

# THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

## 1 Samuel 10:17-27

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One of the most well-known authors of the Victorian era was a man by the name of Rudyard Kipling. Remember the story and later Disney movie called *The Jungle Book*? He wrote that as well as a number of other books. One of them was a novella called *The Man Who Would Be King*. It was about two former British soldiers in the late 1800's, disreputable rascals, who went looking for adventure and ended up pretending to be something other than what they were. Journeying to a distant kingdom in Afghanistan, they chanced upon an opportunity for one of them to take upon himself the role of a divine king. Their deception worked for a little while, but ultimately it ended tragically. The king lost his life at the hands of those who had once worshipped him, and his partner returned to India, a broken and impoverished fugitive. The title of this sad tale also identifies another individual, one who can be found within the pages of the Bible. His name was Saul. Like the imposter in Kipling's story, he too was a "man who would be king." But in reality he never quite lived up to that expectation.

So this morning let's take a look at the man named Saul and why he failed to be a king who would rule both wisely and well. First of all, let's examine the passage of Scripture which is the focal point of this message. Samuel, Israel's Judge, had called the people to meet him at Mizpah, the place where they had defeated the Philistines. He reminded them of their past, beginning with their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and how God had continued to protect them from their enemies. Now, however, they were rejecting God's leadership and wanted a king to rule over them, like all the other nations around them. So God was going to grant their request, and that's why they had gathered together at Mizpah. Through an elimination process, first the tribe of Benjamin, then the clan of Matri and finally Saul, from the family of Kish, was chosen. He was the one whom God had chosen to be the king. However, no one could find him because he was hiding in the baggage of the encampment. Finally he was recognized and brought before the people.

That's a strange beginning for someone who is to be a king, and it's even stranger because Samuel had already anointed him with the oil of kingship in a private ceremony. The assembly at Mizpah was a public confirmation of what had previously taken place. Furthermore, after he was anointed by Samuel, the Spirit of God came upon Saul in great power, and it was a transformational experience, evidenced by his ecstatic behavior. People were asking, "What has happened? Has Saul become like one of the prophets?" You would have thought, therefore, that Saul would have been standing fairly close to Samuel, knowing that he was the new, divinely appointed king, not hiding in the baggage. So why such strange behavior? Was it an expression of humility? No, it was fear. Saul was actually afraid. He did not feel up to the challenge of being a king. When Samuel met Saul for the first time and hinted at what was about to take place, Saul had responded by saying, "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" (1 Samuel 9:31)? In other words, Saul did not have a very high opinion of himself. In fact, today we would say that he suffered from an inferiority complex.

Of course, he is not the only one who has suffered from a self-image problem in the pages of the Bible. God seems to have a habit of choosing people who do not think too highly of themselves. For example, Moses begged off when the Lord spoke to him at the burning bush saying, "I'm not a good a speaker. You don't want me!" And remember Gideon, that great warrior of the Lord? When God confronted him, he essentially used the same words that Saul did. He said, "I'm a nobody, the least of the least." There was, however, a big difference between Saul, and all of these other divinely appointed leaders. Once chosen, they placed their faith in the Lord and not in themselves. They were willing to dare to do the impossible because they were trusting in the strength and guidance of the Lord. Saul, unfortunately, was never able to follow in their footsteps. He could not escape from himself.

On two separate occasions, his lack of confidence both in himself and in the Lord got the best of him. The first is recorded in 1 Samuel 13:1-15. Saul had gathered his army together at Gilgal, and as in the past the Philistines were assembling another mighty army. Now Samuel had told Saul to wait until his arrival before offering a sacrifice prior to the battle, a plan of action similar to what had taken place at Mizpah years earlier. The problem was Samuel had not shown up at the appointed time. In fact, Saul and the Israelites had waited seven days and still no Samuel. Things were becoming desperate. The Israeli soldiers were scattering and some had even deserted. Taking matters into his own hands, Saul took upon himself the role of a priest and sacrificed the fellowship and the whole burnt offerings. No sooner had he finished than guess who showed up? Samuel arrived and it was not a pleasant meeting. Saul tried to explain away what he had done. He said that he was afraid that the Philistines would attack before he sought the Lord's favor. So he felt compelled to offer the sacrifices. Samuel would hear nothing of it. He said, "You have acted foolishly. You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time" (1 Samuel 13:13). So what had Saul done? Simply stated, he had presumed to be that which he was not. He was not a priest. He had no right to offer the sacrifice. He had usurped Samuel's authority. Furthermore it was an indication that he was inclined to usurp anyone's authority, even the Lord's, if it got in way of what he wanted to do.

The second incident, which is recorded in 1 Samuel 15:1-36, was much more serious. Going all the way back to the days of Moses, the Amalekites, a group of nomadic tribes, had been a sworn enemy of the Israelites. They had done everything that they could to harm God's people. So finally the Lord said that the time had come to end the aggression of these enemies. They were to be utterly and completely destroyed. That was the instruction that Samuel gave to King Saul. King Saul, however, had other ideas. After the battle was over, he created a memorial to himself commemorating the victory. Furthermore, he kept some of the plunder, especially the best cattle and sheep, and he even spared the life of Agag, the king of

the Amalekites. In a word, Saul wanted to be seen as the great and gracious victor of his enemies.

