

Nov/Dec 2020

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



THE WORLD'S
True KING

ALSO: QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Dear friends:

When our children were young, they had a big wicker basket filled with dress-up clothes to play with. They loved putting on robes and making crowns from construction paper as they pretended to be kings and queens. Children aren't the only ones fascinated by royalty. As our media often show, royals and royalty catch the attention of adults as well.



The Bible includes the stories of many kings and queens—and not all of them are happy stories. In fact, for every good king, there seems to have been at least two or more bad kings in the history of God's people Israel.

Yet God in his wisdom used kings and queens to carry forward important parts of his plan of salvation. And the true King, Jesus Christ, is now seated on the throne of heaven and will one day receive the honor and glory due to his holy name. Pastor Darrin Compagner explores the theme of kingship in November to help us better understand and worship Jesus as the King of kings.

In December, Pastor Art Schoonveld reflects on many questions about God the Father, Jesus, the Bible, prayer, and the church—with a special focus on Christmas and its meaning for our daily lives. He urges us to reflect thoughtfully on the Savior, Jesus Christ, and to draw closer to him during this Advent and Christmas season.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

—Kurt Selles

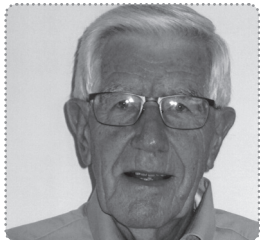
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**“The World’s True King”
Darrin Compagner**



**“Questions, Questions”
Art Schoonveld**

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ReFrame
Media

november

The World's True King

by Darrin Compagner

One way to trace the big story of the Bible is through the theme of kingship. This theme weaves like a golden thread from the beginning of the Bible to its end. Along the way, we find lots of variations on the theme: successes and failures, wise kings and foolish ones, surprising twists and turns revealing what a true kingdom is.

We may have mixed feelings about kings. In our world today, the rule of monarchies and kingdoms seems to be a mostly outdated form of government. And yet many popular stories and movies focus on kings and thrones. From fables and fairy tales to adult fiction and movies and even to the news media, there is always something interesting about royalty.

So let's trace some threads of this rich theme in the Bible: Who is the world's true King? And what kind of kingdom is God bringing to the earth? All of this points to Jesus. Along with his many other titles (Savior, Teacher, Son of Man, Son of God), the Bible declares that Jesus is the world's true King. His kingdom is unlike any this world has ever seen and known. And coming to know and follow him as King is the greatest adventure of our lives.

Darrin Compagner serves as a pastor at Blythefield Christian Reformed Church in Rockford, Michigan. He lives there with his wife and four children, all of whom identify with the kings and queens in C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia.

A ROYAL WEDDING

My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king. . . .
—Psalm 45:1

Any wedding is a pinnacle moment—not only for the couple involved but also for their family, friends, and community. Weddings can be expensive too. The average wedding in North America costs about \$30,000.

Psalm 45 is a song about a wedding—and not just any wedding, but the wedding of the king who rules over God's people. This king is majestic and strong, victorious and gracious. He cares about "truth, humility and justice." He sets the world to rights. This king is noteworthy because he aims to do what is right, living God's way and opposing wickedness. What's more, he is getting married.

As you may recall, there have been a few royal weddings in recent years. They get a lot of attention and sometimes put on quite a show. Many people

get caught up in the pageantry and beauty of a royal wedding. Any marriage is a sign of hope for a new future. But with a *royal* wedding, the hope of a whole nation is renewed, and people are stirred up with joy.

In Hebrews 1:8-9, some words from Psalm 45 are used to describe the kingship of the Son of God, Jesus. The most glorious earthly royal wedding is just a foretaste of history's final hope, when Christ the King comes for his bride.

Christ our King, stir our hearts to sing the noble theme of your righteousness and love. Thank you for the glory of your bride, the church, throughout the world and down through the ages. Amen.

THE BRIDE OF THE KING

Let the king be enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord.
—Psalm 45:11

Yesterday we focused on the first half of Psalm 45, which praises the virtues of the king on his wedding day. Today, as we look at the second half, we consider the king's bride. What does this day mean for her?

She is praised and honored for her beauty. Her reputation and influence through this marriage will spread through the nations and down through the ages. Who is the bride who is worthy of the king described in the first half of the psalm? Who is the bride who can serve as the other half of this image of the world's hope?

The New Testament reveals that the bride of the world's true King is the church. Jesus Christ is the world's true King, and his work is to gather a community of people to be his bride. It is a community made beautiful by his love and sacrifice. The glorious royal wed-

ding of Christ and the church is the hope of the world. And it is something *we* get to participate in.

How? Psalm 45 explains that the bride must leave behind old allegiances and give her love and loyalty to the king. When we turn away from our selfish desires and our loyalties to other things that can distract us (false gods) and we give ourselves to Christ, then our joy is in him, and his joy is ours.

This is a snapshot of the world's true story—and the world's true hope.

