

The Choice of a New Generation | Deuteronomy

The King Who Took Too Much

Deuteronomy 17.14ff

12.17.17

"When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,' ¹⁵ you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. ¹⁶ Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.' ¹⁷ He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.

¹⁸ Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, ²⁰ that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel.

In the Advent Season...when the church celebrates the “advent” or coming of the promised Messiah... MOST churches look at promises in the Hebrew Bible, foretelling Messiah’s birth.

WE...on the other hand...we are just pressing on with our Autumn series on Deuteronomy... BUT... “lo and behold”, it turns out that this FIFTH Book of Moses, last book of the Torah – Deuteronomy does JUST what we want...for an Advent series – it looks ahead to the Perfect Prophet, Priest and King. These may NOT be the stock promises quoted at Advent but they are THERE like gold in a mine waiting to be unearthed!

Moses is telling this young nation who are about to enter the Promised Land (without him!) that when they get in and get settled... they will feel nervous... They will feel like a loose confederation of 12 tribes and they will want ORDER... they’ll want organization and direction and some cohesive form of government for protection... and WELL-BEING (the word used for that is the Hebrew word “shalom” – not just peace but a society and a life that’s whole, flourishing and without chaos or turmoil or peril.)

And while God can be trusted to provide that condition of shalom...they have been unwilling to trust God... And anticipating their weakness in this “trust department” God makes provision for

a third and OPTIONAL office – prophet, priest and...if they want it...feel they NEED it...the office of king.

Today's sermon is about government.

"Pssst!...What's he gonna say about THIS?!...I mean in polite company, you shouldn't talk about religion or politics...BUT the worst thing is to MIX the two!...Why can't we just have a safe little Advent sermon?"

Well...fear not...this will be an Advent sermon...but also...BE VERY AFRAID...the Bible's MAIN IDEA is a political idea...it's about a form of government called MONARCHY...the Bible's central theme is the Kingdom of God...and the promise of SHALOM.

Let's look at it: 1) NON-Shalom 2) SHAM Shalom and 3) TRUE Shalom

The people are nervous...who will speak for God after the old man, Moses dies (which could be any day now!)? And God promises a prophet. They need someone to mediate their disputes and provide justice and equity – and God provides the priests (last week).

And while they may not feel it YET...they will be nervous about their national cohesiveness... in other words, how will they stick together when they are this loose federation of tribes... and remember, going all the way back to the time of Joseph and his brothers, they don't have a great track record of family harmony and togetherness... "We're gonna need a unified front...united we stand! If we don't get some solidarity and administration, we're going to be sitting ducks for those Canaanites!"

Now, before we go further, let's note a few facts here: 1) Wasn't GOD their King? And yes...that was a big truth for the Israelites...and YET, God was not opposed to their having a kind of leader and so many years before they ask, He gives them the option: "if you want a human leader, a king, you may have one."

2) The reason they wanted a king was not simply the insecurity they felt about the twelve tribes separating and the Israelite Nation falling apart. They would see OTHER nations with kings and... "Gee-whiz, Mom! All the cool kids have kings! Why can't I have a king?!" (Notice it's worded as if the nation were a single person – "And YOU say, 'I will set a king over me...'" singular pronoun, not "WE" but "I"). And here, this submerged motive of jealousy is very definitely in the background... "We want to be like the pagan nations..."

And you MAY know that when they DID actually ask for a king a couple centuries later, THIS motive rears its head AGAIN. They asked the Prophet Samuel, "Now appoint a king for us...like all the nations."

“We want to be like everyone else...we want to be an average nation... a common political body...”

“But you're NOT average...you're NOT common – YOU are holy...unique (not very unique!) – you're one-of-a-kind...belonging to the One True God...”

But behind the request is NOT simply a practical consideration like – “Hey, we’re getting bigger and we could use some structure so we can defend our borders...” No! It was, “We are not comfortable being a holy people...we want to be like everyone else!”

And THAT motive is not just a mistrust of God’s leadership and His promises to GIVE them the Land (like 100 x in Deuteronomy!) but it’s a repudiation of their whole identity and their national mission.

Again...it wasn’t that government and organization is bad...God definitely had a plan for the office of king. BUT, the motive from the start (and OUR wrong motives don’t THWART God’s good plans...thankfully) but the motives were wrong from the start –

And that brings up this second idea of Sham Shalom.

The people’s persistent refusal to trust God, to receive protection and flourishing FROM Him...their discomfort with BELIEVING...their desire to be like the other nations...their hope of SHALOM without God – THAT was lurking in their motives and would eventually surface

And this brings up how we too...look for all kinds of things that ONLY GOD CAN PROVIDE and we hope to have them from other sources...without reference to God Himself.

Government is good...and is necessary. There are some forms of government that are better than others... and we find IN THIS VERY PASSAGE some ideas that make government better (we’ll look at those principles in a moment) but ultimately, government really can’t complete us...

As far as I can tell (and I’m not an attorney as I said last week – to which I’ll add that I’m NOT a political scientist or historian) but as far as I can tell, the difference between the American Revolution and the French Revolution (1776 and 1789) was that ours saw government as a means to protect life and theirs saw government as a means to enhance life. (see Allan Bloom *The Closing of the American Mind*, pp. 157-172) Our revolution was not a Christian movement but there was at least enough of a consensus about basic Biblical beliefs, some of which came right out of this passage...

The point is, in our own constitutional democracy, we had a much more MODEST idea of what government could or couldn’t do...

