

A KING OVER US



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1 Samuel 8

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In the fall of 2002 I moved from Santa Barbara to Vancouver, British Columbia. I went there to get a masters degree at Regent College. At Regent I discovered a foretaste of heaven. The student body came from over 30 countries. We were a mosaic of people brought together by a love for Christ. Because of our diversity, our discussions about God, Scripture, faith, and the church were so rich. I was constantly challenged to think beyond my white, American, middle class world view. As a result, my understanding of God expanded and my faith in him deepened.

They say that when you move to another country, it takes about 6 to 9 months for culture shock to set in. For me it took two. The events of October 2002 perplexed me more than anything else in my four years in Canada. I walked into Regent one day and saw a group of Canadian and British students in a huddle. There was an exuberant excitement about them so I asked them what was going on. One of the women gushed like a teenage girl waiting for a boy band, “The Queen is coming!” And I thought, “Oh... the queen...that’s nice.”

There was a frenzy of activity in Vancouver to prepare for the Queen’s arrival. The route of her motorcade was talked about on the radio. People lined the streets before dawn to watch her limo drive by. They couldn’t even see her because the windows were tinted, but they got to see her car. And one night the Queen dropped the puck at the Vancouver Canucks game and the next day a photo was on the front page of every newspaper in B.C. The Canadians were in a euphoric state for days; it was like they were expecting the imminent return of Christ because they had seen the union of two of holy things: the Queen and hockey.

This was all something of a spectacle to me and my fellow Americans. The next week, a Texan submitted a satirical piece to our school paper called, “What’s in the Queen’s Handbag?” He had noticed that when the Queen dropped the puck, she had a little purse tucked in her elbow. Why, the author asked, with five attendants constantly following her around,

did the Queen need to carry anything? He went on to speculate about what was in the handbag.

I thought this was hilarious, but the Texan’s poke at the Queen’s handbag ignited a firestorm of criticism from a British student. And so began a heated debate in the student paper of a little seminary in Canada—the land of politeness. A debate about who the Queen is, and whether or not she and her handbag are a joking matter. I was just baffled.

Monarchy. Queens and kings and the reverence they invoke. These are things that don’t easily translate to democratic, individualistic, American brains. And yet, kingship is one of the central themes of scripture.

When Jesus began his public ministry, his first words proclaimed that the kingdom of God had come near. In fact, over the next three years Jesus preached more about God’s kingdom than anything else—more than he preached about money, righteousness, and even about love. If the kingdom of God is important to Jesus, then it must be important to us, his followers.

We’re going to spend the next 10 months studying the life of David, a man often called “the great king” of Israel. To prepare ourselves well, we need to be like expats settling into a foreign country. *We* need to do the work of listening and learning a new culture. We need to ask ourselves, why is the idea of kingdom or kingship so critical to God’s story—and—is it critical to our story? Over the next two weeks we’ll seek the answer to those questions together.

A great place to begin framing a picture of biblical kingship is 1 Samuel, chapter 8. Please turn there with me. We’ll begin with verses 1-5.

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.”

We’ve just jumped into the end of the period of the Judges. From our recent series on the book of Ruth, we know that judges led Israel for roughly 300 years. The judges were military leaders called up by God to deliver Israel from foreign oppression.

By this time, the tribes of Israel are well settled in the promised land, but they are surrounded by power-hungry kings with strong armies. Iron weaponry is cutting edge technology and, comparatively, the Israelites are still in the stone age. Israel recently suffered a huge loss to the Philistine army. 30,000 foot soldiers died in battle and the Ark of the Covenant—the place where God resided among his people—was captured and held for 7 months.

For the last several decades, Israel has been faithfully led by a judge named Samuel. But now he’s old and the people think it’s time for him to pass on the mantle of leadership. But there’s a problem: Samuel’s sons, who are already functioning as judges, are utterly corrupt. They don’t follow the law of the Lord; they are a law unto themselves. Their sins—unjust gain, bribery, perverting justice—are in direct violation of God’s law. Joel and Abijah seem fixated on abusing their power to gain more power. These two reveal the disease of selfishness that was widespread among God’s people.

The book of Judges says that each generation in Israel grew more corrupt. You can see this disintegration if you look at the book from 30,000 feet. Last week I read the whole book in one sitting. I noticed that in the beginning, the Israelites approached God and spoke directly to him. But as time passed, they approached God more infrequently. Instead, they speak only to the judges.