Christ, our King, by your Spirit help us leave behind lesser loves to find our joy and hope in you. May the nations praise you forever and ever. Amen.

THE CREATOR KING

God said, "Let there be . . ."

—Genesis 1:3

In the Bible we have God's great story of the world from its beginning to its end. This story includes not only complexity and beauty but also great tragedy and sorrow. One of the golden threads woven into this story focuses on the world's true King. Who is this King, and what does true kingship look like on the earth?

In the Bible's opening verses we hear God speaking. In the ancient world, no one could make things happen the way a king could by just speaking. If the king said, "Let there be a banquet," the servants jumped into action. "Your wish is our command," they would say.

In Genesis, God speaks as King, and the cosmos itself springs into being. God can even make something out of nothing! Light and darkness, day and night, water and sky, sun and moon, vegetation and

creatures. Whole arenas of life are formed and filled. And the King says, "It is good."

This Creator King builds by speaking, and his lordship over all things is put on display. Ancient kings in their earthly kingdoms would build temples, palaces, and gardens. The Creator King has built the marvelous temple-palace-garden complex that is creation, the whole universe, including our earthly home. The world in which we "live and move and have our being" exists because our King continues to speak and uphold its existence (Colossians 1:16-17). Amazing!

Creator God, we see your kingship in creation, and it is good. Give us delight and joy in all that you have so marvelously made. Amen.

SUB-CREATORS

"Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule. . . ."
—Genesis 1:26

When an ancient king built a temple, the crowning moment would happen when he placed an image of a god in that temple. This was usually a great carved statue, placed there to remind everyone of the god's strength, beauty, and virtue.

As the creation story of Genesis reaches its peak, the Lord God places a living, breathing image and likeness at the center of his creation. God creates humankind in the very image of God. And God gives humankind the great dignity and task of living in God's image. God rules, so human beings are made to rule.

J.R.R. Tolkien labored for decades to create an imaginary world in great depth and detail. We can read about it in his books such as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien sometimes described his work as "sub-creation."

God, in creating us, also created us to create. We are sub-creators, intended to speak, build, tend, and rule in ways that reflect God's goodness, justice, beauty, and truth.

Just thinking about the majesty and grandeur of all that God has created can profoundly humble us. It is an antidote to our pride. At the same time, it can lift us up from feelings of meaninglessness or hopelessness, for we are created to be kings and queens, participating in God's rule. We are created for no less than majesty!

"LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1). You have created the world in glory, and you have made us rulers over the works of your hands. Amen.

ROYAL PROMISE

"I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you."
—Genesis 17:6

Our story begins with humans called to reflect the rule and reign of God (Genesis 1:26-29). But people turned away, seeking to build their own kingdoms. This quickly turned to violence and oppression, and now humanity lives in rebellion rather than in harmony with God's rule (Genesis 3-11).

Even so, God called Abraham and Sarah. He came into their lives to make covenant promises, to reestablish them as a people living in harmony with God as King.

Abraham and Sarah were an old and childless couple. The new start God made with them didn't look very promising. But God makes promises in unpromising situations. God promised to be their God, to bless them, and to make them a blessing on the earth.

Then, tucked in with this packet of promises came a powerful little seed. God said to Abraham, "Kings will come from you," and God said about Sarah, "Kings of peoples will come from her." What would that have been like—to hear God say that your descendants would be kings and queens on the earth?

God is in the business of reestablishing right kingship on the earth. His promises to Abraham and Sarah would, in time, bear good fruit for their descendants and for the whole earth.

Lord God, thank you for your promises. Fill us with your Spirit so that your kingdom may come and your will may be done in us this day. Amen.

LOOKING FOR A LEADER

"The scepter will not depart from Judah. . . ."

—Genesis 49:8

Every human organization needs leadership. Schools, businesses, governments, and churches all seek competent and faithful leaders. What makes for a good leader? Strength? Vision? Good looks? Age? Character? Shrewdness?

Families need good leadership too, including the family of God's people. Yesterday we considered how Abraham and Sarah were chosen, along with their descendants. Through them, God was reestablishing his rule of righteousness in a fallen world.

But the story that follows in Genesis shows a family that gradually descends into chaos. This is what happens in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel), and his twelve sons: fear leads to unfaithfulness; deception leads to betrayal and broken trust; favoritism leads to envy and hatred.

But God spares this family and keeps it together—because God keeps his promises. In our reading today from Genesis 49, Judah, one of Israel's sons, is named as the main tribe from whom kings would come.

The New Testament also reveals later that Jesus is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). He is the true King whom God promised would come, and he will restore God's rule of righteousness forever.

Almighty Father, we thank you for sending Jesus, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah," to save us from chaos and destruction. By his rule, guide us to live for you and to follow your good ways each day of our lives. Amen.

THE KING OF EGYPT

“Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go?”

—Exodus 5:2

The big story of the Bible is the story of God’s kingdom. God is the King over everything.

