

"Set a King Over You Whom the LORD Your God Chooses"

Here you have a passage that envisions a time when Israel will want to have a king rule over them. In actually, they always had a king ruling over them. They had God as their king. But this passage envisions a time when that won't be enough for them. That won't satisfy them. They will instead decide that they want to set a human king over them.

This probably seems pretty anti-progressive to us today. What nation today would want to setup a king over them? I mean think about that, what new nation comes up today and says, let's setup a monarchy for our system of government. That's unheard of today. Instead, it wasn't that long ago that the trendy thing to do among nations was to get rid of your king. Revolution after revolution got rid of king after king. Yes, there are still some monarchies left in the world. But the popular thing to do nowadays is to setup a democracy or a republic. That's the wisdom of the day for dealing with the problems in a society.

Well, there would come a point back then in Israel's history, where they would believe that their problems in society could be solved with a king. That was evidently the trendy thing for them to do. They had existed for quite some time without a king. God was their official king. He had setup a system of local judges and elders to help keep the peace. Occasionally he would raise up some judges to act almost in a sort of kingly role in helping the people free themselves from their political enemies. You can read the book of Judges for that. But here in Deuteronomy this is before the installment of their first king. Here, Moses was their leader, but certainly not a king.

And so in this passage, God sees a time that Israel will one day want a king. This passage is permissive in nature, not imperative in nature. In other words, this passage doesn't demand that Israel setup a human king. But it does allow for Israel to do that if they want. Yet, when they did, God is giving them certain guidelines to follow in establishing a king. They weren't to pick a king like all the other nations. They were to pick a king of God's choosing.

And so today we'll look first at these principles for setting up a king in Israel. Second, we'll look at how this worked out with Israel's first three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. Finally we'll think God's ultimate choice of a king for his people. Hopefully it's clear to most of us that this ultimate choice is none other than Jesus; our Lord and Savior. But let's see how this passage gets us there.

So let's begin by looking at the principles for setting up a king in Israel. The question becomes what kind of king would Israel setup. There's two choices. The choice listed in verse 14 or the one listed in verse 15. Verse 14 says that they could set a king over them "like all the nations" around them. Verse 15 says that they could set a king over them whom the LORD chooses. Which would it be? Would they pick a king that resembled the kings of the nations around them? Or would they pick a king that fit God's description of the ideal king?

And so this passage tells us how God would choose a king. Look at verse 15. The first thing we're told is that this king must be a brother Israelite. He must not be a foreigner. Now some might think that is just a wise and pragmatic command. A foreigner might not have the same vested interest and emotional connection with the people as someone who was native born and physically related. But I believe this is more than just about that sort of practical wisdom. You see, this king would be ruling on behalf of God. He'd be enforcing God's covenant laws. A foreigner would not be a member of the covenant. And so this first requirement is about what this king must be. He must be a fellow Israelite who is under the covenant. As a fellow servant in the covenant, he would be called to lead the people in together keeping the covenant.

This passage then goes on to describe several things that this king must not do. Verse 16. He shall not multiply horses for himself, and he should especially not send people back to Egypt to get more horses. Now, horses back then were typically a way to increase your military strength. Having lots of horses not only showed how wealthy you were, but it very visibly said, "Look at how powerful my army is." It would have been a sort of display of power to their enemies. But the message God had given Israel time and time again was that they were to trust in God for military victory. God was the real king riding out before them into battle. God's strength would give them victory; not the might of the people; nor the military prowess of their human king. And so, the king himself must embody this attitude by not amassing an extraordinary amount of horses.

Of course, related to this, is this provision not to send people back to Egypt for horses. Egypt was one exporter of horses. But related to this is something seen later in Israel's history. When enemies threatened Israel, some of their kings would appeal to Egypt for military help. All of this was prohibited for the king to do. They must trust in God. The fact that God had freed Israel from Egyptian slavery meant that they must never return that way. There was no longer anything for the people of God in Egypt. They must not in any way become indebted to them again. And so the king of God's choosing would not lead the people back to their place of former slavery. Instead they'd lead them into trusting in God's victory.

