

The Reign of God

A STUDY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD



Jim McGuiggan

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The Reign of God

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*For beautiful Ninni Lott and her glorious husband, Frank Jr.
Heroic servants in the Kingdom
of the Lord Jesus.*

Chapter 1

God and Eternal Purpose

THE 'GOSPEL' OF UNBELIEF

- Bertrand Russell
- H. J. Blackham
- Ronald Hepburn
- Jean Paul Sartre
- Friedrich Nietzsche

GOD AND HIS PURPOSE

- His Purpose Fulfilled Within History
- His Purpose to Glorify Himself
- His Purpose Is That of the Father of Jesus Christ
- His Purpose Is to Produce 'Sonship' Through Jesus Christ
- His Purpose Is to Produce Loving Holiness

The 'Gospel' of Unbelief

1.1 In his essay: "A Free Man's Worship," the agnostic Bertrand Russell, puts a 'history' of creation in the mouth of Mephistopheles. This 'history' reveals the real motivation behind God's creation of the universe. "To Dr. Faustus in his study Mephistopheles told the history of the creation, saying:

1.2 'The endless praises of the choirs of angels had begun to grow wearisome; for, after all, did he not deserve their praise? Had he not given them endless joy? Would it not be more amusing to obtain undeserved praise, to be worshiped by beings whom he tortured? He smiled inwardly, and resolved that the great drama should be performed.'

1.3 'For countless ages the hot nebula whirled aimlessly through space. At length it began to take shape, the central mass threw off planets, the planets cooled, boiled seas and burning mountains heaved and tossed, from black masses of cloud hot sheets of rain deluged the barely solid crust. And now the first germ of life grew in the depths of the ocean, and developed rapidly in the fructifying warmth into vast forest trees, huge ferns springing from the damp mold, sea monsters breeding, fighting, devouring, and passing away. And from the monsters, as the play unfolded itself, Man was born, with the power of thought, the knowledge of good and evil, and the cruel thirst for worship. And Man saw that all is passing in this mad, monstrous world, that all is struggling to snatch, at any cost, a few brief moments of life before Death's inexorable decree. And Man said: 'There is a hidden purpose, could we but fathom it, and the purpose is good; for we must reverence something, and in the visible world there is nothing worthy of reverence.' And Man stood aside from the struggle, resolving that God intended harmony to come out of chaos by human efforts. And when he followed the instincts which God had transmitted to him from his ancestry of beasts of prey, he called it Sin, and asked God to forgive him. But he doubted whether he could be justly forgiven, until he invented a divine Plan by which God's wrath was to have been appeased. And seeing the

present was bad, he made it yet worse, that thereby the future might be better. And he gave God thanks for the strength that enabled him to forego even the joys that were possible. And God smiled, and when he saw that Man had become perfect in renunciation and worship, he sent another sun through the sky, which crashed into Man's sun. and all returned again to nebula. 'Yes,' he murmured, 'it was a good play; I will have it performed again.'"

1.4 At least in that view there was purpose in Creation. God decided to amuse himself. Russell follows with this: "Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which science presents for our belief . . . man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving – his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. . ." He continues to say: ". . .no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; . . . all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and . . . the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins. . Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built." And so he says: "Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. . ." ¹ I would say that was 'bad news.' Russell later toned down his rhetoric but he didn't change his views.

1.5 "The most drastic objection to humanism is that it is too bad to be true. The world is one vast tomb if human lives are ephemeral and human life itself (is) doomed to ultimate extinction."² H. J. Blackham, a leading humanist said that.

1.6 It's easy to see that in rejecting God as king we are not left without a king. For skeptics and atheists, 'Chance' is lord and omnipotent matter is co-regent. In our blindness, we fail to see that it is either God's rule we accept or something that crushes and dehu-

manizes. Like Adam, we reject God's sovereignty and the universe becomes a place where 'omnipotent matter' blindly vomits out Man and just as blindly crushes him like a bug. Mindless matter finally produces a being with 'mind' and 'values' and then brainlessly crushes him. (No wonder the atheist Sartre said life was 'absurd.')

If we must choose between the sovereignty of God and the blind determinism of purposeless matter, most of us in our better and saner moments will choose God's rule.

