

“Leading People: Failed Kings”

1 Kings 15:25–26; 2 Chronicles 14:2–6; Ezekiel
34:8–12

The true story

Many Christians are surprised to learn that the Old Testament story is largely a tragedy. The Israelites, the ones through whom God is to rescue humankind, entered into a covenant with God and almost immediately broke it, setting the stage for what was to come—century after century of chasing after other gods and failing to simply love God and others. In all this, they were led by failed kings—bad shepherds—who led the people astray. Sure, there were some kings who got a good report card, but most did not. And the people proved unfaithful to the Lord, reaping the terrible consequences of their choices.

Setting the stage

After receiving the Law and building the Tabernacle, God led the Israelites to the Promised Land, the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They didn’t always make the trek willingly and at one point chickened out entirely, after which they wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years. But eventually, Joshua and the family of Abraham crossed the Jordan and entered the Land. When the twelve Israelite tribes conquered and settled in Canaan, they were not ruled by kings. Instead, the LORD God was their king and they were led by men and women called judges. Samson, Gideon, and Deborah were a few of these leaders.

Things did not go well in the time of the judges. The people drifted further and further from God, eventually doing what simply seemed right in their own eyes. They even began to clamor for a human king, so they could be just like all their neighbors. The last of the judges, a prophet named Samuel, confronted them about their desire for kings. Kings are *takers*, he warned. Kings *take* sons for his armies and daughters for his cooking. Kings *take* the best of the fields and the vineyards. Kings *take* property. *Take, take, take* (1 Samuel 8).¹ But the people didn’t listen; they persisted and God relented, granting their wish.

So, God found a king for his people. His name was Saul and he certainly looked the part, for “there was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else” (1 Samuel 9:2). Interestingly, so far as the people were concerned, Saul was chosen by lot (1 Sam. 10:17-27a).²

But despite Samuel’s anointing of Saul as the first king of a united Israel, Saul proved to be a disappointment. He might have looked like God’s king, but he showed himself to be disobedient to God, figuring that, as king, he knew better. Saul even tried to supplant Saul in some of his duties (see 1 Samuel 13-15 for more on Saul’s disobedience). And so, “The Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Sam. 15:35).

God chooses a new king . . . well, yes and no

God decides to replace Saul and sends Samuel to the home of Jesse, who lives in Bethlehem. Jesse has eight sons. Samuel is to fill his animal horn with oil for he is going to anoint a new king, though Samuel doesn’t yet know who it will be.



¹ This theme of kings as takers is one to keep in mind as we move through the stories of David. Nathan, Samuel’s successor as prophet to the king, would accuse David of this very charge. In the end, the people of God could count on one hand the number of good kings they had over a period stretching four centuries! Of course, good didn’t mean a capable military leader or a competent administrator, but a king who would lead the people back toward God.

² Choosing by lots, i.e., throwing the dice, was seen as a way of leaving the decision up to God, figuring that God would make the dice come out the way God wanted them to. This is the same method that the disciples used to replace Judas after Jesus’ ascension.

The first son, Eliab, is brought before Samuel. Like Saul, Eliab looks like he is from central casting. But God tells Samuel that Eliab is not the one. God won't look at outward appearances but at the heart. So, one by one, Jesse parades his sons before Samuel, who says that none of them have been chosen by God. Finally, Samuel asks if there are any more sons and learns that the baby of the family is out back tending the sheep.

So the young shepherd is brought in and Samuel instantly knows that he is the one. Yes, young David looks both healthy and handsome, but we know that God has looked on his heart and seen what God wanted to see. So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David, after which the Spirit of the Lord "came mightily upon David from that day forward" (1 Sam. 16:13). And, in the next verse, we learn that the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.

Do David and Saul know what has happened, that the young shepherd has been handpicked to replace Saul? "No" is the simple answer and the ensuing tension grows inexorably as the lives of these two men, one king and one a young shepherd, become ever more entwined. God's king, David, *will* take the throne. The only questions are when and how.

