

Good morning,

For some time, we have been walking through the life and teachings of Jesus. Before diving into a portion in which Jesus tells a series of parables – or stories – designed to teach us truths about the Kingdom of God we've pressed pause to first explore more fully this idea of the Kingdom of God. It is an idea central to Jesus' teaching and, in fact, to all of history.

The topic may feel expansive, and at times, abstract, but I think, this is what we should expect.

God's Kingdom is not a small Kingdom. It touches every part of space and time. It is both the nearest thing to you, and the furthest thing away. At times it'll seem present and practical, as though you can reach out and touch it, feel it. And at times, it'll seem distant – a far far Kingdom, yet to come.

Both are true.

Whether you are feeling one way or the other right now (or perhaps don't believe in the Kingdom at all), I hope you stick with us this this journey.

Allow yourself to get caught up in the narrative, and see what God has been up to throughout history.

Two week ago, Tom opened up this series with an overview, giving us a big idea definition of the Kingdom of God and a glimpse of its beginnings.

Tom gave us our working definition of the Kingdom of God:

God's Rule over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan, and in God's timing.

He then went on to describe how in Genesis, we see God is a Kingly Cosmic gardener – creating, shaping, ordering the cosmos to bring about new life and the flourishing of his creation. Under his creation and care, we see that God establishes a world that is “very good,” and invites humans to join him in His kingly duties – reigning as fellow gardeners – overseeing and caring for creation.

But they reject God's rule, desiring to usurp God's authority by choosing to determine for themselves what is right and wrong.

God's very good world becomes disordered.

Matt talked last week about how every king has a design for his kingdom, and every king has a plan to bring it about. Central to God's design is God's Law.

Law speaks to how a king chooses to rule, what he expects within his kingdom. How we feel about God's Law says something about how we view the God Himself. Do we believe that God is good and He has a good design and plan for His world.

But Matt reminded us that ultimately, it is not merely through law and order and the fear of punishment that God will bring about his Kingdom – He will bring about His kingdom through grace and transformation – from the inside out, God will transform His people to be more like him, so that we'll naturally – or supernaturally – live out his design more and more.

God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan, in God's timing.

We have seen this unfold in the first five books of the Bible, from creation in the book of Genesis to the life of Moses and giving of the Law in books Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Today, we pick up after the death of Moses. A man by the name of Joshua had become leader of the Jewish people. He has been tasked with bringing them into the land God had promised them.

God's rule over God's people, *in* God's creation. God's people dwelling in the promised land was meant to be a physical expression of God's rule as well as a picture of what is promised to come for all nations – God lovingly ruling over every heart in every land.

The people of Israel would enter the land, winning great battles like that of at Jericho, but disobedience would prevent a full realisation of God's blessing, in the land "flowing with milk and honey."

After the time of Joshua came the period of the "Judges," when Israel would be plunged into a cycle of oppression and then deliverance, peace, then oppression and deliverance.

If you are a fan of comic books or superhero movies, you may be a fan of the book of Judges – a time filled with leaders achieving superhuman feats bringing deliverance to the people of Israel.

Othniel of the tribe of Judah, son of Kenza (a Gentile convert to the people of Israel)

The first warrior-judge of Israel, delivering Israel from the 8-year oppression by the Edomites.

Ehud of the tribe of Benjamin, son of Gera

The left-handed assassin (can I hear it for all the lefties?!) Slaying King Eglon, he delivers Israel from the 18-year oppression by the Moabites

Deborah of the tribe of Ephraim, and her commander Barak of the tribe of Naphtali

Delivering Israel from the hands of King Jabin and the 20-year oppression by the Canaanites.

Gideon of the tribe of Manasseh, son of Joash of Abiezer

reducing his army from 32,000 to 300 before defeating the Midianite army, delivering Israel from 7 years of oppression.

Jephthah of the tribe of Gilead

Delivering Israel from 18-years of oppression by the Ammonites and Philistines

Shamgar, one of my personal favorites, as he is sort of Old Testament jedi warrior, taking out 600 Philistines with an ox goad.

