

ROYAL INTRODUCTIONS

Kings of the Past Who Point Us to the True King

SAUL: A Tragic Beginning

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I am beginning a series of brief glances at some of the Kings of Israel/Judah, some who are familiar and others who we will meet for the first time. In all of these kings, we will see moments of brilliance and faith that are beautiful, along with moments of tragedy, idolatry, and blatant evil. However, we are not simply to emulate the good qualities and avoid the bad. The lives of these earthly kings point us to the glorious King who will come to reign with righteousness and justice. We get glimpses of that glory in many of these stories. We are also shown the devastating darkness and inadequacy of human kings, leading us to put our hope in the True King of all things. Maybe in our current age, we will be encouraged to forgo trust in human leadership and to put our hope in the King that forever will reign over us.

SAUL – A Story of Tragedy (1 Sam.8-31)

The story of Saul is a tragedy from the very beginning. It is the story of someone who never sought to be king, but who was placed in the role because of his particular giftedness. Unfortunately, those who chose him found out soon enough that he was not the king that they truly needed. I want to highlight two accounts in Saul's life.

It all starts in **1 Samuel 8**. The people of Israel had been living in what we would call a theocracy. In this governing system, God was King and He governed the people through His covenants and laws. After decades of failure and falling into captivity to neighboring nations, the people wanted something new. They wanted a king like all the nations around them. They wanted a strong leader whom they could see and who would fight their battles for them. The prophet Samuel was not happy with this development, because he saw it as a rejection of the rule of Yahweh. Yet, Yahweh told him that He was in this, and told him to anoint Saul.

Why Saul? On a human level, Saul was the prototypical warrior king. He was tall, strong, and handsome. For all the eye could see, he was the perfect human champion. But while Saul was the ideal candidate on the outside, on the inside he was terribly empty, and this would destroy his reign and threaten the whole nation.

This is the common story. We look for leaders who have all the qualities of strength and giftedness. They are good managers of people. They are smart and shrewd. They have the boldness to stand up to enemies to protect us. What we miss is that such strengths and gifts are only good when connected to a heart that is righteous and faithful. We see this in 1 Sam.16 where the stage is being set for Saul's replacement, David. **1 Samuel 16:7** says, **"But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected**

him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

It would be so good if we could see inside a man’s heart like God does, but unfortunately, we can’t. Yet, those who wait for the Heavenly Kingdom must have a very different standard of evaluation for their leaders. Outward gifts are worthless if they are driven by an empty heart. When the true King comes, He will be very different. He will not be so attractive or come from the best of families. He won’t look so impressive. Yet, He will come with humble strength, able to bring down the most powerful human leader with a word, but so gentle that he will not bruise the most tender reed. His heart will be consumed with love for His Father and making Him glorious, not building His own image and reputation. This is the kind of King that we need.

The second instance comes in **1 Samuel 15**. Saul has already had difficulty keeping all of the commands he has been given by Yahweh through Samuel. Here we get to the last straw and one that shows Saul’s tragic weakness and emptiness.

The Amalekites had ravaged Israel for years. When Israel was still marching through the wilderness heading for the promised land, Amalek opposed Israel. Now the time for reckoning had come. Saul was commanded to attack the Amalekites and destroy them completely, leaving nothing, not even animals. This destruction was part of Yahweh’s judgment on their evil. Saul was to be the tool for that judgment.

Saul attacked the Amalekites and defeated them soundly. He slaughtered all the people who were living, young and old alike. But, the Israelites did not slaughter the best of the livestock. They saw that as such a foolish thing to do. Why kill these perfectly healthy animals that are worth so much? The other lapse for Saul was that, instead of slaughtering the king of Amalek, Agag, Saul brought him alive to the camp of Israel as a trophy of his victory. Finally, Saul was so proud of his victory that he raised up a monument, not celebrating how Yahweh gave them the victory, but to himself (vs.12). He celebrated himself, crediting the victory to his prowess and strength.

Along comes Samuel. He already knows what happened, and he comes to Saul with some hard questions. As the two meet, Saul is pretty happy with himself. He even boasts to Samuel that he did everything he was supposed to do. Samuel is not impressed. He says, **“What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?”** Saul’s response was practical: **“the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction” (vs.15)**. To this we now hear Samuel’s well known response.

**“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams.
23 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.” (vs.22-23)***

Saul did obey partly, but not completely. The problem was the driving force in his heart. It was not the glory of Yahweh. It was his own glory as evidenced by the monument to his victory, and his fear of losing respect and honor in the eyes of the people. He did not lead them, but acted as a slave to their desires.

As I think about this sad encounter between Saul and Samuel, I can't help think of how this idolatry of self affects our leaders today, especially in the church. Too many of our pastors, and I include myself, are in leadership positions for their own glory. We might not build statues of ourselves when we preach a great sermon, but sometimes the churches we lead become our monuments. A growing church gives us a good name and respect among our peers. But, when this is our pursuit, one of the ways we can see it working is in how the leader becomes a slave to those he leads. If I build my sense of worth on being successful and respectable, then I have to have the approval and acclamation of the people. Therefore, I will resist taking steps that disrupt that approval, and I will make sure they get what they want. If I don't, they won't hang around, and the monument I am building to myself (a growing church) will not be so impressive. I will be a slave to those I worship. Yes, worship is the right word, because this is the core issue. Saul failed because he worshipped at the wrong altar. His rule was all about him, not about the One who placed Him on the throne and who fought his battles.

The King who was to come would be wholly different. His whole life would be consumed with loving His Father and doing His will, even to the point of suffering a death He did not deserve to suffer. This is the King we need, and it is the one we have. Saul was in many ways the anti-king. He was the opposite of the King Yahweh would ultimately place on the throne. Saul was a sad example of the complete inadequacy of kings rooted in this world. We can learn much from his failure as we look to our own leaders. We long for the King of Heaven who will bring His Kingdom here, a Kingdom of justice, righteousness, and glory.