Thus, David's relationship with God begins when God looks into David's heart and finds a heart to God's liking. Despite all that lies ahead, God would confirm this choice when David finally sits on the throne of Israel. The prophet Nathan brings God's word to David, word that David's family would always sit on the throne of Israel. This dynasty would last four centuries until the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and deposed the king in 587BC. By the time of Jesus, the Israelites/Jews waited anxiously for a Messiah (which simply means "anointed one") from the house of David who would lead the people to freedom.

Sadly, we soon learn that even David is plagued by sinfulness. You probably think you know the story, but here's the unadorned basics: David sees Bathsheba bathing in her own home. He wants her. He takes her. He sends her away. . . . that's it. Read it for yourself. There is no hint of romance or love or goodness or morality.

The only adulterer is David, who uses his power as king to forcibly take (yes, rape) a woman who is married to another man. He even knows who she is. He knows that her husband is one of his top commanders!

Bathsheba is silent in the story until she informs David that she is pregnant. She is a victim of violence, not an adulterer. How could she refuse the king's summons? There is no indication that she knew why she had been summoned. Since her husband was one of David's commanders, the simplest guess would be that David simply wanted to talk to her about something. But not a single word of David's is recorded. He simply takes her.

And then . . . when she turns up pregnant, David makes another, even more terrible choice. He first tries to cover up his crime by having Uriah come home and sleep with his wife. And when Uriah refuses, David arranges for Uriah to be killed in battle. There is no good way to spin this. David chooses (there's that word again!) to murder Uriah, the husband of David's pregnant victim.

How could this be? Murder!?! David is the man after God's heart. God looked at David and chose him from among all men. Through Nathan, God made an everlasting covenant with David (2 Samuel 7).

This doesn't make any sense, no sense at all. Perhaps that is why David's taking of Bathsheba is so often read as a lovers' affair, skipping over the murder of Uriah. Sure, Bathsheba went on to marry David, but with her husband dead, she had to marry someone, for nothing is ever said about sons. You could even interpret the law of Moses as requiring that if David has not brought the death penalty upon himself (as he probably has), he is at least required to marry her (see Deuteronomy 22).

How can we be so sure that this is a story of David *taking*? First, remember that when the Israelites had clamored for a human king, Samuel had warned them that kings are *takers*. They'll take your sons, your daughters, your money, your livestock, Samuel said. King David took Uriah's wife and then his life.

But the more telling condemnation of David comes from the prophet Nathan, the same man who brought God's promise of an everlasting covenant. When Nathan finds out what David has done, he tells David a story of a rich man who "took" a poor man's lamb to serve to a guest. David is at first incensed by the story for he

knows that the rich man is guilty, even saying he “deserves to die.” Then Nathan thunders, “You are the man.” David has become the taker, deserving of death. And God promises that the destruction David wrought in Uriah’s household will fall on David’s family. That is exactly what happens. As the old saying goes, for David, it all went downhill from there.

David’s heart

This story is told only in the book Samuel and is skipped in the book of Chronicles, where David’s story was retold by those writing centuries later. It certainly makes sense to leave it out if you are telling the story of Israel’s greatest king, the one from whose family the Messiah must come.

But the story survived in the book of Samuel. David’s sin is even presented as the cause of the terrible events that would soon unfold. Why has God given us this story? What are we to learn?

Too often, this story is used as a warning about the dangers of lust and temptation, as if we need warnings. We know quite well that lust and arrogance lurk in all our hearts. The story can’t be merely a warning that those in power are nearly always takers – we know that too.

I don’t think this story is such a warning at all. Rather, it calls us to self-examination. We’d make a terrible mistake if we imagined that *we* could never do such things. David is the psalmist, the man with a heart seen by God, and he commits these unspeakable horrors. The story calls us to honesty about *ourselves* and about our life-with-God. Too often, Christians imagine that being “good” Christians means imposing perfectionism on ourselves and on others. This story ought to drive home the truth that such a way can never be our way. Eugene Peterson rightly notes that the Jesus way includes the way of imperfection,³ for David was a most imperfect man.

