

LONG LIVE THE KING!

1 Samuel 10:17-27

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

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Samuel said to all the people, "Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen? There is none like him among all the people." And all the people shouted, "Long live the king!" (1 Sam. 10:24).

On July 31, 2008, the tiny South Pacific nation of Tonga crowned its new king, one the world's last absolute monarchs, George Tupou V. The three-day coronation event included a formal ball, a military parade, a traditional kava-drinking ceremony, a fireworks display, a rugby match, an open-air torchlight music concert, and a beauty contest. The cost for these events was estimated at 1.6 million pounds, spurring complaints because of the nation's 40% poverty rate. The government and a majority of the people defended the expenditure, seeing it as important to upholding the traditional culture of the island nation.¹

The Tongans' insistence on a proper coronation is backed up in principle by the biblical example of King Saul. Israel's elders had come to Samuel the judge demanding a king, and God had revealed to Samuel his choice of Saul son of Kish. But there was still a need for the public formalities that would install Saul in his kingship. Saul's coronation marked an ominous change in Israel's history, and provided a remarkable assertion of God's sovereignty as Lord over all.

¹ Sophie Tedmanson, "Lavish Coronation Ceremony for New King of Tonga", *The Times*, August 1, 2008, accessed on-line at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4440717.ece>.

ISRAEL'S UNBELIEF REBUKED

A coronation is one of those events that demands a careful attention to protocol. There are, however, times when exceptions are warranted. In the 18th century Church of Scotland, the General Assembly had power to impose an unwanted minister on a congregation. Thus, in 1773, the General Assembly directed a presbytery and its members to induct Mr. David Thomson as minister of a parish near Stirling. The presbytery's moderator, Robert Findley, addressed Mr. Thomson during the installation service. He informed Thomson that he and the other ministers were present only at the order of the General Assembly and that six hundred heads of families, along with all the elders of the church except one, had opposed his selection as pastor. Before the presbytery and congregation, Findley therefore implored Thomson to "give it up." Thomson refused, directing Findley to "obey the orders of your superiors." At this, Findley intoned the words of installation and then closed the service, without having even prayed for the new minister or his congregation.²

Findley violated the polite etiquette for a ceremonial occasion like a pastor's installation. But there are times when the truth requires a breach of protocol. Samuel reasoned this way when he gathered all Israel to an assembly at Mizpah. This was the place where Samuel earlier had led the nation in repentance before the Lord, resulting in their victory over the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:6-7). Samuel returned now to Mizpah not merely to remember the prior repentance but in the hopes that a new repentance might occur. Therefore, while a coronation would normally call for polite and formal behavior, with bland speeches and cheery affirmations, Saul took the occasion to rebuke the nation for its unbelief in demanding a king in place of the Lord.

Samuel's rebuke had two parts, the first of which was to remind them of God's great and saving works in their history. He told them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you'" (1 Sam. 7:18). It is true that under God's rule, Israel had been regularly oppressed. They

² Cited from Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 85.

were cast into slavery in Egypt, opposed by the Moabites and Ammonites, and now were being oppressed by the Philistines. Likewise, it is true that being a Christian enters us into battle with the world, the flesh and the devil. It is, in fact, because we are God's people, because we are set apart from the world and from sin to a life that is holy, that believers experience at least some of our trials and pains. But God had been faithful on every single occasion when Israel had called on him. "I delivered you," God summarized, and we will find that God delivers us from all our fiery foes as well.

Nonetheless, God's people are sometimes tempted to avoid trials by fitting in with the world. If we do just a few things the world's way – falling into a worldly manner of speech or dress, or adopting the world's priorities for money, time and talents – we can avoid sticking out or presenting a threat to worldly culture. This is what Israel was doing in demanding a king. They were not asking for a new god to worship, but only a political system to make them "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:20). In fact, Samuel insists, to demand the latter was to imply the former. He cried out: "today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses, and you have said to him, 'Set a king over us'" (1 Sam. 10:19).

