

The Kingdom of God

Finally, after years of Israel's sin and struggling in the desert, God marched His people into the Promised Land! Israel witnessed God's unmatched power firsthand as their army consistently destroyed enemies that were far bigger and much better armed. At this point in the story, you would think that we would see Israel thriving, rejoicing in God's power, enjoying God's presence, walking in His ways, and living happily ever after. But tragically, that is not how the story goes. Whereas the book of Joshua records God's faithfulness in delivering the Promised Land to Israel, the book of Judges records Israel's unfaithfulness and refusal to live as God intended. Judges feels like a roller coaster: Israel falls into sin and apathy; God raises up a leader to deliver them; the people once again acknowledge God; Israel again falls into sin and apathy; God again raises up a leader to deliver them, and on and on it goes. But Israel entered a more hopeful period as Samuel came on the scene. Samuel was a prophet of God and the last of the judges. With Samuel, Israel received a godly leader who faithfully delivered God's word to the people. It was during this time that Israel became a monarchy. But to understand the significance of this shift, we have to look back to the beginning once again.

The King of Creation

Maybe you have never thought about the creation account this way, but Genesis 1 and 2 present God as the King of creation. This King is so powerful and His word is so authoritative that He has only to speak to call things into existence. Genesis 1 and 2 depict the King creating a realm over which He will rule. In the garden of Eden, everything functioned in perfect harmony; everything operated in perfect submission to the King's rule. In the first pages of the Bible we find a beautiful picture of what the world looks like when everyone and everything joyfully embraces the King's reign. Though we often see human beings rejecting God's authority and trying to establish their own, God originally created humanity to rule on His behalf:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen. 1:26–28) The picture we are given here is of God, the absolute Ruler over creation, delegating His authority to mankind. We were created to mediate God’s gracious rule to every part of His creation. Humanity was made to function under God’s kingship. But when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they abused their freedom and rejected God’s kingship. With this simple act, God’s rule on earth was challenged. Adam and Eve chose to follow the serpent, Satan. This reversal is so significant that Satan is now referred to as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). The reality in which we now live would have seemed inconceivable to Adam and Eve before the fall. Could God’s kingship really be disputed in the world He created? Would humanity really reject God’s reign and live in defiance? As strange as it would have sounded before the fall, this is the struggle we experience every day of our lives.

Q1 Take a minute to think about what you learned about God by reading Genesis 1 and 2. How is God’s kingship established and displayed in the creation account?

The True King of Israel

We get another powerful picture of God’s kingship when He led His people out of slavery in the exodus. Through the ten plagues, God showed that He was the supreme Ruler of this world—He entered the dominion of Pharaoh and of Egypt’s gods and asserted His ultimate authority. By defeating the false gods of Egypt and leading His people victoriously out of slavery, God demonstrated that He was the true King of Israel and of the whole earth.

The covenant that God made with His people at Mount Sinai was an expression of His kingship. This type of covenant, where the conquering king would establish terms for how his people would relate to him, was common for nations at the time. We can see this clearly in Exodus 19:5–6: Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God was the King, and Israel was His kingdom. The tabernacle and the temple were dwelling places for the King—they were His palaces. Remember that the ark of the covenant, where God’s presence dwelled, was the centerpiece of the tabernacle and the temple. The Bible actually refers to the ark as the footstool of God’s throne (1 Chron. 28:2, Ps. 132:7). This shows us that the tabernacle and temple were about more than containing God’s presence as some sort of good-luck charm or spiritual force. These dwelling places acknowledged the kingship of God; they were a reminder that God was in the midst of His people, ruling over and caring for them. After God led Israel into the Promised Land, the people consistently chose to move away from God and the clear direction He had laid out for them at Sinai. Instead, they chose to do whatever seemed good to them at the time. We read in the book of Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6, 21:25). Not only does this statement indicate that Israel ignored God’s laws, it also suggests a solution: Israel needed a king. God was the rightful King of Israel, but they were unwilling to view Him as such. It looked as if God’s kingdom would never be fully established in Israel.

