the word "eschatology" we sometimes think, oh, we're talking about the very last days, the end of history. And that's true, but according to the N.T.*, when Jesus first came to earth, he inaugurated the last days. The prophecies in the O.T.† about what God would do when he would ultimately save his people, those have begun when Jesus came to earth, so we now live as Christians in a time when already many of God's promises have been fulfilled, but we are still waiting for other promises to be fulfilled in the future. So that's this kind of fundamental inaugurated eschatological structure that's fundamental to understanding a lot of the N.T. and our own Christian lives as well.

— Dr. Douglas Moo

Jesus told many parables showing that the kingdom of God grows over a long period of time. For example, in Matthew 13, he compared the kingdom to a field growing toward harvest, a mustard tree that grows from a seed, and yeast spreading through a batch of dough. In verses 39, 40 and 49, he taught that the kingdom would continue to grow until "the end of the age." Only then would "this age" finally be over and "the age to come" be present in all its fullness. This is why the New Testament speaks of the kingdom of God as happening in three stages. It has already arrived, it is currently in the process of arriving, and it will arrive in the future. The fact is all three are true. According to the inaugurated eschatology that Jesus taught, the kingdom *has* come, *is* coming and *will* come.

* New Testament

† Old Testament

We can divide the timeline of the last days into three main parts. The last days began with the inauguration. This is when the ages began to overlap during Jesus' life and earthly ministry, including the foundational work done by the apostles. The continuation follows the inauguration. During this time the church builds God's kingdom to prepare for Christ's return. Finally, the consummation brings the full blessings the Old Testament expected for the eschaton. It ends *this age* and permanently replaces it with *the age to come*.

Let's look more closely at the timeline of the last days, beginning with the inauguration. Through explicit teaching and parables, Jesus taught that he had already inaugurated God's earthly kingdom.

Inauguration

For instance, in Luke 16:16, Jesus said:

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it (Luke 16:16).

Similarly, in Matthew 11:12, Jesus told his audience:

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing (Matthew 11:12).

The kingdom has been advancing, or growing in the world at least since the time of John the Baptist. And, as the Bible teaches, John's work prepared the way for Jesus' public ministry. But Jesus didn't just teach and tell parables about the inauguration of the kingdom. He also argued that his miracles proved the presence of God's kingdom. As he said in Luke 11:20:

If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you (Luke 11:20).

He asserted the same thing in Matthew 12:28.

Jesus' taught that in order for demons to be cast out, they first had to be defeated. And the only way that could happen was if a more powerful force conquered them. Since the demons were obviously beaten, it meant that God had advanced his armies, conquered his enemies, and built his kingdom.

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the church was another indication that the last days had begun. Acts 2:1-11 tells us that, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church. This outpouring enabled them to speak in other languages, and visibly marked them with tongues of fire. Listen to Peter's explanation of this event in Acts 2:16-17:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (Acts 2:16-17).

Here, Peter saw the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as proof that the last days had begun.

Probably the most frequent way the New Testament refers to the inauguration of the kingdom, though, is through the term “gospel.” In the ancient world, “gospel” or “good news” typically referred to a king that had conquered new territory. In order to announce the new government to the people, the king would have messengers proclaim the “good news” that he was their new king. Similarly, the Old Testament used the term to refer to Israel’s restored kingdom after their exile. Listen to what Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7).

Isaiah is speaking especially to those who are anticipating going into exile, or maybe those who have already been into exile are hearing what Isaiah wrote, or reading what he wrote, and they are heartened because “good news” in his context means that our king has won the victory, that his armies have been successful in battle, and he’s delivering us from our captivity. He’s going to bring us back home to our land. And we see that Isaiah picks up on how God has done that in the past. In verse 4, he talks about how God did that in Egypt and delivered them from Egypt. And also in verse 4 he says, in Assyria, the Assyrians came, but I’m going to deliver you. And so, with the Babylonian exile, there’s this anticipation that God will once again be victorious... So Jesus, when he picks up this concept of “good news” from Isaiah, is talking about real deliverance in the lives of people, where the gospel liberates people, the gospel changes things on the ground, and our God is victorious.

— Dr. Greg Perry

Isaiah had in mind messengers that were proclaiming God’s victory over his enemies. And that meant that God was reigning — his kingdom had been established. This is why Jesus and his apostles borrowed the term “gospel” from Isaiah. They wanted people to understand that God had defeated his enemies and had begun to reign on earth. Or to put it in the terms we’ve been using, God had *inaugurated* his earthly kingdom.

The second stage of the last days is the continuation of the kingdom.

Continuation

The continuation of God's kingdom stretches from Christ's first coming to his return. During this time, we enjoy many blessings of the age to come, like the Holy Spirit's gifts and victory over our spiritual enemies. But we also suffer the hardships of this age, like sin, disease and death. Even so, we have great reasons to persevere through this tension, knowing that our work is expanding the kingdom of God, and that he will reward our faithfulness.