If the apostle James had been at Mizpah, he would have had this to say: "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (Ja. 4:4). Christians who desire to be "like the world" are like the Israelites in their demand for a king. For all their formal claims of fidelity to the Lord, Israel was committing apostasy, replacing God's rule with that of a mere man. Being God's people demanded fidelity to him and holiness before the world, and thus Israel's request for a worldly king was "a desire to no longer be the Lord's people."³ Jesus told his followers, "In the world you will have tribulations. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33). For Christians to turn aside from the tribulations that accompany godliness is implicitly to renounce Christ's power to overcome on our behalf.

³ John Woodhouse, *I Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 184.

ISRAEL'S KING REVEALED

We are not able to tell the exact manner in which Samuel spoke the words of his rebuke – whether he was loud or soft, fast or slow – but I would not be surprised if there was a pause within verse 19. Samuel rebuked them for rejecting the Lord in asking for a king. Might he not have paused to await some expression of repentance? After all, their previous assembly at Mizpah had witnessed a breaking forth of remorse for their sins. Now would be a good time for a repeat performance. If Samuel did take such a pause, it was in vain, greeted only by stony silence. Therefore he continued, “Now therefore present yourselves before the LORD by your tribes and by your thousands” (1 Sam. 10:19).

This summons must have come as an unsettling surprise for the people. They would have been unsure about the procedures for the king's selection, but they knew what it meant to be summoned by tribes and clans for selection by lots. For this is what God had done earlier in their history in response to the sin of Achan after Israel's defeat at Ai. First, a tribe was selected by lot and then a clan, then a household, and finally the man was revealed who had brought God's wrath by his sin. Achan was thus revealed and he along with his entire household was stoned to death and burned. On that precedent-setting occasion, the lots were used to identify the sinner who would receive God's wrath (see Jos. 7:16-18).

Now Samuel called the nation to assemble once more, with the lots before him. The leader of each tribe was to come forth, write the name of his tribe on a stone, and then await the selection. The lot of the tribe of Benjamin was called out. Then all the clan heads of Benjamin came forth to present their stone, and the lot of the Matrites was chosen. Finally, out of this clan, the name of Saul son of Kish was read. He would be the one to... what? Israel was being judged, and Saul's name was chosen by lot... for what? In the place where Achan was chosen to receive God's wrath, Saul was chosen to be Israel's king.

Saul was selected as king by lot for two reasons. The first was to indicate that God's assent to provide a king was a form of his judgment. Usually, when a prophet denounced Israel's sin, the

sentence of God’s judgment immediately followed. Here, “the selection of Saul is inserted at the very point where we would expect an announcement of judgment.”⁴ Sometimes, God’s most severe judgment is to permit our sin and its consequences, and so it was here. Not that Saul was being punished by being made king, but all Israel was receiving divine discipline through his selection as king. This is confirmed by God’s later statement: “I gave you a king in my anger” (Hos. 13:11).

Having done this, the use of lots served a second purpose. Since this was an authorized and accepted way by which God revealed his selection, the lot identified Saul as God’s choice for the kingship. Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” The lot therefore showed that Saul was not merely Samuel’s choice as king, and it gave public legitimacy to Saul’s kingship through this divine revelation.

But there was one problem: “when they sought [Saul], he could not be found” (1 Sam. 10:21). We can imagine the scene: “And finally, God’s choice to be king of Israel, Saul the son of Kish! I said, ‘Saul the son of Kish!’ Has anyone seen Saul the son of Kish?” The answer was that “when they sought him, he could not be found” (1 Sam. 10:21). Where was Saul? Saul knew he was going to be chosen, having received advance notice through his anointing, which was then confirmed through three divinely-revealed signs. So shouldn’t Saul be standing by for his grand entrance onto history’s stage? Instead, Saul was hiding amidst the baggage! What are we to make of this unexpected behavior?

