

The Age of Kings: 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles

The Age of Kings: What can history, even biblical history, possibly reveal to us about God? What was God up to in the reign of King David and his son Solomon? Why did God destroy ancient Jerusalem and send them into exile for seventy years? What relevance can the age of Old Testament kings possibly have in the life of a twenty-first century believer? Why did God speak prophetically to his people during this period of time? These questions and more will be considered in this class. We will explore together God's redemptive historical work revealed in the pages of scripture and see how the mission of the people of God both then and now has always been the same.

The objective of this class is: to gain an appreciation for the period of the northern & southern monarchies in the OT, and understand the relationship between the redemptive work of God and the events that unfolded during this specific time in history. Careful attention will be given to both the Davidic Covenant as well as the decline and exile of the people of God.

Introduction: This week we will explore the catastrophe and change that accompanied the life and ministry of the prophet Samuel. However, before we move on to look at 1 Samuel chapters 4 -8, there is one comment regarding the close of chapter three and the first part of verse one of chapter four that should be made. 1 Samuel 3:19-21; 4:1a states, *"And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel..."* After discussing the blasphemous lifestyles of Eli's two sons, and before exploring some of the catastrophic events that we will consider in the chapters this week, it should be comforting to God's people to know that, *"...the Lord appeared again at Shiloh."* This stands in stark contrast to the beginning of chapter three, *"...the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no open vision."* The return of the visionary word of the Lord to the people of God brings assurance that God has not forgotten his covenant community, and will not cast them off. This promise takes on new meaning since something unprecedented is about to transpire among the people of God.

Part One: The Ark in Exile – There is a significant transition between the first part of verse one in chapter four of 1 Samuel and the remaining three chapters that follow. Up until this point, Samuel the prophet has occupied center stage. His birth, as well as call to prophetic ministry have been highlighted. He now steps into the shadows as the narrator informs us of events that transpire, which prove consequential to Israelite worship. 4:1b reveals, *"...now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines..."* This would appear to be a good thing, after all Israel was instructed by God to drive out the inhabitants of the land, and the Philistines were residual dwellers unlawfully occupying land that was promised to them. However, the battle did not prove successful. By day's end, Israel had been beaten and four thousand men were dead. The elders, quite perplexed in a manner reminiscent of their defeat at the hands of the men of Ai (Joshua 7:2-9), gathered together and asked, *"Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?"* Dr. Dale Davis in his commentary on 1 Samuel, correctly summarizes the folly that ensued on the part of the leaders when he states, *"The elders asked the right question... they answered too quickly. They should have allowed it to hang and bother them for a while."*¹ This they did not do. They did not wait until the word of the Lord that had come to all Israel could offer guidance and direction. Instead, they sought to bring up the ark of the covenant. The physical sign of the abiding presence of a covenantal God. Surely they could not go wrong with such a sacred object in their midst. After all, if they

¹ Davis, Dale Ralph. 1 Samuel: Looking On the Heart. Pg. 53
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were defeated before the Philistines with the very token of God's covenant among them, what would become of God's great reputation? It is here that Israel learns a very valuable lesson, one that is just as relevant for the church of the twenty-first century as it was in OT times. God is not as nearly concerned with his reputation as he is with our right relationship with him. If the basis for our relating to God is on our terms instead of his (think for instance of the darkness that existed at the very heart of the temple cult at the time to say nothing of the popular mood for every man to do what is right in his own eyes), then our clinging to sacramental tokens of his covenantal faithfulness will bring his swift chastisement upon us. When this occurs, it will be difficult for us, not unlike biblical Israel, to see such chastisement as a loving gesture from a faithful God.

The ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts was taken from the tabernacle in Shiloh and escorted by none other than Hophni and Phinehas into the midst of the camp. When it arrived, the people of Israel shouted in jubilation, which terrified the Philistines. The battle, however, would not end in favor of God's people. Instead, the day ends catastrophically. The ark of God is taken, the two sons of Eli are killed, Eli dies, and Phinehas's pregnant wife goes into premature labor and dies in childbirth. There is no wonder that the parting words of Eli's daughter-in-law were, "Ichabod". Quite literally, this name bestowed upon Eli's grandson means, "where is the glory?" When given in the context of what had just occurred the meaning can be rendered, "...*the glory has departed from Israel.*" It can be argued that, much like Samson for whom the Spirit of the Lord departed and he did not know it, the glory had departed from Israel long before. What actually occurred was an outward expression of an inner state of being. The big picture will reveal that even in this unthinkable, unimaginable act, God was sovereignly working to restore and redeem his covenant people.