And perhaps the most famous of the judges...

Samson of the tribe of Dan

A man with superhuman strength, and long luscious locks.

Killing a lion with his bare hands, and thousands of Philistines with the jaw of a donkey.

Despite bringing upon his own downfall, he helped deliver Israel from 40-years of Philistine oppression.

Then there's Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon of which we know less, but each served as judges in Israel helping to bring peace.

After these would come two priestly judges – Eli and Samuel.

Can you imagine being alive then, watching this unfold? Seeing the raw power on display through strong leaders?

Do you long for something like that today? Do you long for strong men or women – whether by strength or wit – to be raised up to bring physical deliverance, overthrowing all forms of oppression.

Perhaps some of you are sitting there thinking...

“Yeah, I'm here. Pick me ...

And you know what, growing out your hair is a whole lot easier than hitting the gym!”

[hair picture]

In the midst of difficulty in this life - when we encounter the crushing weight of a broken world – it feels natural to long for a strongman leader to pull us out of the pit, to set things right.

When a judge was present and active, the people didn't need to ask “Where will salvation come from.” Deliverance was at hand.

But let's be honest, comic books can be fun to read, but I'm not sure they're fun worlds to live in. Episode after episode, the hero saves the day, but in the midst of how much suffering?

Among the Israelites, Judges rose up, brought deliverance, but then judges died, and oppression would return. Like a turning wheel, Israel would cycle through a time of deliverance, then peace, then plunge back into oppression.

Was this the fullness of the promised Kingdom? Surely a good plan wasn't an endless cycle of deliverance and oppression – leaving people bracing for the next enemy at the gates?

It makes sense, that people of Israel longed for something more – they longed for a secure Kingdom.

And when they looked around, what did they see that secured kingdoms? Kings.

And this may seem like a natural decision during that time. We see in 1 Samuel 8:20 that the people wanted a king to lead them and to go out before them and fight their battles. With a consolidation of power could come security and a longer lasting peace.

You see, unlike the judges, Kings establish lines of succession, and so there would be no more waiting around for the next judge arise.

An earthly king was even a part of God's plan. We see it as early as God's promise to Abraham, the father of Israel.

We read in Genesis 17:3-6, to Abraham

I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and **kings will come from you.**

And then, in the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 17:14-15a)

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “**Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,**” **be sure to appoint over you a king the Lord your God chooses.**

From this perspective, one could make a case that asking for a King was not only practical but it hearkened back to the promises and plan of God Himself.

And so it was during the time of the last judge of Israel, the priestly judge, Samuel, that the people came with a request.

I'll invite Ginger up to read about this now. We're in 1 Samuel 8:1-9

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8 When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ²The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. ³Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah ⁵and said to him, “Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.” ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the Lord. ⁷And the Lord said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. ⁹Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

What a second, what just happened? This doesn't seem fair. How is asking for a King, not only a rejection of Samuel, but a rejection of God Himself? Wasn't this part of the plan?

Where did they go wrong?

The Kingdom of God:

God's rule, over God's people, in God's creation, by God's plan, in God's timing.

Simply put: The people wanted a secure Kingdom, by their own plan, in their own timing. They wanted their own Kingdom.

I spent a lot of time leading up to this point, and I did it on purpose. Why? I wanted us to get caught up in the narrative. It's where many of us spend most of our lives – day after day, week after week – wrestling, longing, looking for hope, for security, asking questions of why the world is broken, and when will it be fixed?

Or why is my car broken, and when will it be fixed? Why am I failing this course, and how can it be fixed? Why is my marriage struggling, and can it be fixed?

Like the people in the time of the judges, we want a savior or a solution to rise up.

Whether it's shopping therapy, politics, or the next big self-help book, we are constantly looking for deliverance – looking for salvation. Perhaps the newest fashion or skin care products can give me beauty and self-worth. Perhaps the right politician will fix the mess we're in. Perhaps, if I could just read an easy 12 Step guide I could become wealthy and respected.

