

Long Live the King

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[0 : 00] Lord our God, thank you for your word. Thank you for gathering us together in your presence. Thank you for sending your Holy Spirit to make your will known to us through your word.

Grant us understanding and obedient hearts, we pray, for the sake of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Welcome to the days of the lives of the bold and the beautiful kings of Israel. Our story so far, a woman weeping alone on the dusty floor of a house of worship, cries out for a child whom she has tried so long to conceive.

Our hero, being the compassionate and gracious hero that he is, hears her cry and grants her prayer. She falls pregnant and for a time there is much rejoicing on the days of the lives of the bold and the beautiful kings of Israel.

Yet when she gives birth to the boy whom she calls Samuel, she knows she must make a terrible sacrifice. She knows that our hero has plans for the boy and so she dedicates him to the hero.

[1 : 15] So Samuel leaves his mother's house to tears and violins to serve under a judge named Eli. Time passes on the days of the lives of the bold and the beautiful kings of Israel.

And the boy does indeed hear the call of our hero. And he responds. Our hero has plans. More time, more episodes pass on the days of the lives of the bold and the beautiful kings of Israel.

And Samuel grows older and wiser. But Eli grows older and fatter and complacent. And it becomes clear that our hero wants Samuel to step up to the role of judge.

A new season begins of the days of the lives, etc., etc. And the credits change so that Samuel's picture now takes prominence.

Except our hero is still the hero, of course. Over the coming seasons, Samuel serves the hero as judge year in and year out. Seeing the people of Israel through Philistine attacks, through the loss and recapture of the Ark of the Covenant, through treachery, through victory in battle, and always, always calling the people back to serve our hero.

[2 : 35] But now, as the current season begins, Samuel has grown old. He needs assistance in his role as judge, so he appoints his two sons.

But his sons are not men of honour nor honesty. They cut deals with mob and union bosses.

They're far more interested in profit than prophecy. Finally, these brothers become the catalyst for the people of Israel to gather and protest to Samuel.

But they're not asking for the hero to solve their problems. They're demanding a new type of government. They want a king like the nations around them.

Well, at this point, on the days of the lives of the bold and the beautiful kings of Israel, the suspense reaches new heights.

How does this call for a king reflect on Samuel? And how does it reflect on our hero, who ought to be the true ruler of the people? What will he do? Well, sure enough, the next episode shows that our hero is not pleased.

[3 : 51] But because of the compassionate and merciful hero he is, even in his displeasure, he has plans of deliverance and grace, as he always does.

And so he tells Samuel to wait for the man of his choosing, who will be king, to be revealed. Then after all that tension, it's time for a bit of comic relief on the days of the lives of the bold and the beautiful, et cetera, et cetera.

And so, last week, the episode opens with the donkeys of Kish. And we see a beautiful, handsome AFL footballer type chasing after these donkeys, uphill and down dale and across yonder moor, until finally he can chase no more.

Then, through a series of amazing events, clearly arranged by our hero, Saul meets Samuel, and Samuel anoints him secretly as king of Israel.

But then when Saul goes home, he doesn't tell. And now, the continuation of the drama that is the days of the lives of the bold and the beautiful kings of Israel.

[5 : 14] Well, before we go on, I hope that you don't think I'm making light of the word of God by comparing it to a midday soapy or a combination of the two.

But just because God's stories are great stories doesn't mean they're not true stories. And we mustn't be ashamed of the fact that they are great stories.

They are true and great and dramatic and compelling and funny and gripping. And if you don't think so, you should probably read more than a paragraph of your Bible at one time.

Because that's when you get the story. God wants us to be gripped when we learn about him and when we encounter him.

God is the first and best storyteller. And his stories are true stories. And they communicate truth in every word, in every look, in every thought, in every relationship.

[6 : 21] And they're recorded to stir us up to a faith of passion and purity and adventure. And not only is God the ultimate storyteller, but as I'm sure you gathered from the days of the lives of the bold and the beautiful kings of Israel, God is also the hero.

God is the hero of the Bible, the hero of history, the hero of all creation. And so, when we look at the stories in the Bible, the narratives of the Bible, and even when we're just looking at a small chunk of narrative from the Old Testament, it is important for us to look at it to discover how God is revealing himself as the hero.

