

King of Kings

Over the last few weeks, we've been getting a birds-eye view of the Bible. We're doing this is because when you know where a passage or a story fits in the overall story of the Bible you'll know better understand it.

The first week, we talked about the fact that the Genesis creation account stands alone from the origin stories in the ancient world. It tells us that the universe was the intentional act of a loving creator. It says humans were created "in his image," which was language that was typically only applied to kings and Pharaohs, not to ordinary, everyday people. That image of God in us means that we have a responsibility to order and care for creation to bring about flourishing in the world. But we don't have to do it on our own. Like a good king, God gives us his wisdom to carry out that task.

But apparently, we don't like to be told what to do. We thought we knew better than God, so we determined to do things our way and sought to be our own gods and the result was chaos and destruction, separation from God and strained relationship with each other.

But God was not satisfied with that separation and he wasn't willing to people alone without hope and without wisdom. So, he initiated a covenant with a man named Abram and told him that he would use his descendants to bless the world and restore it to what he intended and to reconcile humanity with himself and each other.

So, he formed a kingdom of his descendants, provided them with land and a law to show them how to live as the people of God. But, like Adam and Eve in the garden, the people of Israel didn't want God to tell them what to do, they wanted a human king to tell them what to do. Now, God wasn't thrilled about this but he gave them what they wanted. There were only a handful of kings—like King David, who ruled according to God's wisdom, but most trusted their own wisdom. And the result was chaos and destruction. And for the people of Israel, it meant Exile in Babylon.

But, like Adam and Eve, God didn't leave them alone and without hope. Through Israel's prophets, he told them that in time, God would send a new king to restore righteousness and restore the people of God to their rightful status. These are the words of God through the prophet, Isaiah. [Isaiah 61]

Fast forward more than five centuries. The Gospel writer, Luke tells the story of a man named John—a prophet who called the people of Israel to repent and he baptized them and told them that the king they had waited for had finally come. A man named Jesus appears and is baptized by this prophet who is known as “John the Baptist.” Here's what it says, **“As [Jesus] was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”**

Now, many people ask the question, “Why did Jesus allow himself to be baptized?” We always associate baptism with sin and Christians believe Jesus didn't sin. So, what's

the point. Well, not only does baptism symbolize a cleansing from sin, it's also a show of solidarity with the people. So, Jesus' baptism did two things. First, by being baptized like everyone else, Jesus identified with the people of Israel who believed John's message that the new king was arriving.

But even more importantly, this wasn't really Jesus' baptism—it was his anointing. Since Israel's kings were put in place by God, they had to be anointed by God's prophet. For instance, after God had rejected king Saul, the prophet Samuel went out and found Israel's greatest king, David and anointed him over his brothers.

The image of the Holy Spirit descending brings to mind the picture from Psalm 2, where David writes about his own anointing. God says, **“I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.’ I will proclaim the Lord’s decree: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have become your father.’”** Kings were referred to as the Son of God. When Jesus is called Christ, it means Messiah, King, Anointed One. This is when Jesus was publicly anointed king.

A little later, after his testing in the wilderness, Jesus goes into the Jewish synagogue in the town of Nazareth, where he grew up. It doesn't say whether he asked for it or if someone just handed the scroll of Isaiah to him, but he turns directly to the passage we read earlier, Isaiah 61, and reads it out loud:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery

of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus was identifying himself as the king God promised to Israel in Isaiah 61.

Have you ever had a situation when you were anticipating something for a long time? Maybe it was something you never experienced, and you were excited about the chance to finally experience it? Or maybe it was something you were dreading. And you painted a picture in your mind of what it would be like, but when the time finally came, it wasn't anything like the picture?

My wife and I got married in 1993. We had just graduated from college in South Dakota in May, got married in July and in August, we were planning on moving down to Kentucky for seminary. Of course, we were both idealistic. In her mind, she was marrying this perfect physical specimen, who was kind and thoughtful and I was marrying a supermodel whose only goal in life was to please me. It all turned out to be true!