And the world is filled with good looking, smooth talking, seemingly powerful, counterfeit saviors. Distracting us from true deliverance – from our true King.

I have a confession to make. As I walked through the epic time of the judges, I gave you a bit of a redacted story. I purposefully left two rather important things out. First, I left out God. I left out God right up until I wanted to justify the people of Israel asking for a "king like all the other nations." How often do we only appeal to God or His Word when we're trying to justify something we already want? Second, I left out the people's sin – their wickedness – which brought about their own oppression.

Where did the people of Israel go wrong?

I don't think their desire for security was bad, nor was their search for a solution, but they had an eye-problem that made them look in the wrong place that stemmed from a heart problem that made them want it the wrong way.

This wasn't a problem that came out of nowhere, it was a culmination of a cycle repeated over and over throughout the time of the judges.

An eye-problem stemming from a heart problem.

As the heart problem causes the eye problem let's start with heart.

The heart issue is that they had become atheists. That is, practical atheists.

And, before we get too judgmental, it's probably something many of us are guilty of, as well. We live as practical atheists.

Now, I don't mean to say that they were atheists in the modern sense of the term – rejecting the existence of any gods. I suspect there were few genuine atheists in the ancient world.

I mean atheist in the sense of Psalm 14:1, where we read "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

This isn't a rejection of the idea that God exists, but to live one's life in a way that does not concern itself with God. Or, to live as though God has no significant impact upon what we do, think, or say – acting as though God does not care or that the things of God do not matter.

In the midst of our questions, our struggles, our search for deliverance, are we just as guilty?

The pattern of the time of the Judges is described in Judges 2(:10-19), where we read that

another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals.

¹⁸ Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived ... But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

“They knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.”

Their practical atheism brought on a two-fold blindness:

1. They became blind to the root of their problem - their own sin and the disastrous effect it was having on them and their nation. Forgive the imagery, but like a dog returning to its vomit, they kept going back for more.
2. Secondly, they became blind to the true source of their deliverance.
 - a. They became blind to the God, who sent plagues and parted the Red Sea to deliver them from Egypt.
 - b. They became blind to the God who went before them as a pillar of cloud in the day, and pillar of fire at night.
 - c. The God who part the waters of the Jordan
 - d. They became blind to the God, who commands the host of heaven, in whose presence the very ground becomes holy.
 - e. The God, who collapsed the walls of Jericho
 - f. Made the sun stand still
 - g. And gave Samson his strength

Blind to the source of the salvation, each and every time, they looked for what made sense if there was no God. They looked for a strong man to give them security – “a king like all the nations.” A king on their terms and in their timing to bring about security in their way.

In asking for a king, they echo Deuteronomy 17:15, asking for a King like all the nations, while stopping short of verse 16, “be sure to appoint over you a King that the Lord your God chooses.”

As God instructs him, Samuel will warn the people that a King like all the nations will take, take take, such that they would one day cry out for relief from the King that they had chosen. And yet, the people persist.

God’s plan was to reign as King over a kingly people, through an earthly King – but one would not merely take, take, take, but one who would give – one who would serve God and serve the people.

We see this continuing in Deuteronomy 17:18-20

may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

God wanted to choose a servant King

But this may not make sense if we can’t see beyond our own poor eyesight. If we’re primarily seeking salvation – or deliverance – through power, as understood by this world.

At heart issue of forgetting God, distorts reality. It makes it difficult to see beyond the horizon of our own experience. We look around at our neighbors – “at all the nations” and see what they can teach us about setting things right.

How easy it is to be drawn into unhealthy standards and the self-sabotaging worship of counterfeit saviours.

The Israelites looked around at what they could see. Their heart-state kept them from seeing the blinding light of the sun – the big neon sign – that their salvation is from the Lord. And they instead looked to the other nations, to what they could see and verify with their own eyes right then and there.

In demanding of Samuel to be given a king like all the nations, we see that they don't simply reject Samuel (God's appointed leader for that time), but they reject God Himself.

