

WHAT A KING SHOULD BE: READING 1 AND 2 KINGS

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Every book of the Bible reveals something unique about the glory of Christ. After his resurrection, Jesus explained to his disciples on the road to Emmaus how all of Scripture concerns himself. The hearts of his disciples burned within them as the Lord opened the Scriptures (Luke 24:32), and our hearts should experience the same as the Spirit of the living God enables us to behold the glory of the Lord in every page of Israel's history.

In 1 and 2 Kings, we learn that none of Israel's kings ultimately fulfilled God's plan for a just and merciful leader. It was as if the regal robes sagged over every king's slender shoulders with whopping necklines and drooping wrinkles, like a preschooler wearing his father's oversized t-shirt. No matter how hard commendable kings like Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, and Josiah tried, even they fell woefully short of the ideal due to their sinful hearts.

Yet even in these historical accounts, the word of God fills us with hope and leads to the burning heart of seeing Christ. "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). 1 and 2 Kings reveal God's merciful character and prepare the way for a true and better king.

Yearning for the Ideal King

Israel was a privileged nation that experienced many blessings from God, but it longed for something better. Most kings were far from commendable (only five were commended by the author), and not only did they not wear the mantle well, but they were often hell-bent on despising their calling and dragging Israel down with them to the deplorable depths of the surrounding nations.

For the better part of over 400 years, the book of Kings (the Hebrew Bible does not divide the books into two) describes a divided Israel searching for someone to fill out these robes who would worship God with total commitment, purge idolatry, and uphold the Law of God both personally

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and nationally. But instead, these royal leaders often made things worse. And the divided nation found itself unified only in disappointment and a communal yearning for the ideal king.

The bottom line for all 42 kings was that not one set of shoulders were broad enough to shoulder what a king *should be*. All were inadequate.

So why should a Christian read such a depressing, antiquated book like Kings that depicts both people and rulers who are consistently disloyal and besmirched with failures?

One reason is to behold and appreciate afresh the unmatched character of God's faithfulness displayed in the lives of an underserving yet beloved people. Sometimes, we see best when we do not see what is best. As you read Kings, you will undoubtedly be keenly aware of the frustration and longing that all of Israel deeply felt. Still, you will also encounter the wonder of the unsurpassed character of Yahweh, revealing his excellency and beauty. And in beholding his character, hope is kindled in our hearts for the one these kings are preparing us for.

Beloved of the Lord

There is an aspect of God's character in Kings that shines forth as the sun,

beckoning his people like flowers to bend towards their source of life and hope. Repeatedly, we see the unfailing mercy of God on display.

At first glance, the modern believer might feel a little challenged to connect his life to these 42 kings, especially the book's first king, Solomon (1 Kings 1). Not many can relate to his varied skill set, riches, responsibilities, and gifting. But the connection with the reader is not tethered to the income, wisdom, or achievements of Solomon. Rather, it's found in the story of his father, King David, who intentionally committed adultery and murder and tried to secretly cover up an illicit pregnancy until outed by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 12).

Tragically, David's sin resulted in the death of the innocent child born from the adultery he committed with Bathsheba. And yet, God's mercy is bestowed upon undeserving David with the birth of another child from Bathsheba whom David names Solomon, which means "peace." And because God wanted to communicate even more than the "peace" this child would later bring Israel, he sent Nathan the prophet to name the child Jeddediah, which means "beloved of the LORD" (2 Sam. 12:24-25).

God was still committed to his covenantal promises. His affection towards his undeserving people had not changed. Solomon, despite the circumstances surrounding his parents, was to be "beloved of the LORD." No matter his accomplishments or moral failures later in life, every time the name of David's son was mentioned, it was a testimony and reminder of God's unfailing mercy to a failing people—a people *beloved of the LORD*.

You see, before Solomon was the envy of the Queen of Sheba, before he was a world-renowned architect, before he was Israel's most successful king, he was first a child of grace. This connects directly to the story of our lives. We too can marvel at the reality of being a 'child of grace' and 'beloved' by God because of His unmerited mercy shown to us in Christ, mercy shown to "brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose [us] as the firstfruits to be saved" (2 Thess. 2:13).

Mercy for Manasseh

Another example of God's merciful character shining forth in the middle portion of the book of Kings is the story of Manasseh. Despite a godly heritage (Manasseh's father was King Hezekiah), Manasseh ushered in a culture

of death to the nation of Israel unlike any king before him by purposely reversing every one of his father's godly reforms.

Countless prophets and innocents were slaughtered during Manasseh's reign. (Tradition names Manasseh as the king who ordered the slaying of the prophet Isaiah by sawing him in two). Altars to Baal and Asherah were erected everywhere, while Manasseh encouraged the practice of witchcraft, fortune-telling, homosexuality, and the worship of the starry host. He not only burned his son as an offering and provoked the Lord to anger with flagrant evil (2 Kings 21:6), but he also set up a phallic idol in the middle of the Temple where tapestries of illicit designs were hung in the holy places, constituting a brothel in the midst of the most sacred of sites.

His reign is a turning point in the history of Israel, a tipping point of no return. Israel will go into exile, and Manasseh's deliberate rebellious she-nanigans were to blame (2 Kings 21:11-15).

And yet, after Manasseh was humbled by God through Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, he cried out to Yahweh, who was said to be "moved by his entreaty" (see 2 Chron. 33:15-17 regarding his genuine repentance). Manasseh's story proves that God's heart of mercy is shown even to the vilest of sinners. He longs to be gracious with the wayward and the undeserving! He is "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:6).

Friends, this is astounding! Even Manasseh? Yes! And there is mercy for you and me as well. How? Because Jesus' shoulders were broad enough to bear the weight of the wrath of God for every heinous sin, and his innocent blood was shed that even the worst of the worst is not beyond the reach of his hand or the scope of his mercy.

The Triumph of God's Faithfulness

One more instance of God's mercy comes at the end of the book. The last four verses of the book of Kings strangely focus on Jehoiachin (also known as Jeconiah), the king who surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and was carried off to Babylon only to remain imprisoned for 37 years while in exile. Unexpectedly, after Nebuchadnezzar dies, his son Evil-Merodach frees Jehoiachin, exalts him among all other captive kings, provides for him at the king's table, and gives him a pension to provide for his own needs (2 Kings 25).

Surely, this is a kindness and mercy of God to a disgraced king. But it is much more. This mercy extends beyond King Jehoiachin to the entire nation because it reminds the reader that a living relative of David survived the invasions, sieges, and deportation. He was a living relative who had a son while in captivity (Shealtiel), who in turn had a son in exile (Zerubbabel), and these men carried on the Davidic line that would one day produce the long-awaited Messiah (Matt. 1:1-17).

God's highest mercy is his faithfulness to the covenant promises he made to his covenant people. Despite the hot mess the vast majority of the reigns of the kings of Israel embodied, God's faithfulness and mercy triumphed still. His promises are sure! His mercy not only trumps their failures but yours and mine as well. "Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds" (Ps. 36:5).

Only a King whose shoulders are broad enough to keep covenant even unto death, to safeguard all his promises and extend unfathomable mercies to his beloved could ever qualify to fill out the royal robes of righteousness that were befitting the ideal king. From Solomon to Manasseh to Jehoiachin, the book of Kings produces a longing Jesus alone could fulfill.

Only Jesus is what a king *should be*. Only he could shoulder such a burden and immaculately wear the royal robes so well. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever.

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