There are two main assessments of Saul’s action. Some commentators see this as commendable humility on Saul’s part. Cyril Barber, for instance, points out that many of God’s best servants have sought to avoid positions of public prominence, including Athanasius, the great champion of the faith in the early church.⁵ Matthew Henry asserts that Saul hoped that his absence would lead to the choice of another, since Saul “was conscious to himself of unfitness for so great a trust.”⁶ Saul’s concern, this argues, was for

⁴ Bill Arnold or Robert Bergen.

⁵ Cyril J. Barber, *The Books of Samuel*, 2 vols. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1994), 118.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:262.

the well-being of his nation, and he thought someone else would do a better job than he could.

More negatively, others have argued that Saul reveals cowardice by hiding under the baggage. Indeed, the context strongly suggests fear instead of humility as the reason that Saul hid himself. And who can blame him, since he was being called to step into God's place! Saul could see that God was angry and that his selection was God's judgment on the nation. We can hardly blame him for trying to get away. Nonetheless, Saul's selfish neglect of duty foreshadows a pattern that will be repeated during his kingship. Israel had desired a king who would give them the leadership edge enjoyed by the worldly nations, no longer willing to rely simply on God's saving power. Here, then, is the kind of self-serving cowardice they will have to get used to under human kings! However we may understand Saul's hiding at his coronation, this beginning does not bode well for the future kingship of Israel.

I admit that I would enjoy seeing a video version of this episode. For when Saul could not be found, the people wondered, "Is there a man still to come?" The Lord answered, "Behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage" (1 Sam. 10:22). So the people ran to the baggage, found Saul and hauled him out. We read, "When he stood among the people, he was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward" (1 Sam. 10:23). Here is where I would love to see the look on Samuel's face as he called out: "Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen? There is none like him among all the people" (1 Sam. 10:24). If Samuel had worn a smug look of irony, we could not blame him. "There is the man you have sought, the man chosen by the Lord as your king, the bold leader who was hiding under the baggage during his own coronation – isn't he tall and handsome?" The people, recovering themselves as well as they could, shouted in response, "Long live the king!" (1 Sam. 10:24). Regardless of his timid behavior, Saul looked like just the kind of king they were hoping for – tall, handsome, and outwardly impressive. The issues of character and faith were easily brushed aside, and Israel acclaimed the king they had desired.

The main point of these verses is God's continuing and relentless sovereignty. The people demanded a king, but they were not able to

achieve independence from God. It was the Lord who chose and revealed Saul. God's sovereignty was not set aside, even as he relented to Israel's demand for a king to replace him. Likewise, Christians will find that no matter how we may strive to grab the reigns of our own lives, deciding for ourselves how we will think and live, God remains relentlessly sovereign and he apportions all our circumstances. Either in faith or in unbelief, we *will* have God as our Lord and he *will* exercise his sovereign prerogatives.

ISRAEL'S LAW REAFFIRMED

Another way that God emphasized his sovereignty was through Samuel's immediate application of God's law to the new kingship. "Then 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" (1 Sam. 10:25). Israel could have the king they desired, though God would select and reveal this new ruler. Moreover, the kingship was to be subject to God's law and to the word of God's prophet.

There is a vital distinction made in the text, which speaks of the rules, or "justice", not of the "king" but of the "kingship." In other words, Samuel was placing the new institution under the authority of God's Word; he did not highlight the authority of the king over the law, but rather the authority of the law over the king.

There can be little doubt that the commandments that Samuel read aloud and then wrote down were taken from God's teaching on the kingship in Deuteronomy 17. Not only was the king forbidden to accumulate massive treasures or devote himself to excess luxury (Dt. 17:16-17), but more importantly he was devotedly to observe God's Word. The king was to hand-write his own copy of God's law to keep with him at all times and to read in daily, "that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them" (Dt. 17:19). If the king would carefully observe God's statutes and commandments, then Israel would enjoy success and the king's reign would be long (Dt. 17:20).