The human king in Egypt was called Pharaoh, and this particular pharaoh had no respect for the Lord, the one true God. This pharaoh was cruel and oppressive and had made the people of Israel his slaves.

Back in the book of Genesis, an earlier pharaoh had assigned Joseph, a grandson of Abraham, to be second in command during a time of famine. And with God’s help, Joseph had worked to ensure life, justice, and harmony (see Genesis 41:41-57). That was what a ruler was supposed to do.

But in the book of Exodus, a few hundred years later, the situation changed dramatically. “A new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt” (Exodus 1:8). This

pharaoh saw the descendants of Israel as a threat rather than as a people to protect. So he enslaved and oppressed them.

Lord Acton, a British historian, is known to have said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The king of Egypt in Exodus embodied the human spirit of rebellion against the reign of God. That pharaoh had great power, and he was not interested in the way of justice and life, so he oppressed and killed people instead.

God’s rule over the world, and his way of ruling the world, are always facing the resistance of human rebellion.

Father, forgive us when we follow the foolish ways of the world. Bring us into the kingdom of your Son, we pray. Amen.

ROYAL BATTLE

"The LORD reigns for ever and ever."

—Exodus 15:18

Yesterday we reflected on the pharaoh of Egypt who spoke proudly and defiantly against the Lord. That set up a dramatic showdown. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel) is the King of creation, the Lord of the whole universe. He told Pharaoh, "Let my people go." But Pharaoh refused.

The Lord God gave Pharaoh many opportunities to acknowledge the Lord's kingship. But Pharaoh kept ignoring God. After a series of ten plagues, Pharaoh did let the people go—but then he roused his army to go and recapture the Israelites as they traveled away toward the Red Sea.

But Pharaoh's forces were overwhelmed and swallowed up by the Red Sea. The victory of the Lord was complete and definitive. This is what finally awaits anyone who resists the

true Lord of lords and King of kings.

In Exodus 15 the Israelites sing their victory song: God's victory is *their* victory. They look back with joy, they look forward with hope, and they look up in triumph because "the LORD reigns for ever and ever"!

In Christ Jesus, the Lord has won the decisive victory over the powers of sin, death, and hell. By faith, his victory becomes our victory, our joy, our hope, and our triumph.

O God, "though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear," for you have willed your "truth to triumph through us." Thank you for Christ, our victorious King. Amen.

WANTED: A GOOD KING

"Be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses."
—Deuteronomy 17:15

The idea of having a king or ruler is common throughout human history and culture. But what does an ideal king look like? By what standard should a king be measured?

In today's passage, the Lord, through Moses, anticipates that the time will come when Israel will want a king like all the other nations have. So here God gives his law for appointing a human king; he lays out the basic job requirements and gives a standard by which kings will be measured.

Note too that God shows that having a human king is optional. It is neither required nor forbidden. If the people want a king, the king must be someone from among them, both divinely chosen and appointed by the people.

The description of this king may seem surprising. He is not

to have too much in the way of weapons, wives, or wealth. Though Israel may get the *idea* of the king from surrounding nations, the *ideal* for kingship will actually be countercultural. The kings of other nations used weapons, wives, and wealth to proclaim and advance their reign. But that was not to be the way in Israel.

For those of us who proclaim Christ as King, we note how different he is from worldly kings. His kingship is humble and peaceful because he reigns with God's love and goodness, maintaining righteousness and true justice everywhere.

We praise you, O God, for in Jesus you have given us the King who rules over all the kings of the earth. By your Spirit, help us to learn his ways and follow his kingdom of peace. Amen.

A USELESS, ALL-IMPORTANT KING?

"Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel."
—Deuteronomy 17:20

In the game of chess, there is something curious about the king piece. It can only move one square at a time. It can barely defend itself, and it is often unable to attack opponents. The bishops, rooks, knights, and especially the queen are far more capable.

And yet there is a paradox at the center of the game: the king, though fairly useless, is the all-important piece. The whole game is about defending the king. The final move in the game is "checkmate," meaning the king is dead.

Yesterday, when we looked at God's instructions for Israel's king, we focused mainly on what a king should *not* be or do. So today let's speak more positively. The king must lead the nation in absolute loyalty to the Lord and his covenant. A new king is required to write out his own copy of God's law.

That was a task that would often take a careful scribe a year to complete. What a seemingly inefficient and useless task for a new king!

But God's ways are surprising and don't always make sense to us. They point us to the beauty and wonder of Christ Jesus as King. By worldly standards his kingship may seem useless, but by God's standard it is all-important. Christ's gift of his own life for our sake, followed by his rising again from death, turns out to be God's surprising victory for us all!

Lord Jesus Christ, lead us to know and love God's Word and ways so that our every move may be in service for your kingdom. Thank you for saving us, Lord! Amen.