We were excited that we got into married student housing, but we moved down to the school sight unseen. I'm going to sound really old, but this was before the internet, so we had never even seen a picture of it. Now, my wife is not fancy—she doesn't need to have the best of everything, but she loves decorating and living in a nice space that she

created. So, she was excited that we would have a place we could make our own. We had a picture in our mind of a cozy little place where we could make our first home.

We got our housing assignment and found out that we were moving into a furnished apartment with the address, “22 Broadhurst Manor.” That’s great name, right? In our heads it looked like this [Broadhurst 2 pic] When you Google “Broadhurst Manor” today, this is what comes up. Or this [Broadhurst 3 pic] We would have even settled for this [Broadhurst 4 pic] But when we pulled up, this is what we got [Broadhurst 1 pic]

Now, we should have known. We were moving into married student housing for \$200/mo. We were on the second floor, so we climbed the pole to our apartment (it did have stairs). But we opened the door and immediately, Ann started crying. We were expecting “furnished” [living room pic], but got “furnished” [ugly couch]. We went back to the bedroom and found two single beds. I thought, this is really a conservative seminary! Our four years of seminary were great. We wouldn’t change a thing!

But you get the point: Sometimes reality is very different from our expectations. What we get isn’t always what we want. This was the case with Jesus the King. The Jews had certain expectations of what this coming Messiah would look like and what he would do, but the reality turned out far different. Let me mention just some of the ways.

First, they expected him to be political, but his kingdom is spiritual! Now, it’s understandable why they would expect this. They resented the fact that they were ruled by the Romans. They didn’t have their own land or king. So, when the prophets promise a

Messiah—well, Messiah means “king” and what do king’s do? Well, they collect taxes, make and enforce laws, and...they build an army that fights for its people. So, the very image of “king” would have led them to this image.

But even some of the prophecies about the Messiah would lead them to believe this. For instance, Isaiah 11 tells about the Messiah and says, **“⁴He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked.”**

And yet Jesus never even hinted that he was building an army. He never even talked about the Romans as enemies. When someone asked him if Jews should pay taxes to Caesar, he didn’t really care much about the answer. He said, **“Give Caesar whatever belongs to Caesar and to God whatever belongs to God.”** He taught his followers to **“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** It didn’t sound like Jesus was about to attack the Romans.

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus was arrested, he was questioned by the Governor, Pontius Pilate, who asked him if he was the “king of the Jews?” This was an important question for Pilate because if Jesus was a king, he was a rival and there was the possibility of an armed revolt against Herod, who also considered himself the “king of the Jews.” The Roman Empire didn’t really care who the Jews considered to be their king—as long as they respected Caesar—they just weren’t fond of riots. So, Pilate wanted to know.

And Jesus answered him, **“My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world.”** (John 18:36) In other words, Jesus was saying, “I’m not a political threat to anyone.”

But this would have been disappointing to the Jews. You see, because they had a specific picture of what the Messiah would look like and what he would do, when Jesus didn’t fit that mold, they were left wondering if he was really the guy.

Because Jesus was THEIR king, they expected him to be for them and against everyone else. They wanted a king who would destroy the Romans and put the Jews back on top. The problem is that Jesus never intended just to be the king of the *Jews*, he intended to be the King of Kings. Not only did he love the Jews, he loved the Romans. Not only did he want the Jews to be free from sin and oppression, he wanted the Romans to be free from sin and oppression. While he came from the Jews, he came to be the king of everyone. And the reason violence couldn’t be the answer is that with violence, there are winners and losers. The oppressed, when they conquer always become the oppressor. But that wasn’t God’s answer. In fact, it was just the opposite.

Jesus was a different kind of king with a different kind of power. *They expected Jesus to kill his enemies, but instead he died for them.* The greatest scandal of Jesus’ ministry was that he seemed to do everything upside-down. We expect kings to be born in a palace, but Jesus was born in barn. We expect kings to come from nobility—well,

Jesus *was* from the line of David—but that was ancient history. Now, he was born to a poor Jewish family. You would expect a king to have many servants, instead, Jesus **“didn’t come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”** (Mt 20:28)

The power Jesus exercised didn’t destroy people, but the forces of evil. He knew those who considered themselves his earthly enemies were only under the power of his *real* enemy, Satan. He came to teach, heal, forgive, and cast out demons that held people in bondage. He freed Jews and Romans and anyone else he encountered.