1.7 It isn't surprising to hear humanist, Ronald Hepburn, chide his fellow-humanists for destroying faith in God and then creating a 'god' out of 'evolution' to take his place. Hepburn shows that unbelievers, when they exclude God, buy into a system which is mindless and purposeless. And Friedrich Nietzsche the atheist, vehemently protested against unbelievers who wish to dump Christianity but keep its morals and values. Nietzsche's choice of nihilism rather than God's rule was an awfully sad choice. He took his atheism seriously and it broke his heart not to say his mind. In "The Gay Science" he has a madman seeking God with a lantern, at noonday. The atheists on the corner begin to mock and the madman turns on them. They don't know what a horrible thing they have done in 'killing' God, he tells them. He wants to know if they don't feel the world getting colder and darker since they have (in 'killing God') unchained the earth from its sun and it careens off into the darkness of abysmal space. If atheism were true, we'd have to live with it! Life would be 'absurd.' A sick joke. Gary Larson, the cartoonist, shows us a butterfly being born out of the cocoon and being ensnared in a spider's web which is spread across the exit of the cocoon. That's raw! Christians don't believe that. They don't have to!

God and His Purpose

1.8 There is a God and the Bible speaks of his purpose and his purposes. Key texts would include Ephesians 1:3-14 and Jeremiah 29:11 which says: "*For I know the plans I have for you. . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you. . .*" These texts, from among a great many, show that the God of the Bible is a purposing God.³

1.9 That grand purpose (which involves a number of lesser but related purposes) is real, not imagined! The Christian has committed himself to the message of the Bible, of course, and holds that what it proclaims is real! Dependable! No less than anyone else, the believer seeks to build his Life on the substantial, the well founded (see Luke 1:1-4) and he has found good reason to accept the testimony of the Scriptures.

1.10 That purpose is brought to fulfillment in history! Whatever else the Jewish and Christian faiths are, they are rooted squarely in history. That agnostics and atheists like Will Durant and Antony Flew can see no guiding hand in history is not really surprising. We often see what we want to see and often miss what, for one reason or another, we conclude isn't possible. But even believers stagger at times when they see the senseless (yes, senseless) events of life. (She was a missionary for forty years in the far east. She went to vacation in America for a few weeks and then to return to work. She leaned over to pat a dog on the head and the brute tore off her whole bottom lip. Make sense of that!) It isn't only unbelievers who shake their heads and mutter protestations. Believers struggle too.

1.11 It isn't only the senseless events of life that tempt us to doubt God's ruling hand in history. It's the dull, ordinary 'day after day' nature of so much of life. Perhaps this is what led Henry Ford to say that 'history is bunk!' and 'history is just one damned thing after another.' Believers wouldn't use a religious word like 'damned' in that fashion (at least not usually) but they know the feeling behind that use of it. So much of life, is not senseless, is without 'real' purpose or 'real' significance.

1.12 And then there are the injustices and cruelties we see in us and around us. God is ruling and Stalin is ravaging? God is in control and Hitler is exterminating? God is sovereign and Pol Pot is committing genocide? God is guiding and Ceausescu is pillaging? Enlightened Christians aren't ignorant of the serious questions which arise when they say: "God is King!" (The issue of God's sovereignty and human freedom has come alive as a debate between believers in

these past ten years. This witnesses to the fact that they are already aware of the tensions which unbelievers point out.)

1.13 The Christian confesses that much of history offers no evidence of a guiding hand. But he can and does point to certain events in history which make it clear that God does indeed take a hand in the historical process.

1.14 The call of Abraham, the Exodus, the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the birth of the Church are the sort of events I mean. In a world of oppressed and hungry billions, it offends me to hear people say that God chooses the right hairdresser for them (as I have heard some people claim). But it's a long way from that to saying he has no hand whatever in history. These events just mentioned are occasions when God pulls back the curtain and shows himself or perhaps, more modestly, when he reaches his hand from behind the curtain and we glimpse that. We don't have to make sense of every single happening in life to know that God is sovereign! We don't have to load every action with theological or spiritual significance to know that certain actions are loaded with both! In a world of 'natural laws' and sinful people we're going to come across 'senseless' incidents.

1.15 No one got into the dog that tore her whole lower lip away and made him do it (see paragraph 10). God certainly didn't. Demons don't need to. We can't make sense of that sort of thing. What's more, you don't have to! God doesn't give a hang if I use one kind of toothpaste as distinct from another, whether I prefer dark clothes to light, or spinach over cabbage. The Bible is filled with incidents which in and of themselves have no theological significance. 'They're events which light up the human landscape and if we are sufficiently concerned to look, we'll see the hand of God in them. At that point we know that history isn't just one damned thing after another.' Whatever God has in mind as a finale, it is going to happen within the crucible of human history.

1.16 That purpose is to bring God glory. The Ephesian 1 passage repeatedly makes God's will and God's glory the central concerns. It

is the will of God that Man be redeemed and brought into a living relationship with God. And it is because that is the will of God that God is glorified by his creatures.