THE KING OF THE TREES

*Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, "Come and be our king."
—Judges 9:10*

Today's reading includes a parable in which the trees search for a king. The parable emerges from a time of turmoil in the period of the judges in Israel. It comes as a stinging critique of people who seek a king for all the wrong reasons. Rather than seeking God's help and approval in finding a king, they sought to advance their own power and selfish ambitions.

In the parable, the trees seek a king first from one of their own, an olive tree. But the olive tree is too content producing olives and oil. The fig tree and grapevine similarly have productive lives serving a purpose. They see no reason to give this up in order to rule over others.

In desperation, the trees turn to the thornbush and say, "Be our king." The thornbush can't believe his luck. If these other fools don't want the job,

he'll take it! His thorns and brambles have always been despised. But now he'll show them!

The thornbush king demands absolute loyalty and makes threats to those who are disloyal. Jotham, the parable-teller, finishes by essentially saying, "May you get the leadership you deserve."

Often we get the leadership we deserve rather than the good leadership we truly need. But through God's goodness we have Christ as our King—our needed Savior. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Lord, forgive us when we seek rulers who have more ambition than wisdom. And help us to take refuge in the King who hung on a cross for our salvation. Amen.

THE FIRST KING

"You have now rejected your God . . . and have said, 'No, appoint a king over us.'"
—1 Samuel 10:19

When cultures and nations tell about their first king, the stories are often impressive. Mythical births, epic quests, heroic achievements, and magical ceremonies fit into the mix. But today's passage tells us of the first time Israel gets a king, and the tone is surprising.

The Lord speaks through Samuel and sounds almost heart-broken (see also 1 Samuel 8). The choosing of Saul as king is orchestrated by the Lord through a method of casting lots. When Saul is chosen and the people look around for him, he is hiding. In a way, it's remarkable that this story is even mentioned in Israel's history.

Who is actually Israel's first king? Israel's first and true king is none other than the Lord. Saul is merely a temporary, earthly stand-in. And so are all the flawed, human kings who come after Saul. There is a ten-

sion and paradox in the history of Israel's kings. Should a nation with the Lord as King also seek a human king?

But in this we see God's good, gracious, and long-term plan. Humanity needs God as King first of all. But humanity also needs a human king. The paradox remains a riddle until it is solved in the kingship of Jesus. God sent his Son—fully God and fully human—to be our first and forever King!

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Alpha and Omega, the ruler of the kings of the earth. We praise you as our first and forever King. Amen.

A ROYAL FRESH START

"The LORD does not look at the things people look at. . . . The LORD looks at the heart."
—1 Samuel 16:7

When King Saul fails a great test of obedience, the Lord moves on. God sends Samuel on a mission to find a new king, a royal fresh start for God's people.

This leads to the fascinating story of David's selection and anointing. The sons of Jesse parade in front of Samuel. Some of them look the part, given their outward appearance. But the Lord pours cold water on that, rejecting one after another. Finally, the youngest son is brought in from tending the sheep. With a healthy glow and nonetheless handsome, David arrives. The Lord has seen and approved of David's heart, and he tells Samuel to anoint David as the future king of God's people.

In this way David is plucked from obscurity. And the extraordinary thing about David is that he is surprisingly ordinary.

So many good stories start out this way. For example, Cinderella is overlooked until she goes to the ball. Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy are just ordinary kids playing hide and seek until they stumble into the world of Narnia.

What David embodies is true for all people chosen in Christ. God's extraordinary love and plans begin with strikingly ordinary people, who receive a high and holy calling. In Christ, we are "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), anointed to serve God's coming kingdom.

Lord, we thank you for calling us to be your own. Help us to see the honor and joy of participating in the kingdom of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

LIFE UNDER A NEW KING

"Now then, be strong and brave, for Saul your master is dead, and the people of Judah have anointed me king. . . ."

—2 Samuel 2:7

Israel is at a precarious moment in their history. They have enemies on all sides. Their first king has just died. They face an internal struggle. Will they descend into chaos or become the nation God has called them to be, a light to the other nations?

At this crucial moment, David steps up. He prayerfully pursues God's leading and welcomes the anointing of the people as their king. Remember, God had chosen him earlier, telling Samuel to anoint him (1 Samuel 16). So now David's kingship becomes a reality, fulfilling that earlier promise. And David shows graciousness to those who have been loyal to Saul. Through David, God is going to unite a troubled nation and give them good leadership. God is bringing order out of chaos, new life out of a time of degeneration

and death. The people of Israel must increasingly be dead to Saul and alive to David as king.

So too, when we trust in Jesus as Lord, we transfer our allegiance from our old degenerate life of selfishness and sin to begin a new life in Christ. We bring our lives under his rule and reign. We proclaim and begin to embody his kingdom.

What does it mean to be a Christian? One way to describe it is to say that we live under a new King. We are loyal to the loving King whom God the Father has given to the world, and we live in the hope and service of his kingdom.

Loving God, break the power of sin in our lives. Help us to count ourselves dead to sin but alive to you through Jesus. Amen.

WHAT A KING NEEDS

"I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you. . . ."

