

The Evil Origin of a Good King

by John Piper

The sermon explores the origins of Israel's kingship, highlighting the rejection of God and the importance of repentance and grace in leadership.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 17:14, Matthew 2:2, Luke 1:32, John 1:49, Acts 2:30, Romans 5:20, 1 Corinthians 15:25, Revelation 1:5, Revelation 17:14

Topics: "Sovereign Grace", "Repentance"

Description

John Piper preaches about the evil origin of a good king, tracing the lineage of kings in Israel back to the period of Samuel and the people's demand for a king like other nations. Despite the sinful beginnings, God's sovereign purposes prevail, using even the sins of His people to fulfill His plans. The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing past deeds of God, repenting from sin, and trusting in God's grace and faithfulness, even in the face of irreversible consequences.

Transcript

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THE EVIL ORIGIN OF A GOOD KING When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wise men came from the east to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is he who is born king of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2). Before his birth the angel had told Mary, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever" (Luke 1:32f). When Philip brought his brother Nathaniel to see Jesus at the beginning of his ministry Nathaniel said, "Rabbi you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel" (John 1:49). Jesus himself speaks of the kingdom of God as his kingdom (Matt. 13:41;16:28;19:28, etc.), he rides like a king into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:5,9), he is charged by his enemies with forbidding tribute to Caesar because he is the true king (Luke 23:2); he admits to Pilate that he is a king (John 18:37); and he is crucified under the inscription, "The King of the Jews" (John 19:21). The faith of the early church was that after the resurrection Jesus took his throne at the right hand of God (Acts 2:30,36; Heb. 1:13) and now rules as king until all enemies are put under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25). One day (and perhaps soon) he will be manifest to all the universe (including your next door neighbor) as Ruler over all kings (Rev. 1:5); and every tongue will acknowledge that he is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14); and he will reign forever (Rev. 11:15).

According to Acts 2:30, God had sworn with an oath to David that he would put one of his descendants on his throne (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12,13). Jesus Christ fulfills that promise and will one day bring it to consummation

when he bursts forth from the silence of heaven and makes his reign visible. Since his reign will never end Jesus brings to an end the succession of kings who ruled over God's people. But how did such a line of kings ever get started? Almost a thousand years of Jewish history took place before the kingship was begun in Israel. What happened to change Israel from a confederation of tribes to a unified kingdom? The event is full of practical, theological lessons for us even today.

God had brought his people out of Egypt, through the wilderness and into the promised land. But when Joshua and his generation died the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals (Judges 2:11). As a result God stopped fighting for Israel and fought against them (Judges 2:15). For over 300 years then, Israel's life was a miserable roller coaster ride of sinking in sin and oppression, then crying to the Lord and being delivered by a "judge," then falling back into sin (Judges 2:16-23). The last of the judges was Samuel (1 Sam. 7:15). He anointed as the first king over all Israel (1 Sam 10). Saul was followed by David and David by Solomon and after Solomon the kingdom divided into the northern and southern kingdoms until, after years of rejecting the word of the prophets, the northern kingdom was taken captive by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. and the southern kingdom was taken captive by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

The key to the origin of the kingship in Israel, therefore, is found in the period of Samuel and specifically in the words of Samuel found in 1 Samuel 12:6-25. What I would like to do, then, is work our way through these 20 verses with a view to how the kingship arose and what we can learn about the ways of God for our own lives.

Samuel's speech was made in Gilgal at the official inauguration of Saul as king (1 Sam. 11:15). Samuel knows that his own leadership is now being replaced by the king; and verses 1-6 of 1 Samuel 12 have the ring of retirement about them: "I am old and gray. Now if anyone has a charge against me let it be known." Samuel washes his hands of this decision to have a king. Nothing he did has driven the people to demand a king. He lays down the mantle of judge, but not the mantle of prophecy. He still has a message for the people. He still loves them and will pray for them.

The first thing he does then in verses 6-8 is remind the people of God's mighty deeds in their history: "Stand still that I may plead with you before the Lord concerning all the saving deeds of the Lord which he performed for you and for your fathers" (v. 7). How do you plead with people concerning the past? You can't change the past; you can only change the future. So what Samuel must mean is: I plead with you to recognize what it implies that God has done these things for you. I urge you to act in the future like people who believe God will take care of them as he did in the past. This is in fact how he brings his message to a close in verse 24, "Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you." Samuel pleads the past for the sake of the future. We know the sort of God we are counting on tomorrow only because we can see the way he acted yesterday.

But Samuel points out in verse 9 that Israel has not been a good student of her own past. When they came into the promised land, "they forgot the Lord their God." The result of protracted disobedience is always divine judgment and the rest of verse 9 spells it out: "God sold his people into the hands of his enemies: Sisera, the Philistines and the Moabites." But one of the purposes of historical judgment is to jar the people to their senses so they will return to the true source of hope and joy. God always holds out hope to those who repent and turn to him and seek his way. Verses 10 and 11 illustrate how this happened. The people confess their sin in verse 10 and cry out for help to God: "We have forsaken the Lord ... O deliver us out of the hand of our enemies and we will serve you." God answered this plea again

and again during the time of the judges. Samuel mentions in verse 11 four outstanding judges by whom God gave deliverance to Israel: Jerubbaal (another name for Gideon), Barak, Jephtha and Samuel himself. At last for a time in Samuel's life the people enjoyed safety.