Judges 2 provides a good summary of this whole period of history. It mentions the death of Joshua and his generation. Then in 2:10 it says that “there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.” With their history forgotten, and a personal path to God disintegrated, the Israelites were lost in a downward spiral of lawlessness and idolatry.

“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). This sentence is repeated across the book of Judges; it’s a sign of the times leading to the days of Samuel. F.B. Meyer, a pastor and author at the turn of the 20th century, described the times this way,

“The nation was in danger of desolation by internal anarchy and external attack.”¹

The elders of Israel are wise enough to know that Samuel’s corrupt sons are a poor leadership choice. So they come to Samuel with this kingship proposal. “Appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8: 5b). It *seems* like a decent strategy—a regime change in a time of instability. To make a show of strength. To go from a broken string of temporary judges, to a succession of kings who will go toe-to-toe with those threatening armies. But the foolishness of their proposal is revealed in the words, “like all the nations.”

Remember Israel’s story since Genesis. From the very beginning, God’s people were never meant to be like the nations. Israel was to be set apart for God, to be holy like their God was holy. They were supposed to be the nation whose holiness would draw every nation to worship Yahweh! Israel was meant to bless to all the families of the earth, but *now* here they are—wanting to be like the nations!

Is anyone else getting that sinking feeling in the pit of their stomach? Let’s see what happens next.

1 Samuel 8:6–9:

But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.”⁷ And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And 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.⁸ According 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.⁹ Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

Samuel is upset by Israel’s request. To say that he was *displeased* is an understatement. The power of his emotions gets lost in translation. We can safely say that Samuel was offended. He led Israel faithfully for *decades* and they are ready to cast him aside for a younger man. I think he’s also riled up because he recognizes the impure motives behind their request. *Samuel* remembers Israel’s covenant with God. *He* remembers what they’ve been called to, and whom they are to serve. But Israel seems to have a complete disregard for God.

God interprets Israel’s request as a rejection. You could also faithfully translate verse 7 to say, “they have despised me.” But it’s not a rejection of God in general;

it's a rejection of God *as king*. This language should surprise us. We know many names and titles for God up to this point, but king? I did an extensive concordance search of Genesis through 1 Samuel. I could find only two places in these books where the language of kingship is used with God. In one instance kingship is implied in poetic imagery. And in Deuteronomy 33, Moses says that God became king of Israel when he gave them the law. But it's not a title that the Israelites then use with God.

Nevertheless, God says their request for a king is a rejection his kingship. God says that this rejection is nothing new; it's been going on since he rescued Israel from Egypt. That's over 400 years ago! Without explicit kingship language, we have to ask—how was God king as far back as Egypt? Let's refresh our memories.

We remember that in Egypt, the Israelites were slaves. Pharaoh was a harsh and oppressive ruler. He forced the Israelites into back-breaking physical labor. Israel cried out to God, and God delivered his people from slavery.

We remember the stories of Israel in the desert beyond Egypt. God was with them, leading them in a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. In this barren land he provided bread from heaven. Where there was only dry, cracked earth or bitter water, God poured out fresh water from a rock. As they followed God through this strange desert, he gave them a law so they could learn to walk in his ways.

We remember that after 40 years in the desert, God led his people to the promised land, a place with abundant natural resources. God gave them this land as their inheritance. The book of Joshua says that "God went out before" his people. That God fought for them and gave them victory over great armies so they could settle there and make it their home.

Nowhere in this long history did Israel call God their king. But everywhere in this long history God reigned as king.

God *showed* Israel that to be king is to deliver people from oppression, rather than lead to it. He showed them that kingship means giving laws that lead to life—laws that protect the vulnerable, rather than exploit them. He showed that reigning means generously providing for people, not gaining for himself.

God's kingship stands in stark contrast to the rule of the Egyptian Pharaoh and to Samuel's sons. Israel's history is proof that God is a *great* king—in fact, he is *the* great king of Israel—and yet his people want a king like the nations.

Recall that summary phrase from Judges—"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." If you interpret this phrase only within the book of Judges, you might think that Israel's problem is their *lack* of a king—that if they could just have a king, they'd find stability and thrive. But when we read this phrase in light of 1 Samuel 8, we hear a critique that points to the wayward heart of Israel. God was their king *in every way*, but they didn't acknowledge his reign. Instead they rejected God. They disobeyed his law; they worshiped powerless idols; they began to follow the ways of the nations around them.

Let's hear the warning that God has for the Israelites, if they continue this path.