Verse 17 goes on to prohibit the king from multiplying wives and wealth. The call to not have multiple wives probably especially has in mind the common practice of the day where kings would marry princesses from other foreign nations as a way to make peace treaties with them. But God had already warned in his law that the people weren't to marry those outside the covenant. They weren't to marry foreign wives because their heart could be led astray after the false gods of their pagan wives.

The prohibition against excessive wealth for this king was in part an issue of humility toward his brothers. Would he as king look to extract so much wealth from the people in such a way that exalted himself and became a burden on them? Or would he recognize his own humble position; that he was a fellow servant of God and that there was no reason to lift himself above his brothers. Of course, we all know that love of money is the root of all sorts of evils. The king of God's choosing would not place his trust in his wealth, or wives, or military strength. He'd humbly place his trust in God.

And so instead God says what the king should be doing in verses 18-19. When the new king becomes king, the first thing he should do is write out a copy of the law of God in a book, and begin to read it each and every day of his

life. Commentators like to point out here that the grammar doesn't necessarily mean that the king himself actually did the copying. He could have just had a copy made for himself. Well, that's true. But it certainly doesn't say the king couldn't be the one who actually physically did the copying. I started doing that this week with a book of the Bible. I started copying a little each day. It's actually a very good devotional exercise in and of itself. But the point here is that this king from the very start of his reign must be founded on God's word. He was to have his own personal copy of the book of the covenant. That would have been a pretty rare thing back then for an individual to have his own personal Bible. But the king was called to make one and then to read it every day. This king was to follow the path of blessing described in Psalm 1, that his delight would be, "in the law of the LORD" and that in this law he would meditate "day and night." That's the sort of king God would choose. One who was a man after God's own heart. Who saw his place as a servant of God and his covenant. To humbly enforce justice and the law of God over the people.

This daily meditation was to grow the king in godliness. It was to result in him fearing God; in training him in obedience; in increasing his humility; that he would not stray to the right or to the left in keeping God's commands. The result of this sort of kingship is listed in the final verse. Verse 20 says that this sort of kingship would prolong his kingship. It would result in a long reign. Not just for himself, but for his children as well. In other words God promises here that a godly reign as king would secure a dynasty of an ongoing kingdom in Israel. That's pretty amazing. God essentially promises here an ongoing kingdom to the king that properly leads the people.

And so this is the sort of king God would choose. This is the sort of king that the people must set over them, should they one day decide to have a king. This king was not the ultimate authority and strength like how all the other nations treated their king. No, I like how 1 Chronicles 29:23 describes King Solomon taking over for his father David. It says "Then Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD as king instead of David his father." There it doesn't say that Solomon sat on the throne of David, which was true, but it says, but on the throne of the LORD. That's what the king in Israel really was to be. A king under the true King; representing God who really reigned over the people.

Well how did Israel do in this? Did they follow these provisions for establishing a king? Let's consider the first three kings in Israel's history: Saul, David, and Solomon. Well, with the first king, the book of 1 Samuel makes it very clear that the people wanted the wrong sort of king. The people came to the prophet and judge Samuel in 1 Samuel 8 and demanded a king. But the text is very clear to show that they wanted a king like all the nations. The wording there is exactly like the wording in verse 14 of our passage. It's intentionally drawing a connection. The book of 1 Samuel goes on to say repeatedly that the way the people had requested this first king was a rejection of God as their king (1 Sam 8:7, 10:19). 1 Samuel 12 twice calls the people's request for this first king as wickedness. Why? Because they didn't have in mind the sort of king God would choose. They wanted a king like all the nations. That's in direct violation of this passage. Well, that's what they wanted, and so that's what God gave them. He allowed them to go down that path by giving them Saul as their first king.

Saul did some good things as that first king, and plenty of bad things too. But his fundamental mistake is recorded in 1 Samuel 13. There he directly

disobeyed God's Word. He didn't keep the law of God. Listen to what God tells King Saul through the prophet Samuel:

And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you. For now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue." (1 Samuel 13:13-14)

That's a pretty amazing response. God actually tells Saul that if he had kept his commandments, he would have given Saul an everlasting kingdom. When you hear that, you should think right back here to Deuteronomy 17:20. God promised the faithful king an ongoing kingdom to him and his children. That could have been Saul's. The language of such a kingdom to Saul is placed in terms of "forever!" That's a long time. But it was not to be for Saul, because he didn't keep God's laws. Instead God goes on to put a new king in power. This was a man after God's own heart. This was a king of God's choosing. God chose David to replace Saul as king.

