

The Age of Kings: 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles

The Age of Kings: What can history, even biblical history, possibly reveal to us about God? What was God up to in the reign of King David and his son Solomon? Why did God destroy ancient Jerusalem and send them into exile for seventy years? What relevance can the age of Old Testament kings possibly have in the life of a twenty-first century believer? Why did God speak prophetically to his people during this period of time? These questions and more will be considered in this class. We will explore together God's redemptive historical work revealed in the pages of scripture and see how the mission of the people of God both then and now has always been the same.

The objective of this class is: to gain an appreciation for the period of the northern & southern monarchies in the OT, and understand the relationship between the redemptive work of God and the events that unfolded during this specific time in history. Careful attention will be given to both the Davidic Covenant as well as the decline and exile of the people of God.

Introduction: This week we witness the inauguration and decline (rejection) of Israel's first king. They requested a king like all other nations, and we see firsthand in scripture what that means. Unfortunately, they realize too late the extent of their rebellion against God. God is not caught off guard by the failure of King Saul, but has a man in the wings that was chosen from the foundation of the world to be the anointed of the Lord, someone through whom the King of Kings will one day come and will reign forever from his throne. Let us pick up where we left off last week and see the activity of Samuel in response to Israel's request for a king.

Part One: Lost & Found – Chapter nine is a clear lesson on the providence of God. Our Confession of Faith defines God's providence accordingly: *"God, the Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest, even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy."*¹ This truth is beautifully displayed in the story of things lost and found. Saul is introduced amidst a seemingly mundane farming mishap: his father's donkey had run away. They are lost, and he and his servant are tasked with finding them. They travel far and wide, and are unsuccessful. Finally, when they are in the land of Zuph, Saul decides their trip is a lost cause and determines to return to the house of his father. His servant encourages him to seek counsel from the man of God (the seer) who just so happens to be in the nearest city to where they are. They *find* a fourth of a shekel, that will suffice as an honorarium for the man of God.

While they are walking in the direction of the city they see some young girls leaving the city to draw water and ask them if the seer (prophet) is in residence. It just so happened that he had returned to the city that day from making his circuits and was expected to attend a local sacrifice to the Lord that was also a feasting in the presence of the Lord. He was expected to bless the sacrifice before the people assembled partook of the meal. They would *find* the prophet at the feast. When they arrive at the feast they *find* the prophet, and he informs them immediately not to worry about the donkeys because they have been *found*. He also makes an interesting statement to Saul, *"...for whom is all that is desirable in Israel? Is it not for you and for all your father's house?"* This phrase in Hebrew is a unique one and can arguably be translated, *"And for whom is the longing of all Israel? Is it not for you and all the household of your father?"* I believe this to be a more accurate translation of this passage. In other words, Israel's desire for a king like all the other nations would be met in Saul. Saul seemingly caught the drift since he

¹ WCF Chapter 5.1
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avoids the issue by declaring his father's house insignificant among the clans of Israel. After this exchange, Samuel invites them to the feast that has been prepared where a special priestly portion has been set aside especially for Saul. They then accompany Samuel to his house and sleep on the roof. In the morning, he instructs Saul to send his servant away ahead of him in order to, "...make known to you (Saul) the word of God."

Chapter ten begins, "*Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on his head and kissed him and said, 'Has not the Lord anointed you to be prince over his people Israel? And you shall reign over the people of the Lord and you will save them from the hand of their surrounding enemies.'*" Afterwards, Samuel gives Saul a sign that this incredible pronouncement is genuine and will come true. The first sign is that he will meet two men near Rachel's tomb who will inform him that the donkeys have been found and that his uncle is anxious about him. Second, he will meet three men on their way up to Bethel to worship the Lord there.² One of the three will give him two loaves of bread that would have otherwise been used in worship. He was instructed to take the loaves and continue on in his journey. Lastly, he would be greeted by a company of prophets near Gibeath-elohim. The spirit of the Lord will rush upon him and he will prophecy with them and become another man. All these signs came to pass, yet Saul remained in the house of his father.

Saul and his servant went looking for donkeys, but found a kingdom. However, he would learn the hard way that the kingdom was not his, but the Lord's. Before we move on we must offer the critical missing link in the story. 1 Samuel 9:15-17 states, "*Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed to Samuel: 'Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have seen my people, because their cry has come to me.'*" With this verse we are offered a glimpse behind the curtain. We know that all the events from the beginning of the chapter to this point were not mere coincidences, they were providential orchestrations on the part of a loving and caring Creator. God has selected a man who will lead his people. He used mundane, even inconvenient events to accomplish his good pleasure.

