

David #2 • Choose your king

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders.

The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, 'You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.'

But when they said, 'Give us a king to lead us,' this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: 'Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you.'

1 Samuel 8:1-8

In the previous talk we took a brief overview of David's life, and introduced the theme of this series, how the character of David became invested with deeper meaning in both the Old and New Testament.

Today we are going to take a look at one of the biblical themes that David came to embody, the theme of kingship.

Some Bible passages seem to suggest that Israel wanting a king was a bad thing... but – as we'll see – it does appear that God intended Israel to have a king... a king who would foreshadow a much greater king.

As I explained in the last talk, up until the time that David lived, Israel was a tribal nation with each tribe led by a council of elders.

For inter-tribal decisions, a judge was appointed.

Samuel was the last of these judges.

Samuel is nearing the end of his life, and he appoints his feckless ‘nepo baby’ sons to succeed him.

However, the council of elders knows his sons are not leadership material, and use it as an opportunity to make a radical change in the way that Israel is governed.

Rather than suggest a more suitable judge to succeed Samuel, they demand that Samuel appoints a king over Israel...

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, ‘You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.’ But when they said, ‘Give us a king to lead us,’ this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD.

1 Samuel 8:4-6

Samuel is not happy about this.

Knowing that the elders didn’t respect his sons would have touched a nerve, and as a faithful God-fearing, battle-hardened judge of Israel, Samuel was not used to having his decisions blocked.

But the main thing that upsets Samuel is that they are asking for a king to replace him. Samuel knows that Israel’s king is God, and he suspects that the elders’ motivation for wanting a human king is not right.

Being a godly man, Samuel takes his grievance to God.

And God answers him.

And the LORD told him: ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you.’

1 Samuel 8:7-8

God tells Samuel that he is right in his suspicion that asking for a human king is a rejection of God as their true king.

And, as God points out, this is not a new thing. They have been rejecting God as their king since the day he rescued them from Egypt.

But, contrary to what we expect, God tells Samuel to listen to them.

On first reading, this would appear to be God permitting something that wasn't his primary intention.

Like a parent who has repeatedly stopped a child from doing something that they know will end in tears, but who eventually gives in to their nagging and sends them off with a,

'When you break your legs, don't come running back to me!'

However, I think a closer look at the text will show us that it is not the *idea* of Israel having a king that God is unhappy about, it is the *type* of king, and the *reasons for wanting* that type of king that are a problem.

The initial request of the elders is not just for a king, it is a king 'such as all the other nations have.'

From the beginning, God was Israel's king.

And God treated Israel differently from the surrounding nations' kings.

In the book of Exodus, God said to Moses about the people of Israel...

'...if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. ...you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Exodus 19:5-6a

Unlike the surrounding nations, the people of Israel were not God's slaves. They were intended to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, an example of what it meant to be made in God's image.

This is the way God planned things from the time he created Adam and Eve, making humans in his own image to enjoy and manage the planet he had designed for them to live on.

And how did that turn out? Not well.

Later on, he promised Abraham that he would be the father of a nation that would bless all the surrounding nations.

And how did that turn out? Not well.

Whether they realised it or not, what the elders were doing was not merely rejecting God as their king, but saying that they no longer wanted to be God's treasured possession, God's priests, God's holy nation.

Instead of being a living demonstration to the surrounding nations of what it meant to be God's holy nation, they wanted to be *like* the surrounding nations.

Israel is committing the sin of Adam and Eve, saying that they know better than him, that they want to do things their own way.

God, being compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6b) tells Samuel to explain the consequences of them having the type of king they were asking for...

'Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.'

Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: he will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots.

Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots.

He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants.

Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves.

When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

1 Samuel 8:9-18

At which point the elders say,

'Good point Samuel, what were we thinking?!'

yeah, right...

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. 'No!' they said. 'We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.'

1 Samuel 8:19-20

Yes, Samuel's sons are not judge material, but they know that Samuel has been an excellent judge who God has worked through to protect Israel on a number of occasions.

However, despite this, they are not looking for another good judge, they want a king...

*...appoint a king to lead us, **such as all the other nations have.**'*

1 Samuel 8:5b

Israel's reason for wanting a king was, at its root, idolatrous.

Biblically, an idol is anything that replaces God as the primary source of our trust and worship.

Israel is not primarily rejecting Samuel, they are rejecting God.

*And the LORD told him... ‘it is not you they have rejected, but **they have rejected me as their king.**’*

1 Samuel 8:7

They want to be like ‘all the other nations’... they wanted an instagram type of king; tall, handsome and strong, riding on a powerful horse.

*‘We want a king over us. **Then we shall be like all the other nations,** with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.’*

1 Samuel 8:19b-20

Israel had come to see themselves as vulnerable and weak compared to the surrounding, hostile nations. And, in purely human terms, they were not wrong.

Yes, they had been told about how God worked through Moses and Joshua when they were children. And they had seen God defeat their Philistine neighbours in their own lifetime.

They knew God was capable of defeating their enemies.

They knew God had given them the land they were living in.

But they knew God was not predictable.

They knew that their God wasn’t a god you could wheel out on special days and ignore for the rest of the year.

They knew that God wanted them to be different from the other nations.

And this required faith. And trust. And relationship. And obedience.

And so they decide to delegate this to a king who would recruit an army to defend them, a king who would provide them with the peace and security they craved.

And so God gives them exactly what they were looking for,

...Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and... a head taller than anyone else.

1 Samuel 9:2

Young, good looking, tall... hashtag 'fit'... perfect social media material. But notice that there is no mention made about Saul's character, or his relationship with God.

