

PASTOR'S NOTES. Biblical Perspectives on Politics... Part 1

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."

But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to 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. Just as they have done to Me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking Me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you." (1 Samuel 8:4-8, NRSV)

When we try to apply the Bible to the way we do our politics, we find that there is more than one perspective. This is largely because the Bible covers a span of over 2,000 years. Consider:

- 1. In the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were nomadic wanderers who owned very little land and had control only over their households.
- 2. In the time after, they were slaves for generations in Egypt, where they had no political influence at all.
- 3. After conquering the promised land, they were a confederacy of 12 tribes, and their leaders were those whose lives exhibited the hand of God at work (like Samuel above).
- 4. Then they chose Kings (from about 1020-586 BC) and ruled as a nation among other nations. Occasionally they were the dominant nation, but most of the time they were equal or less powerful than others. For the people, the King could either be just or he could be a cruel dictator. Likewise, local leaders could oppress their own people if they chose.
- 5. With the fall of the Kingdoms of Israel (721 BC) and Judah (586 BC), the people were a sort of slave nation, living in the land but under the control of Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks (from about 586-160 BC). There were Israelites who had authority by collaborating with the ruling nation, but they would have been seen as traitors to their people.
- 6. There was about a hundred-year span (from about 160-63 BC) where the Jews gained independence and exercised their own power over their people, sometimes oppressively.
- 7. But then Rome took over (63 BC), and during the entire time of the New Testament, the people again lived as second-class citizens with no political power at all. In fact, it is likely that the reason there are the instructions for slaves to obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18) was that most of them were slaves who had little prospect of ever becoming free.

So if we were to try to apply the Bible to our life of politics, we have to note that at different times, different ideas applied. Consider how today, if you are in a position of authority or influence, our country looks most like periods 3, 4 and 6 above, but if you are on or near the bottom of the social ladder, the country probably seems much more like periods 2, 5 and 7. So in the next couple of articles I will bring up scriptures that speak to those periods, but I believe still has much to teach us. For now, let's look back at the passage above, which is the time when the people of God were going from period 3 to period 4.

Samuel believes that God is not in favor of a king. They said they wanted to be "like other nations," and but they were meant to be a "priestly Kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). God says that

they are rejecting Him as King (1 Samuel 8:7). God is to be the true King. This idea continues through the Bible, right up to the plaque on the cross when Jesus is crucified. Notice how the story continues:

So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." (1 Samuel 8:10-20, NRSV)

The first kings of Israel, Saul and David, did not govern as Samuel warned, but it was only a matter of time before there would be kings who would do exactly those things, and much worse. The people wanted a king to lead them in battle, to be as or more powerful than the other nations around them. At various times the cost of this was their own freedom and livelihood. Hosea reminds them of this:

Where now is your king, that he may save you? Where in all your cities are your rulers, of whom you said, "Give me a king and rulers"? I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath. (Hosea 13:10-11, NRSV)

So many have put their trust in human leaders, but all of us struggle if we have power. King David sought to be obedient to God throughout his life, but he still used the power of his position to gain wealth, take another man's wife, and have her husband killed, among other things. Most of the other kings did not live up to his example. People look for leaders who they think align with their interests, but God looks for faithful people who lead the people in honoring the one true God and who treat the poor and weak with justice.

Our country's founders knew these verses, and that played a role in the decision that this would not be a land ruled by a King.

But just because there is no king does not mean we are clear from the corruption of power. In the next article I will remind us of some other scriptures that address the problems with any leaders, even if they have only limited power.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.