

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: Saul

SERIES: 1 Samuel

SCRIPTURES: 1 Samuel 8-15

SPEAKER: Shaun Kipe

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**Credit to Eugene Peterson Commentary; Bible Project (Tim Mackie);*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church. It is good to worship with you today. Everybody here in the room and also to those of you tuning in on the live stream.

We're taking 6 Sundays to study the book of **1 Samuel** in your Bible. Looking at some of the major characters and events in the book and trying to discover how they relate to our lives today.

And a few weeks ago, I had shared with you that in the bigger context of the Bible 1 Samuel is the story of the transition of leadership in Israel from judges to Kings. For many years the nation of Israel, is living in the Promised Land led loosely and not well, by a group of judges and so in 1 Samuel chapter 8 the people of Israel ask for a king.

And today we want to spend a few minutes looking at the first King of Israel.

I. King Saul

And, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, we can't get into all of the details of Saul's story. Today's message is gonna cover chapters 8-15, I'm just gonna read all 7 chapters to you today and that will take up our thirty minutes and you can just sit and listen. I'm just kidding. Can't get into all of the details, so I want to pull out

three important ideas that come from this Saul's story that I think relate to our world today. Ok? So first...

A. God works even in those moments when people reject Him.

(pg. 92-93 in Peterson's commentary)

One of the more interesting tensions we find as Israel makes this transition from being led by Judges to being led by Kings is that, it becomes hard to tell if this is God's will for his people or if God simply acquiesces to the desire of people. **Is Kingship a good thing or not?** So before we read a part of 1 Samuel 8...let me read to you a small paragraph from Deuteronomy. This is written a perspective, before Israel is a nation settled down in the Promised Land. Ok, so many years before 1 Samuel.

Deuteronomy 17:14 - ¹⁴ 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," ¹⁵ be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses.

This passage makes it sound like the idea of Israel having a King to rule over them is not such a bad idea. God doesn't seem to have an issue with it. There are not warnings here against it. In fact, it seems as if God thinks this might be a good idea and he'll even show them who should be king. It sounds like Kingship is an ok part of God's plan, right?

But when we get to 1 Samuel 8, the perspective seems to change...significantly. This is where we start to see the tension in Scripture. Almost like the writer of Deuteronomy and the writer of 1 Samuel had differing opinions on the idea of kingship. So, 1 Samuel 8.... **all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways;**

So you get the picture, Samuel was in training to be lead priest. He becomes lead priest. He is essentially leading the nation as priest/judge...loosely. But he's old. And his sons are not fit to take over the leadership responsibility.

now appoint a king to lead^{bl} us, such as all the other nations have.”

And, from the book of Deuteronomy, you might expect to read that...Samuel said, “Ok. No problem. Let's ask God to show us who the king should be.” But that's not what we get.

...this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.

In other words, in asking for a King...it now appears that the people are rejecting God as their King. And that is not a good thing. And Samuel doesn't think it's a good thing. It displeased him. This request, in a sense, is a rejection of God.

And so Samuel, goes back to the people and he actually tries to change their mind. He gives them this long list of warnings about what they should expect if they get a King. He says, just so you know, when you have a king he's going to enslave you, tax you and he'll take your crops, he will take your wealth and he will take your families and your children and he will start to control your lives...

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. ²⁰ Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”

²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD.

²² The LORD answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.”

And so we find this tension, it appears from this passage in 1 Samuel that, God allows Israel to have a king even though this may not have been His choice for them.

Now, here is what is fascinating about this story. There are two sort of practical applications that I think we can learn from this.

1. Not everything that happens in life is God's will.

Do you ever wrestle with that concept? If God is all-powerful and we use the language of "God being in control"...does that mean that everything that happens is His Will. This story seems to say, no.

God allows individuals, families, communities, nations to make choices that go against his will. God does not force Himself and His way of life or His will on us. Christianity is not simply about "human robots" in God's cosmic scheme of existence.

What this means is that all of us must **be thoughtful as we make decisions in life.** Because the decisions we make, will have real life consequences and can even impact and change outcomes.