There is a saying that goes, 'some people serve as examples, others as warnings.' Saul fits in the latter category, he is the king that Israel asked for, not the king they needed.

There is another saying that goes 'be careful what you wish for.' One of the ways God teaches us is by allowing us to have what we want, and letting us experience the consequences.

So far I'm not making a very good case for why God *wanted* Israel to have a king, am I?

OK, let's back up a bit. Because there is stuff in the Bible that indicates that God's intention was for Israel to have a king.

Hundreds of years earlier God appeared to Abram (which means 'exalted father'), changes his name to Abraham ('father of many') and says...

Slide - Genesis 17:5b-6

*I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, **and kings will come from you.***

Genesis 17:5b-6

And later in Genesis, when Jacob blesses his sons, he says...

Slide - Genesis 49:10

*The sceptre will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he to whom it belongs shall come
and the obedience of the nations shall be his.*

Genesis 49:10

It is kings who carry sceptres, representing their power and dominion over their kingdom and Jacob is saying that a king will arise from the tribe of Judah, to rule over the nations.

Hmm... does that ring any bells?

And, hundreds of years before Samuel was born, when Moses gives his final speech to the Israelites, just before he dies and the Israelites enter the promised land, he says...

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.

Deuteronomy 17:14-15a

And Samuel's mum (yes, the Samuel we've been talking about) Hannah, when she had fulfilled her promise to dedicate her son to God's service, composed a long prayer that ends...

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

1 Samuel 2:10b

When we ask the question,

Did God want Israel to have a king?

the answer would seem to be,

'yes, but not the kind of king Israel wanted.'

Does that ring any bells?

The way that God works in history is ultimately mysterious. As finite creatures, we don't have the capacity to fully understand God.

As I've said before...

A fully comprehended god is not God.

God has given humans free will, or to use a more contemporary word, 'agency', we can make informed choices, good, neutral and bad.

God is all powerful and all good (all the time!).

So when we see a situation like this, and ask 'Was it God's will?', the answer is often 'yes', and 'no'.

Yes, human kings, especially David, help us to understand how God is (and isn't) going to bring about his perfect kingship of the world.

No, God did not want Israel to have the kind of king that they wanted.

So why did God give Israel Saul? Why not go straight to David?

I don't know for sure. My best guess is that it was to show Israel that the kind of king they were asking for would be a disaster.

But then even David was far from being a perfect king.

When an infinite God meets finite creatures, there are things that are impossible to explain in a clean, mathematical way.

But, as we all know, life is messier than maths.

It might also be because when humans think they have everything explained, they turn it into a system, a substitute for a faithful relationship with God. We regularly turn knowledge into an idol.

Just my two-penn'orth.

What is important to understand is that God didn't reluctantly go along with what Israel wanted. What we see in the Bible is that even before Israel asked for one, God's plan was to provide a king – a king who would represent God's rule over Israel and the nations around them

And so, having established that there is going to be a king in Israel, we move on to how that occurred.

Samuel, instructed by God, meets Saul while he is searching for some donkeys his father had lost.

(I sometimes wonder if the writer is making humorous contrast between Saul and David. Saul is not able to look after his father's donkeys, while David is a successful defender of his father's sheep.)

Samuel anoints Saul...

Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, 'Has not the Lord anointed you ruler over his inheritance?'

1 Samuel 10:1

Samuel then gives Saul a series of promises and instructions, including that he will be clothed with the Spirit of the LORD. And things happen just as Samuel said. (1 Samuel 10:2-12)

Following this Saul, empowered by the Spirit of the LORD, recruits a large army and defeats an army that is besieging an Israelite city. (1 Samuel 11:1-11)

Saul is then crowned as king of Israel. (1 Samuel 11:14-15)

David's path to kingship follows a similar, if more drawn out sequence.

Saul is still king when David is anointed by Samuel. (1 Samuel 16:13a)

David is empowered by the Spirit of the LORD. (1 Samuel 16:13b)

Like Saul, he wins a battle. (1 Samuel 17)

And is, eventually, crowned king of Israel. (2 Samuel 2:1-7; 5:1-5)

This sequence becomes a significant one in the Bible's 'big picture'.

The Hebrew word for 'anoint' is *mashah*

The Hebrew word for 'anointed one' is *mashiah*

from where we get the word 'Messiah'.

The Old Testament prophets regularly look forward to a perfect king, an 'anointed one', a Messiah.

And it is the title that is most often used for Jesus in the New Testament, ‘*Christos*’ is the Greek translation for ‘anointed one’, or ‘Messiah.’

‘Jesus Christ’ means ‘Jesus, the anointed one;’ ‘Jesus, the Messiah.’

The Gospel writers portray Jesus’ baptism as an anointing.

As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’

Matthew 3:16-17

God the Holy Spirit is pictured as the ‘oil’, and God the Father declares him a worthy representative of the Trinity here on earth.

David’s anointing foreshadows the baptism of Jesus,

one who, filled with the Spirit of God

will win the battle against sin and death,

that will one day lead to God’s perfect kingship being restored to a redeemed world.

Saul, David, Jesus... anointed, receives the Spirit, wins a battle, crowned king.

The Bible wasn’t just thrown together!

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And as we read earlier, when God declared to Israel...

‘...out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

...you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’

Exodus 19:5-6a

So Peter, a thousand years later, writes to one of the first Christian congregations...

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2:9

If you are a Christian, you are one of God's chosen people, part of a royal priesthood, belonging to a holy nation, God's special possession!

Let's go into the new week knowing who our real king is, and asking him to help us declare his praises in this world, so that others might be called out of darkness into his wonderful light.