—1 Kings 3:12

When David died, Israel lost its first great king. Though he was flawed in several ways, he had been a man "after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). In 1 Kings 2:2-3, David tells Solomon, "I am about to go the way of all the earth. . . . So be strong, act like a man, and observe what the LORD your God requires."

What will Solomon need in order to rule well? He demonstrates much of it in today's reading. Solomon has a worshipful heart and a sense of humility. But in order to lead well, he must come to know and trust in God, seeking guidance from the Lord.

The Lord appears to Solomon with an astonishing invitation: "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon asks for the gift of wisdom, and he

receives it in abundance. It is a kingly request and a kingly gift.

As participants in Christ's kingdom, we have many callings in which we can exercise some degree of leadership and service to God. In our homes, workplaces, schools, and churches, or wherever God leads us, we need wisdom to live faithfully and fruitfully. In James 1:5 we read, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

Generous God, we acknowledge how deeply we need the wisdom of Christ. Help us to believe that you will supply all that we need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A KING WORSHIPS

“Will God really dwell on earth? The heavens . . . cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” —1 Kings 8:27

Solomon’s greatest achievement as king was that he built a temple for the Lord. It was, arguably, the high point in the history of Israel. This was the moment when the people were closest to fulfilling their identity and purpose as a kingdom of people who honored the Lord. By promoting God’s character of justice and mercy and giving God all glory in worship, they were becoming like a light to other nations.

Solomon’s prayer embodied these essential values. The nation gathered around him. He knelt, modeling a posture of repentance and submission. He recalled the goodness and faithfulness of God to Israel and to his father, David. He pleaded for God to hear their prayers, forgive their sins, and bless and guide their everyday life. This was a rich and beau-

tiful prayer and moment in Israel’s history.

But, sadly, Israel’s history—and even Solomon’s own life—would slide into distraction and disobedience. And in that way the people demonstrated their need for a greater temple and a better king.

When we worship, we do so gathered around the true King at the center: Jesus. He leads and guides us into true worship and mission “so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God and that there is no other” (1 Kings 8:60). No temple can contain him.

Lord God of Israel, Father of Jesus, there is no God like you. You keep your promises. Renew us in our calling to make your ways known in the earth. Amen.

THE WORST KING

"I have found you . . . because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD."
—1 Kings 21:20

Throughout the Old Testament most of the kings are bad. But the worst is King Ahab. In his 22 years as king he does "more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him" (1 Kings 16:30). With the help of his queen, Jezebel, he vigorously and violently promotes the worship of other gods in Israel.

In today's reading we hear of one of Ahab's most dastardly acts. And his greed gets magnified by Jezebel's drive for power. Along with this we also see the cooperation of the elders and nobles and the lies of two scoundrels. It's as if the whole government is participating in this plot to kill an innocent man and steal his land.

This is a dark chapter in Israel's history. But into that darkness comes the lightning flash of Elijah, who speaks God's word to all the people. Again and

again, he confronts Ahab and Israel with their sins and calls them to repent. The Lord will not allow this vile king to lead his people astray forever.

Sometimes we have to be sufficiently disgusted with our sinful ways in order to gain an appetite for grace. Sometimes it takes an honest assessment of the corruption and idolatry of our leaders to make us hunger afresh for the goodness of our true King, Jesus.

O God, help us to see the evil in our world and in our lives. Give us the leadership that we need more than we deserve. And please grant us a hunger to know Christ as King. Amen.

A SHALLOW KING

For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. —Esther 1:4

Today's reading in the book of Esther brings us to a time when Israel's people lived in exile under the rule of a foreign king, Xerxes. He ruled over the largest empire in the world at that time. He had tremendous power and wealth, but most of that was just for show. In his own family he had no respect, and he was a pushover for any adviser who had his ear. He was kind of a joke.

How would God's people live under such a king? How would they react to Xerxes' reign? Resist? Accommodate? Despair? And where was *God* in all this? When godless rulers fill the seats of power, and worldly ways seduce many with their allure, how is God still King?

We too live in a superficial age. And some of our leaders exhibit more vainglory than sound character and wisdom.

But God showed that he was up to something in the story of Esther. God's work was often behind the scenes and subtle, but God would soon show that real splendor and glory are about far more than wealth.

Exposing shallow kings and restoring peace and justice may take time, but we can be assured that God is in control. God will show himself to be the Lord of history, and he calls his people to walk faithfully and wait for his deliverance.

O Lord, may we not put our trust in mortal kings who cannot save. Give us hope and help us to trust in you, the Maker of heaven and earth. Amen.

BRAVE QUEEN ESTHER

"I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."
—Esther 4:16

While Israel was living under a foreign, shallow king, God raised up a courageous and competent queen. Esther's story has a sort of fairytale, rags-to-riches beginning. She's a poor orphan who goes to live in the palace and eventually becomes a queen. But the romantic facade of this story hides a nightmarish reality.