John Ortberg, **"Very often God's will for you will be, "I want you to decide," because decision-making is an indispensable part of character formation. God is primarily interested in the character forming business not forced-behavior-modification.**

God does not just eliminate the consequences of our decisions and make His will happen. Sometimes in theology this is called "human freedom." As human beings we are not just robots. Life is not simply the result of cause and effect and that things in our world or individual lives couldn't be different than what they are.

But rather that our decisions, our choices have an impact in the world. For good or for evil. And while there may be times where God steps in and effects outcomes, it

seems that from stories like this, God also allows outcomes that he wouldn't necessarily have desired. This should cause all of us to think long and hard about the decisions we make in life and the possible outcomes of those decisions.

In fact, one of the very first stories in Scripture is about a couple in a garden who was faced with a choice. To eat or not to eat from the tree. And God's desire, it seems would have been for them to choose wisely and not eat. But he allowed them to make a choice that went against his will. And their choice had consequences. Long-lasting, life-changing consequences.

Israel's choice for a king had long-lasting, life changing consequences. 500 years led by kings. And if you're familiar with the stories of the kings of Israel, you will know that most of those stories are filled with failure. The Kings did exactly what Samuel warned the people they would do. The Kings were often selfish, self-serving, disobedient, and regularly forgot God and following his laws.

And so the experiment of "being led by Kings" did not lead to a nation or group of people who lived contented, thriving lives. **God allows us to make choices and those choices have consequences.** As we make our way through life, we should be incredibly thoughtful about the choices we are making.

Now, I realize this idea sounds a bit intimidating. The choices you make have effect in this world for good or for evil. That is a huge responsibility. It's why some people, simply dread making decisions.

So while we want to learn to take decision making seriously...here's the second part that I love about this story. We want to taper this sobering reality with another reality and that is, that even...

2. When we choose against God's best design, He continues to work out His plans for humanity.

While our decisions carry great impact in the world, we must always be aware, that the ultimate outcome of humanity and our lives and this world sits comfortably in God's capable Hands.

When we choose against God's will, he doesn't abandon us. On many occasions the Israelites wondered if he did. They rejected God and went down the kingship path. But God did not abandon them. Time and again, He stepped in and made himself known and His presence felt among the people.

And, and not only does God not abandon the people, he actually chooses to work through or we might say redeems their poor decision. Because many years later, even though the idea of Kingship may not have been his choice, he will choose to save his people by sending them a "king." In fact, he will become a king himself. That title will be hung on a cross above his head. He will claim rightful kingship. But not the kind of King that failed his people, the kind of king that saved his people.

I believe the theological concept at work here, is **grace**. That even when we fail, misunderstand and make poor choices, when we eat from the forbidden tree, when we reject God and ask for a king...God continues to work out his purposes in our lives. And I think that's grace.

There's hymn we sing sometimes here at Five Forks that talks about this concept. It starts off with these great words "Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt." It means that even when we choose against God's will, he graciously redeems our poor choices.

Sometimes we get stuck in our own decision-making because of the huge responsibility and we're not sure exactly what is the right choice is and we might even be afraid that we'll mess up God's plan for our lives. Or maybe we've made one of those poor decision in life. And we wonder, have we ruined our lives for good. The

answer in this story is no. Our poor choices, bad decisions don't have to be the final word. We learn from the story of the Kings, God does not abandon us.

And so you have a decision to make this week. You will make choices about your life, your behavior, the words you will speak, the emails you will send. And you must take that responsibility seriously. Because your choices carry significant impact. But, once you've done the hard work and thoughtful work...then you move forward with confidence, knowing that God will continue work out His plan.

That even in our failure and mistakes, God will work! He will not abandon you.

Second, one of the lessons we need to understand in this transition in Israel's history from being led by judges to being led by Kings is that:

B. God's Kingdom is not dependent on any particular form of government.

I want you to follow me on this for just a moment, because I think this an important concept for us to grasp, very practical in today's world.

One of things that we see in the story of the Bible from beginning to end is the survival of God's people in all kinds of situations and circumstances.

God's people existed, first of all, as **a nomadic family** wondering around the Mesopotamian desert, that was Abraham and his family. Then they ended up **as slaves** in Egypt. And for 400 years God's people lived and survived and carried out their faith in slavery, under the rule of a ruthless, foreign empire.

Then they escaped and lived for 40 years, as **a nomadic wondering herd** in the desert. With no real central government...simply under the leadership of Moses.

