

1 SAMUEL (2)

A King After Whose Heart?



Stephen Gunawan



What was wrong with asking for a king?

Israel's request for a king had this background:

- As revealed in the Book of Judges which was chronologically right before 1 Samuel, the condition of Israel could be summarized in this way: "In those days there was no king in Israel, and the people did as they deemed right" (**Jud 17:6, 18:1, 21:25**).
- As per our lesson from **1 Sam 1-7**, God was preparing for a new age through Samuel, who was the last judge of Israel; and a good judge. But by **1 Sam 8**, Samuel had grown old, and his children were not displaying the qualities of good leaders; and on the contrary were even displaying the vices of corruption and self-benefitting actions not befitting of leaders (**1 Sam 8:1-3**). They were reverting back to the compromising ways of some of the previous judges. Listen to the words used to describe them:
 - They did not walk in Samuel's ways
 - They turned aside after dishonest gain, accepted bribes and perverted justice

Although in chapter 8 we are not given a clear reason for Israel's insistence for a king, the bible later explained the reason for their anxiety (**1 Sam 12:12**): because Nahash King of the Amorites was about to attack them. So it was actually an understandable (although not excusable) response in the face of possible oblivion. Let's say we are faced with a threat of war, and the president of our country refuses to lift a finger to rescue the nation, whilst at the same time continue to enjoy himself corrupting money from taxes. I think we would do the exact same thing and request a new leader or face obliteration.

So, the inevitable question is this. What was wrong with Israel's request for a king? Here's a list of why we can think that God was intending for them to ask for a king:

- That the lesson of the Book of Judges emphasized on the need for a king to rule over the whole nation and ensure conformity to law.
- God's own promise that His chosen people would be a kingdom, and that they would be led by a human king was given long before this very event. It went back as far as God's covenant with Abraham when God said that "*kings will come from you*" (**Gen 17:6**) and in later verse when it is said that "*kings of people*" (**Gen 17:16**) would come from Sarah.
- This promise was again reinforced to Jacob (**Gen 35:11**);
- and Jacob extended this covenant to his son Judah, blessing him to become a tribe of kings, with the scepter of kings (**Gen 49:8-10**).

So clearly, what was reprimandable about the request for the king was definitely not the fact that they wanted a good leader. Nor was it their wish to become a kingdom or that theocracy and monarchy was mutually exclusive to each other (contrary to what most people would understand of these passages). So what was the real problem?

The real problem was because they had asked for a king "*such as all the other nations have*" (**8:5**). Even after being told of the consequences by the Lord, they insisted on having a king for this very motivation: "*No! We want a king over us. 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*" (**8:19-20**). Twice they have made it clear that the reason they wanted to have a king was so that they could be like other nations. See, Israel was meant to have kings, as promised to Abraham, but their kings were not to be like the kings of the pagans. And God had even predicted this behavior, and made His rules in **Deut 17:14-20**, which started out this way, "*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,' be sure to appoint over you a king the Lord your God chooses*" (**Deut 17:14-15**). And then the Law went on to describe what the king must and must not do. Amongst the requirements, the king was not to multiply a great number of horses for himself (and thus not accumulating power). He must not take many wives (and thus not gratifying his fleshly desires). And he must not accumulate large wealth for himself (and thus not satisfying his selfish interests). In short, he must not be self-serving. What he must do was acquaint himself with the Law, to revere his God and to consider himself as being equal to the



people. In short, he was to serve God, and others. And so Israel's kings were but God's representatives in administering justice; and were under God. These requirements would make the Israel kings to be so unlike the pagan kings, who would have no second thoughts about accumulating power, gratifying sinful desires and satisfying self-interests. The pagan kings established the laws of the nation, they were not under the Law of God. And the pagan kings considered themselves half-divine, whilst the Israel king equal in essence to the people. They were nothing alike!

By envying the other nations who have such a king, Israel really did, in fact, reject God's ultimate authority. And this was what God said of them. He said to Samuel, "*it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected Me as their King*" (8:7). And then God equated this request with the sin of idolatry they were involved in, "*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*" (8:8).

