

The Once, Not Future, King 1 Samuel 8:1-22

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Over Christmas, I was re-reading T.H. White's classic book *The Once and Future King*. It is his contemporary retelling of the King Arthur legend. As I was reading, I was struck by the many parallels to King David of Israel: (1) David and Arthur were both unregarded young boys when they were tapped for kingship; (2) both presided over golden ages; (3) both faced insurrection at the hands of their sons; (4) both became ideals that later kings looked back to; and (5) the title *The Once and Future King* refers to the British idea that King Arthur would return during Britain's greatest need. Meanwhile, the Israelites looked forward to a coming messiah who would be like David.

However, what is most fitting for this story is that they both come to power after the reigns of ruthless tyrants. In the case of Arthur, it is after the reign of Uther Pendragon, who was a conqueror, a man of force and might. In the case of David, it is after the reign of Saul, the first king over Israel. What we see in today's story is the buildup to how God allowed such a tyrant to be king over Israel in the first place.

As our story starts, notice that the Israelites are in the same situation they were in during 1 Samuel 4: suffering under the poor leadership of corrupt sons. Apparently, Samuel did not learn anything from his mentor Eli's mistakes, for his sons turned out just as bad as Eli's sons. It appears that Israel had forgotten the lessons of the past as well. They continue to rely not on God's provision, but on their desires.

In 1 Samuel 4, they tried to use the ark of the covenant as a magic totem to assure victory over the Philistines. We saw that they were not trusting in God's power, but rather using the ark as a magic item through which they could have power over God. So the people had stopped trusting God and began to cry out for a king like other nations had. They even inform us why they desire a king: they want stability (1 Sam. 8:5) and protection (1 Sam. 8:19-20). God sees this crying out as betrayal because he sees the motive in their hearts. He sees that they have put their trust in a technique, in a structure, rather than in the person of their God.

It is important to realize that God is not opposed to the idea of kingship. God allows for kingship, and Deuteronomy 17 gives us the regulations for the king: he must not accumulate a great military force, or great wealth, or many wives. He must not enjoy all the perks of power. Rather, he must be a leader in keeping the people humble before God. As Deuteronomy states,

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. 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, and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left (Deut 17:18-20).

The basic point behind the ideal Israelite king is that he is a king subject to God. He is to be a servant pointing his people to the great king, God Almighty.

This is an important discussion because we are designed to give our hearts away to something greater than ourselves. *We will* give our hearts over to someone to follow. But what type of person will that be? The temptation is to follow the flashy and the attractive. Our temptation is to believe the promises of the glitter and glamour. Indeed, we long to be dazzled by impressive leaders. We are attracted to power and wealth and glamour and influence. In short, we are attracted to glory. Our problem is that we want to see the apex of glory in our human leaders rather than in God as the giver of glory.

Now, here is the paradox: those who seize glory for themselves usually wind up degrading all those around them. Samuel explains all the abuses that will happen when you entrust the king with power and glory. He states: (1) the people will become his slaves; (2) he will be a harsh taskmaster; (3) he will take the best of their crops; (4) he will press their children into his service; (5) he will place heavy burdens upon the people and take away their freedom; and (6) the people will groan for relief (1 Sam. 8 10-18). As we can see, when a king, or anyone for that matter, grabs glory for himself, he inevitably destroys the dignity of other humans around him.

One of the saddest epochs of human history was that of the French Revolution. Tragic chaos and bloodshed were unleashed as the atheistic thinkers of the enlightenment strove to remake society in their own image. Out of the chaos, a general arose – Napoleon Bonaparte. His early successes in Italy made him a popular and powerful figure. He was soon appointed to a ten year office as Counsel, being basically commander-in-chief, but still having accountability to the people. France was still considered a republic. Through the early 1800's, his lust for power grew and he expanded his control into Switzerland, Italy, and other parts of Europe.

Then, in 1804, he arranged to have himself crowned emperor. He envisioned a dynasty lasting for generations. Knowing the people loved a spectacle, he surrounded himself with pomp. And at his coronation, he took the crown from the hands of the pope and crowned himself emperor. His brilliance dazzled the world. Writers and artists from Britain and America hailed Napoleon as a hero. But, within a decade, he plunged Europe into some of the most bloody and senseless wars, even dragging the United States into what we call the War of 1812. He was brilliant and exciting, but he brought perks all to himself. And because of him, all France and Europe suffered. Though Napoleon reached the modern apex of glory, his end was to plunge a continent into war and further to destroy the country he had built.

As the Israelites clamor for a king to which they can give their glory, God relents and grants their desire. And what a king! We will see in the next chapters that God raises up Saul, who does deliver his people from the Philistines, but who also is quite mad and tyrannical. The people did not know what they were asking for.

And so we give ourselves away to the dazzling leaders who command our attention. We scramble after the latest plan and quick fix. Those of you who are in business know that the fads touted by the corporate gurus come and go: downsizing, central control, rightsizing, local control, total quality management – chaos theory.

Need I talk about the tastemakers in our culture, where it seems that to be attractive you have to be all the more outlandish and outrageous? Of course there are the obvious examples: Madonna, Brittany Spears, Howard Stern – those who go so over the top that they make themselves caricatures. However, consider this from an article in the New York Times on January 25, 2004,

There is a whole subculture out there of men who are taking lessons in how to pick up women at nightclubs. When I talk about subculture – these are people who will fly to weekend seminars and spend \$500 a night to go out with a “master” and learn tricks of the trade. They go to the fancy high end nightclubs – not seedy corner bars. What are some of the lessons they learn? Be “cocky and funny,” stand out with louder clothing, learn to be seen as the social center of the room. Or, the careful use of the “neg” — a neg is neither a compliment nor an insult — it momentarily lowers the person’s self esteem and suggests an intriguing disinterest (such as “Nice nails, are they real? No? They look nice anyway”).

The point is that all these tricks of aggressive seduction work. Why? Because we want to be dazzled. We, too, want the glory in human leaders.

And do not think we are immune to it in the church. I cannot tell you the number of people who hop from church to church because they want to see the show. They want to see the preacher who enchants them with their erudition or their passion. They want the music their way or they want the style more or less formal. They want a package that is impressive so that they can look around to their friends and say, "Look what we have here!"

But God is rich in mercy. He has a different way of doing things. He does not leave us under the weight of a person like Saul. He does not leave us under tyrants who degrade us all by seizing the glory for themselves. God will raise up a David, who is a servant to his people. But even David is but a shadow and a picture of the King who is to come. God tells us about this King, who comes to suffer and die. Isaiah 53 tells us about this suffering King:

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering, like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not (Isa. 53:2-4).

Isaiah goes on to describe the King who will be the suffering servant. This is the kind of king God raises up for us. Paul puts it even more powerfully in Philippians when he says of Jesus,

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:6-11).

Do you see the basic pattern here? Greatness is measured not by gathering glory unto you, but by giving yourself away. The last shall be first and the first last. If you would be great, then you must become a servant. The Philippians passage tells us that Jesus Christ, being fully God, deserved glory more than we can imagine, but that he gave himself fully as a servant.

The Passion of the Christ well portrays the kind of King that we have. You are not to be dazzled by the little preacher, but by the suffering, bleeding, aching, dying King nailed to a tree. That is the once and future king. He is the one in whom you put your trust. He is the one to whom you ascribe glory.