This passage has played an important role not merely in Old Testament Israel but also in church and state relations ever since. John Knox pointed to this passage to show that earthly monarchs are

not laws unto themselves but are themselves subject to God's law. Thus when Mary Queen of Scots committed adultery and abetted the murder of her husband, Knox called for her arrest and execution. Even more significant was the influence of Saul's coronation in Samuel Rutherford's 1644 classic, *Lex Rex*. Rutherford wrote *Lex Rex*, which means the "law of kingship," to oppose the idea of *Rex Lex*, the king as a law unto himself. Rutherford's book was based on Deuteronomy 17, probably the very Bible verses that Samuel set before Saul, and referred to Samuel's placing King Saul under the authority of God's Word. Rutherford asserted that the kings of Scotland did not have the right to make laws that were contrary to Scripture and declared that when a king conducted himself lawlessly his rights over the people were forfeited. *Lex Rex's* biblical model of separation of powers and social covenant was influential among the Founding Fathers of America and also provided a biblical rationale for colonial American Christians in their rebellion against the lawless English monarch. John Robbins therefore described 1 Samuel as "the oldest textbook in political freedom," pointing out that by placing human society under God's law, "the Bible... furnishes us with the principles we need to defend a free society."⁷

It is not just kings who are called to obey God's commands, but all of God's people as well. Many Christians are confused about obeying God's law, since the New Testament teaches that we are "not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). Paul says this in referring to the law as a means of righteousness. He means that Christians do not gain salvation by the law but by the grace of God in the gospel of Christ. But Paul's point in that passage was not to promote antinomianism – the belief that grace frees us from any and all standard of conduct. Paul makes this clear by asking: "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Rom. 6:15). Christians are not saved by God's law, but we are saved to God's law: that is, our life as believers is to be in keeping with God's commands. This includes both the moral obligations of the Ten Commandments, the importance of which is stressed all

⁷ John W. Robbins, *Freedom and Capitalism: Essays on Christian Politics and Economics* (Unicoi, Tennessee, 2006), 30, 46.

through the New Testament, and the rules and regulations that God has given in his Word for all of life.

Just as God would reign over King Saul by means of the law of the kingship, God exercises his sovereignty over our lives through the statutes and rules in Holy Scripture. Christians preparing for marriage must be informed of God's rules and regulations, involving the duties of husbands and wives. Just as Samuel read the rules of kingship at Saul's coronation, so also ministers must prepare couples for marriage by presenting husbands with the biblical command to love their wives with Christ's self-sacrificing and cherishing love (Eph. 5:25-31) and teaching wives the biblical command to help and submit their husbands in everything (Eph. 5:22-24). These are not merely traditional ideas about marriage, but God's rules and regulations for the marital state. Likewise, the Bible has rules for the relationship between the civil authority and its citizens (Rom. 13:1-7), for the duties of parents and children (Eph. 6:1-4), masters and servants (Eph. 6:5-9), and pastors and church members (Eph. 4:1-3; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). Christians are to be taught these rules and to live by them.

God is sovereign over his people, and he reigns among us through his Word. To carefully observe God's rules is not to practice legalism but to render faithful obedience to our gracious sovereign. Observing God's laws does not hinder our well-being, but rather is the way believers experience the freedom of God's richest blessing. One might argue that a map constrains the behavior of those who follow its guidance, but maps also give us the freedom to arrive safely at our destination. This is why, for a believer in Christ, the apostle James refers to God's commands as "the law of liberty" (Ja. 1:25), since God's commands order our life for good and administer to us his sovereign blessing.

ISRAEL'S KING INSTALLED

“**L**ong live the king!” the people cried, establishing a tradition that continues today. With these words Israel welcomed her new king, Saul the son of Kish. Had the people consulted God's Word, however, they would have known that however long Saul might reign, his dynasty could not endure. For as Israel's

patriarch, Jacob, had prophesied, the royal scepter was designated for the tribe of Judah. “The scepter shall not depart from Judah,” Jacob said, “nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen. 49:10).

1 Samuel will tell the story of how the kingship passes from Saul to David, from the tribe of Benjamin to Judah. Israel’s kings were types – instructive forerunners – of the true king over God’s kingdom, his own Son, Jesus Christ, who was born of the line of David from the tribe of Judah. In Saul’s coronation we see a striking and instructive foreshadowing of Christ’s installation as our king.

