

Biblical Theology Core Seminar Class 4: The Story of Kingdom Through Covenant

[Teacher's note: questions for class placed in italics.]

Think I can summarize the storyline of the Bible in 8 words? What if I said the storyline of the Bible is all about...

God's people, in God's place, under God's rule.

That's how Graham Goldsworthy summarizes it in his excellent little book *Gospel and Kingdom*. Just think about it:

- In Genesis 1-3, God ruled his people (Adam & Eve) in his place (the Garden of Eden).
- In Genesis 6, God rules his people (Noah and family) in his place (the ark).
- From Genesis 12 and all the way up to the exile, God means to rule his people (Israel) in his place (the land of Canaan) by means of his law. They rebel and he exiles them.
- Then in Matthew's Gospel, we discover a man who perfectly lives according to God's rule. And those who are united to this man by faith look forward to a new heaven and new earth (God's place) where will live together forever under God's rule.

The story of the whole Bible in those 8 words: God's people, in God's place, under God's rule.

Welcome to week 3 of the biblical theology class. The phrase "biblical theology," we said in week 1, refers to a particular way of reading and interpreting the Bible. We read the Bible as a single story, a coherent narrative, about the redemptive acts of God in Jesus Christ.

Last week we walked into the carpenter's shop and had a look at a couple of tool boxes.

- *Exegetical Tools*: grammatical-historical method and sensitivity to genre help us to understand the author's original intent.
- *Storyline Tools*: we look back and then forward in order to locate where we are in the storyline and to see how the text points to Christ. Specifically, we need the tools of theme, promise-fulfillment, typology, and continuity-discontinuity.

This week, we're going use these tools to trace one particular storyline in Scripture that's very similar to Goldsworthy's story: the story of kingdom through covenant.

I. RETRACING THE STORY—KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT

The idea of "kingdom through covenant" comes from the excellent book by Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum called *Kingdom Through Covenant*. The idea is simple: from

beginning of Scripture to the end, God establishes his kingdom through covenants. And it's these covenants which give structure to the Bible as a whole. Think of them steel framework which hold the whole building together.

Creation and the Adamic Covenant

Turn to Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." God is creator of the universe. And as creator, he is ruler. He is king. The author has authority.

This is what we see beginning in verses 26 to 28, where God creates Adam and Eve in his image, and then in verse 28 God blesses them and then commands them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion..." God's rule is a generous and authorizing rule, to be sure, and he rules by setting the trajectory of Adam and Eve's life.

Nowhere do the first few chapters of Genesis use the language of covenant. But if something looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck...

What is a covenant? "A solemn commitment, guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both covenanting parties, sealed with an oath" (Paul Williamson, NDBT).

This covenantal nature of their relationship becomes especially evident in chapter 2. Look at verses 15-16:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'

God provides Adam with a list of duties and commitments, and he promises blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. He binds them by this verbal commitment, the oath, this covenant.

To define covenant another way, "A covenant is the constitutionalization of a relationship."¹ It involves the coming together—con-gregating—of separate parties by a morally binding pact that establishes lines of authority and the boundaries of the group of community.

How does God establish his kingdom rule on earth? Through covenants. God even calls Adam a Son.

Look at Genesis 5:

¹ Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant & Polity*, 24.

“This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. **2** Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. **3** When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.”

Of course Adam and Eve reject God’s rule in Genesis 3. They launch the original revolution. They pull out their parchment paper and quill pens and draft their own constitutions that crown themselves kings.

Does their revolution succeed? Do they place themselves outside of God’s rule and kingdom?

Genesis answers with a resolute “no” in at least two ways. First, the sword remains in God’s hand, even if his hand is now invisible. The genealogical tables in Genesis 5 conclude every name with “and he died.” He’s enacting his curse on humanity as promised.

Second, the fact that all humanity remains under God’s rule is evident with the Bible’s second major covenant, the Noahic Covenant. (I’m going to turn their names into adjectives by putting “-ic” after their names: Noahic, Adamic, Abrahamic...)”)

Noahic Covenant

In Genesis 9, God renews his original mandate for all creation. Turn there:

Verse 1: “Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.’”

Notice it’s restating the Adamic Covenant. But you see in verses 2 to 6 God makes adjustments for the fact of the Fall. So animals fear humankind, and then the charter for government is granted.

