



Chapter 4 - Bugs and Cuts
We want a King: 1 Samuel 1-15

1. Introduction

- This morning, we continue with Chapter 4 in the preaching series we have been running since the beginning of the year, which is called 'The Story of God and Us'.
- Chapter 4 covers how the Sapling grows under the Theocracy, which then gets morphed into a nation in the time of Judges. But soon the people demand a king, so that they can be like their neighbours, who also have kings, and the drama begins. The Judge of the time, Samuel, warns them against this, as centralising such a huge amount of power in any one person's hands is a dangerous move to make. David is probably the best king (and Israel probably comes closest to the restoration of right relationship with God), however, he is human and flawed. In time, the Nation splits into the Northern and the Southern kingdoms, and the role of the prophets increases, as God uses them to remind the Israelites about justice, true salvation, and representing God and his Shalom properly.
- So that's the backdrop. Dean and Rachel covered the second part of Judges last week, where we see how badly things go when people decide to act according to how they see fit, and disregarded God's structures, ways and narratives.
- Today we start with the first 15 chapters of 1 Samuel.
- We continue to encounter the narrative of a faithful God, dealing with an unfaithful people - throughout Judges, the Israelites would be well led and obedient (and enjoy prosperity and peace) under any number of the Judges, and then lose the plot and end up in terrible warfare and destruction.
- At the end of Judges, Israel is in terrible shape. We pick up the story in 1 Samuel. Once again, we cover a lot of scriptural distance in a short space of time, so please hold on for the ride!

2. We want a King

Reading: 1 Samuel 1 - 15

2.1. The Story of Samuel and Saul

- Samuel is the last Judge of Israel, and the end of the epoch of Judges sees Israel in a very poor place indeed. If you need to refresh your memory, please look at Dean and Rachel's notes from last week.
- Instead of the tradition of 'Judges' carrying on after Samuel, the people look at the behaviour of Samuel's sons (and finding it wanting to say the least) and decide that they too need a king, just like the nations around them.
- Bizarrely (or should I rather say, unsurprisingly) God has seen this coming, and there is even a provision written into Israel's laws for precisely this day when Israel would demand a king.
- Let's start at this point. Please turn with me to Deuteronomy Chapter 17:

The King

¹⁴ When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," ¹⁵ be sure to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. ¹⁶ The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." ¹⁷ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

¹⁸ When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. ¹⁹ It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees ²⁰ and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

- God gives some pretty specific instructions regarding the king to be chosen. Now, let's look at the key text in 1 Samuel relating to this story, that of 1 Sam 8.

1 Samuel 8

Israel Asks for a King

¹ When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. ² The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. ³ But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead ^[z] us, such as all the other nations have."

⁶ But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. ⁸ As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do."

¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle ^[aa] and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day."

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. ²⁰ Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."

²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²² The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king." Then Samuel said to the men of Israel, "Everyone go back to his town."

- The Jewish people have been living for close to four centuries without strong central leadership and they miss it. So they ask the prophet Samuel to appoint a king.
- Samuel is not happy with this request but God tells him to go ahead. Still it is clear that God is not happy with it either: *"Listen to the voice of the people according to all that they say to you for they have not rejected you but they have rejected Me from reigning over them."* (1 Samuel 8:7)
- Why are Samuel and God displeased, especially since Moses had predicted this turn of events and there is even a commandment to do so? The answer lies in the way the people asked for a king: *And they the people said [to Samuel] "... Now set up for us a king to judge us like all the nations ..."* (1 Samuel, 8:6)
- A Jewish king was not supposed to be a king "like all the nations" had. A Jewish king was supposed to be a model of what an ideal Jew is all about - a model for the rest of the nation to emulate.

