

“King Selection”
1 Kings 1-2
January 8, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

As the book of Kings opens, Israel is at a time of uncertainty. The great King David is obviously fading and not long for this life. That’s the point of the opening verses of the book. In the words of one commentary, David is old and cold. His servants try covering him with more clothes, but he is still cold. Then they have another idea. They want to add to his harem the most beautiful woman they can find. Something like a beauty pageant is held, and a woman by the name of Abishag is selected as the most beautiful young woman of the nation. They reason that if she can’t get his blood flowing again, nothing can. But it doesn’t work, for we read that **“the king knew her not,”** a common euphemism in the Scriptures for sexual intimacy.

So David has declined to the point that everyone knows his death is not far away. But a successor has not been named. God had already declared through Nathan the prophet that a son of David would sit on his throne (2 Sam. 7:12), but it was not revealed exactly which son it would be. Two sons compete for the crown in these first two chapters, Adonijah and Solomon. One is the wrong king and the other God’s anointed. As is the case with us, everything depends on having the right king. To make a wrong choice leads to catastrophic results, while making the right choice leads to the fulfillment of our strongest and best longings.

So who is your king? Are you following one who will bring life to your soul, or one who will lead you into greater bondage? Many people object to the question and respond, “I have no king, because I do what I want to do.” I would point out that the person who would say such a thing does in fact have a king, the king of self. This person is taking orders from his or her own desires and conclusions about life. Kings are inescapable. The only question is whether you are following a king who is God’s anointed and who will bring life and freedom, or a king who will promise much but only bring bondage.

I. The Wrong King

Adonijah was the fourth son of King David. The first son, Amnon, was killed by Absalom in retaliation for Amnon’s raping of their sister. Absalom, David’s third son, was later killed in a failed coup attempt. The second son is not mentioned after his birth, so presumably he has died previous to this point of the story. Adonijah is now the oldest living son, and he is anxious to assume the throne, so anxious that he can’t even wait for his father to die. He

cultivates two strong allies to assist him in his desire for the throne. Joab is the general of Israel's army and Abiathar is a high ranking priest. The three of them come up with a plan that amounted to claiming the throne by acting like a king. So Adonijah prepared a royal parade, led by fifty men running in front, with horsemen in front of them and finally Adonijah riding a chariot at the end of the parade. It would have been an impressive sight. He also prepared something of a coronation feast, complete with animal sacrifices.

Adonijah had several advantages in his quest for the throne. As we've already seen, he was David's oldest remaining son. He also looked the part, identified in verse 6 as **"a very handsome man."** People always like their leaders to look the part, and he certainly satisfied that requirement. It seemed that Adonijah's hope was to seize the throne by being first out of the gate. If he could get a jump on his rivals, he could build momentum until his kingship could achieve some critical mass. After that, anyone challenging it could be forcibly silenced.

But this is not the way Israel's kings are selected, and Adonijah's efforts suggest to us two pitfalls to be avoided as we decide who will occupy that critical role of king in our lives. Both of these pitfalls are common to us all as sinners. Here's the first: reliance on human achievement. All the best things in life are received, not achieved. Solomon offers a significant contrast to Adonijah in this regard. While Adonijah is all about plotting, scheming, and working hard to achieve his goal, Solomon is largely passive in this story. Others—primarily Nathan, Bathsheba and David himself—act on his behalf. While Adonijah seizes control, Solomon gives up control.

The best things in life are received, not achieved, because they are gifts of God. Chief among these gifts is our salvation. But the list of God's other gifts is a large one. We are like the ground receiving the rain. We don't force God's gifts or seek to manipulate him for them, but passively and gratefully receive them. What would it look like for you to renounce the ways of Adonijah here and live a life that is more about receiving from God? The two things that come to my mind are more joy and less anger. When you stop trying to control so many things and open your heart to see the gifts of God, it brings great joy to your heart.

It also brings less anger. I was on a group bicycle ride a couple of weeks ago when someone asked me about anger right after a motorist passing us did something foolish and reckless. Most of the people I ride with know that I'm a pastor, so I get questions they think pastors are equipped to answer. So a fellow rider asked me, how do you handle anger? I answered, "Well, let me begin by saying that I still battle anger, and there are many times when I lose the battle. But I also find that trusting God and giving up control is a powerful weapon in fighting anger. It is when I want to be in control and others don't cooperate with my agenda, that anger rises up in my heart. When I trust God

and receive the gifts he gives me, even when those gifts come disguised in ugly wrappings such as inconsiderate motorists, that I find anger loosening its grip on my heart.”

There is a second pitfall we see in Adonijah’s life, a pitfall that once more often accompanies having the wrong king. It is found in the words **“exalted himself”** in verse 5. When we submit ourselves to the true King, we accept the place he has for us. But when we remove ourselves from the authority of the true King, we create a false self. The false self is the one we think we need in order to have the kind of life we want. Adonijah’s false self was to be the most important man in the kingdom, the king. He wanted to be in control, to have people defer to him, to have his word be the final word. This false self always puts us on a collision course with the true King, as we are going to see in our next point.

The false self is a universal quality of our fallen human condition. We see it in the fig leaves put on by Adam and Eve in an attempt to cover their shame. Your false self is what you use to do the same. In most cases it is not as ambitious as Adonijah was with his false self. It may be as simple as wanting people to like you by being the funniest person at the dinner party. Or it could be wanting to be thought of as smart and competent, always having an answer. In every case, it is about as pitiful as a woman I once knew whose false self seemed to me to be that of an accomplished singer. She went to music school where she was a voice major. But when she sang, it was clear to everyone that she simply couldn’t sing. That is the futility of the false self with us all. It rules us as king and then lets us down and eventually destroys us. That is what happened to Adonijah, and that is what happens to all who make the wrong choice of king.