He defended the oppressed, but when it came time to defend himself, he refused to fight. Instead, he endured an unjust trial and a brutal death absorbing the sin and anger of humanity—taking our sins upon himself, so that we could be forgiven. The king who sacrificed himself for the sake of his subjects...whoever heard of such a thing? But while Jesus was on the cross, he prayed for those who killed him, **“Father forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.”** (Lk 23:34) This king didn’t fit their mold.

Now, it’s easy for us criticize the Jews of Jesus’ day for not recognizing the Messiah. But before we get too excited about that, we need to realize that we do the same thing. We create our own mold of what we want Jesus to be and we try to squeeze him into it. But if Jesus fits neatly into your mold and never challenges your thoughts and desires, you probably need to adjust your expectations.

For instance, *we expect him to be spiritual, but not political.* Now, when I say that Jesus was political, I mean that his head wasn’t just in the clouds, but he cares about

what happens on earth. He cared about justice. He cared for the poor. He cared about the marginalized. He cared about relations among people and among nations. He cared about human flourishing.

But there are a lot of Christians who want Jesus only to be the one who saves us from our sins and gets us to heaven and nothing more. Now, he certainly is that. In a few minutes, we're going to celebrate communion, where we recognize that King Jesus gave his life for us, made a way for us to be forgiven and reconciled to God.

But Jesus was also political. Just not necessarily in the way we think about politics. When we think of politics, we think in terms of Republican and Democrat, Liberal and Conservative. And, of course, there are Christians that identify with all those labels. But too often, rather than submitting ourselves to what Jesus taught, we try to squeeze him into our party platform.

But I'm familiar with the platforms of today's American political parties. And as I read Scripture, I don't see Jesus fitting neatly into Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative. He's more liberal than any of us when it comes to loving and identifying with sinners, outcasts and the marginalized, but more conservative and stringent than we are on issues like marriage, divorce and sex. We're good at drawing lines where Jesus didn't draw them and making enemies out of people Jesus came to save.

Whether you consider yourself a Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, chances are, Jesus would have points where he would agree with your party platform and

others where he wouldn't. If Jesus never challenges your partisan platform, you're probably not taking him seriously.

In the same vein, we expect him to be for "us" and against "them." Following Jesus has always required people to humble themselves. In his day, Jews separated themselves from Gentiles. Samaritans from Jews. Different ethnicities separated themselves from each other. We do the same today.

We separate along party lines. We separate ourselves by race and ethnicity, male and female, socio-economic status, elites and deplorables. But Jesus viewed everyone as made in the image of God and worth dying for. But he also looked at all people as sinners in need of grace. Everyone a sinner, and everyone loved.

Now, we like those words today. They sound good to our society's ears. Everyone is loved, everyone is equal. So, we expect King Jesus to be loving, not demanding. Somehow, we have built up this picture today of Jesus as the hippy who's OK with anything. But while Jesus is far more loving than we can imagine, he is also more demanding than we'd like to believe. He makes demand on us.

He taught us to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us." He told us when someone hits us on one cheek, rather than retaliate, we should offer the other cheek. He said if your eye causes you to lust after someone, pluck it out (I don't think he was being literal about that, by the way, but he *was* challenging our tendency to take sin far too lightly). He taught that he is the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the

father except through him. He warned of eternal judgment for the blatantly wicked, but also the self-righteous and proud religious people. And said that anyone who does not take up his cross daily and follow him cannot be his disciple.

Jesus is the King of a Kingdom that is at the same time loving and welcoming as well as rigorous and demanding. It is at the same time more challenging than you can imagine and more rewarding than you ever dreamed. Jesus is the kind of king who asks everything of us, but is also willing to give everything for us. When you come to Jesus, that's the king you serve and he is the one who will transform you into the person God created you to be. When you know him, he changes everything.

Who is Jesus to you?

Will you take him as he really is?