Part Two: Dagan & Jehovah – The ark was taken by the Philistines and placed in the house of Dagan, their god. Dagan, the national deity of the Philistines, was more than likely the god of grain (an agrarian fertility god).² The morning after the ark of God's covenant was placed in the temple, they arose to find the image of Dagan falling face first before the ark. Such a prostrate position would have undoubtedly communicated worship and submission. After attempting to stand the idol back on his base, they found him prostrate the following morning as well and his head, and hands had been severed. God's glory needs no defending, he can and does ensure his sovereignty in the affairs of mankind. Although he wants to use mankind for his glory, he does not need us. He and he alone is self-sufficient.

It is interesting to note that a result of the presence of the ark in the hands of those outside the covenant community was the "hand of the Lord" in judgement. Verse six states, "*The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory.*" When the other Philistine cities attempted to keep the ark, they fell under the same judgment. In a matter of a few short months the Philistine leaders were crying, "...*send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people.*" After consulting with the local pagan priests they determined to make images of their tumors as a guilt offering to appease the Lord God of Israel, and send the ark back where it came from. When it was time to execute their plan, there seemed to be a glimmer of uncertainty on the part of the elders. They place the ark along with their guilt offerings on a cart and take two oxen who have never been under yoke and are still nursing a calf, shut the calves up a home, and see if the oxen pull the cart away from their stalls and in the direction of Israel. If they failed to do so, they would know that their tumors were the result

² See Tsumura, David. The First Book of Samuel. Pgs. 41, 205.
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of coincidence and not judgment. However, if the heifers did what was unnatural, and went in the direction of Israel thus deserting their calves, they would be certain the hand of the Lord was against them. Needless to say, the oxen forsook their motherly nature and trudged forward to the land of the Israel.

Part Three: Judgment at Home – When the ark of the covenant of the Lord returns to the people of God, the response is not quite what one might imagine. The men of Beth-shemesh were thrilled it had returned to them as revealed in verse thirteen, *“Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it.”* Although the initial manner in which the ark was treated upon its return was in line with what God commanded Moses (verse fifteen), there were certain men of Beth-shemesh who were not of the priestly line that, *“... looked upon the ark of the Lord...”* and were struck down dead for doing so. Afterwards, they invited the men of Kiriath-jearim to come and bring the ark to the house of one of the Levites who was ordained to the express task of keeping it for the next twenty years. There is a point of application that must be made here in order for the full gravity of the situation to be appreciated.

First, the fact that the men of Beth-shemesh were members of the covenant community did not spare them from the judgment of God wrought by their indiscretion in worship. It was no doubt unsurprising to the people of Israel when they heard of the plagues that struck the Philistines when the ark was in exile, for the Philistines were outside the covenant community. However, the people of God were different. They were the ones for whom the paschal lamb was a substitutionary sacrifice, the purchase price of their redemption from Egyptian bondage. They were the ones among whom the Lord promised he would dwell, they were his *church*. Even though we are not told the exact details behind how the men of Beth-shemesh looked upon the ark, the truth remains that their membership among the people of God was not enough to spare them from the just judgment of God for failing to heed his commands.

Secondly, it may seem trivial that the people of God should “look” upon the ark, and thereby bring the wrath of God down upon them. After all, what is the harm in looking? In the same manner, contemporary man may think the manner of Christian worship is insignificant, that God can be worshipped in any way that we choose, in whatever manner we are the most familiar and comfortable. However, the indiscretion in the first scenario is no less severe than in the second. We cannot worship God in any way that we choose, but only in the manner that he commands. God gave very detailed instructions to Moses in Numbers 4:1-15 as to the manner in which the tabernacle and its furnishings were to be carried and transported from one place to another. He commanded, *“...but they must not touch the holy things, lest they die”* (Numbers 4:15). Only the high priest was allowed to look upon the ark of the covenant (Numbers 4:5-6), and only the Levites who descended from Kohath were allowed to transport the furniture of the tabernacle (Numbers 4:15). So, why was it such a sin for the men of Beth-shemesh to look upon the ark of the covenant? The ark of the covenant was the ceremonial seat of God, and represented his presence, his voice, and his mercy. Only he who was qualified by God’s own selection could gaze upon it and draw near to it. Such a command only seems trivial if we fail to grasp the magnitude of the holiness of God.

