God's Big Picture: 1.The Pattern of God's Kingdom

Introduction

Seeing the big picture is always important. If you are out walking in the hills and are lost in a forest you have real problems if all the trees look alike and you have no idea which way you need to go. For centuries human beings argued over whether the earth was flat or round. For us with satellite photography there is no difficulty in getting the right answer! As Christians we can get confused sometimes by the mass of information in the Bible. A new Christian can have trouble finding their way around the Bible, but even when we know the order of the books and a rough idea of the storyline we can still have times when we lack clarity about how things fit together in the bigger picture.

The word Bible means 'a library' of books. There are sixty-six in all of which thirty-nine are in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. Approximately forty people authored the books under the guidance of the Holy Spirit over a period of more than fifteen hundred years. Although there is a diversity of types of literature from narrative to songs to wisdom literature and the dramatic symbolism of the apocalyptic visions, for example, in Daniel, Ezekiel or Revelation there is an overarching unity to the Bible. It claims to be the Word of God and is inspired by Him. II Timothy 3:16-17 states: ***All Scripture** is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, [17]so that the man* [or *woman* anqrwpos] *of God may be **thoroughly equipped** for every good work.* The Bible is divided into two sections the Old Testament that begins with the Creation of the Universe in Genesis chapter one and finishes with the return of a small group of a few thousand Jewish people restored to their land from exile in Iraq (Babylon) in the sixth and fifth centuries BC. In very broad terms Genesis 1-11 looks at the big picture of humanity from the creation of a perfect world which humanity marred by our sinfulness; God's judgement in a universal flood in the time of Noah and the dispersal of humankind around the world after the confusion of languages at Babel. The last part of Genesis 11 moves to look at one family in southern Iraq and focuses on one man Abraham from whom God plans to create a great nation and though him and that nation to bless every nation on the planet. The first book Genesis covers four generations of his family's progress. In Exodus after a period of around 400 years Moses was asked by God to turn these descendants of Abraham, slaves of the Egyptians into a nation that will return to the Promised Land of Canaan. The books of Exodus to Deuteronomy cover that journey with details of the legal and religious guidance God gave them in their formation as the people of Israel. The next books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth describe their struggles to possess the land prior to the establishment of the nation with three prominent kings Saul, David and Solomon. After these kings the nation split into two small kingdoms –Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrian army in 722BC and Judah in 587/6BC by the next superpower Babylon. After a seventy year exile in Iraq three groups of returnees culminating in that of Nehemiah in 445BC a small fragile nation is rebuilt principally in the territory of the former state of Judah around Jerusalem. The majority of the Old Testament books cover this period of time recording its history and the messages of the prophets God sent to the nation. There are then approximately 400 years of silence (in terms

of revelation from God), prior to the coming of John the Baptist as the herald of Jesus and the extraordinary conception, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. There are four accounts of the key events in Jesus' life, prior to the book of Acts which narrates the major developments in the first thirty years of the history of the Christian Church from its beginnings in Jerusalem through the major areas of the Roman Empire to Rome itself. All the other New Testament books are letters to individual Christians or congregations concerning what we believe and its implications for our daily lives. The final book Revelation concerns a series of visions given to the apostle John concerning the future, beginning in his own day then through history to the return of Christ and finally a glimpse into the new heavens and earth that will eventually replace our present world.

The Bible is a unity and each part must be seen as part of the whole. Some parts are difficult to understand without a sight of the bigger picture. However, that principle is obvious from many areas of life from little things such as jigsaw puzzles where a sight of the picture may be necessary for us to make sense of the pieces in front of us to the bigger picture of determining God's plan and purposes for our lives. This series of sermons is aimed at helping us to grasp a little of God's big picture and purposes for humanity. It will use the imagery of the Kingdom of God, a term explicit in the teaching of Jesus but implicit throughout the Bible. It is not the only way we can view redemption-history; another obvious approach would be to use the different covenants of the Bible. God wants the best for His children. We will endeavour to cover from creation to recreation, Genesis to Revelation. In this first study we will briefly outline God's original intention for creation in Genesis chapters one and two.