Overall, David was a good king. He was indeed a man after God's own heart as king. He generally looked to read and follow God's laws day and night. Just read over the many Psalms written by David and you can get a sense of his passion for God's Word. And yet David himself was not perfect. He was a sinner. It's common knowledge that he committed adultery and then murdered a man to cover it up. He had his own lapses of judgment. But when he sinned, he brought these sins to God and asked for forgiveness and restoration. And God did forgive him. But the most profound thing about David's kingship is that God gave him a promise. Even though King David didn't perfectly keep all God's laws, God made him an amazing promise. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised to David that from his lineage, there would come forth an eternal kingdom. God promised David that he would take one of his physical descendants and establish his kingdom forever. What Saul in a sense failed to do, God gave to David. Again, you have to see this in light of verse 20 in our passage. David didn't do this perfectly by any means, but in God's grace, he was going to use David's line to bring about an eternal kingdom.

So then the question becomes, which one of David's sons would fulfill this promise? To which of them would God give an eternal kingdom? The next king for Israel was David's son Solomon. Was King Solomon going to be the fruition of this great promise God had made to David?

Well, the clear answer is no. King Solomon was highly exalted by God. He was granted great wisdom and many blessings. He was able to build the temple of God. But Scripture in no uncertain terms paints a picture of Solomon's short comings. In fact, if you compare 1 Kings chapters 10-11 closely against our passage here in Deuteronomy, the similarity is striking. The similarity, unfortunately, is in how King Solomon did all the things that this passage says the king should *not* do. 1 Kings chapter 10 describes all the silver and gold that Solomon amassed. It says in that chapter that he amassed a large supply of horses; and in fact 1 Kings 10:28 says that he imported them from Egypt. Then in 1 Kings 11 it says that he married many wives; seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Many of these wives were, as you could expect, foreign wives. And so 1 Kings 11:3 says that these wives turned his heart away from the Lord, just like what's warned here in verse 17 of our passage. Later in 1 Kings chapter 12 the people report how heavy of a yoke Solomon had made on them; suggesting that Solomon was not humble toward his fellow brothers either, as verse 20 requires either.

So when you match up all the prohibitions of Deuteronomy 17 against King Solomon, you get the impression that it was almost written for him. That's how clearly Solomon broke this passage. He was not a king of God's choosing in these actions, despite some of the good things he did. The result was that God ripped the kingdom away from Solomon. The nation split up after Solomon, with almost all of it becoming a separate northern kingdom. What was left in the southern kingdom called Judah was God's way of keeping a remnant for David. This was in light of God's promise he made to David that one day, one of his offspring, would be established over an eternal kingdom.

And so this brings us to our third point. Let's consider how all of this relates to God's ultimate choice of a king over his people. Well, we've already said this is Jesus. Hopefully you've already seen where we are headed here. God made an initial choice of a king. King David. But we've seen that King David was not the final king. He was a good king, though with his sins and problems. And yet God did promise him an amazing promise. That through one of his offspring an eternal kingdom would be established. Clearly, that wasn't Solomon. If you look at all of David's other offspring who reigned in the books of 1 and 2 Kings, it was none of them either. Ultimately this would be Jesus.

You see, the prophets foretold this. When Israel as a nation continued to struggle, even as they were brought into exile, the prophets kept reminding the people of the hope and promise given to David. That there would come someone from his line who would be the king of God's choosing. Isaiah 11:1 said that there would yet be a king from the stump of Jesse (who was David's father). Ezekiel 37 says that this promised king from David would reign forever over a restored kingdom, when God would make a covenant of peace with the people. Numerous other Old Testament prophecies repeat this promise in different ways. And when you get into the New Testament, this promised King is repeatedly identified as Jesus. I like how Revelation 17:14 describes Jesus. It says that Jesus is the Lord of lords and King of kings.