Now let's apply the story to modern culture, because many Christians would look at this scenario and merely comment on how stiff-necked the Israelites were; how if we were in their shoes – having witnessed all the miracles that God performed in their midst – that we would not wander away from His path. We look at Israel and say "them," and not look at ourselves and consider that we might be just like they were. But what the Israelites did was something that was very, very natural. And had we been there in those days, we might have taken the same course of action. Consider this for an initial argument. The Western nations as we know it today have been immensely blessed by the Gospel. We can witness in history that the earliest nations to ever be influenced by the Gospel and by Christian work ethics were all blessed not only with prosperity, but also the rule of law that allowed them to be foundationally strong and able to sustain its own developments (had it stayed faithful to the Christian truth). I will not discuss (or debate) this in length here, but in short I want you to consider the fact that it was the Christian system of belief that had blessed the nations of the west initially. As the most obvious example; the system of democracy that has allowed the countries of the West to develop economically was actually based on the structure of King-Prophet-Priest governmental system prescribed by the Bible. The kingly (executive), prophetic (legislative) and priestly (judiciary) functions allowed for a system of checks and balances. This in turn hindered the chosen leaders to be totalitarian in his rule. The American founding fathers also proved to be leaders who were biblically astute, and they applied that knowledge when making the policies of that nation. They formed the Constitution and placed themselves not above the law, but as servants of the law. These willful and conscious acts of putting oneself under accountability were what made those countries great. Understanding the temptation of power, the fact that those leaders would willingly place themselves under uncoerced placement under higher authority was nothing less than noble – it was, I believe, divinely inspired.

Now, this was a miraculous story to say the least. America only has slightly more than 2 centuries of history behind her; whilst China has 5,000 years of history. But yet, America was able to rise above the rest in a very short span of time. This was nothing short of miraculous. However, does this legacy now continue to have its hold on America? No! In fact, America like most of the West have completely forgotten the grace of God and completely turned around to become the most secular and the most pagan nation. America, like Israel, had deserted God and had chosen to serve the idols. I therefore plead my case that the reading of Scriptures should be done not as one detached from the realities of ancient times; but as one confronted with the same problem that plagued the Old Testament Israel – namely, SIN.

Let's return to our story. What was truly reprimandable about their request was the fact that it was an act of faithlessness. They have forgotten the lessons from history of how it was never might that won their battles, but rather God. Throughout the periods of the exodus, the wanderings, the battles for and in the promised land, the periods of the judges - were not these histories that should have taught them that God's accompaniment was the most important? Kings were meant to be God's representatives in dealing with His people. They were never meant to hold absolute power, for we will see very much later in David's life, that Israel's king could be rebuked and even punished by a prophet.



Saul's election

Saul's election was very much an answer to Israel's desire. It was God's allowance in accordance to the people's wishes. For even if there had been another David at the time to take the throne, Israel would not have wanted him. For they looked outwardly, and they looked for someone who would be mighty in battles. For that God gave them Saul.

Saul's failure and the Lesson from God

Saul's (and Israel's) first and biggest test came from God in the person of Goliath. It was almost like a ridicule. Saul was accepted by the people because he was one head taller than most people; a person of stature. The test befitting of such a person (and the nation that wanted him) then would take the form of a giant not one or two heads taller, but was twice their size! I could almost hear angels laughing in what seemed like a divine comedy when Saul the tall shivered in fear and the people who confided in him lost their very hope.

I don't know whether it was the Philistines' patience or fear which kept them at bay for forty days (**17:16**). That they hurled disciplined threats twice a day but never actualized their attacks seems suspicious to me. Why, the threat sounded like a prescription of antibiotics meant to weaken the enemy's morale – “take twice daily for forty days.” Could it be that, despite their towering hero Goliath, they had no confidence to win the war had they challenged the army of Israel head on? Could it be that despite Goliath's intimidation, they had a secret weakness that their enemy knew nothing about? Could it be, as I'm inclined to say; that the repute of the God of Israel, who had been infamous for ridiculing the gods of Egypt, of Jericho, and recently Dagon of the Philistines; had intimidated the Philistines more than they'd like to believe. And if I am right in my suspicion, the fact that the Israelites were oblivious to this further showed how shattered they were that their strong tall leader looked like a timid cat in front of a tiger that was Goliath.

Hero Boy to the Rescue

As if acting as a heavenly film director, God shifts our attention to young David at this point. David was portrayed as perhaps the exact opposite of what we would expect. Practically a nobody at this juncture, David was just a young shepherd without the slightest experience in battle. So unqualified was he that when Samuel mentioned that he wanted to anoint a future king, his own father and family not only placed him as the last possible option, he was blatantly overlooked! No wonder Goliath despised David so. He must have felt insulted that this trivial boy would challenge him, and perhaps furious over the fact that an entire nation even thought of sending him to battle against Goliath the Great.

