

The Frailty of Human Kings
“Give Us a King”
1 Samuel 8
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Moral and ethical failures and abuse of power among leaders isn't new, nor is it news to any of us. We're all painfully aware that celebrities, politicians, business leaders and spiritual leaders are flawed, and yet we keep placing our trust in them and finding ourselves surprised when the latest fall is reported. So, who's to blame...the leaders in whom we place our trust, we, who are so quick to fawn over leaders we view as successful, or the celebrity culture in which we live?

Like many of us, I'm intrigued by this topic, but my intent over the next three weeks isn't to make broad commentary on church culture or to wax eloquent about character-based leadership. I'm also not interested in critiquing those who have fallen. My concern is for Jesus' Church—specifically our church family here at McBIC. I want to see this be a healthy, thriving environment, where people are being transformed and growing as disciples, as they're well led by leaders who humbly submit themselves to God and his purposes.

I'm looking forward to preaching this series, because I believe it's a needed and timely message, and I'm also excited about how this series fits into the larger context of Advent—the season of Christmas when the Church celebrates Jesus' coming as a baby and anticipates his return for his Church. As I was sharing my idea for this series with our staff in September, several of them pointed out how it fit so well with Advent. I was focused on this series and didn't immediately see what they were seeing, but then it hit me..."The Frailty of Human Kings"—the title I landed on for this series—dovetails beautifully with our anticipation of the coming of Jesus, our true King, during Advent. So, those of you who enjoy celebrating Christmas as early as possible can view this as an extended Advent series.

It's difficult to read and study the Old Testament without eventually asking the question, *"Why are hurt, pain, brokenness and failure so prominent in the Bible?"* Difficulty in answering that question leads some to label the Old Testament as meaningless for today, and others to abandon Christianity altogether. In the pages of the Old Testament we read about a sacrificial

system with its blood and gore that can make us squeamish. There are extensive lists of rules and laws and punishments that seem outdated and make little sense to us. A priestly system is described in depth, that was cumbersome and frankly, didn't work well. And then there are the kings—men, whose egos, abuse of power and moral failures make leaders' shortcomings today look tame by comparison. And this is our Bible—our holy book...what do we do with this?

I've become convinced that one of God's primary purposes in giving us the Old Testament is to show us that human solutions to the problems of life, don't work. Ever since Adam and Eve chose to pursue the way that seemed best to them, rather than the path God laid out for them, men and women have been tempted—and often given in to the temptation—to think we know better than God, and to choose our way, rather than the path God has laid out for us. Along the way, as people kept failing, God kept pointing to his solution, that culminated in the coming of Jesus, Immanuel—God with us—the Promised Messiah.

During this series I'll be focusing on Israel's demand for a king and the first 3 kings who led Israel. My hope is that we'll be able to apply insights from these stories to our lives and that we'll confess and repent of our tendency to pursue our own way, rather than submitting ourselves to God and walking the path He has laid out for us. I'll provide some commentary, but mostly I want to allow these stories to speak for themselves, trusting the Holy Spirit to apply the insights and truths to each of our lives. The premise for this series that I want us to keep in mind is this: You and I are in a precarious position when we look to people or rely on human insight for direction rather than fully placing our trust in God and relying on Him.

I invite you to follow along in 1 Samuel chapter 8 as I begin to read this chapter.

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice. 1 Samuel 8:1-3

Joel and Abijah's behavior was bad, but it wasn't unprecedented. Samuel's predecessor, Eli, had the same problem with his sons. They ate meat sacrifices that were supposed to be set apart for God; they bullied worshipers into giving them food; and, they slept with the women who served at the tent of meeting. Unfortunately, Samuel's sons weren't alone in their abuse of their prophetic position. I'll start reading again at verse 4,

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” 1 Samuel 8:4 & 5

The Israelite leaders stated their problem clearly to Samuel. In essence they said, “*We love and respect you, but you’re getting old and won’t be with us forever, and your sons are not you.*” The leaders had legitimate concerns about what would happen to them and their nation after Samuel’s death, but their solution was problematic. “*Now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.*” Even though the prophets and judges whom God appointed had their issues—they were human after all—they were part of God’s unique plan for his nation. God specifically steered away from kings—the system all the other nations had—because He knew the potential for abuse and He wanted his people to rely on Him for their protection, not human leaders. Beginning at verse 6 we read,

But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. 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. 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. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.” 1 Samuel 8:6-9

Samuel understood that the Israelite leaders’ request wasn’t in their best interest and wasn’t God’s plan, so he cried out to God in prayer. God assured Samuel that the Israelites weren’t rejecting him, they were rejecting God just as they had done time and time again since He had rescued them from Pharaoh and Egypt. God instructed Samuel to make sure the people understood how a king would operate. In verses 10-18 we read Samuel’s words of caution.

Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. 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. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.” 1 Samuel 8:10-18

In making this choice the Israelites were rejecting God’s rule and subjecting themselves to the bondage of a human king. As I read this, I can’t help but see the parallels between what

the Israelites were asking for and what God had delivered them from in Egypt. God delivered them from Pharaoh so they could be free from oppression and serve God and now roughly 600 years later they were asking to be placed back in a similar situation. Samuel warned them that eventually their oppression would lead them to cry out to God for relief, but unlike what God had done for them when they cried out in Egypt, God wouldn't answer their prayers for deliverance, because their suffering would be the result of the poor choice they had made. As we see in verses 19 & 20, the people were unconvinced—their minds were made up.