1.17 Man's redemption (the forgiveness of sins—1:7) is not an end in itself. It is to God's everlasting honor and glory that he chooses to forgive Man, but God is honored and glorified by a lifestyle. God has called man, in Christ Jesus, to live in loving holiness before him (1:4). It is the believer's business to live his life by reflecting the character of God as seen in Jesus Christ. In this God is glorified. His work of reconciling Man to God and man to man is the larger picture of what 'salvation' means. God saves us not only from the penalty of our Sin, he ongoingly redeems us from our evil. This is part of the redeeming process, this is his will and what pleases him! This ongoing redemptive work brings glory to God in transformed lives.

1.18 That purpose is the outworking of 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Whatever we hold about predestination and about God's eternal decrees, we must remember that it must not mean "anything which would do violence to the character of 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.'" Jesus 'brings out the meaning' of the Father (John 1:18). It was Jesus who said: *"If you had known me you would have known my Father also – he that has seen me has seen the Father."* With 1 John 1:5 as background, Michael Ramsey has rightly said: "God is Christlike, and in Him is no non-Christlikeness at all."⁴

1.19 There are difficult questions to be answered in the area of God's eternal decrees and foreordination. But it will be infinitely better for us to confess abysmal ignorance than to proclaim a view which conflicts with the image of God shown in Christ! Take no view of predestination which presents God as tyrannical and sadistic. The very notion that God is such a God as would create people in his image for no other reason than to eternally torture them because it is "his good pleasure" is abhorrent. That would not be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That would be someone like Stalin or Hitler or Ceausescu! (The biblical doctrine on the precise nature of 'hell' is another subject for another time but Whatever one's view on 'eternal punishment,' it is nonsense to declare that the God who wept over

those who rejected him (Luke 19:41-44) had omnipotently decreed that they could do nothing but reject him so that he in turn could torture them eternally because it pleases him! John Wesley was right, a God like that is the Devil.

1.20 Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). He pleaded with and offered salvation to those who steadfastly rejected him (Matthew 23:37; John 5:40). Since he always reflected the will of his Father (John 6:38), he was doing the will of God when he offered salvation to those he knew would choose to reject him. The offer was sincere! Christ did not offer salvation to those whom God had eternally decreed to eternal torture. No!! God genuinely offers salvation to all, even those he knows will despise his offer. And when they reject his offer it pains him at his heart (see Matthew 23:37; Ezekiel 18:23,32; Isaiah 65:1-2; 2 Peter 2:1, and 1 John 2:2 as a few examples from among many).

1.21 Yes, there are a few strange sounding passages, here and there, which may be difficult to interpret. However difficult they are (and they're not that difficult!) we must not interpret them so as to saddle God with the character of a Stalin or an Eichmann.⁵ There are times when we know what a passage doesn't teach even if we aren't sure precisely what it does teach.

1.22 I heard of two men who were disputing over the meaning of a text. The one who was in the negative seemed to finally make his case – the passage was not teaching what his friend said it was teaching. “Well, if it doesn't teach that, what does it teach?” he was asked. He confessed he didn't know. “If you don't know what it does teach, how can you be sure that it isn't what I've said it taught?” he was asked. At that point a very severe looking woman walked down the other side of the street. “Ah, I see your wife over there!” said the man in the negative. The other took one look and was relieved to say: “That's not my wife!” He was asked: “Who is it then?” He said he didn't know. “But if you don't know who it is, how do you know it isn't your wife?” was the response. It is possible to know what a passage doesn't teach without knowing precisely what it does teach. Stand firmly on the character of Jesus Christ and do not attribute

anything to God which violates the character and mission of the Christ.

1.23 It was God's eternal intention to save sinners through living union with Jesus Christ. God himself would take the initiative. He by the sacrifice of himself (in his Son) would provide the basis upon which the ungodly could be acquitted. By God's eternally offered grace, sinners would trust the complete work of Jesus Christ. God's eternal intention is to save people through deeds he eternally ordained for his Son, Jesus Christ. That eternal intention is proclaimed to us in a foreordained message. Sinners are saved through the foreordained Christ (Acts 2:33; 1 Peter 1:19-20), by a foreordained gospel message (1 Corinthians 2:21) in order that they should live a foreordained way of life (Ephesians 2:10) and they are said to be a foreordained community of brothers and sisters (Romans 8:29-30) who bear the image of the Christ. However over-simplified that might seem to some, it doesn't saddle God with a sadistic character.

