

## Looking for A King

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

September 8, 2024 AM Sermon

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1 Samuel 8:1-22

Today we begin a new sermon series. From now until the middle of November, we will be looking at the life of David, which means we will be spending our time in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. That's where the David story is told. David shows up in the middle of 1 Samuel and his story goes all the way to the end of 2 Samuel. It makes David one of the richest, most detailed and most complex characters in the whole Bible. We will take a deep dive into his life and times and God's way with him as a way to reflect on our life and times and God's way with us.

The first sermon in this series will be introductory. This week we will study the lead-up to David's rule by looking at the institution of the monarchy and how it came about in Israel. To do that, we will look at 1 Samuel 8. Here's the background for this passage. Up till now Samuel has been leading Israel as a kind of spiritual guide/judge. He's not a king. He's kind of a combination between a prophet and a judge. But lately people haven't been happy with Samuel and here is how that goes.

Let's start with Samuel's remarkable speech in the middle of our passage. For 8 verses, as Samuel talks about kings, he sounds like a politician in Colonial America. Samuel sounds like he could be giving a rah-rah political speech to a group of colonial settlers in 1775. You know: "Down with the king!" Samuel sounds like a republican. Not a republican in the sense of the modern political party, but a republican in the traditional sense; a republican as someone who favors the political system of a republic over a monarchy. "Don't trust those kings! They will tax you, they will take your land, they will conscript your sons, they will take away your daughters, they will take away your freedom!" "Down with King George!"

Samuel is not pro-king. And it's not just Samuel; God isn't happy with the idea of a monarchy either. He doesn't seem to be a fan of this political system. When the Israelites ask for a king, God takes it as a personal rejection. "They want someone to lead them in battle?! What do they think I have been doing all these years?!" "They have turned their back on me just like they always do!" He even says that when Israel asks for a king, "they are trying to follow other gods." In God's eyes, asking for a king like the nations around them, amounts to idolatry. The idolatry accusation is maybe a little surprising. Why is asking for a king idolatry? Aren't they just asking for a change in the political system?

Actually it's more than that because Israel asks for a king 'like the nations' and the kings of the nations around them were not just kings; most of them were considered divine. Most of them were like idols made of flesh and blood. Take Pharaoh for instance. The Egyptians saw Pharaoh as partly divine. It was said of an early Pharaoh named Djedefre that he had no earthly Father, instead his Mother was miraculously impregnated by the sun god Ra. Later Pharaohs got their divinity in a different way. It was believed that they became divine at their coronation when Ra came upon them and made them divine. Gilgamesh was a great, legendary ruler of Sumerian culture. According to his epic, he was the son of a mortal Father and the goddess Ninsin. Persian Kings were also considered divine: You will remember that in the book of Daniel, King Darius issued an edict that no one should pray to anyone but him (which got Daniel thrown into the lion's den). And of course, in Jesus' time, there were temples to the Roman emperors where people would sacrifice offerings. So, when the Israelites ask for a king like the nations around them, they are asking for an idol.

There was a good reason these kings welcomed these stories of divine origin. It established their power. It established their regime. You don't talk back to a god. You don't question the authority of a divine being. You don't try to overthrow a divine being. You submit to a god. You give them unquestioned allegiance. You bend the knee before them. So all these cultures had these myths of divine kings as a way to add weight and legitimacy to their throne.

When you realize how prevalent those divine stories were in all the other cultures around Israel, it helps you see that 1 Samuel 8 is remarkable. The Bible does something different from any other ancient culture. All those other cultures tell glory stories about the beginning of their kings. Stories of divine origin or divine blessing. Not Israel. The line of Israel's kings starts with God's head-shaking disapproval and Samuel's scathing speech. There is no talk of divinity here. In the Bible, it is clear that the kings will not be exalted creatures; they will be regular human beings. In some cases, they will be a little too human.