Esther is *taken* to the palace and subjected to a cruel process. She is more a trafficked slave than an eager contestant in a beauty pageant. She is made into the trophy wife of a foolish king. She is, initially, silent and subservient to this process. Is this what is in store for God's people—going along silently with the ways of a sinful world?

But when evil rears its head and Esther learns about it, she finds her voice. A plot to kill all the Jews in the kingdom comes

to light, and Esther, a Jew, rises to the occasion. She courageously goes to the king even though it could cost her life. And she cleverly orchestrates a turn of events that saves the lives of many of God's people.

The Lord God is the true King. He has been raising Esther to her position "for such a time as this." In the Bible's many stories of kings, the story of this *queen* stands out. She risks everything for the sake of her people. And in doing that, she foreshadows the loving kingship and sacrifice of Christ.

Jesus, thank you for laying down your life for ours. Embolden us with the Holy Spirit so that we may have Esther-like courage and love to serve you. Amen.

LAUGHING AT KINGS

The One enthroned in heaven laughs . . . saying, "I have installed my king. . . ."
—Psalm 2:4-6

It is not easy to be hopeful and prayerful people in a world of politics. For people of faith, it is easy to be intimidated. In a world of powerful corporate interests, global economies, and systemic injustices, what difference do our puny prayers and little acts of obedience make?

Psalm 2 speaks of the nations and peoples of the world, with their powerful kings and rulers, conspiring against the Lord. They say that following God and his ways is oppressive. God's ways of justice and truth hold them back and get in their way; it's much easier to throw off those chains, they say.

What can Christ's followers do in a world where the majority and the powerful reject God's ways? One answer might be to listen for God's laughter. The Lord's laughter in Psalm 2 shatters the illusion that the wicked

will have their way forever. The Lord laughs when presidents and prime ministers speak as if their plans are ultimate and their victories are final.

The Lord announces in Psalm 2 that he will appoint his own Son as King over the nations. And in Jesus' ascension to the throne of heaven, this process has already begun (Acts 2:31-36). Trusting wholly in Christ, we can pray that his kingdom keeps coming, and we can be assured that God's ways will prevail over the unjust powers of the world.

Lord, let us celebrate your rule, knowing you are in control over all the mess of worldly politics. Give us the blessed refuge of trusting in Christ, our King. Amen.

THE KING'S SHALOM

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.
—Psalm 72:1

Psalm 72 is a hopeful prayer for the king who rules over God's people. *Shalom* is a key word in the original text, often translated as "prosperity" and "peace" (see verses 3 and 7). Shalom carries the idea that something broken has been made whole. When you are restored to health and wholeness after battling an illness that has badly weakened you, maybe even to the point of death, that is an example of shalom. Another example could include being restored to a meal around a table with loved ones after being cut off from family and friends for a long time, or after enduring a period of great loneliness.

This psalm dares to hope and pray for shalom to be restored throughout the earth. This happens in the context of righteousness (being right with God) and justice (living in right relationships with peo-

ple). Righteousness and justice go together like the two sides of a coin. The great hope and prayer is that God's shalom comes on the earth through the right king.

Trusting in Christ as King, we can live with a heart of wisdom, identifying places and situations where things are broken, and seeking to make them right.

The shalom of Christ the King comes as we repent, believe, and follow Christ as King. We receive his reign and pursue it in whatever ways his Spirit leads us.

Gracious God, may Christ's rule come to us like showers watering the earth. May his shalom bring forgiveness and healing to our hearts and to the world. Amen.

JOY TO THE WORLD

Shout for joy before the LORD, the King.

—Psalm 98:6

Joy is one of the highest and holiest experiences of human life. Joy has been defined as the response we have to being united with what we love. To journey to a desired destination brings joy. The arrival of a child at the end of a pregnancy brings joy. To experience freedom after a time in confinement brings joy.

Psalm 98 calls God's people to active expressions of joy. Why? Because the Lord "has done marvelous things." God's saving love throughout the ages brings his people to new lands, new life, and new freedom. And the right response to all this is joy and rejoicing.

Music is especially well-suited to rejoicing. Musical melodies and rhythms get into us. They set our mouths to humming and our toes to tapping. Music involves our bodies, minds, and emotions. So, fittingly,

the psalmist says, "Sing to the LORD a new song," and invites the accompaniment of a range of instruments to celebrate the Lord's kingship.

On this day, known as Christ the King Sunday, we lift songs of joy to celebrate that we have been reunited with God through Jesus. In him all our lesser experiences of joy find their eternal source and goal. And beholding him face to face one day will bring joy that resonates and resounds eternally.

Gracious God, let everyone receive Christ as King. "Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing" for joy! Amen.

DAYDREAMING

"The LORD your God is with you. . . . He will . . . rejoice over you with singing."
—Zephaniah 3:17

Today's reading from Zephaniah is lyrical and beautiful. It speaks of a coming day when God's care for his people is so close, so complete, so strong, and so sweet that it almost sounds like a dream. It evokes the hope of a future day when God's favor and love will be complete and wondrous.