However, perhaps of greater shock at the turnout of the event was Saul's actions. If Goliath underestimated David so, could Saul not have seen the idea that David did not stand a chance? Was he so willing to send the one he must have thought to be an overzealous young man straight to his death? Was he, the tallest man in Israel, not even the slightest bit guilty that this teenager was stepping in the battle that should have been his responsibility? And, to give David his armor and speaking as if it was a favor- had he no shame? And the greater lesson would be for Israel. They had wanted a king “*to lead them and go out before them and fight their battles*” (**8:20**). And there was their king, not only cowardly, but sending a young helpless boy to fight his battle. Man's choice is so unreliable.

Fear always overcloud our judgment. And in the great fear that overwhelmed Saul, he saw that shameful act as an opportunity to shy away from his duties. If David failed, it was due to his own decision and recklessness. But if in any way he could have succeeded, unlikely though it may be, would it not have been to his benefit?

Not one moment, not even one, did Saul thought of consulting the God he served. All the while fear was the driving force behind his thoughts and actions. Yet in contrast, David was all along driven by his passion for the Lord. His confidence came never from his ability, never from his physical strength, but he drew upon his knowledge and experience of his God; of how He had always protected David from any danger. And now in the face of an enemy belittling the very nation his God had chosen, there was no way he could stand idly by. Against all odds, David stepped up to the challenge. And in this scene, we get but a glimpse why this person was indeed a man after God's own heart.



How David did win must have baffled everyone. The great fearsome giant was felled not by a sword, not by a spear, but by a slingshot! Had he lived to tell the tale, Goliath would probably have committed suicide out of sheer shame.

All the drama, all the excitement was just to re-emphasize the lost message that Israel had forgotten, "*all those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's*" (17:47). It was never Samuel's and never Samuel's sons. Nor was it ever Saul's. And contrary to what the cheerleading ladies must have thought, but it was even never David's war to fight. His impossibility of winning was merely a witness of how it was God fighting his war for him.

Moral of the Story? Part I

Every good story needs to contain lessons, moral lessons that we can implement in our lives. So what is the lesson of this story? Many preachers would tell us, that in the face of great giants (or to put to its context, gigantic problems) in our own lives, we must remember that faith in God obliges that we do not yield to temptation or to fear or to the pressure of succumbing to the ways of this world; but rather to trust in Him, the Lord our deliverer who fights our battles for us so we can be called "*more than conquerors*" (Rom 8:37).

Yet to end the story at just this point would be somewhat unempathetic to the millions of people who tried implementing their simple faith in their everyday problems, and failed. "Tried and failed," mind us. To those of us who have failed to even try, we should not even think about having words of comfort that speaks empathy to us. And all of us do fall under this category at one time or another, when we scream impossibility of obeying God's command without having even attempted obedience. If we fall under this category, perhaps even stopping to read and starting to obey would be a wise choice, lest the knowledge of needing to have wisdom becomes a justification of not proceeding to act.

We do remember, do we not, of times when we were new converts? During those times, it seemed that God fights so many of our battles for us and gave us instant, glorious victory. Kicking bad habits, answered prayers, just-in-time solutions seemed commonplace those days. But as we proceed in our Christian lives, and as the challenges we face get bigger, more difficult, and more paradoxical, it seems such rescues diminished. And we sing, where is help when thou is needed most?

A check and recheck is in order. Is this happening because we have somehow forsook our first love and our simplicity of faith, just as we would accuse the Israelites to be guilty of umpteen times? Or is it because, in the process of growing up, the hand that we felt so comfortably supporting our walk is now withdrawn not because the parent lacks care, but because our muscles are ready for the much needed independence test? Do we not realize that, even in the Bible, the many "big" miracles were in fact spread out over thousands of years? And that if we put this into the perspective of time, they are not so many at all? We might not realize it, but in so many circumstances, the Israelites seemed to be left to fend for themselves. They were called to strategize, and victories seemed less and less miraculous. Wait, when explained this way, do you not think that we and the Israelites are more similar than we thought? So many of us must have thought, "if only God gives me an opportunity to see the sea parted, I would never lack any more faith." But think back. We have had our shares of the parting of our red sea. God did defeat one of our own Goliaths once or twice. We did pray our thankful prayer saying, "this would never have been possible if not for You, Lord" once or twice. And some of us have even seen more of God's incredible intervention than most of the people in the Bible. Lest we forget, Christ once said that some people in His earthly time saw more than the people of Sodom, but did not believe (Mat 11:23). Again, we are more alike, us and the Israelites, than we previously thought.