In verse 12, we finally reach the turning point in the history of Israel's leadership. Nahash, king of the Ammonites, threatens Israel and Israel's response is: "No! But a king shall reign over us." Why did they say, "No"? No What? Turn back to chapter 8 where the people make their demand. Look at verses 4-7.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, "Behold you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us like all the nations." And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Hearken 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."

So when Israel said, "No! But a king shall reign over us," they were saying "no" to God as their king. They were saying "no" to the way they had to depend so much on God when they fought their battles (1 Sam. 8:19-20). They were saying "no" to being unlike the other nations: "Appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations."

This was a great evil according to verse 17. The Lord gives a sign of thunder and rain in order to make the people know "their wickedness is great in the sight of the Lord because they asked for themselves a king." And in verse 19, the people admit their wrong: "We have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king." Verse 13 gives God's response to their evil desire to have a king: "Behold the Lord has set a king over you." And thus begins the history of the Kingdom. So even though there were good kings in Israel--David, a man after God's own heart, Josiah, the reformer, Jesus the final king and perfect Son of God--nevertheless, the kingly line in which they reigned had a very evil origin. And there are four things that are very valuable to learn from the way God acted in this event.

First, the way we seek to have something may be wrong when the having itself may not be wrong. I doubt very much that having a king in Israel was in itself evil. If he had been looked upon as a lowly agent of God, instead of a replacement for God; if he had been sought to provide spiritual unity among the tribes rather than worldly similarity to the other nations; if he had been viewed as an imperfect substitute for God until God himself should come and sit on the throne; if out of faith and loyalty Israel had asked God for a king, I do not think it would have been wrong. It was the way Israel sought her king and the motives behind it that made it wrong. Therefore, it was not first Jesus who revealed that what is right and wrong cannot be merely identified with certain acts. Just as important as the act is the spirit and motive with which it is done. Many good things become great evils because they are not done in humble, joyful reliance on God in a spirit of love.

The second thing we learn from the way God acted in this event is that the sovereign purposes of God for the life of his people in the long run are not frustrated, but are fulfilled even by the sins of his people. Way back in Deuteronomy 17:14f, God had not only predicted that Israel would demand a king, but had also given them instructions about what sort of person to appoint. He said,

When you come to the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it, and dwell in it, and then say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me, " you shall surely set as king over you him whom the Lord your God shall choose. One from among your brethren you shall set as

king over you.

The rise of the kingdom of Israel was no surprise to God; he had planned for it long ago. Yet it came about through sin (just like the crucifixion of Jesus was planned for and came about through sin). When Israel sought a king, as God said they would, to be like the other nations, they did a great evil. God planned for that evil. And through it he brought great good to the world. God is somewhat like a powerful fullback who knows his opposition so well that as he heads into the opening in the line he plans to hit the linebacker at such an angle that he spins off into the clear and thus even uses his opponent to reach the goal line. My confidence in the sovereignty of God is the most steadying thing in my life. It takes away the "Chicken Little syndrome." No matter what happens the sky is not falling. God will even take all our mistakes and accomplish his glorious and gracious purpose. We need not have the cosmic jitters about any decision. It's a wonderful thing to learn. It's a great thing to share.

The third thing we learn from the way God acted in 1 Samuel 12 is this: if the plight in which you find yourself is irreversible and it was your own sin that got you there, do not be paralyzed by guilt and despair. Acknowledge the wickedness of your ways (v. 19), be humbled deeply by your sin, but then listen to Samuel in verse 20, "Fear not; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord with all your heart and do not turn after vain things which cannot profit or save, for they are vain." There are too many people who have been lost because they gave up too soon on the grace of God. They said, "There's no use. I'm too far gone. God won't simply forgive this. And my guilt is simply too heavy to carry to Jesus." The paralysis of guilt and depression keeps many people away from God. But don't let it keep you back this morning. Even though you have capped off the evil of your life with some horrendous act of disobedience, yet if you will turn from your evil way and serve the Lord with all your heart, there is all the forgiveness and cleansing you need. "Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds" (Romans 5:20).

Finally, what basis of assurance does Samuel give to the disobedient, but repentant Israelites? It is given in verse 22. Do not fear, "For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself." The basis of God's grace is the love that he has for his own name. The ground of his mercy is his unswerving commitment to preserve and display his glory. Fear not, repentant sinners, who look to me for hope, for I love my name. I will honor my name and all those who lean upon it. What a rock when all else is shaking. Do not let any sin keep you from him this morning, trust him with all your heart. Take his name as your name and he will guard you forever. Jesus says: there is room, there is room at my side for thee.

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