So, tonight, as we come to this part of the story of Saul's rise to kingship, even though it seems pretty straightforward, we're going to look at it with that perspective, looking for God the hero.

On the surface, the story could be summarized like this. After earlier being sent to their homes, the people are now called together by Samuel at Mizpah.

Samuel tells them that, yes, they're going to get their wish. They'll get to elect a king then and there. He casts lots and eventually gets down to Saul's family and what should be Saul himself, but Saul's not around.

[7 : 59] God tells them that Saul's among the suitcases and when they see how handsome and tall and AFL-like he is, they call that long live the king. A few people dissent and speak against Saul, but many do bring him gifts, tributes and a number of men commit themselves to be his valiant supporters as God has moved them.

That's the basic story in this episode. But if we were just to leave it at that, yes, we'd kind of get how the plot goes, but there's a richness I think that we miss.

Firstly, I think there are places and procedures in this story that we could do well to have a bit more background on so that we can enter the adventure more fully.

Secondly, we need to look at the different ways in this story, in this part of a story in which God is glorified as that hero and in which we're challenged to follow him as such.

So firstly, and if you've got your Bibles open to page 220, that would be excellent, let's have a look at three places or procedures about which we need more detail and they are the place of Mizpah, the division of the people of Israel, and the casting of lots.

[9 : 12] This is just a bit of background, get you a bit more informed about the passage. So firstly, we read in verse 17 that the people are called together at Mizpah.

Now Mizpah was a place where the tribes gathered, particularly as they faced enemies, particularly as they prepared for battle and especially before they fought the Philistines.

It's a place of strategy, communication, communal organisation, more than a place of worship. And that Samuel is gathering the people here at this time is important because it signifies to us that what we have here is a public civil election of Saul as king rather than a religious election, if you like.

Now that will come later. So the public religious anointing of Saul as king only comes after he has proven himself in battle and we'll see that next week in chapter 11.

But if you read carefully, this is the civil public election but there's nothing secular about it. That is, there's nothing that leaves God out of the picture in this civil or strategic election.

[10 : 29] God, the hero, we know, has already chosen Saul and God's laws of the kingship are read and presented in the ceremony in verse 25.

God is still all the way through this civil election at Mizpah but we'll see that a little bit more later. So Mizpah, place of strategy, place of a civil choice.

He's being elected but not religiously anointed here. Secondly, the division of the people of Israel. Now Israel as a whole in the Old Testament is referred to as a people. You probably know that. The people of Israel can then be divided into 12 tribes. You probably know that too. And that's the first division that Samuel makes in this story. If you have a look in verse 20, he divides them into their tribes and then the tribe of Benjamin is chosen and we know from our previous information that Benjamin is Saul's tribe. [11:38] Each tribe could then be divided further into families. So, now family wasn't just mum, dad, two kids, Labrador.

It was an extended clan, relatives, a bigger group. And so, in this case, in verse 21, we see the lot falls to a family or a clan that we haven't actually heard much about and we don't hear very much about in the rest of the Old Testament, the Matrites.

But it seems from this very old source that they are Saul's family, his clansmen. And so, finally, going on in verse 21, the family can be then separated individuals. And in some way, Saul, even though he's not there, is chosen. That brings us to our third procedure to investigate, the casting of lots.

Now, this practice is kind of like that idea of tossing a coin, used in various parts of the Old Testament as a God-given means of making decisions. Even the priests in the tabernacle in the temple had these two little things called the Urim and the Thummim, which were probably special little stones that they kept in a pocket on their special priest's outfit that they could throw, I think, to help them decide an outcome.

[13:03] And they're especially used to decide between the two goats on the day of atonement which one would be the sacrifice and which one would be the scapegoat sent off into the wilderness. And so they'd kind of throw these stones and however they landed, it would determine which was which, you know, heads or tails for the black one or the grey one.

There were more sophisticated means of casting lots as well, like we would imagine drawing straws or something. And so this one in our account in 1 Samuel seems to be able to distinguish between more than two things.