The ancient Israelites (and if they could do it, so could WE...and we DO) they wanted a king who could give them shalom... in the same way they THOUGHT the other nations got it...without God.

And today, as in all ages, people look for transcendent qualities and conditions like inner peace or a sense of identity or meaning or purpose (not only from government but) from all kinds of sources OTHER than the Only UNIQUE Source who can provide those qualities and conditions.

Government can't complete you... your girlfriend can't complete you...your job...your hobby...your ripped body...more money... more sex...more power... more success or morality won't complete you. These are all able to provide a taste of wholeness ...sometimes the illusion of completeness and personal, spiritual, relational flourishing... but all these are, in the end, destined to fail and produce ONLY a sham-shalom.

In these short paragraphs, before the king is even requested, God puts real limits on him as if to say, "Don't think the king can really complete you...HAVE MODEST EXPECTATIONS...AND KNOW THAT all that glitters IS not gold."

"The nations you envy... the grass over there may LOOK greener..." but the ancient Middle Eastern kings were very often substitutes for God...called themselves gods...and treated the people like their servants. "So...when YOU set up a king, he must NOT multiply horses, wives or wealth – power, sex and money. Your kings are NOT to do that."

"Your kings will be accountable to the Levitical priests (totally counter-cultural in that situation! "The king answers to NO ONE!") "But YOUR kings", said the LORD, "will be accountable to the Law and to the priests (the judiciary – a kind of balance of powers)."

"His first task is to actually copy with his own hand My Torah... He has to touch the parchment and form the letters...to be intimately acquainted with My instruction... and then the king has to keep it with him and read it every day..."

Why? Because, it's NOT "Rex Lex" – the King IS the Law... NO! In My people it will always be "Lex Rex" i.e. the LAW IS KING...and the earthly ruler must always know that he himself is RULED by ME...He is subject to My words...and he must face that every day!"

And once again, as readers of this ancient text, we want to know (as we did last week), "How'd it go? Were Israel's kings... tangibly... noticeably different from the kings of the Gentile Nations? Did they reject this god-complex and did they NOT amass horses (so they looked powerful) wives (so they looked viral and sexy) and money (so they looked rich)?"

Well...the first king was Saul...and he didn't do so well and Samuel the prophet warned them.

After Saul self-destructed...a kid...David was chosen by God (it wouldn't have been the people's choice) but he was a good king... He had some failings when he forgot who he was and "his heart was lifted up" – he forgot that he was really a nobody (a shepherd) and he got all confident ("some people got way too much confidence, baby") – he got too good at smiling for the camera...and he did some really bad, arrogant stuff...but he did repent and humble himself and was, IN THAT WAY, a great example...

After that...Solomon...and he was RIGHT on track for what Moses prohibited ... He multiplied horses, wives and money... It was a big mess and his sons were even worse...

Power corrupts...so they say...and ultimate power corrupts ultimately...it's like we just CAN'T resist it (like Tolkien's ring of power...it goes to your head... like we've been seeing in the sex scandals – all these powerful men... they see themselves as above others and they get warped.)

Some of the kings in David's line...of the tribe of Judah (the royal tribe – the scepter shall NOT depart from Judah; Gen 49.9) some of them (Hezekiah, Josiah...a very small number!) some did roughly abide by the law... but mostly they failed to guard the shalom of the people...

Until... there came a King named, "sar shalom" – the Prince of Peace... He was born in a beautiful sprawling palace. No! It was a little carport attached to a little bed-and-breakfast... It was a barn.

He was NOT much for horses or money... there is a record that He rode a horse once...well, actually it was a donkey (His followers were probably so embarrassed because He looked so NOT presidential!) and He did get some gold once...and frankincense and myrrh but when He died...He was penniless and naked...

He didn't multiply wives either...He was faithful to the One Wife His Father chose for Him...and this Prince of Peace... the "sar shalom" was so above her in status, in appearance, in character and in every way.

He was radiant and royal and faithful and good and she was...well, she was a prostitute.

And in order to win her...He had to come in a way so she would NOT be so intimidated that she would simply DIE of shame...If He came in His royal robes ("the train of His robe filled the Temple" - Isaiah 6) and with His armies (Matt 26.53; Rev 5.11) she would have run and hid (Gen 3.8)...So, He arrived, this Prince of Shalom...and He showed His true nature ...humble...lowly...a servant. His heart was not lifted up... (Matt 11.29)... and His ONE LOVE...this Beloved but unfaithful woman...she didn't get it...

She didn't know the things that really make for shalom (Luke 19.42)... but still...He kept the Torah for her...He was the King who meditated on God's Law day and night...who did not turn to

the right or the left...(Luke 9.51, 12.50)...He obeyed in her place...in my place...and then this King...whose face was radiant and blinding like the sun (Rev 1.16)... He gave Himself to die for her crimes and all her unfaithfulness...and her un-kept promises...and He wore a crown for her... a crown of thorns.

And when He had shown her...His true nature, that God Himself loves to serve...that the King of kings is actually humble...and when He had paid the price that justice demanded...and gone as low as He could go...He died under the weight of her punishment...

And three days later He rose...and came to her and said, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come along. For behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have already appeared in the land; the time has arrived for pruning the vines, and the voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land. The fig tree has ripened its figs, and the vines in blossom have given forth their fragrance. Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come along!"

See? It's a picture of TRUE Shalom...it's the peace, the flourishing that we all want... It's the Prince of Peace who died for the sins of His unfaithful bride.

The government is on His shoulders...listen to His voice today...receive Him and the forgiveness and new life... go to Him and be complete.