And so to complete the first moral lesson, we must be reminded that though the hand was let go, the eyes never were. Our tests of independence were never overlooked by God, no matter what we feel. Those of us who are parents can identify with this. We let go of our hands because we feel it's finally time. But we follow through every one of our children's steps under our ever watchful eyes. Sure, we let them fall down and cry every now and then, but we know very well that the fall would not have broken a bone. We ensure that no significant injury would be sustained. But the



love that would not allow the child to hurt is also the love that desires for the child to grow. How can God's love be any less?

We identify with God's education better if we think of how we would educate. At least this would be so if we continually struggle to educate our children for their benefits. Contrary to popular belief, true parental love is not when we shower our children with unearned luxury and protect them from every harmless bacteria. Rather it is when we allow them to know their own struggles even when it breaks our hearts, keeping a watchful eye on them whilst being ever-ready for the rescue only when it is imminent. We might understand God as our Father more if we strive to be better parents ourselves.

This was perhaps why God chose David the shepherd boy, and also why David could understand God more than any of us ever could. Later on in his story, it will be this David who writes "God is my shepherd." He is identifying God's own guidance to him as shepherding. He identifies whatever God is doing to whatever he did to his sheep, and multiplying His goodness, wisdom and love by the infinite to get a mere glimpse of Him, though this glimpse is more than any of us would probably see. And in doing this, unbeknownst to him, David understood more than anyone Christ the Great Shepherd who will lay down His life for His sheep.

THE STORY CONTINUES

We would think that defeating Goliath was the trigger of Saul's topple; that it would be time for David to take the throne. What would be a better time? Nobody would ever argue his contribution for Israel at this point. Why, Israel would never continue to exist if it were not for his brave actions that saved the day. The people wanted a king who fights their war, and David could not have shown better that he was way better than cowardly Saul at this. We would, as the saying goes, strike while the iron is hot.

But we know this was not how the story went. David never usurped Saul's throne, and he never claimed credit for the victory. In fact, what David did next was to be the lesson that we ought to learn.

The Process of Time

What David underwent after his victory was what many of us would never have chosen for ourselves. He followed through the process of time whilst undergoing the molding of character that was needed for a kingly position. He served under the current king! Saul did not allow David to return to Jesse his father, but kept him in the palace to serve him. And David consented without a single hint of arrogant reluctance that most of us would display if we were half as heroic as David was. Here he was, a young man befitting the post of a King (and already anointed to become one!) and there he was, a cowardly king undeserved on his throne. Yet David quietly went and served under him.

Next came the unavoidable consequence of having an overqualified subordinate without having the will for improvement: jealousy. Here was Saul the star player, and the cheerleaders were rooting for the underdog. And what followed made David's life under Saul a living hell. Saul's jealousy was "*from that time on*" – he never recovered from that disease for a long, long time!

If we were David, we would be ticked off just by hurled insults and plays of politics. But attempt of murder? Or rather attempts of murder? That does it! David is now so ready to take Saul on and take his rightful place on the throne! But wait.. that was not how the story went. David endured knowing that Saul wanted to spear him (and actually did try!). He endured Saul sending him off to suicide battle against the Philistines. He was given a political marriage meant only to bring him harm. And when the attempted murder got very serious, David did the only thing he could: he ran for his life! No wondrous miracles this time, no voice from heaven, he just ran! And he went to Jonathan, his only confidant in the palace and complained just like any of us would. "What is it that I have done wrong?" David was confused. He tried to do everything right, he really did. And his reward was to become a fugitive.

If we think that David always defeated his Goliaths with pebble stones like the first one, we are so gravely mistaken. That one miracle costed David more than a decade of living under grumpy ol' Saul and ended up being on the run.



And when we see what David requested Ahimelech the Priest, we know that he was not reckless when he fought Goliath. David requested a spear or a sword to protect himself! He did not use weapons when he fought Goliath, now he seeks for a weapon to defend against men half Goliaths' size. But when he was given that weapon, he said, "there is none like it." I believe David must have been glad to receive that weapon because it reminded him of how God had protected him during the greatest battle of his life.

And David continued to run, until he met with Achish king of Gath. And when he did, David was, in the words of the Scriptures "very much afraid of the king that he pretended to be insane." David the hero acting like a madman and letting his saliva run down his beard was unthinkable! How could he stoop so low? Was it because he no longer had the faith that God could give him his victory even in such a situation? I believe it was not the case; not with the sword of Goliath on his side, David would not have missed God's ability to grant him victory. But I believe, just as much as the action of taking up sword contradicted his preference when fighting Goliath, David simply refused to move when God has not told him to. David was not a reckless, ignorant young man, he was waiting upon God's leading.