So it's not just a head or tails kind of casting lots. It's got to be able to distinguish one tribe from twelve, one family out of that tribe and then one individual out of that family.

And there's something about this way of casting lots that seems to be able to indicate that someone is chosen who's not actually present. So whether or not they were using some kind of names or there was some indication in what they did that it was someone who was the son of the person that it was pointing to but he wasn't there or I kind of like to think of it like spinning the bottle and every time they spun it it kept pointing to a space and they kept doing it and it just kept going to this blank space and is someone else supposed to be here?

So that's the casting of the lots. It's this strange kind of chance way of making a choice. And that leads us nicely into the second group of points that I wanted us to have a look at in this passage and these are the most important.

[14:53] The three ways in which God is glorified as hero. In the hiding and finding of Saul, in the law of the kingship and in Samuel's introduction.

Firstly, in the hiding and finding of Saul. there's a really great irony in the fact that he's chosen through the casting of lots, given what we already know of this story.

We know that his identity has been revealed very clearly to Samuel before he even knew who Saul was. We know that they met through circumstances orchestrated by God and we know by the time he gets to Mizpah that he's already been secretly anointed by Samuel.

He himself knows he's the one. So how come then Samuel needed to cast lots and how come Saul was hiding in the baggage?

Well, not in the baggage but around the baggage. Why didn't Samuel just announce who was king and why didn't Saul just step forward?

[16:04] At its most basic, the reason everything happened in this way is so God can be seen as the hero.

When you cast lots for something, when you flip a coin, spin a bottle, draw straws, there's a factor that's beyond your control that determines the outcome.

Samuel the prophet who chose his own sons to be his successors, he can't, he can't rig it. Saul can't campaign for it, go, you know, I'm the one.

The power players in Israel, I don't know, heads of tribes, the influential ones, the mob bosses, they can't influence it. The people wanted a king but God would be the one to choose it for them. And I think that's most likely where the hide and seek thing in verse 22 is what that's about. Even the lot on its own isn't enough.

[17 : 13] I mean, perhaps if the winner was present there, he could have been accused of cheating in some way, you know, like putting a magnet in his shoe or whatever they do in Las Vegas.

But the man who God would choose would only be found by God's direct intervention. Yes, through his guiding of the lot, but then by a further revelation to his prophet Samuel.

We're assuming it's some kind of direct word to him that Saul is hiding amongst the baggage. And I wonder if Saul himself was actually testing God's call by hiding himself in the baggage while the lot was being taken.

Well, if God's in charge of this and someone else gets chosen, it was all a big mistake. But no, he is the one. I don't know about you, but it's quite strange to see God allowing people to use what seems at best to be a kind of game of chance and at worse, a practice of divination to decide his will.

I heard of a book once called The Dice Man. It was about a guy who let every single decision of his life be governed by the roll of a dice. And the premise of the book was that amorality soon turns into immorality.

[18 : 50] I didn't read it, I don't suggest you do, but when I think about this kind of casting of lots, I can't help thinking about this guy. So why are God's people doing it here and are we allowed to do the same?

Should you flip a coin about what job you should take or who you should marry, draw straws, girls, you know, anyway. Let me see what the Bible says.

The times when God allows lot casting in the Old Testament, it's only by his leaders in a very carefully limited situation. And it's always with the understanding that as Proverbs 16 33 says, the lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone.

There's no sense in which, you know, the stars or the fates or whatever are controlling this lot casting by the people of Israel. It's the Lord's decision.

But the last time in the Bible that lots are cast is in the New Testament when an apostle is being chosen to replace Judas Iscariot. And even here, the choice is between two men who had been determined by prayer and careful thought beforehand and put forward as godly options.

[20 : 14] But even more significantly, this last time of lot casting happened before the day of Pentecost, before the Holy Spirit was given to all believers.

No other mention of this practice is found from then on. Now, I can't be certain, but I think as a general rule, we ought to see ourselves as beyond the need to cast lots us because we have the Holy Spirit, God's presence dwelling with us.

We have the fullness of revelation in the scriptures and we have the privilege because of the blood of Christ to come to God's throne of grace to find all the help, all the guidance, all the wisdom that we need.