Part Two: The Selection of Saul – That the next step was not taken by Saul, I think is notable. The next step was taken by Samuel. From the inception of the monarchy in the life of God's OT people, the role of king was always subservient to the role of prophet. The king was to do the deeds of the Lord; the prophet would declare the word of the Lord. Samuel took the next step: he called all Israel to the Lord in Mizpah. It was here that he reminded the people of God that they had rejected him from being king. He therefore commanded them to present themselves before the Lord for the drawing of lots. The casting of lots was a method commonly used to discern the will of the Lord in OT times, and proved on more than one occasion to be honored by the Lord for the disclosure of his will. It is quite possible, though not stated, that the casting of lots was done in conjunction with the Urim and the Thumim. However, we know that there were other instances in which the casting of lots alone was used to discern the will of the Lord even in the NT (Acts 1:26). Proverbs informs us that it was believed such a practice was used to communicate the will of the Lord, "*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord*" (Proverbs 16:33). When the lots were cast, the family of Saul was eventually taken, and then Saul

² You will note that the tabernacle of the Lord was apparently still at Shiloh at this point in Israelite history, though it would later be moved to Gibeon when the Philistines destroy Shiloh. However, Bethel remained a holy site for the people of God for obvious reasons (Genesis 28:10-22) and was undoubtedly a site for a high place, a place where Israel worshipped God prior to the construction of the Solomonic temple.
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himself was singled out. However, when they searched for him he could not be found. So, they went again to the Lord and asked, *“Is there a man still to come? And the Lord said, ‘Behold he has hidden himself among the baggage.’”* The Hebrew word here translated, “baggage” is the word, 'לָבָא and can literally mean, vessels, instruments, furniture, etc. Regardless of the location in which Saul was hiding it is clear that he did not want to be found, and he was reluctant to accept the position of king or prince over the people of the Lord. This is ironic (and must not be a literary coincidence) that the previous chapter was all about things that were lost being found, and Saul’s initial introduction to all of Israel was in the context of being lost and found. I agree with Dale Ralph Davis who in his commentary on this passage states, *“On her own Israel will be no more successful finding her king than Saul and his servant had been in finding the asses. I propose then that verse 21c-24 mean to depict how Israel is utterly dependent upon Yahweh, even to the point of finding their king once he has been chosen. Israel cannot manage apart from Yahweh even in the simplest matters.”*³ Nonetheless, at the end of the assembly, Israel has her king, and they all return home.

Part Three: Saul’s Great Victory – Any victory is better than no victory at all, or so it would seem for a monarch of antiquity. Unfortunately, one of the only true victories that are recorded for us from the reign of King Saul was his defeat of the Ammonites when they sought to humiliate the men of Jabesh-Gilead. Apparently the Ammonites had been vexing the people of the Jordan valley for some time by putting out their right eyes. This would have rendered the population incapable of fighting since most warriors covered their left eye with the shield in battle and fought using their right eye.⁴ The men of Jabesh-Gilead requested a treaty (brit or covenant) be made with the Ammonites. However, the Ammonites refused to enter into a covenant with them unless they allowed them to put out their right eyes. The men of Jabesh-Gilead asked if they would be granted a period of seven days to send to all Israel the request for a savior. If no savior came, then they would submit to the terms of the Ammonites.

Saul, who had been in his fields plowing with his oxen, heard the news and witnessed the result of a changed heart. According to scripture, *“...the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words...”* God’s chosen and anointed servant assumed the role meant for him. The timid, tall stranger who hid among the baggage when he was called to the assembly of the Lord, this same man now changed by the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit, gathers an army and saves the men of Jabesh-Gilead from the hand of the Ammonites. Such a victory is one of the only recorded times in his reign that Saul would experience the joy of being used of God as a deliverer of his people.