But we live as fallen people in a fallen world. We experience grief, loneliness, frustration, and injustice. It may be good to realize that much of the book of Zephaniah speaks of things we might see in a bad dream. It speaks of God's judgment against human sin and evil, of sweeping and destructive chaos on the earth, of trouble and ruin, of darkness and gloom (Zephaniah 1:2, 15). In fact, it sounds more like a *nightmare*.

But finally, in God's faithfulness, a day of rejoicing comes. God works to call a remnant of

people as faithful worshipers, humble and honest (3:10-13). And then comes the day of God's love and favor and delight. On that day the Lord and King, "the Mighty Warrior who saves," will hold us and love us like a delighted parent cooing love songs over a beloved child.

In Jesus, our Lord, King, and Savior, the dream of this future day begins to be part of our reality even now!

O God, we rejoice that because of Jesus we are your beloved sons and daughters. Fill us with hope for that future day so that we may endure the troubles of this world today. Amen.

REVEALING THE LORD OF KINGS

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."
—Matthew 4:17

The world needs a true king. The whole Bible proclaims and points to this fact. Many stories, plays, epic poems, mythologies, and fairy tales echo some version of the theme too. This world is messed up; it has lost its true ruler; it has tremendous potential but falls terribly short. We are all waiting for the world's true King to be revealed, to pull together all the diverse and tangled strands of hope and longing, promise and potential.

In the New Testament we come to the arrival of Jesus on the scene. He comes "preaching," a term that means "to herald, to make a royal proclamation." The Bible's core message is a royal proclamation and announcement of truly good news. This is the news that in Jesus, the kingdom of heaven has come near.

What is the kingdom of heaven? It is, most simply, wherever God is King—where God is in charge, shaping people's lives and ruling the world. Jesus comes to embody and announce that kingdom. He is not a politician seeking someone's vote or generous donations. He is the King calling us to true allegiance: "Come, follow me." He makes us participants in his kingdom's advance: "I will send you out to fish for people."

He continues calling today: "Repent. Come. Follow me. The kingdom of heaven has come near."

Lord God, may the thrilling hope of your kingdom's coming win our hearts and rule our lives so that the world may know Christ as King. Amen.

REDEFINING “KING”

“Are you the king of the Jews?”

—John 18:33

Earlier in his ministry of teaching and healing, Jesus had fed 5,000 people with a boy’s small lunch. The response of the people was to try to make Jesus king by force, but Jesus slipped through their fingers and withdrew (John 6:1-15).

In today’s reading from John 18, Jesus stands in front of Pilate, the local representative of Caesar, the most powerful man on earth. Pilate asks what should be a simple question: “Are you a king?” The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all speak of Pilate asking this central question.

But the answer is not so simple. Jesus has questions of his own for Pilate. Here Jesus seems to be getting at the *motive* for Pilate’s question. Jesus repeatedly claims to have a kingdom, so that’s a partial “yes.” But he states that his kingdom “is not of this world.” Pilate has his

hands on the levers of power here, but Jesus shows that *he’s* the true King.

This month, we have been pondering the Bible’s message that Jesus is King. But if we insist on giving our own definitions to the ideas of “king” and “kingdom,” Jesus’ kingship and kingdom will slip through *our* fingers.

Jesus fulfills the world’s longing for a true king, but he also redefines what it means to be King. That is because the kingdom Jesus brings is wholly other—it comes from the very heart of God.

King Jesus, may your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as in heaven. Rule us in such a way that we submit our agendas to yours. Amen.

REDEFINING “KINGDOM”

“But now my kingdom is from another place.”

—John 18:36

“You are a king, then!” Pilate exclaims. He thinks he has an “aha, gotcha!” moment. Pilate knows what to do with would-be kings: squash them like bugs in order to keep the peace. He’s done it many times before with various upstarts and revolutionaries.

But Jesus’ reply is intriguing: “You say that I am a king.” Jesus doesn’t refuse the title; instead, he reorients and redefines it. He refuses to be pinned down by mistaken notions of his kingship and kingdom. This is not what Pilate is accustomed to, so it leaves him questioning the very nature of truth.

Jesus gives one clear piece of evidence showing that his kingdom is different: he offers no resistance to arrest. Every chief, prime minister, sultan, and national chairman has an elite bodyguard. Presidential palaces are heavily defended. Even the

Pope has a bulletproof car. But at his arrest, Jesus asks no one to protect him (John 18:1-14).

As Jesus himself shows, his kingdom is different: non-violent, submissive, even self-sacrificing. This sounds almost like an antikingdom, except that it is *the real thing*, and it reveals that all other kingdoms are merely imposters. This is no ordinary kingdom, because this is no ordinary King.