Part Four: The People Demand a King – The influence of Samuel’s ministry in the life and community of Israel comes to a moment of change and transition once more several years following the exile and return of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. Apparently, Samuel failed to raise his own sons better than did Eli, and all Israel was concerned about either of them succeeding him as leader of God’s people. The very fact that this was entertained as a possibility by the prophet Samuel is somewhat of a novelty, since Baney, Lesson 2, Fall/2016

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none of the other judges mentioned in scripture expected their sons to become the next leader of God's people. The people had a greater, more predominant motive for asking Samuel to choose a king for them: they wanted to be like all the other nations.

According to the law of God, it was acceptable (albeit not ideal) for Israel to have a king. In fact, we find that specific instructions were given for the selection of a king in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. *"When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the other nations that are around me,' you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again.' And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excess silver and gold. And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel."* These commands were explicit as to the function of the king. He was not to be a king like all the other kings of nations surrounding Israel, even though that is how the description for both the people's current request as well as the commandment began. Rather, he was to be nothing less than an emissary of the Lord God of Israel, the true king. It has been stated before that Israel was designed by God to be a true theocracy, with God as their king, and his kingdom rule their great mission. However, the book of Judges reveals that things went terribly wrong in Israel. The heart to submit to the kingship of God was simply not there. The climax of this rebellion, is the event now in question – the request for a king.

Naturally, Samuel was furious. He went to God and repeated the request before him. God's reply is telling, *"Obey 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. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them"* (1 Samuel 8:7b-9). Samuel's warning to the people was filled with contrast between the kings of all other nations surrounding them, and the king that God permitted in his law. Nonetheless, the people remained resolute in their desire and their request seeking affinity with the kingdoms of this world more than with the kingdom of God.

So, if God said it was alright for Israel to have a king in Deuteronomy 17, why were the people of Israel rejecting God when they asked Samuel for a king? There are, I believe, two parts to this answer. First, Israel was permitted to have a king in the law of God (in like manner as the surrounding nations), but God would determine the role and function of this king in the life of his covenant people. Since God alone intended to be Israel's king, the role of an Israelite king would look very different from that of surrounding nations. He would not primarily be the protector of the nation. Instead, that title would belong to God. For this reason, the king was commanded not to amass horses or a great standing army, not because the people of God would not need defense, but because God's people should not place their trust in a robust military, but in the promise that an omnipotent God will fight their battles. It is clear from the context of 1 Samuel chapter eight, that God's people were asking for a king more in line

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with the kings of surrounding nations than God's idea of a divinely sanctioned emissary. When they heard the characteristics of a king from the surrounding nations (8:10-18) they stated, "*No! but there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.*" Therefore, their desire to have a king like all other nations instead of the unique capacity that God allows is one way that they were rejecting the kingship of God.

Secondly, the people were rejecting God by asking for a king because they were implying they needed to be "judged". The judges were raised up by God more as saviors or deliverers than actual judges. However, it is clear from the earlier context of the chapter (8:1-) that Samuel and his sons were the exception. He did more of determining God's will in select matters than saving God's people from the oppressor. His sons, too, were responsible for doing the same and were guilty of, "*...turning aside for gain...*" It is likewise clear from God's instructions to Moses that the king he chooses was to be under authority himself – the authority of the written law of God. God's Word was to be the standard of judgment within Israel. In other words, God's design for a kingship accommodated and supplemented the theocracy. The people's design for a king would replace the theocracy. There cannot be two kingdoms within the church, no man can serve two masters. To cleave to the kingdom of an earthly king was to reject the heavenly.

Conclusion: It does not take a scholar to see that a significant shift is occurring in the community of the people of God, a shift that had been predicated by the dark period of the judges and is now giving birth to the age of kings. The age of kings is an age wherein the hand of the king would often be scorned or rebuked by the voice of the prophet, where God's glorious kingdom and the promise and hope of redemption would periodically be obscured by idolatry and materialism. It is also a time when God's kingdom begins to materialize and become even plainer to visualize and understand as we will soon witness with the second occupant of the throne of Israel.

Questions:

Q: Do you think it is just as important today to worship God in the manner he commands as it was in the time of the OT church?

Q: Do you think it is just as dangerous not to worship God in the manner he commands for the NT church as it was for the OT church?

Q: How does God command to be worshipped?

Q: Does an appreciation for the holiness of God change how you understand the death of the seventy men of Beth-shemesh? If so, how?

Q: Does the church of today suffer from the "other nations" syndrome?

Q: In what ways might the church of our own day be influenced by the desire to be like the world?

Q: What does it look like for you tomorrow morning and throughout this upcoming week to submit to the exclusive kingship of God?

Q: How might this submission (see above) influence how you spend your time?