Then they entered the Promised Land and settled down and lived under the sort of vague, loosely constructed, hands off leadership of **the judges**.

Then followed by **a time of exile** and during the time of Jesus often living under **Roman oppression**, occupied by foreign leaders.

And here in 1 Samuel they ask for **a King**. And even though they are warned this isn't going to go well, they still want a King. And so God's people lived under the rule of Kings for over 500 years.

For us today, it's easy to think that **democracy** is the God ordained form of government.

Sometimes people are paranoid, afraid, concerned that if American Democracy falls, so does Jesus' Kingdom. But Scripture teaches us that God can work out his plans and carry his Kingdom forward regardless of any particular form of government. He's been doing it for over 3,000 years.

And please listen to me carefully, there are incredible benefits to our democracy in America. I am so grateful for the advantages and privileges that we have in this country. We are very fortunate...just as long as we remember Jesus Kingdom is not dependent on or limited by any one form of government.

One of the reasons I believe that this matters, is because when we start to believe that following Jesus and his Kingdom are dependent on one specific form of government, we tend to become "power-seeking."

We have to make sure that, that particular form of government maintains power. And the allure of having controlling power soon starts to corrupt our faith and even our individual lives.

Gaining and maintaining power becomes the driving force of our faith. And you see, the problem with that, is that that core motivation, gaining power and control for our

faith is often in contradiction to the Kingdom we actually belong to. Our King came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Our King made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

The church, God's people have struggled to do well at being in positions of power. We often lose sense of our core identity. Not that we want to be "persecuted" or mistreated...just that it seems in the history of Christianity we tend to do better from a place of weakness rather than strength.

And so we must be very careful to remember that God's Kingdom is not dependent on any one particular form of government. From nomadic wandering herds to slaves to judges to kings to exiles to a Roman oppression to democracies...God's people have continued to exist. Because his Kingdom is not of this world.

The last thing we see in Saul's story is...

C. The conflicted human condition.

Don't you wish life was simple...black and white? Good and bad, right and wrong. Plain and simple. But life in general and even the struggle within our own selves is rarely so simple. We often find ourselves a mixed-up lot. (See Peterson Quote pgs. 125!)

This, in many ways, is the overarching picture we see in the story about King Saul. Was he a good guy or a bad guy?

There's **the good...**

His story starts well. In fact, he's chosen by God to be the first King.

1 Samuel 9 - Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel: ¹⁶ "About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel..."¹⁷ When Samuel caught sight

of Saul, the LORD said to him, “This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.”

He’s God’s first pick, right? If selecting Kings in ancient Israel we’re done NFL draft style. Samuel would walk out on center stage and say, “With the first pick in the year 1000 BCE, King selection draft. God selects...Saul, a head taller than any man from the tribe of Benjamin.”

And when Samuel tells Saul that he has been chosen he comes across so sincere, innocent, humble...

²¹ Saul answered, “But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?”

He seems like a really good guy. Near the beginning of his story there are examples of **Saul being filled with God’s spirit. (1 Samuel 10:9; 11:6)**

There are examples when he first comes to power and starts defeating his opponents, where he seems to show them mercy. And so we have all these examples of **Saul the good guy.**

But that’s not the whole story. What happens over the next number of chapters is that Saul, begins to spiral out of control...into a character of terrible evil. He becomes a power-hungry, greedy, abusive tyrant...to the point where God rejects him as ask King. So turn with me for a moment to **1 Samuel 15.** This the beginning of the end for Saul.

We begin to see his deterioration, it’s a sad and tragic story. And I’ll just warn you, this is not an easy one for us to talk through. I’m not even personally convinced I

have this sorted out. But let's talk about it and see if we can muddle our way through, ok?

As King, Saul is to eliminate the threats to Israel's Kingdom. Like the Philistines who we met last week or the Amalekites who we'll meet today. In chapter 15, Saul receives some pretty clear and direct instructions from God.

1 Samuel 15 – “go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy^[a] all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.”

Ok, let's pause here for just a moment, these kinds of texts are very important for me to point out. If you've been around here for any amount of time, you know we do this fairly regularly with passages like this.

When we read violent commands like this, *“it is ok to not be ok with them or to feel uncomfortable with them.”* There are all different kinds of ways that scholars, theologians, followers of Jesus go about making sense of these kinds of passages. None of them fully satisfy. But...