Israel Takes a King

At first glance, it might seem like a good idea for Israel to be ruled by a human king. The period of the Judges was chaotic, so it would make sense to establish a clear ruler who would lead and govern the people. Besides that, every nation that surrounded Israel had a king, so they must have felt conspicuous. All they had was a tent and an imperfect series of leaders whom God appointed to govern His people for a time. Wouldn’t they be better off with a human king? This is the line of reasoning that led Israel to ask God for a normal king. Read the account in 1 Samuel 8 and pay special

attention to the warnings that God gave about what was really at stake with this decision.

Q2 Read 1 Samuel 8. What does this passage tell us about the significance of Israel's choosing to be ruled by a human king?

The problem is apparent right away: Israel wanted a king so they could be "like every other nation." But Israel had never been like the other nations—and that is basically the point throughout the Old Testament. Israel was to be unique because their God was unique. They were set apart from everyone else because they had Almighty God dwelling in their midst. Becoming like the other nations was a huge step in the wrong direction. God warned them of this, but they didn't see the significance of what they were doing. In choosing a human king, Israel was rejecting God as their king. First, God appointed Saul as the king of Israel, but he turned out to be a poor representative of God's reign. The people learned firsthand why God had warned them about taking a human king. Once again, Israel had come to a dead end. Israel's history continually teaches us that if it weren't for God's plan and His persistent grace, all hope would have been lost long ago.

God's Covenant with King David

But God still had plans for Israel. When God rejected Saul as king, He called Samuel to anoint David, a shepherd, as the next king. The concept of anointing is important. The king of Israel would literally be anointed with oil, and then he would be known as "the Lord's anointed," an idea that finds its fullest expression in Jesus. Though it took some time and confidence in God's promise to him, David eventually became the earthly king through whom God would relate to His people as the heavenly King. David was far from perfect, but the Bible describes him as a "man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), and he set the ideal for what the king of Israel should look like. The significance of what God would accomplish through David is brought out in 2 Samuel 7, where God makes a covenant with David. In the context of this chapter, David looked at all the blessings the Lord had given to him and decided that he would honor the Lord by building a house for the ark of the covenant. (This "house" would be the temple we looked at in the

previous session.) God said that David would not build the temple—this task was left to Solomon, his son—but God also affirmed His purposes for David by making a covenant with him. This covenant built upon the covenants that God made with Abraham and with Moses. It also expanded these covenants and made promises that find their perfect fulfillment in Jesus.

Q3 Read 2 Samuel 7. What promises did God make to David in this passage?

God's covenant with David shows that He is still at work to fulfill His promises to Abraham. Think back to God's covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 12:1–2, God promised to make Abraham's name great. In Genesis 15:18, God promised to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan. In Genesis 17:3–7, God told Abraham that He would continue His covenant with Abraham's descendants and that from Abraham would come nations and even kings. Now consider what God promised to David in 2 Samuel 7. God promised to make David's name great (v. 9), to plant Israel in the land of Canaan (v. 10), and to raise up David's offspring and keep David's line on the throne (v. 12). The promises that God made to Abraham were reiterated in the covenant He made with Moses and now again in the promises He made to David. Despite Israel's faithlessness, God was still at work to accomplish His purposes for His people. Before Israel entered the Promised Land, God prophetically told His people that after they settled into the land they would reject Him and choose to be ruled by a human king (Deut. 17). Knowing this would happen, God had already established a way for Israel to continue to pursue His purposes for them as a kingdom. The intent was that God would reign as King over His people through His relationship—His covenant—with this earthly king. The earthly king of Israel would follow God's rule and submit to God's reign. In doing so, he would be a reflection of the true King of Israel. In addition to this, God continued to give Israel prophets who would hold the power of Israel's kings in check, showing that God is the true King and ensuring that these human kings were ruling on God's behalf.

