The Duties of a King (Deuteronomy 17:14–20) 1 November 2026 KRCN

1. Samuel had grown old. He appointed his sons, Joel and Abijah, as the next judges. He did not sell the position to them; he passed it down to them. The problem was that what he passed down was the office of judge. An office cannot, by its very nature, be inherited. For something to be hereditary, it must be a status, such as that of a king.

2. Had Samuel been a king, it would have been perfectly natural for his sons to inherit his position. Kingship is something one is born into. An office, however, is different. We have said that Samuel, as a Levite, also served as a priest. Being a priest was not merely an office he held, but part of his status. Being a judge, however, was an office he held. By making that office hereditary, Samuel was acting in a way that was inconsistent with his status.

3. Now consider the sons who inherited Samuel's office as judge. According to 1 Samuel 8, they accepted bribes and perverted justice. The fact that they passed judgement tells us that they were carrying out the duties of judges. But accepting bribes? For that to be possible, their status would have to be different. It might be possible if they were kings.

4. The elders of Israel came with a demand: “Give us a king!” They were not asking for another judge. Since accepting bribes was not something a judge could legitimately do, they wanted to establish a king who could accept bribes and pervert justice without restraint. In fact, even before considering that, they were demanding something that was not theirs to demand as elders. They were seeking to appoint a king.

5. Their demand for a king was not a call for reform or progress, to bring the period of the judges to an end and establish a monarchy. Nor was it motivated by a desire to put the nation on the right course, or to build a just and fair society. What they were looking for was a king of their own—someone who would accept their bribes and pervert justice in their favour.

6. Therefore, the book of 1 Samuel is not presenting the transition from the period of the judges to the monarchy as a natural and inevitable development in history. Nor is it saying that this transition began because Samuel, as a judge, made his office hereditary and his sons accepted bribes. Those things were merely a pretext. The elders used that pretext to bring about a change in the established order.

7. Therefore, when the elders of Israel exposed the corruption of the judges and demanded a transition to monarchy as an alternative, their intentions did not arise from a genuine concern for the growth and development of the kingdom of God. They had another agenda.

8. With a king, they would no longer have to endure such inconvenience, would they? What inconvenience? The inconvenience of having what they offered labelled as a bribe. If Samuel were no longer a judge, there would be no one to condemn their practice of offering bribes to get their own way. It was as though they were complaining, “If only that rubbish truck were gone, we wouldn't have to put up with the foul smell!” Yet what they were asking for in its place was a sewage truck.

9. First, consider what it means to be a “king”. A king is not someone who is appointed or elected by others. Kingship is a status. One must be born with a diamond in one's mouth, so to speak. Thus, the hereditary nature of kingship means that no one else can interfere with the status of a king.

10. It is rather like the status of a believer. It is not an office one can attain through diligent study. Nor is it a position one can purchase by spending a great deal of money. Neither can one be elected to it. As with “salvation”, it is possible only when God causes a person to be born again. And, just as with Paul's Roman citizenship, it is a status into which one must be born.

11. But what are the elders doing? They are proposing to appoint a king themselves. The very fact that they are making such a demand is strange. If a king were appointed in this way, he would be a king in name only. In reality, he would be no more than a prime minister. Can someone who has been elected to office pass that office down to his children?

12. The problem, therefore, is not that the judges have done wrong and the people are demanding reform. It is not that people's thinking has progressed, but that they have become arrogant at this point. They believe that they themselves have the authority to appoint a king! The same is true when we consider the matter of “salvation”. People think of it as though it were something they could reform, or obtain through their own choice and election.

13. This is why Samuel now reminds the people of what their demand really means. To demand a king as a new institution to replace the judges is nothing less than declaring that they will no longer submit to God's rule! As the LORD says, “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (1 Samuel 8:7).

14. Now let us turn to Deuteronomy. As we all know, Deuteronomy contains the words God gave to the Israelites in the wilderness, before they had established themselves as a nation. At that time, God said to Moses: “When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, ‘Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,’ …” (Deuteronomy 17:14)

15. And so, this is precisely what happened in Samuel's time. Yet God had already spoken clearly to those who would entertain such a desire: “Be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your fellow Israelites. …” (Deuteronomy 17:15)

16. We shall consider a little later who such a person might be. For now, let us look at the next verse, verse 16: “The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them.” And again, verse 17: “He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.” (Deuteronomy 17:16–17)

17. Continuing with verse 18: “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 Levitical priests.” And verse 19: “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.” (Deuteronomy 17:18–19)

18. In other words, even if a king must inevitably be appointed by human hands, that king must, first of all, be someone chosen by God. Outwardly, it may appear that Israel is choosing him, but in reality, he must be appointed through God's choosing. Furthermore, when the elders of Israel demand a king, what kind of person should be considered as a candidate? Secondly, he must be one of their fellow Israelites. They cannot make a foreigner or someone from a neighbouring nation their king.

19. The person chosen in this way must have two kinds of obligations, as described in verses 18 and 19. There are things he must not do, and things he must do. Let us first consider what he must not do. This king is not someone who, like other kings, goes out to war, conducts diplomacy, or pursues economic development.

20. He must also make a copy of the Law, keep it beside him and read it throughout his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and carefully observe all the words and decrees of this Law. The picture we are given of this king, therefore, is entirely different from what we might expect. He resembles a scribe or a scholar far more than a conventional king.

21. Now, then, let us return to the question we set aside earlier. Who, exactly, is this king? Who is the king who can fulfil both of these conditions?

22. There are the words God spoke through Samuel when he found David: “I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do” (Acts 13:22). Historically speaking, then, the king who met these conditions was David, not Saul. And taking this a step further, the king is none other than Jesus, whom David foreshadowed.

23. Consider what Jesus did during His earthly ministry when He came as King. His entire life can be summed up as the fulfilment of everything prophesied in Scripture and every decree of God revealed in Scripture, without leaving a single thing undone. Right up to His death on the cross, His resurrection and ascension, and even His sending of the Holy Spirit!

24. To put it simply, God had intended from the very beginning to give Israel Jesus as their King. And when they asked for a king, God was telling them that Jesus was the one they should appoint as King. Of course, in Samuel's time, they would not have known clearly who He was. But if the thought should arise in our hearts that we need a king, then we must seek the one who meets those requirements—Jesus Himself.

25. Next come we believers, who have become brothers and sisters of Jesus. As Peter describes us, believers are a royal priesthood. This is because we died with Him on the cross and were raised with Him. This royal priesthood was what Samuel represented. It means that we, today, are the very people who possess that same character and status.

26. So now, as those who have followed Jesus Christ, the firstfruits of the resurrection, and have shared in His resurrection and new birth, what are we to do as kings in the kingdom of God, reigning for a thousand years? We are to make a copy of this Book of the Law, keep it beside us and read it throughout our lives, so that we may learn to fear God and carefully observe all its words and decrees.

27. As believers, you are not being called to fight wars or accomplish great achievements. Nor are you being called to pursue the various pleasures and happiness that people seek in life, finding easier and more convenient ways to obtain them. You have been invited to a feast of God's Word. You possess the status of kings, called to spend your entire lives fearing God and living according to His Word.

28. The catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” If you are a king, surely your answer would be to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever. If not, it would be only natural for you to answer that the chief end of man is to succeed in this world, to live a long and healthy life, and to prosper.