One way of dealing with passages like this, is called **“accommodation.”** The idea is that God accommodates himself in certain ways, in order to work and act in the world. In this case, God accommodates himself to the brutal, ancient context of human civilization 3000 years ago, he meets them where they are at, and seeks to move them to a fuller and better understanding of who He is.

It's hard for us comprehend how such a brutal context of life was just the norm in that world, from our modern perspective. But to say, “imagine a world without brutal tribal warfare” in the ancient world, would be like saying in our modern world today, “imagine a world without cars”. We wouldn't have a category to understand a world without cars. Ancient tribal societies couldn't imagine a world without brutal tribal

warfare. And so God works with us, today, reveals himself...in a world in which cars are an essential aspect of life. God accommodated himself to the ancient world, where “brutal tribal warfare” was an essential aspect of human existence, even though this wasn’t God’s will for humanity.

Which means, we do not believe that this kind of command is God’s intention for all people, all nations, at all times.

To take this conversation one step further, as Anabaptists, however go about explaining this gruesome command, we believe that we must do so **through the lens of Jesus**. This is called a **Christocentric** reading of the Bible. We try to make sense of what read through the lens of Jesus. And when we look at Jesus, his life and what he taught, we say, “this command cannot be a universal command or principle to live by for all times and all places.”

I just want to acknowledge that. We’re not gonna sort that out today.

So with that important caveat in mind. One of the things that stands out in the story to an ancient reader, but not to our modern ears, are the specifics of this command.

The phrase... **“totally destroy”**, according to the logic of the story and in it’s ancient context, was a way of saying **“this war is not to be fought, King Saul, for your personal benefit and pleasure, success”**...in order to gain wealth, power and status. In other words, Saul you may not wage war for motivations of greed and self-aggrandizement! You don’t destroy others, in order to make yourself rich and powerful and comfortable. And so this is where we see the deterioration of King Saul.

The Bad...

1 Samuel 15 - ⁷ Then Saul attacked the Amalekites...⁸ He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. ⁹ But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat

calves^[b] and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

¹⁰ Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel: ¹¹ “I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.”

So, do you see what Saul does? He keeps the wealth for himself. If you follow the big picture...what the author, again according to the logic of this ancient story, wants us to see is that Saul's heart is becoming corrupted. He is choosing to deliberately disobey God's direction. More specifically he is choosing the way of greed and power and personal success over God's way.

It's a fascinating and yet tragic image. God's chosen, who seems to get so much right at the outset, falls into corruption and evil. Saul often comes across as mix-mash of good and bad, humble and proud, right and wrong. And I just wonder if some of us can relate.

1. We too are conflicted.

There are days when we get it right. I want to be patient with kids. I want to be generous with my wealth and resources. I want to have compassion for the poor and weak in our society. And I get it right. And then there are these other days, where I lose my temper, I become greedy with my wealth/resources and ignore the lot of the poor and weak in our world.

It's interesting in the New Testament there is another Saul, who becomes known as Paul...but who talks about this same sort of internal conflict we all wrestle with in our lives...**Romans 7:15 - ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.**

This is part of the human experience, isn't it? You've felt this before.

And that leads into the second practical application here, a warning about...

2. The allure of wealth and power.

What is it, specifically, that was at the heart of Saul's downfall into disobedience and corruption...the desire for wealth and power. He wanted to keep the spoils of war for himself.

Obviously, we live in a much different world today. But, I do wonder if the allure of wealth and power is still very much at the heart of tragic downfalls, whether in our individual lives or as nations. What is it in our world today that would cause us to compromise on the way of Jesus...perhaps more than anything else it is greed, materialism, a desire to be in control and to have power.

Jesus spoke a lot about this...**It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven.** (Matthew 19). And Paul wrote, that **"Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.** (1 Timothy 6)

That allure of money and power started to consume Saul's heart and in the end he traded obedience to God's way for greed and accumulation. It's a warning to us as well.

So there you have it...King Saul a mix-mash of good and bad, right and wrong. An ancient king from history...and yet we find our own stories, oh so closely tied up in his. And for all of us, the challenge is...will we have the courage to obediently follow the way of Jesus.