All of that bravado, however, came crashing down when Samuel arrived. Walking out to greet the aged prophet, Saul boldly declared that he had carried out all of the Lord's instructions. "Why then," Samuel replied, "do I hear the bleating of sheep and the lowing of cattle?" In response Saul desperately tried to make excuses. He said that all of this remaining plunder was being kept for a final sacrificial offering to the Lord. Samuel knew better and responded in wording that is just as compelling today as it was when it was first spoken centuries ago, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry" (1 Samuel 15:22-23). Saul had attempted to deceive the Lord. He had become a rebellious servant of God, arrogantly assuming that he had the right to disobey the one who had anointed him to be the king of Israel.

What followed is one of the most heartbreaking scenes in the Bible. Pleading to be forgiven, Saul begged Samuel to stay and go with him to worship the Lord. Samuel refused and turned to leave, visibly expressing his displeasure with all that had transpired. Desperate to not be rejected in front of his soldiers, Saul reached out and grabbed Samuel's cloak, tearing off a portion of it. In response Samuel turned and said, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from your grasp today and given it someone else, someone better than you." It was the beginning of the end for the man who would be king.

So what if anything does all of this have to do with you and me? What can we learn from this sad account in the ancient history of Israel? Simply put, we should never allow our desire for self-esteem to get the best of us. Years ago a man by the name of Robert S. McGee wrote a book entitled, *The Search for Significance*. Speaking about our desire for self-esteem he wrote in his introduction, "We continue to seek our security and purpose from worldly sources: personal success, status, beauty, wealth, and the approval of others. These rewards may fulfill us for a short time, but they soon lead us to a sense of urgency to succeed and be approved again." And that is precisely what happened to King Saul. He wanted to be successful in the eyes of others, no matter the cost. But he is not the only one. There are lots of people like King Saul, and sometimes you and I can be tempted to join their ranks.

Let me share a few examples with you: the young executive who slaves away in the office so he can be promoted above everyone else, even though his family never sees him; the housewife who believes her home must be spotless, even though her children feel like they are living in a museum; the teenage girl who continually tries to make herself look more beautiful, even though she is thinking about ending her life because she isn't pretty enough. I could go on, but I wouldn't be honest if I didn't include ministers in this listing. Because sometimes we too can get caught up in this popularity campaign, measuring our worth and value by what others have to say about us, or how fast our church is growing. Yes, there are a lot of King Saul's running around in our world today, and it's quite easy for any of us, at any

age, even as senior adults, to measure our worth and value by how we look, what we do or used to do, and how much we have in the bank.

In particular I am reminded of one gentleman who is now deceased. His name was Howard Hughes. He was born at the beginning of the twentieth century, and he rose to fame and fortune at an early age. You may remember him. He was a movie director, although most of the folks who worked with him were glad when he got out of that profession. He was also a real estate developer who in many respects turned Las Vegas into what it has become today, the gambling capital of America. He is probably best noted, however, as an aeronautical genius. He developed the Hughes Aircraft Company and at one point owned Trans World Airlines. In 1939 he received the Congressional Gold Medal for his achievements in aviation. But perhaps more than anything else he is remembered as the man who built the "Spruce Goose." It was an airplane made, for the most part, out of wood. Until recently it was the biggest plane that has ever been built, but sadly it only flew on one occasion, very briefly, with Howard Hughes at the controls. No it didn't crash. It was a giant seaplane that gently lifted off the water and then sat back down about a mile away. As of the year 2020, it still exists, in an aviation and space museum in Oregon.

So why have I shared all of this information with you about Howard Hughes? In spite of all his achievements, in Hollywood, in Las Vegas and in the field of aeronautics, and in spite of his desire to be lauded and praised by others, his life came to a rather sad end. He died all alone in the passenger compartment of a Lear jet on a flight from Mexico to the United States. And much the same thing happened to King Saul. In spite of his desire to be esteemed by others, he too died all alone, on a field of battle, as we will discover in next week's sermon.

So what's the message, the truth that we can take home with us today. What did King Saul fail to realize? Simply this. We are valuable, worthy, we are highly esteemed not because of who we are or what we have done, but because God himself has placed his stamp of approval upon our lives. He did that when Christ died on the cross for our sins. He gave his most precious gift in exchange for our lives, for you and me. For God so loved the world, the world of people like you and me, that he sent his only begotten, his one and only Son, so that whoever believes, trusts in him, shall not perish but have everlasting life. When we realize that our worth and value is a gift from God, not something that we can ever earn, then our lives take on a whole new meaning. We don't have to live for others' approval. All we have to do is to live for the Lord, and when we mess up genuinely ask for his forgiveness. Saul never figured that out. He was the man who would be king, but who never really was.

And speaking of kings, there's another Saul in the Bible who had something to say about kingship. Most of the time we refer to him as Paul. Writing to Timothy about our relationship with Christ, he said, "If we die with him, we shall live with him. If we endure, we shall also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:11-12). Yes, that's correct. Those who love the Lord and stay close to him, even when they have to endure hardship will reign with him. Why, because as Paul also said in this final letter to Timothy, a crown of celestial approval awaits us. He said, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now

there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8). Do you understand what Paul was saying? It's the promise of royalty for each and every one of us who have entrusted our lives into the care of the Lord Jesus Christ.