

## Kingdom of God

1 Samuel 16:7, “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

**Question:** Is the Kingdom of God worldly or just spiritual?

**Key Verses:** Judges 21:25; 1 Sam 8:1-18; 13:14

When Jesus launched his ministry, his campaign slogan was “The Kingdom of God.” As Messiah, he was to lead Israel on God’s behalf. On the surface, it is a simple declaration that Yahweh would rule the nation. However, this proved a bit more complex in practice. In order to really understand Jesus’ preaching and his role as Messiah, we need to step back in time to 1000 B.C. when the throne was first established. After God released Israel from slavery in Egypt, they were a free people. He led them through the wilderness for forty years. Then he guided them into the Promised Land through a series of successful military campaigns. God had proved a formidable ally to his people. That was the original political plan. Yahweh alone was to be Israel’s true and ultimate ruler.

Isaiah 33:22 was emphatic on this point, “For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.” Similar statements are peppered throughout the Psalms and Prophets. To be fair, such statements are more muted in the historical books (see Exod 15:1–18; Num 23:21; Deut 33:5). Perhaps this is due to the fact that Yahweh’s kingship was more of an ideology than a reality. Nevertheless, this vision of God as the exclusive ruler of Israel informed and inflamed Hebrew history with a passion for political independence from dominating monarchs. It was so strong, in fact, that the establishment of the monarchy was equated with the rejection of Yahweh in several important Old Testament passages. This explains why Israel had a long and tenuous relationship with her kings.

For example, Gideon refuses to rule Israel (Judg 8:22–23). When the people begged him to sit on the throne, Gideon could not have been more decisive: “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.” Samuel was even more resolute. Appalled by Israel’s craving for a king, he warns them about the inevitable consequences of an earthly monarch who would take their sons as soldiers, daughters as lovers, and crops as taxes (1 Sam 8:1–12). Even though God agreed, he nonetheless advised Samuel, “Listen to 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” (1 Sam 8:7).

Israel’s ultimate motive was military protection. They trusted a human warrior more than an invisible God, even though Yahweh had just proved himself as a formidable protector against the Philistines (1 Sam 7:2–17)! Samuel would repeat his prescient warning three more times to no avail (1 Sam 10:19; 12:12, 19). Israel was infatuated with human monarchs but why? The answer is found in the book of Judges. God’s invisible monarchy led to visible anarchy. This

became the choral refrain of the book: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). This creates a subtext in the story of the Judges which suggests kingship as an inevitable political necessity yet one which should make the reader uneasy.

Thus, the monarchy stood in constant tension in Israel because it naturally subverted the sole rule of Yahweh. On the one hand, God invited Israel to choose a king (Deut 17:14–17); on the other hand, these kings did the very things God warned Israel they would do (1 Sam 8:11–17; cf. Jer 22:13–17). On the one hand, God promised a ‘Son of David’ to sit perpetually on his throne (2 Sam 7:11–15); on the other hand, Solomon followed precisely the practices prohibited to Israelite kings (cf. 1 Kgs 4:20–28; 9:15–22). On the one hand, Israel hoped for a unified kingdom (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25); on the other hand, Solomon’s son Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12:1–24) caused a civil war that irreparably ripped the twelve tribes apart. Bottom line: God was the rightful ruler of Israel but Israel demanded a more tangible king.

Her first foray into national politics was with a King named Saul. From a human perspective, he had all the right qualifications. Saul was a warrior king--a leader who was tall, strong, attractive, and from a noble family. If you trace his history, however, he had several fatal flaws. **Saul did the very thing God told him what NOT to do.** For example, kings were forbidden from making sacrifices. That was for priests. But when his troops got restless at the battle of Gilgal, Saul personally performed the sacrifice before Samuel could arrive (1 Sam 13:8-9). Because of this insubordination, God stripped Saul of his kingdom even though he sat on the throne for nearly thirty more years. His future lineage was abandoned with these words: “But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD’s command” (1 Samuel 13:14).

Immediately following this incident, **Saul made a vow he neglected to keep.** Granted, it was a foolish vow he never should have made. When his son Jonathan put the Philistines to flight, Saul rashly pledged to kill any soldier who ate any food before putting an end to his enemies. Because Jonathan was ahead of the troops in hot pursuit of the Philistines, he knew nothing of the vow. He dipped his staff in a honeycomb to energize himself for battle. When Saul heard of it, he was committed to keep his vow by executing his own son. His soldiers intervened and talked him out of it...as they should have. Even so, God doesn’t take lightly broken promises and pledged, himself, to dethrone the impudent king.

**Third, Saul neglected to do what God had commanded.** For example, he was told to eradicate every living thing among the Amalekites. This was the long awaited revenge for their refusal to let the wandering Israelites pass through their land on route to Israel. Saul *claimed* to have kept God’s command. But the bleating of the sheep and the breathing of King Agag betrayed his betrayal. That was the last straw! God said to Samuel, “I regret that I have made

Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions” (1 Samuel 15:11).