1.24 Compare what you've just read with this by John Calvin: "Not all men are created with a similar destiny but eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say, he is predestinated either to life or to death."⁶ Thankfully this fierce teaching is on the decline. The God who purposes his sovereign purposes is the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' and that is where we ought to begin study in this area.

1.25 We cannot gaze at Christ who embodied and proclaimed the will and character of God and talk of God 'having the right' to do what he wills with his creation! We cannot call tyranny and sadism 'glorious' even if it should happen to be 'divine' tyranny and sadism. God has spoken on the death of the unrighteous and says he finds no pleasure in it. His 'glory' involves his love for the whole world (John 3:16) for whom he sent Christ as a sacrificial offering (1 John 2:2).

1.26 That purpose was to issue in 'sonship' through Jesus Christ. God created humanity in his own image. He created 'sons' and not

just creatures (Luke 3:38). His children rebelled against him but he had purposed in eternity to extend grace to them through Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 1:9). His gracious work would result in a 'new creation' with Jesus Christ as the 'last Adam' (Ephesians 1:4-5; 2:10; Colossians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 15:46). God's eternal purpose had at its heart our 'sonship' through Jesus Christ and to reduce this Christian era to a 'parenthesis' is to entirely misread the Scriptures.

1.27 That purpose was to bring us to holiness of life. It is true, and the Bible everywhere speaks of it, that salvation is by true, unadulterated grace! God acquits the ungodly! But Ephesians 1:4 insists that we were chosen in Jesus Christ "to be holy . . ." In passages like Galatians 3:10-12, Paul makes it clear that sinful man cannot appeal to the law for justification before God. A person either comes 'trusting' for salvation or he finds no salvation. This precious truth is protected against perversion by sections like Romans 6:1-23. If one lives with God by faith in the Christ, he lives a life of 'God-imitating justice' and righteousness toward God and his neighbor. His eternal intention, says Romans 8:29, has been to create people in the image of Jesus Christ! Whoever seeks that image renounces wickedness in all its forms and pursues loving holiness in all its manifestations.

In Summary

1.28 We've said that the atheistic view of life is "too bad to be true." That a denial of God's existence and of his sovereignty means we are stuck with 'chance' as Lord and matter becomes the blind and mindless tyrant which determines our existence and our destiny. To throw off God's yoke is to take on a yoke no one is capable of bearing.

1.29 We've said that the God of whom the Bible speaks and who has shown himself in Jesus is a sovereign who has purposed a wondrous purpose in eternity. That purpose is summed up in Jesus Christ, his nature and his redemptive work.

1.30 We've said that that purpose is worked out in history in the midst of the human race which God created capable of making free decisions. Because we live in a world of 'natural law' and in social

intercourse with beings who make free decisions, it shouldn't surprise us that 'senseless' things occur in life or that cruel things are perpetrated by people against people. It yet remains that God is in control of history and is working toward the completion of his grand purpose in Christ. Believers may debate how rigid that control is but they all maintain that God is in complete control and that his purpose will be accomplished.

1.31 It's because they believed that God held sovereign power and that the world was filled with rebellion and Satanic-led behavior that Bible writer's talk about the 'coming' of the kingdom (exercised sovereignty) of God. They believed that God would reveal his sovereign power in putting down rebellion and evil. This he would do in specific cases. (Nineveh, for example. See the book of Jonah.) There will come a day when he will completely and finally put down all rebellion through the Messianic king, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15).

1.32 (Questions such as: "What if Man had not sinned?" are as insoluble as they are profitless. The Bible is written in view of God's knowing that Man would sin, Man did in fact choose to sin and the Bible is written in light of those two truths. Additionally, to say that God's intentions went no further than physical paradise is to say more than the Bible warrants. To say that God intends to jettison the physical creation has difficulties attached to it that we can't discuss here.)

Chapter 2

The Term 'Kingdom' – 'Realm' or 'Reign' or Both?

THE MEANING OF THE TERM "KINGDOM"

- Scholarly Testimony
- Usage the Final Arbiter
- Twofold Biblical Usage of the Term 'Kingdom'
- Realm or Territory
- Reign - Exercise of Sovereignty

Scholarly Testimony

2.1 What do you think of when you hear the word 'kingdom'? If you're like most of us you will think of some territory or realm over which someone rules. This use of the word is legitimate and finds biblical approval in a great many texts.⁷ Since a king cannot rule over nothing, we quite sensibly speak of who or what he reigns over as his 'kingdom.' Scholars are agreed, however, that the term speaks of 'royal authority' or 'sovereign power.' It speaks of the power or authority exercised over a realm of people rather than the territory or people itself.⁸

2.2 The popular use (realm) is said to be the 'concrete' use of the word and the central thrust of the word (sovereignty, royal rule or reign) is the 'abstract.'