First, whatever we may think of Saul hiding among the baggage, Jesus also hid his royal calling from the people of Israel. Mark records that when Jesus performed miracles of healing, he instructed the recipients not to identify him. “Jesus charged them to tell no one” (Mk. 7:36; cf. 1:45; 5:20, 34; 8:26) about his divine power. The reason for Jesus’ “Messianic secret” was not his fear or reluctance but the fact that he had come first to die for our sins and only later to return in royal glory and power.

A second comparison is Samuel’s acclamation of Saul that “there is none like him among all the people” (1 Sam. 10:24). This was true outwardly of Saul, but it is true of Christ’s character and being. Jesus alone is utterly pure and without sin; even Pontius Pilate said of Jesus during his trial, “I find no guilt in him” (Jn. 18:38). Colossians 1:18 says that in everything Christ is preeminent. The book of Hebrews hails Jesus as greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than Joshua, and greater than the high priest Aaron. It is for this reason that Scripture says to God of Christ: “You have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subject under his feet” (Heb. 2:8). There truly is none like Jesus among all the people – Hebrews 7:26 describes him as “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” – and he is worthy to reign over God’s people as King forevermore.

Furthermore, we noted that Saul’s presentation was preceded by a statement of God’s judgment on the people. Saul was set forth as an expression of God’s wrath against sin. Likewise, it was the pronouncement of God’s wrath on our sin that summoned Jesus into

our world. Paul says that God “put forward [Christ] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:25). A propitiation is a blood sacrifice that satisfies God’s just wrath, and Jesus takes up his crown as our king having first taken up the cross to die for our sins. The apostle John, witnessing the worship in heaven, records that Jesus is acclaimed worthy of taking up his royal throne “For you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9-10). The Bible declares Jesus’ kingship as a reign of grace over sin, so that all who belong to his kingdom are those who have come to his cross for cleansing, forgiveness, and redemption from sin. Have you done this? Have you brought your sins to the cross to be forgiven in Christ’s blood? The cross where Jesus died for our sins is the throne from which he reigns with peace for mankind.

Moreover, as Saul was revealed from under the baggage, so also Jesus was presented as king to his church by his resurrection from the dead. Paul writes that Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:4). It was by means of his resurrection that God has set his Son Jesus before us as our eternal King and Lord. And whereas God manifested his sovereignty over Saul by means of his law, God works his sovereign grace through Jesus Christ as he now reigns in his gospel.

Finally, Saul’s coronation brought division to Israel. As he went to his home at Gibeah, there went with him a band of followers, “men of valor whose hearts God had touched” (1 Sam. 10:26). Yet there were others, “worthless fellows,” who said, “How can this man save us?” These rebels “despised him and brought him no present” (1 Sam. 10:27). The coming of Christ has likewise divided the world. Some, our hearts touched by the gospel of God’s grace, have raced to Jesus’ cross to be cleansed of our sins and to live as his disciples. But there are many others who despise Jesus and withhold both their praise and their faith. Like Saul, Jesus “held his peace” during his life. But in the day of his return in glory, “with his mighty angels in flaming fire,” Christ will judge the nations (Mt. 25:31) and inflict eternal destruction on those who oppose his reign (2 Thess. 1:8-9).

When Saul was presented to Israel, the people cried out with all the optimism they could muster: “Long live the king!” (1 Sam. 10:24). What, then, shall we say to the Lord Jesus, who comes in the glory of his grace and power? Seeing him as one who excels all others, who died for our sins on the cross, and who reigns now forever in his resurrection life, we can surely echo the Israelites words with much greater hope. God in his anger gave Saul to Israel, but in his mercy has he given us his Son, Jesus Christ. If our hearts are opened by God to see Jesus in the glory of his grace, we will crown him with many crowns, each of us gladly yielding our hearts, and crying out to Jesus, “Long live the King!” His reign will never fail and never end, and those who bow to his throne “will reign forever and ever” with him in glory (Rev. 22:5).