As you work through the stories of David, you often have to work hard to find the man that God found. But we often look in the wrong place. We need to look past his many sins and see his heart, as expressed in his many psalms. There, we find a man who knew that he needed to acknowledge his sin: “When I declared my sin, my body wasted away” (Psalm 32). He knew what his sin was doing to him: “There is no health in my bones because of my sin” (Psalm 38). He prayed for forgiveness: “Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee.” And he waited for the Lord: “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope” (Psalm 130).

You might pull out a Bible right now and take a few minutes to read, slowly and quietly, Psalm 51. The biblical title for this psalm tells us that it was David’s prayer after being confronted by Nathan for his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah. We don’t want to model ourselves on David, but we should ask ourselves these questions after reading Psalm 51: Am I truly as devastated by my sin, as David was by his? Do my own prayers begin: “Have mercy on me, O God”? Does my heart strive for God, even as I fall on my knees, thankful for the gift of God’s unfailing grace?

And the story goes on

Solomon, David’s son by Bathsheba (though not the child conceived when David took Bathsheba), ascended to the throne in his late teens. His story is told in 1 Kings 1-11 and 2 Chronicles 1-9.

Solomon would take Israel to the height of its economic, political, and military power. It was Solomon who built God’s temple in Jerusalem, providing a permanent home for the ark of the covenant. Solomon’s temple stood for more than four centuries until it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Solomon’s reign was also remarkable for its intellectual activity. Credited with writing thousands of proverbs and songs, Solomon was renowned for his wisdom. Solomon’s fame was widespread, attracting even the Queen of far-away Sheba to make a visit.

Sadly, Solomon, through his polygamy and the many temptations of great wealth, also sowed the seeds of Israel’s destruction. Solomon had a thousand wives and concubines, most of whom were foreign. His wives

³ from Peterson’s book, *The Jesus Way: a conversation on the ways that Jesus is the way*.

brought the worship of foreign gods into Israel and turned Solomon's own heart away from the Lord God and toward other gods (see 1 Kings 11). Despite the building of the temple, this abandonment of the covenant between God and his people could lead only to a bad end and would be the way of Israel's many failed kings.

The united kingdom of Israel had three successive kings: Saul, David, and finally, Solomon. The kingdom always struggled under the threat of rebellion and tribal warfare. Toward the end of Solomon's reign, Jeroboam, a leader among the northern tribes, led a rebellion against Solomon. Though Jeroboam was unsuccessful at the time, upon Solomon's death and some unwise decisions by his son and successor, Rehoboam, Jeroboam was able to split the kingdom in two.

The ten northern tribes followed Jeroboam, who became the first king of the northern kingdom, Israel. The largest Israelite tribe was that of Judah which, with the tribe of Benjamin, constituted the southern kingdom, Judah. Rehoboam was the first king of Judah (see 1 Kings 11).

From 1 Kings 11 forward, the book of Kings traces the history of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The successive kings of each kingdom are named and most get a report card from God! Most of the kings got a failing grade – they did what was evil in the sight of God (e.g., see 1 Kings 15:25). Only a few did what was right in God's sight.

Though the kingdoms would enjoy periods of peace and prosperity, both were on a path toward destruction and death after the death of Solomon. The northern kingdom, called Israel, lasted until 722BC, when it was swept away by the Assyrians. And it seemed inevitable that the same destruction would befall the southern kingdom of Judah.

A good king

Though every day was darker than the one before, even in the darkest valley, the GodWho-Is, the God of hope, faithfully keeps the promises he makes, bringing us to the boy king Josiah. There were very few and the last was a young king named Josiah.

Josiah took the throne of Judah when he was eight years old, in 640 BC. He would reign for thirty-one years, until 609 BC. The writers of Kings had this to say about Josiah: "He did what was right in the eyes of YHWH and followed completely the ways of his father⁴ David, not turning to the right or to the left." (2 Kings 22:2)

In addition to destroying the pagan altars and temples, Josiah began the restoration of Solomon's temple. It had fallen into disrepair and Josiah wanted to put things right in the temple of YHWH. During the reconstruction, the priests found a copy of the Law of Moses. Whether it was the entire Pentateuch⁵ or only the scroll of Deuteronomy, we can't be sure. The astonishing part of the story isn't that the scroll was found but that it had ever been lost in the first place. We don't know how long they had been without the written Law, but consider this: What if all the Bibles disappeared? Every one of them. From our homes, our churches, our libraries. Even from our hard drives and the internet. And all the ancient manuscripts as well. Every last one of them. And all the references and quotations in other writings. . . All of it simply gone, never to be recovered.