Earlier in this lesson, we pointed to Jesus' parables as evidence that the kingdom of God grows on earth over a prolonged period of time. We mentioned that in Matthew 13 Jesus compared the kingdom to a field growing toward harvest, a mustard tree that grows from a seed, and yeast expanding a lump of dough. These parables described how God's kingdom spreads and grows throughout the world, primarily through the work of the church. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus gave the church the following instructions:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

In this passage, commonly called the Great Commission, Jesus indicated that he had received authority as king, that the church would spread his kingdom to all nations, and that this work would continue until the very end of the age.

The Great Commission calls us to expand the borders of Christ's kingdom to all nations, and to continue this work until the end of this age. Moreover, as we make disciples, they join us as citizens in God's messianic eschatological kingdom. As Paul told his readers in Colossians 1:13:

[God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Colossians 1:13).

And as John proclaimed in Revelation 1:5-6:

[Jesus] has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father (Revelation 1:5-6).

Also during this time of continuation, Jesus is advancing his kingdom in ways that are less visible than the expansion of the church. For example, he governs his earthly kingdom and battles his enemies from his throne in heaven. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:25:

[Jesus] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:25).

Jesus is already reigning over his kingdom, and will continue to push his kingdom forward until all of his enemies are defeated.

The third and final period of the last days is the consummation of the kingdom, when this age is completely replaced by the age to come.

Consummation

As we saw at the beginning of this lesson, the Old Testament outlines the history of God's kingdom in three phases: the initial creation of the universe and its creatures; a long period of redemption necessitated by humanity's fall into sin; and the eschaton, when God's kingdom completely fills the earth.

The Old Testament portrays the eschaton as a time when the Messiah will end this age of sin and death and rule forever from David's throne in Jerusalem. His reign will renew creation, secure peace throughout the whole world, ensure perfect justice and righteousness, and last forever. And the New Testament agrees with the Old Testament regarding the final state of creation and the kingdom of God. But the New Testament gives us more details, such as identifying Jesus as the Messiah. In Luke 1:32-33, the angel announced Jesus' birth with these words:

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end (Luke 1:32-33).

But according to the New Testament, the greatest eschatological blessings foreseen by the Old Testament won't be fulfilled until the consummation of God's kingdom. These include the return of Jesus, the general resurrection of the dead and the last judgment, the destruction of the current creation, and the creation of new heavens and a new earth. In addition, in places like 1 Corinthians 15:52-54, the New Testament assures us that in the new creation, we'll live forever in glorified bodies. Death will be completely destroyed, and we'll never suffer again. And in 2 Peter 3:10, 13, the apostle Peter added the detail that the present creation will be destroyed by fire. This will purge creation of sin's corruption, and prepare the way for the new heaven and new earth.

The largest volume of new details comes from the apostle John, who wrote the book of Revelation. Near the end of that book, John described the new heaven and new earth of God's eschatological kingdom, including the New Jerusalem, its capital city. Listen to John's description in Revelation 21:1-4:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every

tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:1-4).

We’ll explore these events in detail later in this series. So for now, we simply want to say that the New Testament realizations never disagree with the Old Testament. Instead, they help us make sense of the Old Testament in light of the historical complications related to Jesus’ work as the Messiah. And they offer even greater hope and assurance of blessing to those of us that follow him faithfully.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on “The Goal of Creation,” we began by looking at history from the perspective of Old Testament expectations related to creation, redemption and the eschaton. Next, we considered some New Testament realizations related to those expectations by focusing on theological developments, historical complications, and adjusted expectations.

We live in an amazing time. For thousands of years, the Old Testament looked forward to the last days as that time when God would bring his kingdom to earth. That was the great hope of the Old Testament saints. And we have the privilege of living in that kingdom. True, it isn’t perfect yet; the consummation is still in our future. But even so, we already enjoy many kingdom blessings. We have the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Christ is reigning from heaven and defeating our spiritual enemies. And God is clearly expanding his reign throughout the world. So, even though we continue to struggle with sin and its consequences, we can have confidence that the consummation will come, and that we will live with God in the new heavens and the new earth forever.

Dr. Matt Friedeman (Host) is Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship at Wesley Biblical Seminary and founding pastor of DaySpring Community Church in Clinton, Mississippi. Dr. Friedeman earned his M.Div. from Asbury Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. from the University of Kansas. He is a contributing columnist for the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, a political analyst for WAPT-TV, chaplain for the Hinds County Penal Farm, and is very active in prison and pro-life ministries. He is also the author of several books including, *The Master Plan of Teaching*, *LifeChanging Bible Study*, and *Discipleship In The Home*.

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College & Graduate School.

Dr. Danny Akin is President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Constantine Campbell is Associate Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Dr. Benjamin Gladd is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary.

Dr. Douglas Moo is the Kenneth T. Wessner Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College & Graduate School.

Dr. Greg Perry is Vice President for Strategic Projects at Third Millennium Ministries (formerly Associate Professor of New Testament and Director of City Ministry Initiative at Covenant Theological Seminary).

Dr. Philip Ryken is President of Wheaton College.