Blind to their own sin, and blind to the source of their salvation. They not only settle, but they begged for the counterfeit, which would hurt them further.

And one of the most dangerous things that God can give us is giving us exactly what we want.

That should probably give us a moment of pause.

It also means that one of the most loving things that God can do for us is to not give us exactly what we want.

God granted Israel a King like the other nations.

He gave them Saul, who we read that

There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.

I mean, to be fair, I've always wondered if Matt was too short to be a leader at Hope City.

But seriously, I believe the writer of 1 Samuel highlights the tallness of Saul to emphasise that the people wanted a King based upon external appearances. One who would command respect and wield power before the nations around them.

The people of Israel would experience the consequences of their foolish demand for a King by worldly standards – if you will, Saul the tall, rather than the “lowly” servant King that God had intended.

If you feel like I’m leading somewhere else very specific with this, I am.

It wouldn’t be the last time that God’s people would reject the idea of a servant king. As we will see next week, God in his mercy would raise up a new king, imperfect as David was, but an even great King would come through the line of God – King Jesus.

Unlike Saul the Tall, the prophet Isaiah describes the Messiah as a suffering servant, who would have “no beauty that we should desire him.” Jesus would proclaim a kind of upside-down kingdom in which the “lowly” are made tall.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit.
- Those who mourn.
- Those who are persecuted.

As we read in Matthew not long ago, Jesus cast a demon out of a man, and the religious leaders of the day – blind to their own sin and the source of salvation that stood in front of them – responded by rejecting Jesus, accusing him of doing it through the power of Satan.

Jesus was not what they had expected. He did not fit their idea of the Messiah – an anointed of God – who would bring the fullness of God’s Kingdom. Perhaps they expect a strong military figure or someone who lined up exactly with their interpretation of the Law. Perhaps they were living as practical atheists, and simply didn’t want to relinquish the power they had.

What we do know is that the Kingdom of God was at hand, God’s timing was now and they were not ready.

And if we’re not careful, we can very easily suffer from the same blindness, caused by the same heart-issue.

Whether we’re speaking of choosing to become a follower of Jesus and finding salvation in Him, or in how we live out our daily lives in the big things and small.

Sometimes it's easy to believe in God when the big things are happening, and live like he's not there in midst of the daily grind, but (1) no thing before God is little, and (2) forgetting God in the "little" things can create a habit of the heart that leads to seeking security in all the wrong places.

So what do we do?

Most of us won't King-makers or major actors on the world stage, but whether you will be or not, we must begin with the root-issue, the heart. With a healthy heart will come healthy eyes to better see what God is doing to bring about His Kingdom, on His terms, and in His time.

This doesn't mean that we'll have all the answers, but we do know that God, the source of our salvation goes before us, wherever He calls us to go, in whatever He call us through. The commander of the heavenly hosts fights for us – but on his terms, not ours.

And thank God for that.

We will have a song in a minute reflecting on how God is for us, and as the musicians make their way up, I'd like to read a prayer of praise from the mother of the last judge of Israel.

Hannah was barren, unable to have a child, and was subjected to the mocking abuse of her husbands second wife.

God would bring her physical deliverance through the birth of Samuel, but before her prayer of praise came a prayer of pain, which can teach us an important lesson. Sometimes the hardest battles are one are won by not running into battle and swinging a sword, but by running to God in prayer.

Then Hannah prayed and said:

"My heart rejoices in the Lord;
in the Lord my horn⁹ is lifted high.

My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.

² "There is no one holy like the Lord;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

³ "Do not keep talking so proudly
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,
for the Lord is a God who knows,
and by him deeds are weighed.

"For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's;
on them he has set the world.

⁹ He will guard the feet of his faithful servants,
but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

"It is not by strength that one prevails;

¹⁰ those who oppose the Lord will be broken.

The Most High will thunder from heaven;
the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

"He will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed."

Amen.

Let's turn our eyes to the source of our salvation.