Part Four: The Covenant Renewed – Immediately following the defeat of the Ammonites, the prophet Samuel calls an assembly of the people to Gilgal. His invitation was simple, *“Come let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingdom.”* Gilgal, you will recall, is the place where the covenant of the Lord was renewed between Joshua and the generation of conquest when they had crossed Jordan and prior to the destruction of Jericho. In fact, the city was called Gilgal because the reproach of Egypt was rolled away from the people of God during this time of covenant renewal (see Joshua 5:9). For this reason, and due to the text that follows, the kingdom renewal that is here mentioned by Samuel is not so much a renewal of the king (nor a retirement party for Samuel), but was in the truest sense of the word a renewal of the covenant between God and his people. Just as the original covenant renewal marked the beginning of a new era in Israelite history – the generation of conquest were conquering and living in the land and houses of those conquered in fulfillment of God’s promise to their forefathers, so too this

³ Davis, Dale Ralph. 1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart. Pg. 108

⁴ Davis, Dale Ralph. 1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart. Pg. 116
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covenant renewal marked the beginning of a new era, the era of the kings. Samuel is aware of this change and wants the people to know that the role of the king will not be like all the other nations surrounding Israel regardless of how badly the people of God may want this to be the case.

In a manner reminiscent of the preamble speech immediately preceding the renewal in the time of both Moses (Deuteronomy 29) and Joshua (Joshua 24), Samuel addresses the assembly of the Lord by calling them to bear witness that he has not done wickedly in the time he ruled or judged Israel. To this the people of the Lord gave their consent. Then, Samuel proceeds to inform them once more of the grievousness of their sin in asking for a king like all the other nations of the earth. In order to make them conscious of their sin, he asks God to send a thunderous rainstorm that will remind them that God, their true king, is in control of all things and can defend or destroy even using the weather to do his will. This reminder is in the context of covenant renewal. Samuel declares to the people assembled, *“And now, behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold the Lord has set a king over you. If you will fear the Lord and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well. But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king.”* The blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience here outlined are the same as those used in the other covenant renewals previously referenced.

When the thunderstorm came, the people repented and asked Samuel to pray for them. He comforted them with the following assurance of God’s covenantal faithfulness: *“For the Lord will not forsake his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself.”* God’s faithful preservation of his people would not be for their sake (they not unlike us are undeserving of such recognition), but for his sake. The preservation of the people of God is as certain as God’s own providential care of all his creation. Such certainty is a firm foundation upon which to rely regardless of how sin-sick and weary we may become.

God instructed Saul in 1 Samuel 10: 1b that he had anointed him to be a prince over his (God’s) heritage. The people of Israel were God’s people, not Saul’s people. The land of Israel was God’s land, not Saul’s land, and the kingdom of Israel was God’s kingdom, not Saul’s kingdom. Saul was simply an emissary, a manager of the estate. For this reason, he was to read and meditate on the law of God so that he might rule as God designed.

Part Five: Saul’s Repeated Disobedience – One might expect the renewal at Gilgal to reverse the trajectory of Israel’s overall leadership from the way of transgressing the law of God, to faithfully adhering to the covenant. However, this did not occur. In chapters thirteen and fourteen we begin to witness the unraveling of the newly anointed King. Saul first launches an invasion against one of the Philistine garrisons, which causes quite the stir among the Philistine armies. 1 Samuel 13:5 states, *“And the Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude.”* Such an army would no doubt breed fear and trepidation in to the heart of even the bravest of souls; however, the God of lost donkeys was also providentially orchestrating every event to accomplish his eternal purposes. Many in Israel fled from Saul, and it seems that the exodus of qualified men occurred on a daily basis. It was in this context that the first fatal decision on the part of King Saul was made.

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After Saul was anointed king, Samuel instructed him, *"...go down before me to Gilgal. And, behold I am coming to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do."* These instructions were specifically for the current time when Saul was waiting in Gilgal for Samuel, and the army of the Philistines were ever encroaching upon him. Instead of waiting as Samuel commands, Saul waits until the seventh day, and then chooses to offer the sacrifices without Samuel present. Consequently, when Samuel does arrive (a short time after the sacrifice had been offered), he rebukes Saul for his arrogance and disobedience and makes the first mention of the kingdom being taken from him (13:14).