2.3 Scholars tell us that the word 'king' derives from Hebrew and Aramaic words meaning 'possessor' and/or 'arbiter.' It seems that power and wisdom are the basic ideas. A 'king' is one who exercises dominion, sovereignty, authority. In short, he 'has a kingdom' (see the ASV footnote to Revelation 17:18). I suppose that's because men who were powerful and/or wise were the men chosen to exercise sovereignty or who took the authority.

Usage the Final Arbiter

2.4 In light of the scholarly agreement on this, and in light of the clear biblical references to support their point, one is tempted to dismiss the 'realm' use as a popular but 'only tolerated' use of the term. But since actual biblical use is the final voice on this matter, it's undoubtedly best not to take that view.

2.5 The discussion of the 'meaning' of words is worth a book itself. If we restrict ourselves to gifted and technically competent speakers and writers, it's obviously true that a word (in any given text) 'means' what a writer intends it to mean! If he uses the word in several different ways, then the word has several legitimate 'meanings.' And, listen, it doesn't make a bit of sense to say that the 'real'

14 **The Term ‘Kingdom’ – ‘Realm’ or ‘Reign’ or Both?**

meaning of the word is the one which appears most often! If he uses a word to mean something only three times and uses the same word to meaning something else thirty three times, we are not to conclude that the ‘real’ meaning of the word is embodied in the thirty three. No! The ‘real’ meaning of a word is any meaning which a gifted and competent writer (or a community for that matter) gives to it.

2.6 It’s common knowledge, of course, that the origin of a word may or may not help a later generation to determine what its current ‘meaning’ is. Ten thousand words are scattered throughout our dictionaries which no longer bear any relation to their specific origin.

Twofold Biblical Use of the Term Kingdom

2.7 With regard to the word ‘kingdom,’ it seems plain that the word carries with it ‘royal authority’ or ‘sovereignty’ or ‘dominion.’ It’s also plain that there are times when it ‘means’ (is intended to ‘mean’) territory or realm (or some such thing). See Marshall’s discussion for other possibilities.⁹

Realm or Territory

2.8 When we read that we must ‘enter’ the kingdom or that people may be ‘cast out’ of the kingdom; when we hear that people may have the kingdom ‘taken from’ them or ‘given to’ them; when we read about people being ‘in’ the kingdom or being ‘made’ into a kingdom – when we read all this, it’s hard not to conclude that the word ‘means’ something like ‘realm’ or ‘territory’ when a Bible writer intends it to.

2.9 The following statements from Joshua 13:21, 30,31; Esther 5:6; Mark 6:23 (a few from many) make this point clear. (I’ve added the emphasis.) “The entire realm of Sihon. . .” “The entire realm of Og. . .” “Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted. . .” “I will give you up to half my kingdom. . .”

Reign - Exercise of Sovereignty

2.10 Psalm 103:19 clearly refers to something other than 'realm' or 'territory.' We're told "his kingdom rules over all." The verse speaks of God's sovereignty, dominion or royal power. (Moffatt renders it 'dominion' and the NEB gives 'kingly power.')

In Daniel 4:31 it wasn't territory that was taken from Nebuchadnezzar, it was royal authority or power. Throughout the New Testament we hear of the kingdom of God being 'at hand' or 'near' or 'coming.'¹⁰ Be sure to look these texts up at your leisure. In none of them will the idea of 'realm' or 'territory' make sense in such passages the idea is God's 'reign' or 'rule' or 'royal power.' In the New Testament, Moffatt often translates 'reign of God.'

2.11 C.H. Dodd expresses the matter especially well: "The term 'kingdom' is in English somewhat ambiguous, but it naturally suggests a territory or community governed by a king. The Greek term 'basileia' which it translates is also ambiguous. But there can be no doubt that the expression before us represents an Aramaic phrase well established in Jewish usage, 'the Malkuth of Heaven.' Malkuth, like other substantives of the same formation, is properly an abstract noun, meaning 'kingship,' 'kingly rule,' 'reign' or 'sovereignty.' The expression 'the Malkuth of God' connotes the fact that God reigns as King."¹¹

2.12 Goodspeed, Moffatt and Campbell's Living Oracles make use of 'reign' or 'rule' in place of 'kingdom.' Campbell thought this was particularly appropriate when the kingdom was viewed as approaching. This makes sense. Be sure to consult the references to scholarly opinion given under endnote #8.