1 Samuel 8:10–18:

So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. ¹¹He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. ¹²And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day."

Whether or not this passage refers to one king or several, about the first king—Saul—or a king after him—that's up for debate. You can look for the answer during our David series. Right now, it's more important that we focus on the *nature* of human kingship revealed in these verses.

There is a very clear theme in the ways of the human king. We hear it in the repetition – "He will take, he will take, he will take..." Simply put, human

kings take. Israel's kings will force the people into military and agricultural service; which was common among gentile nations, but not in Israel. Human kings will tax their people, and they won't take just *any* portion of their harvest, they will take *their subjects' best!* Human kings rule to benefit *themselves*.

Again, we see the disease of selfishness. A king bent on self-promotion, self-pleasure and self-preservation will have little room in his heart for his people. Notice the end of verse 17, "and you shall be his slaves." A selfish king will lead the people back to oppression and slavery—exactly what God freed them from in Egypt!

Remember our quick review of Israel's history? Their history revealed God's triumphant reign. It revealed that God is a king who delivers from slavery to freedom; who nurtures people from hunger to sustenance; who lights a way in darkness; who makes a home for his people. Simply put, God is a king who gives. He gives of himself. He's constantly pouring out his power to benefit his people. Who wouldn't want a king like this?

That's why it's so sad that Israel is blind to the foolishness of their request for a king. With Joshua and his generation dead, no one remembers God's reign. Now, in the days of Samuel, because they both fear and envy all the nations, Israel is about to trade a Giver for an oppressor.

I suspect that we have inherited Israel's foolishness. That you and I have rejected God's glorious reign and replaced it with someone lackluster. I'm not talking about elevating a human king or queen to replace God. I think in this time, in our culture, we put *ourselves* in God's place. That it's all about me, and what I want, and what I need.

I think it's a gradual and subtle process. Maybe this is how it happens...see if you recognize this story...

I was living my life—the good and the bad—getting by. But then something big happened. In a quiet moment, in a catastrophe, I recognized my need for God and I cried out for salvation. God showed up and did something miraculous. He forgave me my sin and showered me with goodness. He set me free from everything that shackled me. I was blessed by the presence and provision of God, and I sang his praises.

Time passed. Life was still life—there was good and bad—but God had brought me this far. I had trust.

More time passed. There was good stuff, but there was more bad stuff. There were new challenges at home. The pressure intensified at work. Too many expectations. And I scrambled to manage it all. I constantly worried about failing, about disappointing people, about losing relationships. One day, I looked around and thought—everyone else's life seems easier than mine. Safer than mine. More than mine.

Then I started to hear these voices. They told me that I was worth more than this. That I deserved the best. That there was a way to avoid this bad stuff. The voices told me to make my own way. To push harder. To climb the ladder whatever the cost. That I didn't need to rely on anyone else. That I had the power to change my life.

And so I worked harder. I took what I needed to get where I wanted to be. And I did make things better. I have more. People admire me. But in quiet moments I wonder why I'm so tired all the time...why I feel stuck and lonely and empty...why I don't sing anymore.

Sound familiar?

We are like the Israelites. We get distracted and wooed by the world around us, and we forget that God reigns. It's then a slow slide into selfishness. In our efforts to take control of our lives, we reject God, put ourselves on the throne, and enslave ourselves to this never-ending quest for more.

Like Israel, we fall into idolatry. I'm not talking about worshipping objects of stone or metal. Our brand of idolatry is about what consumes our thoughts. We idolize things like money; educational, career and athletic achievement; marriage; parenthood; sex; physical beauty...fill in your own blank. None of these things are inherently evil, but none of them can save us. Only God can save. These things poison our lives when we give them too much power over us. Anytime we give divine power to earthly things, we should be ready for a fall.

In 1 Samuel 8, we hear God's warning for his people: if you put anyone on the throne other than me, you will lead yourselves into slavery. And if that weren't caution enough, God says in verse 18, "in that day you will cry out...but the Lord will not answer you..." Israel heard this warning but their response wasn't what a loving parent wants for their wayward child. Let's read through the end of the chapter, starting at verse 19.

1 Samuel 8:19–22:

But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us,²⁰ that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.”²¹ And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord.²² And the Lord said to Samuel, “Obey their voice and make them a king.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “Go every man to his city.”