In order to understand the travesty of this first trespass, we need to think critically about two important features of the story. First, what exactly did Samuel command Saul to do? According to 1 Samuel 10:8 Saul was commanded to wait, *"...until I come to you and show you what you shall do."* The message is clear, that even a king is not capable of moving forward without the word of the Lord. The co-dependency between the King and Prophet is here seen and remains a critical feature in the identity of the King as emissary of the Lord. Second, Saul chose to disobey because he was being forsaken by the fighting men of Israel. 1 Samuel 13:8 reveals, *"He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him."* Critical to the one anointed for the office of king was the ability to see things from the perspective of heaven instead of human reason. Such a trait is not too much to ask, it was definitely displayed in Saul's son, Jonathan, when he would later say to his armor bearer, *"... nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few."* Saul's decision to offer sacrifice showed both a blatant disregard for the role of the prophet in the leadership of God's people, as well as a lack of trust in the providential protection of the true King of Israel – Yahweh!

After this occurrence, the fatal blow came. In 1 Samuel 15:1 we read, *"And Samuel said to Saul, 'The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord.'"* Samuel was reminding Saul prior to sharing the Word of the Lord, that he was anointed by God through the means of the prophet. This was more than simply stating the obvious; it was a reminder of something concerning which Saul had previously displayed amnesia – the king is exclusively dependent upon the word of the Lord for instruction. By reminding Saul of his anointing, he was reminding him of his duties not as owner of the estate of Jehovah, but as manager of the estate.

Samuel's instructions to Saul are clear, *"Now go and strike Amalek, and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."* They were to be accursed even as the inhabitants of Jericho had been accursed. Nothing was to remain. Saul assembled an army and utterly destroys all the Amalekites with the exception of their king (King Agag), and the best of the sheep and the oxen. Saul would soon learn that partial obedience is disobedience. The word of God comes to Samuel saying, *"I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments."*

Part Six: Saul Rejected as King – When Samuel approaches Saul, the hypocrisy of the king shows no limits. Whether he was sincere in taking interpretative liberties with the word of the Lord, or whether he simply held in low regards the commandments of the Lord, the outcome was the same. Although Saul claimed he did indeed obey the voice of the Lord, he later reveals that he was aware he did otherwise. When asked why he had brought back the best of the sheep and the oxen, Saul replied, *"...the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal."* The weakness of the king persists even in his explanation. Instead of taking responsibility

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for his own actions, he blames the iniquity on the people, over which God had placed him as leader. Samuel's reply is haunting: *"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offering and sacrifice as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king"* (15:22-23).

The kingdom was taken from Saul and, *"...given to a neighbor better than you (Saul)."* The travesty that would plague Saul for the remainder of his life is that God had left him, and, *"...Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death..."* The word of the Lord was withdrawn from him. His reign would be filled with despair and uncertainty ever listening for the familiar voice of the Lord, ever longing for the footfalls, but never hearing and never seeing. In the end of his days he will resort to the medium of a sorceress in an attempt to try to hear something from the prophet in death that he was unwilling to obey in life.

Before concluding the lesson this week, let us unpack the nature of Saul's unpardonable sin using the response of Samuel the prophet. A dissection of the sin(s) is enumerated below.

- 1) *Disobedience* – The sin of disobedience is perhaps the most obvious. To disobey is to do otherwise than what God has commanded.
- 2) *Rebellion* – This entails seeking to fulfill one's own mission instead of the mission of one's superior. Saul obviously had ulterior motives and was convinced that God would turn a blind eye. After all, why would the Creator of the ends of the earth take the time to reprimand him for partial obedience?
- 3) *Presumption* – To presume upon the grace of God, whether as justification for sinning and obtaining pardon or to take interpretative liberties with the commands of God is, in the words of holy scripture, equal with idolatry. Why? Because presumption places the self (whether in fulfillment of the desires of the moment or the initiative to re-interpret God's commands) at the center of the kingdom. Such actions are an attempt to dethrone God and worship some other idol in his place.

Conclusion: As we conclude the lesson this week we should pause to ponder the many ways that God showed Saul grace. We should also consider the fact that Israel got what they requested: a king like all other nations. A king who placed himself and his own desires above obeying the commands of the Lord. A king who acted more as a supreme being instead of an emissary of the divine. A king who sought to build his own kingdom instead of God's and would later exhaust countless resources in the pursuit of one man rumored to be his replacement. Such an experience will prepare the way for another – a man after God's own heart; a man who will be the ancestor of the true King who rules and reigns in righteousness.

Discussion Questions:

Q. Why do you think Saul hid during the assembly at Mizpah?

Q. Have you ever sought to hide from the plan or call of God? Please explain.

Q. How did God show grace to Saul, and how does he show grace to us today when we are presumptuous and disobedient?