Jesus is the final answer to verse 15 in our passage today. He's the one God has chosen as king over his people. And what an amazing choice this is. You see, it's in Jesus that God's desire to rule his people finds fulfillment. And this passage that allows for a human king to rule his people finds fulfillment at the same time. That's because Scripture shows us that Jesus is both God and man. Finally, in Jesus, there's a perfect representative of God: Jesus is King, as the God-Man Messiah!

And Jesus' actions confirm that he is the king of God's choosing. On earth, he was not concerned with multiplying earthly wealth, earthly wives, or earthly horses. Instead he perfectly kept all God's laws. He even delivered God's laws to the people. He spoke and taught God's Word to all he came into contact with. He called others as well not to be focused on earthly wealth, but on storing up heavenly treasure. And he showed his humility, that in even though he was in the very form of God, he humbled himself to become a man, and then even to the point of death. And this death was not for no reason; it was the greatest act of humility, as he gave up his life for you and me. He gave up his life to save fallen humanity. He humbled himself to the point of death on the cross.

He did this to form the church, his one bride. We now look forward to his return when he will do two important things. He will gather up the church as his one bride. And in the picture of Revelation 19, he will ride out on a white horse from heaven, with an army made up of white horses from heaven.

Then at that day, he will ride in divine strength to conquer all God's enemies. This is our great and majestic king who reigns over an eternal kingdom. Those who are with this king, are called the chosen and faithful, Revelation 17:14. We can be with this king, by faith in him.

You see, that's the question we each have to ask ourselves today. Who will you set as king in your life? Will you set Jesus over you as your king? He is the king whether you acknowledge it or not. You can welcome him now and live. Trust your life to him. Turn from a life of rebellion against God, and ask him to come into your heart. If you do, then he'll begin a work of transformation inside you. And you will be on the side of Christ. If you are with Christ, then on that final day of judgment when he rides in with his holy army, you will not be touched with his judgment. That will instead be a day of celebration, as the church will be wed to Christ for eternity! And so, this passage in Deuteronomy called Israel to consider what sort of king to set over them. This passage calls us to consider the same question. We will each have some sort of king in our lives. Maybe it's money. Maybe it's fame and power. Maybe it's the lust of our eyes that rules us. Maybe for you it's something else or someone else. But this passage calls us to set Christ as king over our hearts and lives. Do that today in faith. Trust your life to him. Submit to him as you Lord today.

There's a final application from this that I'd like to make. If we've done this, if we've set Christ as our king, then that makes us a Christian. The Scriptures tell us that as Christians, God has adopted us as sons, and made us co-heirs with Christ (i.e. Gal 4:7). That means that we too have now become princes in this eternal kingdom. In light of this passage, how ought we then to live as a chosen prince of God?

Well, this whole passage can give you food for thought in that, but let's hone in on one thing particularly. Consider verses 18-19. The king was to make a copy of the law and read it daily. He'd essentially have his own personal Bible back then for his personal study. This should be our application today as well. This is what the chosen king's life should look like. Certainly this is fitting for the life of the chosen princes and princesses as well. We live in a day where it's so easy for each of us to have our own copy of the Bible. Let us read it and study it every day. The implication of this passage is that we should have daily devotions. God's royal family is one that daily studies his word! We are part of God's royal family. Let us daily study his Word. Not out of compulsion, but out of passion. Passion to know God better. Passion to know God's laws better. Passion to know his grace in Christ better. Passion for God's Word.

Maybe at times in your Christian life, you were fervently reading the Word daily. Maybe for some of us the dust has started to collect on our bibles. Last's month's issue of the magazine Modern Reformation had a picture of a Bible covered in dust with the words "Read Me" written through the dust; kinda like how you might write "Wash me" through the dirt on a dirty car windshield. If this has become your Bible, then I urge you brush it off. Become committed again today to daily studying God's Word. We are part of his eternal kingdom. Let's live each day then as princes and princesses of this great kingdom. Let's take our copy of the Word of God and keep it close to our heart each day. Amen.

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