The Coming King

What God did through David as the king of Israel is a picture that reflects what He had been doing through His people from the time He formed them. But it also points forward to what God would do through His Son, Jesus Christ. It shouldn't surprise us that David ultimately failed to be the perfect king of Israel. He failed in several respects, most memorably by impregnating Bathsheba and then having her husband murdered in an effort to hide his sin. David received God's forgiveness and was still the standard by which all other kings were compared, but his imperfect obedience left God's people longing and waiting for another Ruler. The prophets continued to revisit the idea that a Ruler was going to come from the line of David and that this Ruler would put the kingdom of Israel—and all the kingdoms of the earth—back in order. This coming King would restore the world to what it was intended to be. Isaiah 11 describes this King as a "shoot from the stump of Jesse" (Jesse was David's father) upon whom the Spirit of the LORD would rest. He would rule Israel and the nations perfectly. Jeremiah 23:5–6 describes the King as a "Branch" from the line of David who will "reign as king and deal wisely" and whose name would be "The LORD is our righteousness." Ezekiel 34:23–24 describes the coming King as a perfect shepherd for God's people. Amos 9:11–12 says that God will rebuild the fallen house of David, and Hosea 3:5 envisions Israel once again pursuing the LORD under the reign of "David their king." God's future for Israel was very much tied to the concept of Israel as a kingdom under the reign of the Lord's Anointed, who would mediate God's sovereign rule. Notice the imagery God used as He spoke about the future of His people in Ezekiel 37: My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the

LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.
(vv. 24–28)

Q4 Spend some time thinking about these promises of a coming King (consider looking up the passages mentioned in the last two paragraphs). How does the concept of a King arising from the line of David set the stage for Jesus's arrival in the New Testament?

Searching for the Kingdom of God

After the reign of King David, Israel had a disappointing line of kings. Eventually, the kingdom of Israel grew so wicked that God sent them away from the Promised Land and into exile (a period in Israel's history that we will explore in the next session). Once Israel lost the kingdom, their national identity was at stake. They desperately wanted to regain the kingdom. But not until the arrival of Jesus would this become a reality. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record a partial return of God's people from exile, but there is still no kingdom. The book of Daniel promises that the kingdom will come in the future and that the "Son of Man" will rule all the nations. As we turn the last pages of the Old Testament and begin reading the New Testament, we find that the kingdom of God is still a major issue. In fact, Jesus came onto the scene preaching "the gospel of God," saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14–15). This is an incredibly exciting proclamation in light of Israel's history as a kingdom! The kingdom has finally come—the good news that Jesus was preaching was that the kingdom of God had once again returned and Jesus was there to rule as God's anointed! In fact, from the moment Jesus's birth was announced, it was clear that He was the coming King, the Ruler from the line of David who would bring the perfect kingdom of God to earth.

Q5 Read Jesus's birth announcement in Luke 1:26–33. How does the language used here help us see Jesus in light of the Old Testament kingdom?

Q6 Why is it important for us to see Jesus as the culmination of the kingly line of David?

When the angel announced Jesus's birth, he used essentially the same terminology that we saw in 2 Samuel 7 when God made His covenant with

David. Jesus was the true King of Israel: You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:31–33) We have almost arrived at the New Testament. Most of us are more familiar with the teaching of the New Testament, but understanding the Old Testament helps us see more clearly what the New Testament is telling us. Ultimately, the New Testament is all about Jesus Christ. That term Christ is a title, not a last name. It is actually the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for “Messiah,” or “Anointed One.” When Jesus walked onto the scene, He came as the anointed King of Israel. His role is to mediate the sovereign reign of God over His earth and His people. We still have a part to play in this, but first we need to see that the kingdom of God has a long history.

Q7 How should the kingship of God and of His Anointed affect the way we view our relationship to God and His Son?

Q8 Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would help you to lovingly submit to His rule as the King of creation. Pray that God’s reign over this world would be established and that this rebellious world would see Jesus as the true King.