Genesis 1-2 The Pattern of God's Kingdom

1. God is the Creator

The Bible begins with a pronouncement in Genesis1:1: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* (a) **The false views opposed by this statement** (i) that this world has always been here *In the beginning God* Some people have claimed that the material world around us has always been here in some form or other. The Bible declares this viewpoint false. There was a time when the material universe that we know did not exist. Only God is eternal. He existed before anything else came into being. There is not an eternal chain of causation –the 'who made God question', because there has never been a time when God was not in existence. God created space, time and everything we can touch, taste, handle, see or hear or experience. (ii) Atheism God's existence is taken for granted and assumed in the Bible. He is the first subject in Scripture. It is taken as self-evident that there is a God. In the great chapter on faith in the New Testament, Hebrews 11, verse six makes this point: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him **must believe that He exists** and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.* (iii) Polytheism *In the beginning God*…not gods… most people in other countries at the time Genesis was written worshipped a huge number of usually nature gods. The Bible is very clear only one God. Deuteronomy 6:4 stated: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is **one**.* Yet **Elohim** (God) is singular in form yet with a plural ending. The oneness of God does not fully express His identity. Genesis 1:26 with reference to the creation of humanity states: *Then God said, Let **us** make man in **our** image, in **our** likeness.* How do we resolve this puzzle? Genesis 1:2 gives us another

clue: ***the Spirit of God*** *was hovering over the waters.* In the light of the New Testament revelation we recognise that God the father took the initiative, but the Holy Spirit was also active in the work of creation. In the second verse of chapter one of John's Gospel the author makes this statement regarding Jesus' input into creation: *Through Him all things were made;* ***without Him nothing was made that has been made****.* Jesus brought the universe into being following His Father's instructions with the help of the Holy Spirit. Paul in Colossian1:16 wrote concerning Jesus: *For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible… all things were created* ***by Him and for Him****.* (iv) Pantheism the belief that all is god or that God is found in the rocks and trees or other aspects of creation. In New Age thinking today it can be found in the views of those who deify 'mother earth or Gaia'. A fellow student at the teacher training college where Kathryn and I studied in the mid-1980s recalled an extraordinary sight one summer. A group of people staying for a week got up before sunrise to go out onto the beautiful lawns to worship the sun by bowing down to it in some kind of religious ritual. The Bible is very clear God is separate from His creation. However, we must also recognise that creation is good. Genesis 1:31 states: *God saw all that He had made and it was* ***very good****.* (v) Fatalism 'it's in the stars' or 'what will be will be' –God is in charge –*God created* by an act of His will. His conscious choice brought the universe into being to bring praise to His name. Psalm 19:1: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands.* (b) **the truth affirmed by this statement** (i) God's self-existence He is dependent on no-one. In our world everyone and everything is dependent on someone or something else for aspects of our lives. Laws of cause and effect are not applicable to God as He is outside His creation. (ii) God's self-sufficiency He has no needs and is entirely independent of anything or any person in the Universe. All that He does is (to use Paul's words in Ephesians 1:5) *in accordance with His pleasure and will.* He takes delight when we honour Him in our lives, but is not diminished in any way by its absence. (iii) God is eternal In Psalm 90:2 Moses wrote: *From everlasting to everlasting You are God.* The heavenly beings are recorded by John in Revelation 4:8 as continually praising God with these words: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.*

2. God is sovereign over all creation

(a) *And God said* Psalm 33:6 states: *By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth.* The title for Jesus in John chapter one is *the Word.* John 1:1:1-2: *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2]He was with God in the beginning.* God will not any confusion over the connection between the Creator and His creation. He is the Lord who spoke and brought the world into being. To reflect on such a thought even for a moment should lead us to worship and adore Him. Worshipping or bowing down in adoration to anything in creation is forbidden. In the second of the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 20:4-5a God declared: *You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. [5] You shall not bow down to them or worship them;* (b) giving Him the honour to which He is entitled Psalm 8:1 states: *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth! You have set Your glory above the heavens.* Verses 3-4 continue this theme: *When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, [4] what is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him?* Psalm 95:1-7 is another song of adoration of our amazing creator: *Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. [2] Let us come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song. [3] For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. [4] In His hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to Him. [5] The sea is His, for He made it, and His hands formed the dry*

land. [6] *Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;* [7] *for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care.* The Psalms are full of praise for God's work in creation. Similarly the heavenly beings also honour and glorify God for His creative work, as John heard in Revelation 4:11: *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power,* ***for You created all things****, and* ***by Your will they were created*** *and have their being.*