God’s warning was Israel’s opportunity to repent, to return to walking in his ways. He gave them a choice: worship the all-powerful, giving king; or bow to a human king who will take from you. But the Israelites were too blind, and stubborn, and caught up in their own desires. So God gave them what they asked for.

Over the next several months, we’ll witness the consequences of Israel’s request. We’ll see the highs and lows of their life under two kings—first Saul, then David. The strengths and frailty of human kingship will be clear. As we study David’s story, remember the images of God’s reign. Let’s see how the great king David compares to the great king of Israel.

If you recognized yourself in Israel’s story today, if you feel convicted that you’ve taken God’s place in your life, be encouraged. As I was writing this sermon, I felt discouraged about the downward spiral of Israel, and sad about my own foolishness. But lines from scripture kept popping into my head. Lines like... the Lord is, “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15). And this one... “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning...” (Lamentations 3:22–23). People of God—every day is an opportunity for us to repent and let the Lord reign in our lives.

In 2010 I moved from Pennsylvania to Arizona. I resigned from a job in college ministry because I wanted to work with more than one generation. I hoped to minister in a church. So I bunked with my parents for a bit and began my job search. I thought it would be just a few months until I found a job. Long story short—I applied to over 300 jobs over the next 4 years—ministry jobs and jobs to pay the bills. I had lots of interviews, and even made it to the top of the pile a few times, but never got a job offer from a church. I scraped together a living with temp jobs, but spent 19 months unemployed.

My time in Arizona was a desert wandering for my soul. I felt stuck and helpless. Where was God? I was doing everything I could to get a job, but God seemed idle. By year three, I thought about abandoning ministry altogether and going back to school to find a new career. I probably would have given up if God hadn’t so clearly called me into ministry.

Those years were painful but important. They helped me see how entitled I felt to a good life. Oh, I expected life to have challenges, but I never expected God to wait so long to make my way clear. I realized that I had a timetable for God’s provision, and it was pretty stingy. I discovered that I idolized financial security and that I had tangled up some of my self-worth with my work. And—oh boy—did I get a good look at my control issues.

God exposed some very unsavory things inside me, but here’s the good news—he gave me every chance to repent. When I grew anxious and cried out to God, he forgave and comforted. When I prayed, I talked less and listened more, and I figured out that all God wanted from me was trust. And so I got up one morning and did my best to let God reign that day. And then I did it again the next day. And I learned that a faithful disciple is not made in a day. A faithful disciple is made daily.

If you want to be faithful before God, if you want him to reign in your life and be the only king over you, then I have three encouragements for you. Here’s the first: remember your history.

Israel forgot what God had done for them, and they led themselves toward oppression. Don’t follow that example! Instead, take the time to carefully read your life like you would a great novel. Notice where God shows up in your story—in big ways and simple ways. Identify the times that God rescued you, provided for you, and showed you the way through darkness. And then mark them.

Earlier I mentioned Israel’s great defeat by the Philistine army. Well, the Philistines come back later for another fight and all Israel fears for their lives. In that moment, they return to the Lord; they repent and make sacrifices before him. Just when the Philistines are about to attack, it says, “the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were defeated before Israel” (1 Samuel 7:10). Then Samuel, in his wisdom, sets up a big stone in the place where God won the victory. He called it *eben-ezer*, the stone of help. It was a visual marker of God’s faithfulness to his people, so that every time they saw the stone, they would remember God’s help.

Second: mark your God moments! When God does something great for you, do something to mark it so you will remember. You can be creative about this; it doesn't have to be a literal stone. But do something tangible.

When I was ordained in June of 2014, I bought myself this ring. It is a visible reminder to me of the verse God used to encourage me to persevere in ministry. During my time in Arizona, I went on a spiritual retreat. It was when I was thinking about abandoning ministry. I was sitting on a pier on a beautiful lake when God led me to 2 Timothy 1:6 which says, "fan into flame the gift of God which is in you by the laying on of my hands." God's encouragement to me was so clear. So I stuck with God, and I waited another year and a half to find his path to ministry. And now here I am. This ring, with its stone the color of flames, reminds me of God's faithfulness.

Friends, remember your history, mark the God moments, and then tell your story! Tell your family, your friends, coworkers, and especially the younger generations. Tell anyone who will listen. Because when we tell stories of God's faithfulness, we build up the muscle memory in our brains. So when trouble comes, we'll be ready to trust the only One who can save us—the great king of Israel.

(Endnotes)

¹ Meyer, F.B. *Samuel: The Prophet*. Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2002. Print.