Moral of the Story, Part II

We see here a situation that is more empathetic to our everyday problems. No visible miracles, no tiny pebbles that could kill the great Goliath. Just us, left to fend for ourselves, and being left like a sheep amongst the wolves. And no, David had not heard Jesus forewarning that this was to be the case, so at least we should be better prepared than he was.

And so who says the bible is unrealistic? Who says that the great men of faith never experienced what we now experience – a feeling of being left unattended to whilst facing an impossible enemy? Noah did, being asked to build a gigantic ark whilst all along enduring the mockery of faithless men. Abraham did, being asked to believe for a son when it was long overdue. Moses did, being left in the desert for forty years without a single voice from God after overzealously killing one Egyptian man albeit with the right intentions. And all of these men endured such a feeling for a very, very long time – not just one or two days. Some for decades, others even more. And David in this case endured such life for at least a decade of his life, assuming he was in his teens when he defeated Goliath and thirty when he became king.

Such struggles are like the strengthening of the bones of our faith – something which, although painful, is a much needed part of our lives. And like the Parent He is, God keeps a watchful eye on us while we struggle to learn the meaning of faith, hope and love in this lifetime. At times, when He thinks it necessary, He stoops and intervenes. At other times, He uses His rod and staff to discipline us and bring us back to the right path just as a Shepherd would. Sometimes, we would feel like we are in green pastures and drinking still waters. Other times, we face the valley of the shadow of death. But every single time, God's watchful eyes are ever present, and goodness and love will follow us all the days of our lives; if we only stop to look.

If we only stop to look, we will learn to distinguish every the still small voice of God's guidance. We will learn to recognize when God uses His rod to discipline us and take comfort in the fact that He would only do so because we are His sheep, and we are His legitimate sons. We will learn to recognize His staff when He pulls us back from an honest mistake that we made because we fail to heed His voice. We will learn to know when He allows the big bad wolves to howl ever so loudly just so we know that the Great Shepherd has fenced them out and has put us out of harm's way. We will learn to hear His voice and His guiding us, just because we are His sheep, and sheep know the Shepherd's voice.

Finally, we need to learn that God's providence for the Israelites, and in this case for David, is the same as His providence for us. We need to stop making excuses that God is not doing the miracles in our lives as He had done in theirs. In fact, we need to know that we have it easier than they did – we have the Bible as the complete revelation which we can learn in its completeness – something they never had. Most of us face less persecution in the physical sense than the saints in the Bible. But all of us, and I mean all, will need to be processed through long periods of time to learn to know God's leading.



Why, even Christ the only begotten Son of God never had His privileges! Most of us might never ponder why He would spend thirty long years of His thirty three and a half just going through the motions. Some of us would have the privilege to appreciate the fact that the King of kings is born in a smelly, dirty manger and died horribly a sinner's death on the Cross.

This was way more than the ultimate sacrifice. Had He come as a King to earth, it would have been an infinite sacrifice. Had He come in luxury, it would have been self-denial. Yet He came as a servant so He could understand our weaknesses and empathize with us (yes, the Bible even use the word empathy).

The bible does not give us mythical stories that does not relate to our lives – it is the gift of the Great High Priest who understands us and knows what we need. Perhaps it is our turn to simply drop the excuses by saying that we find no solution in the Scriptures, and start to begin once again a journey of faith with God. That was what David did. That is what we must do.

The Rest of the Story

The rest, as they say, is history. Or, the rest is another story for another day. As a film chooses its beginning and its ending, I have chosen this part to end this story. Anyway, it is a retelling of such a classic story which most people already know. What's more important is whether we have learned all the lessons of faith.

Closing Thoughts

By now you might have realized that the question we began with (whether Saul's election was God's mistake) was never the main issue in this article. If so, you might also have realized that Saul's election was never the main story (he was never intended to be the forefather of the Messiah – never!). It was not a mistake, it was a fall whilst learning to walk that God allowed. Baby Israel needed to learn a lesson, and God granted it to them.

But by now, I hope we have all realized that God alone is wise enough to know which of our requests to grant, and which to reject. Our prayer-lives should not be a journey of enforcing our will and desires on God, but conversely should be a journey of us learning to know what is good for us – of learning His will. If that be your life, you will find yourself amongst the privileged to enter into the school of heaven; whose graduates will share in their Master's happiness. If you have not, well, I would like to invite you to enroll into this school – to be Christ's disciples. Some have called it the School of Hard Knocks, seeing how it never gives a shortcut or an easy way out. I think it is more appropriate to call it the School of Light Yokes, knowing how it grants everlasting joy and peace to its students. Soli Deo Gloria!