- To ask for a king "like all the nations" suggests that the Jews wanted a big strong person, like the rest of the nations-an all-powerful leader who would make all the decisions so that they could sit back and throw off that heavy burden of responsibility that they've had to deal with on a day-to-day basis. It's much easier in many respects to have someone decide for you, which is why the an ancient piece of Jewish scripture says that "a slave is happier being a slave" - a slave who is well treated will give up his freedom to know that he is being taken care of and decisions are being made for him.
- The Jewish monarchy, as described in the Bible, is a unique institution. A Jewish king had real power and tremendous responsibility, but he was not a tyrant or dictator. He was the model for the rest of the nation to emulate: a leader, a scholar, pious, righteous and God-fearing. He was a catalyst that enabled the Jewish people to fulfill their national historic mission as a light to the nations.
- *"Only he [the king] shall not have too many horses for himself...And he shall not have too many wives... and he shall not greatly increase silver and gold for himself...It shall be that when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah...It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear the lord, his God, to keep all the words of the Law...so that his heart does not become haughty over his brethren..." (Deut. 17: 16-20)*
- In the year 884 BCE, 393 years after the Jewish people first entered the Land of Israel, Saul is anointed as the first king by the prophet Samuel in accordance with the wishes of the people.
- How was Saul chosen king? The story of Saul's anointing tells us much about the functioning of Jewish society in this time period. For one thing, there are many prophets around. So many in fact - Scripture says that from the time of Moses to the destruction of the First Temple there were over a million prophets - that the people turn to them for everything. You have a profound question? Ask a prophet. You need advice on marriage? Ask a prophet. You've lost your donkey? Ask a prophet. The Bible itself mentions that prophets were originally called seers (*roeh* in Hebrew) precisely because their higher spiritual level enabled them to see things that others couldn't, including lost objects. (see 1 Samuel, 9:9)
- Indeed this is how Saul and the Prophet Samuel meet. The first seer that Saul encounters while searching for his donkeys happens to be the Judge of Israel and the greatest prophet of his generation. It's an odd story. A man goes to the greatest prophet alive and asks, "Where's my donkeys?" The prophet answers,

"Don't worry, your donkeys have been found, and by the way, you're king of Israel."

- Samuel takes out a flask of oil and pours some on Samuel's head. The oil he uses is comprised of special mixture of *afarsimon* oil and spices (see Exodus 30:22-28) called "*Shemen HaMeshicha*" -- anointing oil. (The Hebrew word *Meshiach*-Messiah, comes from this word *moshach*-anointed.) Saul does not tell his family what Samuel told him and when Samuel gathers the nation to announce that Saul has been chosen as king, Saul goes to hide. When a few people mock Saul as unsuitable to be king he remains silent. When we could say that his actions are a sign of his humility and modesty, in reality this is where we first see the weakness of his character.
- Scripture makes it very clear that Saul is not only head and shoulders above everyone physically, he's head and shoulders above everyone morally and ethically. He's an exemplary human being, but he has one weakness - his sense of humility interferes with his duty as king. If a prophet of tells you that you're king- you don't argue and you can't reject the offer.
- As great as Saul is, his innate modesty and humility inhibit his ability to properly lead the Jewish people. To lead the Jewish people requires a unique combination of iron will and diplomacy - as we saw in the difficulties Moses faced leading the Israelites in the wilderness. If the leader is not strong enough the Jewish people will walk all over him, but if he's too aggressive or tries to bully the Jewish people they'll rebel. The problem of flawed leadership - which begins with Saul - is something that will plague the Jewish people throughout history as will become glaringly apparent.
- When the Ammonites invade, Saul finally rises to the occasion and accepts kingship. He goes on to lead the Jewish people in series of victories against her enemies and thus establishes his authority as king and solidifies his leadership.
- According to most sources, Saul's reign lasts from 884 to 882 BCE. He's king for only two years and he dies a tragic death. Indeed, his brief reign is largely tragic.

2.2. Why didn't God want Israel to have a king?

- This really is the key question, and the answers are obvious, but also require a bit of thought and mulling over:
 - Israel wanting to be like every other nation is not in itself wrong, until you consider how different Israel really was. Israel under Yahweh, symbolised redemption from oppression; Israel had been set free from

Egypt in God's first act of Empire-busting; and Israel had a long collective memory of being prophet- (Moses) and -Judge led, models which placed God as head, and the people as 'priests'. And now Israel wanted to give up all of this, in exchange for a king.

- A king inevitably meant that Israel would trade its 'counter-culture' culture, and become 'just another nation'; just another nation that needed to tax its citizens, build its army, grow its wealth. Just another nation aspiring to become an Empire. And under Solomon, just another Empire. This meant exploitation and oppression of other nations, the very things God had set Israel free from under Egypt.
- In choosing a King, Israel was essentially rejecting God. It was missing the best, because it hoped for something better.
- And it cost Israel dearly. Samuel warned that a king would mean:
- *¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle ^[aa]and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day."*
- In other words, a king will cost you dearly. I have warned you, now live with the consequences.

3. Conclusion

- We continue with the story of Bugs and Cuts, the struggle for the sapling tree to grow amidst weeds and pestilence. From the first 15 chapters of the book of 1 Samuel, we see how God eventually grants the Israelites their wish for a King, and ultimately, how this is a prelude to destruction and hardship for ages to come.
- Let us pray. *May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the*

fellowship of the Holy spirit be with us all. Amen.

Sources

- 1) <http://www.aish.com/jl/h/48936347.html>
- 2) <http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/0908.htm>