However, the truth upon which the casting of lots in ancient Israel was based, that God is in control of all things, even the roll of a dice, that's a great one to keep in mind when we pray and ask for direction.

God is the hero in every situation, whether he's behind the scenes or out the front. All things are being worked together for God's glory and for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose in Christ.

[21 : 49] Now, a second way in which God is seen as the hero in this book is in what Samuel does as soon as Saul is recognized as king.

We read in verse 25, Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord.

Most scholars, I think they're right, think this is referring to Deuteronomy chapter 17 verses 14 to 20 that we had read out as our first reading tonight.

It's the only section of the law in the Old Testament which specifically refers to the rule of a king. And it comes in the section of Deuteronomy three chapters which are specifically concerned with the government of the people of God.

And if you listened I know it's hot but if you listen to that passage if you have a look at it later you'll see that it began with a prediction of exactly what has happened here in 1 Samuel 8 that when the people entered the land they would eventually look around and say I will get for myself a king because the people around me, the nations around me have one.

[23 : 08] There's an ambiguity in that passage in Deuteronomy 17 because even though the heart attitude of the people calling for a king is wrong God is not actually opposed to them using this system of government.

It's not mandated but he says you may have a king if this king is under his ultimate kingship as I said last week and so he gives laws to guide the selection and the implementation of that office. The king mustn't make himself rich he mustn't have many wives he mustn't return to Egypt for alliances for trade he mustn't exalt himself over the other members of the community and that's fascinating unlike in other the surrounding nations the king along with everyone else is to be equal under God instead he must always have the law of God with him he must learn it he must observe it he must not turn from its path he must read in it all the days of his life and if he does this then he and his descendants will reign long over Israel so God the hero wants all and all the people to know that he is the king still even when Saul comes to prominence even when Saul won't be hiding in the baggage anymore God's law can't be shelved now that the people are not a theocracy in the same way that they were under

Moses and Joshua and the judges no God's law now simply rules the king as well as the people as it always has God remains the king the hero and finally the third way that the Lord is seen as the hero is found back at the start of our passage in verses 18 to 19 thus says the Lord the God of Israel I brought up Israel out of Egypt and I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you but today you have rejected your God who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses and you have said no but set a king over us did you notice that Saul had some detractors at the end of this passage troublemakers or no good men this was because he had not yet proven himself as worthy to lead and as I mentioned already that would come in chapter 11 when he meets and defeats this eye gouging Philistine and he's victorious there and then he's consecrated before the Lord at Gilgal not at Mizpah in this religious place he's proven himself and the people will then be unified in their support for him but what about the Lord the God of Israel in asking for a king the people have treated God as though he has failed to prove himself as their leader and yet Samuel reminds them before they even elect this king God has proven himself time and time again most powerfully in the exodus from Egypt but he continually saves them from all their calamities and distresses it says in verse 19 and yet they have still rejected him saying to him a great big no no this no is repeated from chapter eight and it's so telling isn't it such a powerful symbol of what human rebellion and sin is at its core a conscious rejection a no to God's good rule and reign a setting up of ourselves as king of our own existence that's sin saying no to God and to say no to the living God is a serious thing even though as I shared last week in chapter nine

[27 : 50] God promises to use this king he will give them to deliver them the offense of their action of their saying no cannot be passed over unsaid here the people must be warned again of the danger of the state of their heart God has done nothing but love and save and rescue and care for them he has proven himself their hero all they have to do is say yes the challenge for us today is to do the same God has proven himself once for all to be the great lover of humanity the great hero in coming to earth as a man in Jesus Christ in dying for our sins in rising to give us eternal life there can be no greater proof of love than this that Jesus

Christ died for us while we were still sinners God has proven himself beyond a shadow of a doubt and yet some still wait for God to prove himself to them holding on to their no like it was justified but God calls us in this story and in every story in the pages of the scriptures to say yes to him he is the hero whether we recognize it or not but he can be our hero our passage today from 1 Samuel might just be a small part of a bigger story but it can teach us a big truth say yes to God he is in control he is king of all he is our hero amen son he is he is the hero he is