There is something in us that wants a shiny hero. We don't want our leaders to be regular humans; we want them to be exalted. To fight our battles. To answer our questions. To solve our problems. We put extra shine on our heroes. We idolize them. But there aren't any heroes in the Bible. As the Bible tells the stories of the kings of Israel and Judah, all the warnings of Samuel will come true. They will be a messy bunch. They will not make Israel or Judah great; ultimately they will make them a mess. And it's not just the kings; all the human leaders held up in the Bible are broken and messy. The Bible tells their story in a way that keeps you from idolizing them. Abraham laughs at God's promises and gives his wife to pharaoh. Noah gets drunk in his tent. Moses murders an Egyptian. Samson was a mess in a hundred different ways. Peter betrayed Jesus. Paul persecuted him. Thomas Doubted him. All the other disciples abandoned him. In our passage Samuel shows that he's not above nepotism when he favors his sons. And as we will see in this sermon series, David may have been a great king, but he was a long way from perfect.

And as we should absolutely expect, the way the Bible portrays heroes and leaders is better than the divine myths of the nations around Israel. The Bible's account is better because it's true. We put extra shine on our heroes, but they all turn out to be seriously human. Martin Luther King Junior, a great man hero of the Civil rights movement, but he was also pretty clearly unfaithful to his wife. Winston Churchill, great hero of WW2, resolute in the face of Nazism. Also said some terribly racist things. Martin Luther, champion of the reformation, but at the end of his life said vicious and hateful things about Jews. Don't get me wrong, I still think all these men were servants of God. I'm not saying we should 'cancel' them; I'm saying they are as human as the rest of us.

1 Samuel 8 tells the truth about people. It's the same truth the Psalmist tells in Psalm 146: do not put your trust in princes or in human beings who cannot save. Good words for this election season. We don't think our leaders are divine, at least I hope not, but we do treat our politics with religious zeal, as if it's the hope for fixing what's broken in our country. It's not good. Good words for the church. As Philippians 1:6 says, the Lord will finish the good work he started in us. We will be redeemed. The church will be made holy and whole, but along the way, church leaders will make plenty of messes (present company included) because we are human. People mess things up. We are beautiful creatures made in the image of God, but we have a spectacular ability to mess things up.

But here's the surprising thing, the astonishing thing, about 1 Samuel 8. God sees the mess coming, God knows that this request is foolish, and yet he says... 'Yes. Yes, you can have a king.' God knows the request is a rejection of him. God knows the request is a form of idolatry, but God doesn't lash out or explode in anger, instead he says, 'Yes, you can have your king.' And he doesn't say yes and wash his hands; as we will see, he enters into the flawed process with his grace and care and guidance.

You know what it reminds me of? The Parable of the Prodigal Son where the Son asks his Father for his share of the inheritance. It's an outrageous and disrespectful request. "I'm done with you Dad; give me my money." There too, the Father says yes. He says yes and he keeps on loving his child. It shows what kind of Father he is. Long-suffering. Patient. Slow to anger and abounding with steadfast love. Willing to put up with so much from his children. The fact that God gives the people what they ask for in this story shows how different he really is than those earthly kings. They will use the people, take advantage of the people, enslave the people. If you look at Samuel's speech, the dominant word is take. The kings will take, take, take. But the Lord on the other hand will give and give and give. He will give permission here, and going forward he will give kindness and patience, and forgiveness and grace upon grace upon grace.

So you see, ultimately this story where the people choose a king like the nations instead of choosing their heavenly king foreshadows another day about a thousand years later. There again the people are offered a choice. Standing in front of them is the King that God always intended to send to the world: King Jesus. God is standing there in front of them in the person of his Son. And Pilate will give the people a choice. Here is how it goes in John 19. "Here is your King!" Pilate says to the people. But they shouted, "take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asks them. "We have no king but Caesar!" they answer. Once again the people choose the king like the nations around them over the rule of their loving God. And once again God submits to their choice, this time at the cost of his only Son. Once again God gives grace in the face of our rejection. And this time establishes his Son as our true king. The one who really can make all things new. The one who saves us and sets us free.

There will be people asking for our ultimate allegiance in this world. There will always be leaders promising us that they can bring us into the promised land if only we put our trust in them. May the Lord bless all human rulers and give them wisdom. I will, as commanded, pray for them and as far as I am able, I will work for the well-being of our society. But my hope will never be in any of them. My ultimate allegiance will never rest with any of them. Instead I will come to this table, the table of my king, the king who has given his life for me, the king who continues to come along side me in all my terrible choices, the king who has given me grace upon grace upon grace. I will come to this table and pledge my allegiance to him. Maybe you'd like to join me.

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