How would Christianity change? In our generation? Our children's? Our grandchildren's? Would the body of Christ survive? Could there be a church without the Bible? Could we rely merely on memory and tradition.

More than 600 years before Jesus, the people of God discovered that they had been confronted with these questions.

⁴ This is, of course, figurative. David was Josiah's ancestor but predated him by 400 years.

⁵ The Pentateuch, Greek for "five scrolls" is comprised of the first five books of the Old Testament. The Jews believed that the hand of Moses – virtually coming from God's mouth - had written those books. The five books also are referred to as the Torah, meaning "teaching" or "law."

The discovery of a recovery

Let's go back in the story a bit. Josiah's grandfather, King Manasseh of Judah (686-641 BC) embodied all that could go right and go wrong. His early years on the throne were an abomination to God, as he led the people to other gods. But imprisonment by the Assyrians brought genuine repentance to Manasseh, who, after returning to Jerusalem, tore down all the images of other gods and the altars used to worship them. Manasseh was succeeded by his son, Amon, whose short reign mirrored the terrible days of Manasseh's early years. After Amon's assassination, his son, Josiah, took the throne though he was only eight.

When Josiah was sixteen, we are told he began to seek God. When he was twenty he purged the kingdom of all the altars, tents, images, and so on that were used for the worship of foreign gods and he ordered the execution of the idolatrous priests. When Josiah was twenty-six, he led the people in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Everyone in the kingdom contributed wealth to this project and "the people did the work faithfully."⁶

In the course of the reconstruction, the workers made a staggering discovery. They found a copy of "the book of the law of the LORD given to Moses". It isn't the discovery of the book that should stagger us, it is the fact that they had lost it in the first place. When he learned of the book's recovery, Josiah tore his clothes in anguish and dismay for he knew that the people had not been keeping the covenant with God. But what was he to do next?

Josiah sent the scrolls to a prophet, Huldah, to confirm that they were actually the books of the law and to provide a prophetic⁷ interpretation. Huldah is especially worth noting, for she was a woman. The fact that she is acknowledged as a prophet of God in the patriarchal culture of the Israelites reminds us that God's work is never the province of only one gender. She offers two prophecies from God. First, Judah remains headed for destruction. Their sin had been great and the consequences of their sin cannot be avoided. Very dark and difficult times lay ahead. But she also bears this word – Josiah will reign a long time and will die before the darkness descends on Judah. Josiah has been responsive to God's word and humble, she tells him. He won't have to see Judah's destruction.

King Josiah then calls all the people to the temple, where he reads to them the entire "book of the covenant." After the reading is finished, Josiah pledges himself to a life of obedience to God and the covenant, and he makes the people do the same.

When Josiah went seeking God at the young age of sixteen, he could not have imagined that God would reveal himself to Josiah in this way, through the discovery of the long lost Torah. In the coming centuries, as the Jews were battered and torn by one oppressor after another, commitment to the collection, composition, editing, and copying of the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets became a prominent part of Judaism. And after the final destruction of the second temple in 70AD, Judaism became a religion built around the reading and study of these writings.

Exile

Despite the good work of Josiah, the centuries of neglect had done their work. The shadow of mighty Babylon loomed larger and larger. Exile, death, destruction—all of it lay shortly ahead. Next week, we will look at Exile from the perspective of a very talented Israelite, Daniel.

⁶ The book of Chronicles helps to fill in some of the details, for that book also tells the story of the Kings of Israel, though it is a more "cleaned-up" version with its own perspective on events.

⁷ It is important to know that prophecy in the Bible is much more a matter of *telling forth* God's word than it is foretelling the future.