3. <u>Humanity is the pinnacle of God's creation</u>

(a) **<u>The Uniqueness of our creation</u>** (Genesis 1:26a, 27) Throughout the process of creation in Genesis One God has been issuing commands and the work of creation has taken place. However, the language changes in 1:26 which indicates that God has come to the highest point of the week's creative activity. This is the pinnacle of creation; the crowning achievement for which God has a sense of anticipation concerning what He is about to do. The divine Godhead made a conscious choice together to bring into being a creature, humankind that would alone among creation be like God. Genesis 1:26a-27 states: [26] *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness…* [27] *So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.* We were created to have fellowship with God, because as Paul put it in I Corinthians 11:7 we are *the image and glory of God…* What does it mean that we are created '*in the image / likeness of God*? It concerns our minds, our wills, our affections and especially our ability to have relationships with other people. It also includes the capacity for the use of language and a wide variety of languages that no other creature can utilise as humans have the capacity to do. In the Godhead there are perfect relations between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. To be the best we can - God desires us to have wholesome and mutually enriching relationships with our fellow human beings, to a degree that goes beyond that to which the rest of creation is capable; in particular the capacity within us for worship and adoration of our Creator and that potential placed within each human heart for fellowship with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Even outside of faith in the Lord there is sufficient of the image of God within each human being to cause them to have some awareness of their Creator and therefore the responsibility to do something about it. However, sadly some people wilfully reject the evidence for God as seen in creation and they pretend that it all came about by blind chance –that out of nothing a big bang produced everything without the directing and guiding hand of God. Paul has a blunt message for such people in Romans 1:18-21:*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,* [19]*since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* [20]*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,* ***so that men are without excuse.*** [21]*For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.* Have you put your faith in our great God and Saviour? Or are you still outside of fellowship with Him?
(b) **<u>The Uniqueness of our responsibilities</u>** (Genesis 1:26b, 28) A unique status is accompanied by equally special responsibilities that have been entrusted to no other creature God has made. *and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."* [28] *God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."* A fuller account of what that entailed is given in Genesis 2. Genesis 2:15 stated: *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it* ***and take care of it.*** Genesis 2:18-20 records some of our other responsibilities*:* [19] *Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them* ***to the man to***

***see what he would name them**; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.* [20] *So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.* (i) With respect to the planet We do not own the planet. Each of us may own possessions; a house or even a bit of land –but collectively we share the planet in trust for future generations. This means as individuals and families; church families and other larger networks within society right up to government level we need to play our part in caring for the planet. Even if the dire predictions of some experts regarding climate change are wrong it is still right to utilise in a wise and sustainable fashion the earth's natural resources and to share them fairly between the nations. The pollution caused by the industrial revolution of the past few centuries has caused serious damage to the environment and human greed for greater profits at the expense of others has to be addressed. Western nations cannot ask emerging ones in the Two-thirds world to make sacrifices if we too are not prepared to share the burden of providing adequate food and water supplies across the globe; an equitable sharing of energy supplies and the opportunities for appropriate economic growth and development. Individually although our contributions may seem small a commitment to purchasing where possible Fair Trade products; locally sourced products again if that is possible and sensible purchasing of goods to avoid unnecessary waste and then recycling as much as we can of the by-products of a Western lifestyle. Together we can make a difference for the well-being of the planet and its eco-system, but also for the vast range of other life forms and creatures that also share our planet. Yet our Father wishes us to enjoy our lives here and the blessings of His creation and not be on a guilt trip over what we cannot reasonably be expected to do. Here in Genesis there is no division between what Western Christianity has divided up into 'sacred' and 'secular' categories of employment. Each of us has gifts that we can use for the glory of God and the benefit of other people. (ii) With respect to society Humanity has certainly done the most damage to the planet but also we have failed as a species to get on with one another. The amount of wars and conflict in our world for every conceivable reason or excuse is an absolute disgrace. In our next study we will consider the damage humanity did to God's perfect world, but here in Genesis 1-2 it is clear God created us as social creatures. In Genesis there is no division between what Western Christianity has divided up into 'sacred' and 'secular' categories of employment. Each of us has gifts that we can use for the glory of God and the benefit of other people. This was one of the unexpected blessings of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Prior to that day members of Religious Orders and Parish Clergy, together with the smaller numbers in the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy were seen as holding superior callings to everyone else. The Reformers were insistent on returning to a more biblical view of each person serving God in the sphere in which they have been placed. This understanding allows respect and dignity for people in the least desired occupations as well as others in highly esteemed professions. However, in our current social climate even in some Evangelical Christian circles younger people are actively discouraged from considering a calling for the pastoral ministry or long-term missionary service overseas, because of the lower social status and income levels they would receive compared with many secular occupations. As Bible-believing Christians the issue is one of vocation –has God led you in this direction? If so then persue it with all your might, for the glory of God! Under girding this fundamental position Genesis 1 explains that men and women were created equally as persons in the image of God. In chapter two the Lord takes that a step further and focuses on the relationship between men and women. Genesis 2:18, 20-24 are the key verses on this topic: [18] *The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." But for Adam no suitable helper was found.* Incidentally the Hebrew word **ezer** (helper) used in Genesis 2:18 is used primarily of God as the helper of His people Israel in the Old Testament –so there is no connotations of inferiority