Verse 5b: “And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.”

Then verse 8: “Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: **9** “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you... **11** I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”...**13** I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Covenants always have a sign. This one is God’s bow of war set down. He will withhold his judgment, introducing the idea of eschatology to the Bible.

The Noahic Covenant, as I said, renews the Adamic, though he places it in a post-fall context. Noah is the new Adam. God's rule comes through him.

Consider what this means: all humanity is subject to God's rule and are accountable to his judgment, whether they acknowledge God or not. Sodom and Gomorrah learn this in Genesis 19. King Abimelech learns it in Genesis 20. Pharaoh learns it in the first half of Exodus. Nebuchadnezzar later. Jesus tells Pilate his authority comes from above.

The Psalmist sums up: "Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns!'" and "he will judge the peoples with equity" (Ps. 96:10).

Friends, do you think the our neighbors and our colleagues and our congressmen are any less accountable to God than these biblical characters? Through the Noahic Covenant, God's kingdom, his rule, remains in effect.

Noah does little better than Adam. He gets drunk. A few chapters later we find all humanity rebelling once more through the Tower of Babel.

Abrahamic Covenant

This brings us to the Abrahamic Covenant. Turn to Genesis 12:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. **2** And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."... **7** "To your offspring I will give this land."

Then in chapter 15—flip there—God says in verse 18: "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land..."

Finally in chapter 17—turn there—this covenant is explained even a little more fully. Verse 4:

4 "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations...**6** I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. **7** And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you...**10** This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

Father Abraham will beget not just children, but kingdoms. Verse 6: "will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you." Notice also the sign of the covenant in verse 10. Covenant sign: circumcision.

Abraham, too, was a new Adam. God's covenant with Adam and Noah we can call common covenants, because they were covenants with all humanity. But beginning with Abraham we get a line of special covenants—covenants that are exclusively given to God's people. **What's important for our purposes is to understand the relationship between the common covenants and the special covenants.**

Remember our tool of the grammatical-historical method. Listen closely to the grammar in the line texts we just read:

And God *blessed* them. And God said to them, "*Be fruitful and multiply...*" (Gen. 1:28)

And God *blessed* Noah and his sons and said to them, "*Be fruitful and multiply...*" (9:1, 7)

[God promises Abraham] And I will make of you a great nation, and I will *bless* you and make your name great, so that you will be a *blessing*. I will *bless* those who *bless* you... (12:2-3)

I may make my covenant between me and you, and may *multiply* you greatly...I will make you exceedingly *fruitful*...And I will give to you and to your offspring after you...all the land of Canaan... (17:2, 6, 8)

What's the difference? The **commands** of Genesis 1 and 9 turn into **promises** in Genesis 12 and following (see also 26:3-5, 24: 28:3; 35:11-12). God means to use the redeemed line of Abraham to fulfill his creation purposes. I gave you blanks to fill out in your handout. *How shall we characterize the relationship between the common covenants and the special covenants?* What the common covenants command, the special covenants give and therefore fulfill. Write in "command" and "fulfill."

God gives this, as we see in the opening chapter of Exodus: "But the people of Israel were *fruitful* and increased greatly; they *multiplied* and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7).

Which means, God's special people are to model what is commanded of all people. They are to be God's special kingdom, who exemplify and model and portray and image what God means for all humanity by living with righteousness and justice.

Mosaic and Davidic Covenants

Turn to Exodus 19, where we first encounter the Mosaic Covenant. *Can someone try to describe for me the relationship between the Abrahamic and Mosaic and Davidic Covenants?*

Both the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants are devices for implementing these Abrahamic promises (fill in the blank with “implement”). Remember our tool called promise-fulfillment? God makes a promise to Abraham. Then he uses these two covenants to say, “Now you do it!”

Israel is called a “son.” They are a corporate Adam. Look at Exodus 4:22: “Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, **23** and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.”

After rescuing the people from Egypt, God says in verse 19:

If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex. 19:5–6)

Is God talking about the Abrahamic Covenant here? No, he’s talking about one he will give to all Israel through Moses. Sure enough, look at the next chapter, where you see the 10 Commandments. Covenant sign: Sabbath keeping.

