

A Godly King

What is the secret to being a truly good national leader? Given the judgment of history, whether that leader is president,



Michael K. Olmsted

prime minister, emperor or king, human weakness is the one common denominator for all heads of state. Israel's first king, Saul, was consumed with emotional illness that played out in his hatred for David. David was a powerful military leader, but his immorality marked him and tore his family apart. Solomon was known for his wisdom and making Israel a powerful nation, but his rule was diminished by compromising political policies and allowing pagan religions back into the land of God's promise. Josiah, the young reformer, called Judah back to God, but one man cannot change the hearts of an entire population. The biblical account of Israel's kings is a saga of failure because, to the human eye, power appears too often as truth.

Democratic government was unknown when Israel was cementing its control over Canaan. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 records Israel receiving permission to have a king like other nations. All they have known is Moses, who was both their political and religious leader as they struggled through the wilderness and began learning to trust God. Now they have their own territory and want a structure of laws, a system of justice and a political system that offers stability. Distinctly for Israel God must be at the center of their individual lives, society and government. The history of the western world is written in wars and persecution involving both government and church. Even in the Old Testament there are obvious warnings that religion and politics is not always compatible. In 1 Samuel 10:1 Israel's king was anointed by God and granted power to defeat Israel's enemies. But in 1 Samuel 8:7 Israel's desire to have a king like other nations is seen as Israel's rejection of God as their king.

Moses grants Israel permission to have a king, but he specifies five qualities that this king must model if he is to lead them in the ways of God. Moses' words are demanding, but, if followed, they will show the world a better way to live.

First, Moses says: "One of your own community you may set aside as king over you; you are not permitted to put

a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community" (v. 15). Is this prejudice? No. The rest of the world had no concept of the one true God and could not begin to understand the history and purpose of God for a people who were to be powerful witnesses for God and his grace. The Old Testament carefully reveals how God is preparing the world for Christ, which will take generations and dramatic changes across the globe. When Christ was born not much had changed from their time in Egypt and even Israel failed to understand how God's promise became reality. The flow of God's plan of salvation was to be traced through the tragedies and joys of the people who knew both slavery and freedom. God would be faithful to them through their darkest hours.

Second, Moses says: "You must never return that way (to Egypt) again" (v. 16). Egypt was slavery, a destructive world of false gods, hopelessness and death. The world seduces us with promises of pleasure, success, wealth, self-importance and gratification. When death takes a loved one, or your finances collapse, or your child is crippled or your career falls apart, where do you turn for hope and meaning? Do you go back to the slavery and gods of Egypt? Or do you turn to the God who parted the sea, led you through the wilderness by a pillar of fire and smoke, fed you with manna when there was no bread, and led you to the Promised Land? You look to the future and the God who loves you beyond human limitations and distorted memories.

Third, Moses says: a king "must not acquire many wives for himself, or his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself" (v. 17). This advice clashes with the values of that day, when a king's wives and harem testified to his power and diplomatic connections with other rulers, and his wealth declares his power and the favor of his gods. The court of Israel was to be different from that of Egypt and Syria, which were built on the backs of the common people and regarded the king as absolute ruler. Israel's true king was always to be God. The mortal king was to serve God and the people.

Fourth, Moses says: the king "shall have a copy of (God's) law written for him in the presence of the Levitical priests ... he shall read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 17:14-20

observing all the words of the law" (vv. 18-19). I hear our politicians quote the Bible out of context or use it to try and justify their ideas. This king is to be accountable publicly before God, never forgetting he rules temporarily. He is not allowed to plead ignorance of God's law, he is to study that law every day with the guidance of a priest. No ruler is allowed to claim ignorance! Even Solomon, for all his worldly wisdom, failed to follow this instruction.

Fifth, Moses says: the king should not make the mistake of "exalting himself above the members of the community" (v. 20). Everyone stands equal before the throne of God. David's arranging for Uriah to be killed in battle so David could take Bathsheba as his wife is a blatant example of a king playing god for selfish reasons. Power does corrupt, not just kings, but anyone who has authority over others, from the poorest house to the palaces of government. The king's legitimate authority was to grow out of his submission to God.

The history of the forty-two kings of Israel and Judah illustrate all the ways those rulers failed to follow Moses guidelines. Among so-called Christian nations of our day there so many tragic examples of gov-ernment heads who have violated all of Moses' instructions and committed heinous crimes. Instead of talking about selfish or evil political leaders, we might consider how *we* measure up to biblical standards and what our personal votes say about our faith in God. Reaching beyond politics, how do you treat people who work under your authority? Do you every use your position at work, school or home to get what you want or take advantage of others? How can you use your influence or position to help others, right an injustice or change situations that harm fellow workers? Is the Word of God your guidebook in relationships, actions and values? Do you study the Bible regularly? Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 when answering what is the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you mind" ... and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). That puts life in a proper perspective for every Christian, and summarizes Moses' words concerning how a godly ruler should live.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.