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "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." I Samuel 8:19 & 20

The people heard Samuel, but they refused to listen. And the most troublesome aspect of their demand was their rationale: "*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.*" Their response showed that their choice was a blatant rejection of God's leadership. God called them to be holy, set apart from the nations around them, but they said, "*We want to be like the nations around us.*" God was their leader, but they said, "*We want a king to lead us.*" God had been the one to fight their battles against the Egyptians and the inhabitants of the Promised Land, at times even sending musicians and singers who were worshiping Him into battle at the front of the army, but they demanded a king who would lead them in fight against their enemies. I Samuel chapter 8 concludes Samuel and God's exchange and Samuel's final words to the Israelites.

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king." Then Samuel said to the Israelites, "Everyone go back to your own town." I Samuel 8:21 & 22

The next words we read in 1 Samuel chapter 9 are a description of Saul, Israel's 1st king. "*There was a Benjamite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish son of Abiel, the son of Zeror, the of Bekorath, the son of Aphiah of Benjamin. Kish had a son named Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else.*" I Samuel 9:1 & 2 In other words, Israel's first king was exactly what they were looking for: a man from a prominent family, who was good looking, big and strong...and Saul was a disaster as

king. He blatantly disobeyed God on several occasions, most noticeably when he refused to wait for the prophet Samuel to come and offer sacrifices before his troops went into battle. Saul got nervous because the enemy was approaching and so he did what was strictly forbidden and offered the sacrifice himself. And Saul's intense envy and jealousy of the young man—David—who would become his successor, led him into madness. Saul had the outward traits Israel valued in a king, but his character and commitment to God were badly deficient.

In the weeks ahead we'll explore King David and King Solomon's reigns as Israel's kings. Both these men started off great, but later succumbed to grievous sin. As we look at David and Solomon's lives as kings, I'll focus on the dangers all of us face in positions of leadership, but this morning I want us to focus more on our role as followers—who and what we place our trust in.

In the Scripture passage we read today, Israel removed themselves from God's leadership, because they thought they'd be better off being led by a king, than being led by flawed prophets/judges. Israel's demand for a king isn't an isolated case. The story line of the Old Testament is the recurring choice God's people made to reject God's ways and pursue their own way, to their own detriment, and you and I are prone to make the same choice today. Do you recognize any of these tendencies in your life?

- Israel wanted a king, so they could be like all the nations around them who had impressive rulers leading them into battle. We want to look like and be accepted by the people around us, rather than being people who are set apart (holy) for God. In our day, peer pressure isn't just something students struggle with. We all feel the pull to look like the people around us.
- God's rule was so intangible. The Israelites longed for a leader they could see. We place our faith and trust in tangible things we can see and touch, rather than placing our faith and trust in God. In 2 Corinthians 5:7 when the Apostle Paul wrote, "*For we live by faith, not by sight,*" he sums up well a difficult challenge we face as followers of Jesus.
- God's leadership, direction and protection didn't seem sufficient for Israel, so they asked for a king who they thought would provide for them. We choose what we think will provide protection, comfort, and fulfillment for us, rather than accepting God's provisions. Reliance on God is difficult for us too, and doesn't just have implications for who we trust to lead us, but plays itself out in unhealthy sin patterns, addictions, and toxic relationships.

The choice to place our trust and security in things or people rather than in God is always a problem, but it's especially problematic in the church, which Jesus established to point people to his love and grace and forgiveness and transforming power. When local churches adopt the world's system of wealth and power, we remove ourselves from God's blessing and protection and we look to other people and things to provide what only God can provide. When we give power and authority that is only intended for God to human leaders, we set leaders up for failure and we set up ourselves for hurt and pain. I want to return to my premise I stated at the outset of today's sermon: You and I are in a precarious position when we look to people or rely on human insight for direction rather than fully placing our trust in God and relying on Him.

As I challenge our church family this morning, I want to be honest about my own temptation in this area as a leader. I enjoy the praise and affirmation of people and need to guard against my tendency to be a people pleaser. In my pride, it's easy for me to feel good about myself when I or our church experience success or when teams I'm part of succeed. If I'm not careful I can fall into the trap of thinking I'm responsible for the good things that happen to me or the success I experience, and lose sight of my dependence on God.

Israel's choice to demand a king and to pursue their own way, rather than submitting to God and walking in the path He laid out for them, resulted in pain, brokenness and oppression. My heart for you and for me is that we would resist the tendency to rely on human strength and wisdom and submit ourselves to God and his purposes. I want to see us have healthy, thriving church culture here at McBIC, where people are being transformed and growing as disciples, as they're well led by leaders who are humbly submitting themselves to God and his purposes. As we close out our time together this morning, I invite us to confess and repent of our tendency to pursue our own way, rather than submitting ourselves to God and walking the path He has laid out for us.