Then look at chapter 24, verse 7 where this covenant is solemnized and confirmed:

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” **8** And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

It’s by keeping this covenant and being obedient citizens of God’s kingdom, said God back in chapter 19, that they would be a kingdom of priests. They would show the world what true human dominion look like through keeping the Mosaic covenant. Israel’s dominion was supposed to redefine righteousness and justice for a world that had perverted it, as Pharaoh had. They would do this not as holy individuals but as a holy nation (see also Deut. 6:25).

Turn to Deuteronomy 17. The occupant of David’s throne was expected to preeminently embody the values of the Mosaic Law, thereby reflecting the kingship of God (see Deut. 17:18–20 in your handout).

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. **19** It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees **20** and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

The terms of the Davidic Covenant are then described in 2 Samuel 7. Turn there. God says a number of things, but principally God says in verse 12, “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom...[13] I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

David and his offspring were to specially represent the rule of God and God’s kingdom to the people of God, and he was to represent God to the people. The kingdom of God was to be made even clearer through this covenant. David, too, was to be a kind of new Adam, a special son of God, representing and imaging his heavenly father.

New Covenant

Sadly, Israel and its kings rebelled. They didn’t represent God’s wisdom and righteousness in their corporate life, but mimicked the folly and idolatry of the nations instead. The result: injustice and unrighteousness (e.g. Is. 1:23; 10:1-2; Jer. 5:28).

God therefore determined to offer a new covenant, and this new covenant would establish a truly just and righteous kingdom. Turn to Jeremiah 31:33: “This is the covenant I will make,” says God. And notice the terms of this covenant.

- It gives them new, obedient, and free natures: “I will put my law within them.”
- The covenant establishes a community of people ruled by one ruler—a body politic: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”
- And it’s a body politic, a kingdom, that destroys all the natural heirarchies of humankind. There are no classes or castes or ethnic rivalries here. Verse 34: “No longer shall each one teach his neighbor...saying ‘Know the Lord’ [no one has more access to truth than others and is therefore fit to rule over others], for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”
- And this covenant establishes this body politic on a foundation of judicial pardon and reconciliation: “I will forgive their iniquity.”

Based on what we’ve just seen, *how would you describe the relationship between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant?*

I give you two ways NOT to describe it. And two ways to describe it.

Moving from the Mosaic to the New Covenant is **not** about

- moving from corporate to individual,
- or from obedience-required to no-obedience-required.

It is about moving from a covenant in which Israel’s obedience and kingdom life

- *depend upon their own strength* to a covenant in which their obedience and political/kingdom life would *depend upon God and his Spirit*.
- God commands. God fulfills. Notice, the relationship is similar to the relationship between common and special.

Fulfillment in Jesus: Who Is Jesus?

It's with all this in the background that we understand Jesus showing up in the Gospels and preaching the kingdom of God. It's in your handouts, but turn to Matthew 1:1. "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." We're gonna get a little nerdy here. You ready? Matthew wrote these words in Greek. And in Greek, the first two words are βίβλος γενέσεως. You see that in your handout.

What does biblos sound like? Book of.

And what does genese-os sound like? Genesis.

Now, if anyone has been paying especially close attention to their handouts, where have we seen those words before? Look back at Genesis 5:1 on page one of your handout: "This is the book of the generations (biblos genese-os) of Adam..." There those same words are in the Greek version of the Old Testament, which is what Matthew and his readers would have been reading. *And what do you think the name of the first book of the Greek version of the Old Testament is?* Genese-os.

Okay, back to Matthew. In the very first two words of the first book of the New Testament, Matthew grabs the very language from the opening chapters of Genesis, and says, "The Book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ." *Who is he saying Jesus is?* A new Adam!

But not only is he a new Adam, he is...*who else?* The son of David.

And who else? The Son of Abraham.

But wait, there's more. Turn to 2:14: "he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt **15** and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

So who is Jesus now? The new Israel

So Jesus is the new Adam, come to bring a new Genesis, and he is the son of Abraham, the son of David, a new Israel! How do you think all those covenants we just talked about will get fulfilled?

Turn to chapter 4. You see at the beginning of the chapters, he is tempted by the devil after being in the wilderness for 40 days. *What does the temptation by the devil remind you of?* Adam.

And what does 40 days remind you of? Israel.

But of course Jesus does what neither Adam nor Israel could do: resist Satan and obey. Is this a new Adam and Israel?

Turn to chapter 5, verse 17: Jesus does what? Fulfill the prophets and the law.