Looking at this brief biography we observe three fatal flaws. Mark these well, for they will destroy your own God-given calling as well. First, Saul trusted people’s opinions rather than God’s command. Each time he failed it was because popular opinion went against God’s clear command. When you are more influenced by your supporters than your God, bad things tend to follow. Second, Saul promoted himself through manipulation and management rather than resting on God’s approval. Through his position and power, he rushed the results he wanted rather than waiting for God to provide. When we get ahead of God we tend to lose our way. Third, when Saul failed, he always had a ready excuse. His initial instinct was to point the finger at someone else who was to blame. When a leader cannot take responsibility for failure, he is doomed to repeat and proliferate his mistakes.

Why are we talking so much about Saul when David is the subject of our key passage? Because without understanding Saul’s failure one cannot appreciate David as his replacement. God sent Samuel the prophet to anoint a new king. Saul was the right man from a human perspective: Tall, strong, capable, famous. Yet none of those qualities qualified him in God’s eyes. God looks for leaders of a different fabric. God instructs Samuel this way: “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Elsewhere it declares David was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22).

Thus, king David became the quintessential leader of Israel precisely because he left leadership in the hands of Yahweh, Israel’s ultimate king. He was merely God’s hands and feet, his voice to remind the people of Yahweh’s laws. His leadership was representative of Scripture, not independent of it. His goal was God’s fame, not his own. He battled for God’s honor, not his personal reputation. That is the kind of leader God is looking for. This is, in fact, what he wants from you in your own realm of influence.

David sought God’s heart. That’s why he became the ideal king. However, he was not a perfect king. In fact, he was flawed at multiple levels as we all are. This is why Israel needed a Messiah—a king who would lead with God’s heart, not just chasing after it. David’s flaws did not disqualify him from being a leader but ultimately he was not capable to ruling God’s dynasty permanently. For this, we needed Jesus Christ. David, thus becomes the imperfect model after which the Messianic hopes would be fashioned. His life and legacy was to point to Jesus. 1 Samuel 16:7 is a salient reminder to us, not just to Samuel, to look for the heart of the man, not his stature. Without this insight, we would surely have missed the person of Jesus. He was born to peasant parents in an insignificant burb in Bethlehem. He had no titles or degrees and certainly no military force. He lacked the finances to buy an office and the social status to

win friends in high places. Yet through his humility of heart and his unwavering devotion to God, he became the most influential leader of human history.

### **How Might Jesus Have Thought About Kingship?**

Jesus surely knew he was to be King of Israel. He surely looked to his predecessor David, as the foreshadow of his own reign. Yet he never overtly claimed the title. He never gathered a military or passed laws. He never sat on a throne or asserted political titles. Why? This brief historical survey shows precisely why Jesus thought of himself as king without asserting himself as king.

First, there was the question of whether the monarchy was a good idea. Since the Scriptures themselves describe it as a deviation from God's original political order, it is possible that in Jesus' ultimate vision of the kingdom, he considered alternatives to a monarchy. No question, there had to be a Davidic ruler to establish God's kingdom (2 Sam 7:12). But what should he look like? Perhaps a 'judge', akin to Moses, would have struck Jesus as a better model. Since Jesus' primary message was about the kingdom of God, it seems obvious that he was more interested in God's rule than his own. He was well aware of the Israelite tradition which criticized the monarchy.

Second, if Jesus did accept an exclusive leadership role, by whatever name, there were certain necessary characteristics in order to rightly carry out the reign of Yahweh. Four spring immediately to mind from these critiques of the kings. (1) First, and foremost, one must promote and defend the exclusive rule of Yahweh (1 Sam 12:12–15). (2) One must be guided by and be in submission to the Torah (Deut 17:18–19). (3) One must not exalt himself above his fellow Israelites (Deut 17:15, 20). (4) One must use power and resources to enact justice for the poor rather than using them for self-promotion (1 Sam 8:11–18; Deut 17:16–17; Jer 22:3–4). All told, this is a fairly accurate description of Jesus' ministry and perhaps even his self-perception. The monarchy was not God's original political structure for Israel, and it came with both birth pains and permanent scars. While God permitted it, the monarchy appears more as a necessary evil than a utopian ideal for the state. Jesus knew his own national history. If he took seriously his own role as God's envoy, then his life would have reflected the same tension as the Scriptures concerning kingship. Yes, he was a Davidic descendant with a regal role to play. Yet he must carry out that role in absolute submission to God and God's Law as well as in complete surrender to the humble service on behalf of Israel. If that is the kind of kingship Jesus envisioned, the gospel writers have captured it with precision. For this reason we can say that 1 Sam 16:7 is more a description of Jesus the Messiah than David the king. And if we are to following in either of their footsteps, it should characterize our own ambitions as well.

### **Key Points:**

- Kinship in Israel was always a tension because it leaned into human leaders rather than God alone.
- Israel's first king, Saul, showed fatal flaws in leadership because he promoted and protected himself. That's why he was replaced by David.
- David, though a man after God's heart, was still imperfect. Yet he reflected well the heart of the true Messiah, Jesus, who would reign on God's behalf.

**Action Step:** Take this essay to a friend or mentor. Read to them the three fatal flaws of Saul and the four characteristics of Jesus' leadership. Ask them to point out your greatest strength in imitating Jesus and your potential danger in imitating Saul.

**Further Resources:** Gene Edwards, [\*A Tale of Three Kings\*](#) (Tyndale, 1992).