Lord Jesus, give us your life from above, that we may grasp and follow the ways of your seemingly upside-down yet surprisingly right-side-up kingdom. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE GLORY OF THE SON OF MAN

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. —Daniel 7:14

God created human beings in his image to rule over creation, but our experience is often more of frustration and futility than ruling like royalty. And we often do more damage than good in our use of the earth and its resources. We long to be capable of competently ordering, guiding, and shaping the world as God intended. But, as fallen creatures in a fallen world, how can we exercise dominion? We can barely keep our own closets organized.

Still, God has created a world where human beings are intended to rule and have dominion. In the vision of Daniel 7, we are introduced to a human being, a son of man, who is given authority, glory, and sovereign power from God, the Ancient of Days. His kingdom is international, everlasting, and indestructible.

In the New Testament, Jesus often calls himself the Son of Man. And this title could be mistaken for a humble claim, implying that a “son of man” is just a regular human being. But with the backdrop of Daniel 7, we see how audacious this title is. Often Jesus uses it in reference to his authority: to forgive sins, as Lord of the Sabbath, and to return one day in glory (Mark 2:10; 2:28; 14:62).

In Jesus, God’s plan for human dominion is restored. He intends to share this kingdom with us.

Lord Jesus, Son of Man, give us faith to grasp your glory and sovereign power, and grant that we might share in your kingdom’s coming. Amen.

REDEFINING KINGSHIP: NOT SO WITH YOU

“Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” —Mark 10:45

James and John make a bold request to rule and reign with Jesus in his glory. It may be good to say that Jesus does not deny them this desire. He intends to share his kingdom and his glory with his followers. But Jesus *does* reorient their request.

Jesus uses the title “Son of Man.” As we saw yesterday, this title means he is a king with an everlasting kingdom. But Jesus also is redefining our very concepts of “king” and “kingdom.” Following Jesus as king means “drinking the cup” of humble sacrifice and suffering. Our great hope of one day reigning with Christ in glory means that we are called to humbly serve him now.

We are right to claim Christ as King and to see ourselves as participants in his kingdom. But our notions of kingship and being rulers need to be

cleansed and reclaimed. Our ideas are corrupted by selfishness and sin, which always lead to destruction. Prime ministers and presidents do not refer to themselves as slaves. Raking leaves, changing diapers, delivering meals, or befriending the new kid at school are not on the job descriptions of worldly rulers. But reigning in glory with Jesus someday means serving in humility right now.

Jesus goes further yet. He not only serves in his life; he loves to the fullest in his sacrificial death, offering himself as a ransom. This is an altogether new kind of king and kingdom!

Lord, we want to share in your kingdom’s glory. By your Spirit make us strong enough to share in your servant humility. Amen.

COMING SOON: THE RETURN OF THE KING

He who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making everything new!"
—Revelation 21:5

In December 2003 the long-awaited third installment of *The Lord of the Rings* movies was released in theaters. It seemed wonderful and fitting that millions of people, in the season approaching Christmas, were making plans for *The Return of the King*.

In the New Testament the word for "throne" shows up 62 times, including 47 times in the book of Revelation. This is a book of thrones, crowns, kings, ruling, and reigning. Some evil figures sit on or claim thrones, but the throne of God is the source of unmatched power and judgment—and at the same time it is the center of glorious worship.

Much of the book of Revelation depicts struggle and chaos unleashed on the earth, yet we always see this guiding image: *the throne is not empty*. Jesus, the one seated on the

throne, is both tremendously powerful but also incomparably loving. On the throne of God is the Lord Almighty, the King of kings, who is also the Savior of the world. And he says, "Look! . . . I am making everything new!"

Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, we are making plans for the return of the King as we head into the Christmas season. One day Jesus will come to wipe away all the sad things of this world. Grief will be gone. Death will be done. Pain will perish. The King of kings will have his rule fully recognized throughout all creation.

You are worthy, our Lord and King, to receive glory and honor and power!
Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

THE KING'S GRACE

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.
—Revelation 22:21

It has been said that the last pages of our Bible bend around to touch the first pages. They bring full circle the one big story of God's love and salvation of the world. In the beginning, God the King creates the world and proclaims it good, good, very good. "Good" is the most important word describing God and God's world in the beginning.

But much that unfolds later in this story—and in our world—is not good. There is sinful rebellion, guilt, shame, corruption, violence, injustice, and disintegration. The world is broken, and we feel it in the depths of our souls. The world's history books and the daily news proclaim it unceasingly. But unceasing too in the Bible's big story is something that transforms and redeems all this brokenness: grace.

The King's grace is a phrase often used to refer to a king's favor or presence or to simply a king himself. In the Bible, it is finally the King's grace that gets the last word. Grace comes in the person and work of King Jesus. He is the one who is King of kings and Lord of lords. The first chapter of the Bible proclaims, "Good." The last chapter proclaims what is greater still: "Grace." God's big story moves from *good* to *grace*.

Whatever we face in terms of struggle, guilt, or sorrow, the King's grace gets the last word. The King's grace is the world's—and our—great hope!

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.
May the grace of our Lord Jesus be with all God's people. Amen.

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