God's rule is made perfectly manifest through the perfect human king, Jesus. Jesus came as the new Adam, the seed of Abraham, the true Israel, the greater David, to both fulfill everything they pointed toward, but also to do perfectly everything they could not do.

Jesus is the rule of God. He is the kingdom of God.

Church

But of course Jesus did more than establish God's kingdom in his own person. He gave a covenant. Turn to Matthew 26:26-28

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." **27** And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, **28** for this is my blood of the[c] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. **29** I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

What's the title of today's course? Kingdom through covenant. Jesus established his kingdom in the lives of a people through the new covenant in his blood. God's people in the New Testament therefore receive the benefits of Christ's rule ("Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven") and they pray for it to further come ("Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven").

Paul says in Galatians 6 we are the "Israel of God." And Peter now says of us.

You are a chosen race [the new Adam's!], a royal priesthood [sons who rule on God's behalf], a holy nation [a new Israel], a people for his own possession.

We are the new Adams, sons, the new Israel, Abrahamic children of the promise.

These people of the new covenant are to be the people of his kingdom who specially represent God, and model what God expects of all nations.

II. PATTERNS IN THE STORYLINE

That, in brief, is the story of *kingdom through covenant* in the Bible. It ends on the day when Christ's kingdom becomes fully visible, when "every knee will bow and every tongue confess Christ as Lord."

And as I told you this story, I employed the tools of biblical theology.

Were we doing exegesis? Very quickly, yes.

In addition to covenant, what were some of the key themes in this storyline, themes that we can now see hold the story of the whole Bible together?

- (i) The theme of God's kingdom or God's rule;
- (ii) The theme of covenant.
- (iii) the theme of righteousness that God created humanity to live righteous lives together;
- (iv) relatedly, the theme of the specialness of God's people;
- (v) the theme of sonship or representation and how God's special people represent what God expects of all;

Where did typology factor in? What types did we see? Adam is a type of humanity who is then developed. He's also a type of king with dominion. The garden is a type of kingdom. The flood (which we didn't talk about) is a type of judgment. All these and more are pointing to antitypes in the New Testament.

What role did promises/fulfillment play? God made certain commands through Adam and Noah, which he promised to fulfill through Abraham's offspring. Then the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants offered the people an attempt to fulfill those promises. When they failed, it became evident that God had to fulfill them.

Where do we see continuity and discontinuity? Of course, the very notion of promise and fulfillment, for instance, depends upon a dynamic of things both changing and staying the same. And the key with this tool is to notice how things gradually become more visible and significant.

- The covenant is implicit in Genesis 1 and 2. It becomes more explicit by Genesis 12, 15, and 17.
- God's kingdom is in seed form at first. It becomes visible in Israel living under the law, albeit imperfectly. It becomes perfectly visible in Christ. And it will become broadly visible in the church.

Think of a light switch with a dimmer. That's how redemptive history moves.

Finally, how does the story focus on Christ? He fulfills the covenants. As we said, he's the last Adam, the seed of Abraham, the new Israel, David's greater Son. He fulfills all God's promises. the commands and structure

To sum up, we had to use all our tools for discerning this storyline, as you see in your handout.

III. SYSTEMATIZING IT ALL

Finally, we're not going to take the time to demonstrate how our biblical theology translates into systematic theology. But if we were going to, *what are some themes we would want to explore?*

- 1) God rules all things and will call all humanity to judgment. Therefore...
- 2) There is no such thing as spiritual neutrality, whether in public or private. There is only one standard of righteousness and justice—a biblical one.
- 3) God's special people exist to model what is required of all humanity: a true politics. Where should we look for true justice? Among God's people. This in turn should lead to discussions about...
- 4) The witness of the church, and how its evangelism is tied to its deeds. Which in turn is tied to...
- 5) The role of God's law in the life of God's people.
- 6) The institutional nature of the people of the new covenant, and how they should be marked off by the signs of the covenant: Lord's Supper and Baptism.
- 7) More broadly, the church as the regenerate people of the kingdom. That's what the new covenant promises, right?
- 8) The church's mission and whether we can say the kingdom extends further than the regenerating work of the New Covenant.

Often, people address theological questions like these by picking their favorite proof texts. Hopefully, you're beginning to see that you need the whole storyline of "kingdom through covenant" to really see how God would address them.