in the use of the word –rather complementary ones instead. [21] *So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, He took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh.* [22] *Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib He had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.* [23] *The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."* [24] *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.* Men and women were created by God to be equal as persons, but in a family context, for example, to hold different roles as a mother and father to their respective children. The utter contempt of our current Westminster Government for marriage; the necessity for fathers in the family home; for mothers who choose to take time out from their careers to be at home with young children is based on spurious form of egalitarianism that fails to recognise that people can be equal in status as persons but holding differing roles, for example in family life. Marriage is the cornerstone of family life and although tragically 40% of marriages do not succeed, by definition 60% do. Virtually every study of educational achievements and social well-being amongst younger people confirms that those who have the blessing of the active involvement of committed parents at each stage of their lives on average score more highly than their equivalents without that blessing. God was not a kill-joy in proposing sexual continence, restricting its full expression to within the boundaries of marriage. We can see the damage caused by the forty years of sexual license and excess. The pressures on marriages and family life have never been greater in the last couple of centuries than they are today, but as Christians may God give us the strength to seek to model a lifestyle that is honouring to Him that will encourage others also to live in the way God intends.

4. <u>God's Pattern of work and rest is a model for humanity</u>

Genesis 2:2-3 states: *By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His work.* [3] *And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done.* The pattern of creation over six days of a conventional twenty-four hour week was not an accident. God intended it that way to set us a pattern of an intentional day of rest per week from our regular duties. The word *Sabbath* means rest. In God's list of foundational principles for living for His people – the Ten Commandments –number four states: [8] *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.* [9] *Six days you shall labour and do all your work,* [10] *but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.* [11] ***For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.*** *Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy* (Exodus 20:8-11). Why should we keep one day per week as a sabbath? because God did as an example to us; His principles in the Ten Commandments are the basis for a happy and healthy society, not just for the people of God in their Jewish or Christian communities. Some Christians want to observe only nine of the ten and omit this one, despite Jesus declaring in Matthew 5:19: *Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* Hebrews 4:9-10 reaffirms this point: *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;* [10] *for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from His.* Why take a day off? Studies of the effectiveness of workers have shown consistently that those who work five or six days per week by a significant margin outperform those working seven or four or less days per week. This is not rocket science but common sense. God wants us to have a work /family / church life balance. Notice in Exodus 20:8-11 the sabbatarian principle was both for employers and employees and their animals, together with migrant workers from other countries. All of God's creatures are entitled to that time of rest from work. In addition the land was entitled to rest from the production of crops

–its own Sabbath- to avoid over production in a fragile eco-system (Leviticus 25:1-7). For the Jewish people there were additional Sabbaths held on other days of the week as part of certain festivals (see Leviticus 23 for various examples). In the Passover festival (Exodus 12:16; Leviticus 23:7-8), for example, the first and the seventh days of that week were to be observed as Sabbath days. These additional Sabbaths amongst other Jewish practices were not binding on Christians (see Colossians 2:16 *[16]Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.* and Romans 14:5-6), though some Christians and Bible commentators confuse them with the observance of the fourth commandment and thus claim that we need only keep the remaining nine to please God! Isaiah gives us a challenge in Isaiah 58:13-14: *"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, [14] then you will find your joy in the Lord…* What does this mean for our lives today? It speaks to us of having a balance of work and rest; time for our church family and for our physical one; time for personal interests and time to benefit other people. However, it is no accident that Christians down the centuries have observed Sunday as their day of rest (early Jewish Christians in the 1st Century AD apparently observed both the Jewish Sabbath and Sunday as days of rest!). In practice, putting time for worship with God's people as a given with priorities over our hobbies or other clubs or interests. This will come at a cost to some of us as certain sporting and social activities for ourselves or our children have in recent years been moved to God's day. It is not easy as a Christian parent explaining this principle to our children. However, in later life they will thank you when they realise why you did it for their good. This is not only for us, but also with respect to other people. We should seek to have a lifestyle that does not require other people to engage in their regular work to serve us on God's special day. Let us keep Sunday special with our families and our church family –maybe a lack of honouring God's day has minimised our joy –let us take up Isaiah's challenge and value God's plan for our week.

The Pattern of God's kingdom begins with a recognition of God as the Creator and all that flows from that declaration in Genesis 1:1. It continues with an acknowledgement that God is sovereign over all creation and we ought to give Him the honour and worship that is due to Him. Humanity is the pinnacle of His creation and therefore hold a unique place in His affections, but also is given unique responsibilities to care for our planet and for other people. God's guidance in Genesis 1-2 also gives us a model of how we should spend our week with a combination of fruitful work and time for rest so that we might enjoy life as He does, for His glory, Amen.