II. The Right King

When the prophet Nathan hears of Adonijah’s attempts to become king, he goes to Bathsheba, Solomon’s mother, to do a little plotting of his own. They want King David to bring his influence to bear in the selection of Israel’s next king. So they prepare two speeches, one to be given by each of them. Bathsheba’s speech reminds David of a promise he had made that Solomon would be his successor, while informing him of Adonijah’s efforts to undermine David’s promise by seizing the throne for himself. Nathan’s speech also informs David of the recent events, and then asks David if this is his doing, even though Nathan knows it is not. It is a bit of a clever rebuke, designed to move David to action. It works. He orders that Solomon be anointed as Israel’s next king and that he be allowed to ride on David’s mule, something in this culture that seemed to indicate David’s choice of his successor.

One of the striking things about the anointing of Solomon as king, as well as both of his predecessors, Saul and David, is the crucial role of God's prophets. The prophet Nathan was the one who saved the day here and worked for God's choice to become the anointed king, just as the prophet Samuel had done in the case of Saul and David. Ironically, in a book that seems by its title to be all about Israel's kings, prophets are going to play a large role in 1 and 2 Kings. More attention is given to the prophets Elijah and Elisha than any single king of Israel.

Prophets speak for God, and God loves to reveal the identity of the true King. Just as Solomon had Nathan to serve in this role, so Jesus also had a prophet. John the Baptist was Jesus' Nathan, speaking prophetically of Jesus as God's anointed one and Israel's true King. All four gospels start talking about Jesus by talking about John the Baptist because he is the prophet who prepares the way for Jesus by revealing God's word about Jesus. How do you know you have the right King? God reveals him to us through his word. God is a speaking God because he loves us and wants a relationship with us. He does not leave us in the dark having to figure these things out for ourselves. He says to us, "I have installed my King. Bow before him. No king will ever love you like my King. No king will be able to lead you and provide for you like my King. So with joy in your hearts, bow before him now."

At the beginning of chapter 2, David instructs his son concerning his priorities as Israel's king. **"Be strong, and show yourself a man, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes...that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn"** (2:2-3). True masculinity and real strength is to walk in God's ways, to be faithful to God's covenant. These are going to be the yardstick by which all of Israel's future kings will be judged. Ultimately, these books of 1 and 2 Kings will record the failure of David's sons to live up to this. Solomon starts well, but then falls into idolatry. Many of David's sons who become king turn out to be completely evil, while some of them are a mixture and some of them follow fully in David's footsteps. But the evil kings eventually lead to Israel's judgment in being cast out of the land.

We expect to read words like these from David, urging the faithfulness of his son. But the next words puzzle many, because David names several enemies and friends, and tells Solomon to bring punishment to his enemies and good to his friends. The enemies are Joab, the commanding general of Israel's army, and Shimei, who cursed David when he was fleeing Jerusalem during Absalom's failed coup attempt. The sons of Barzillai are the friends he wants Solomon to reward. Barzillai had shown kindness to David when he was returning to Jerusalem after the coup attempt. He was an old man then and has since died, but David remembers him and wants Solomon to show kindness to his sons.

The rest of chapter 2 records how Solomon carried out the punishment upon his enemies, the ones David had named plus Adonijah. What is striking about every single enemy is that they are doomed by their own missteps. Adonijah is the first one mentioned. He went to Bathsheba and requested that Abishag be given to him as a wife. Abishag, you may remember, was the beautiful young woman brought into David's harem for the express purpose of keeping him warm and hopefully helping to revive some of his vigor. When the request comes to Solomon, he interprets it as a continued play for the throne. A king's harem is considered off limits to any but the king and his successor, so to ask for her hand in marriage is to attempt to become king. Solomon responds by ordering his palace guard to kill Adonijah.

Abiathar the priest is dealt with next. Instead of executing him, Solomon exiles him from Jerusalem. A priest outside of Jerusalem has no work to do, so this was not a light punishment. Joab appears next. When he hears of the execution of Adonijah, he knows he is in trouble. He thinks he can find refuge in the tabernacle and lays hold of the horns of the altar. When Benaiah is sent to strike him down, Joab refused to leave the tabernacle and said, **“No, I will die here”** (2:30). So he is struck down in that place.

Shimei, who cursed David, is dealt with by confining him to Jerusalem. He is told that if he should ever leave Jerusalem, he will be executed. After three years, two of his servants run away and Shimei pursues them, taking him away from Jerusalem. Solomon hears of it and orders his execution.

What is the point of these many tales of punishment upon David and Solomon's enemies? Is it just the record of a king's brutalities needed to establish his kingdom? I don't think so. The point is this—there is no refuge *from* God's King, only refuge *in* God's King.

CONCLUSION:

So let me close with an application. Is God's King, Solomon's greater Son, Jesus, your King? Will you bow before him as your King? It is very important that you hear this question properly. It is not intended to be a reprimand, but an invitation. Can you hear the Father invite you with a loving smile on his face to receive the true King?

Jesus is the true King. I read a prayer this week that described perfectly the benefit this King is to us. “Lord, your answer to the chaos and strife of the world is your Son, Jesus Christ. He will eventually break brokenness, kill death, destroy destruction, and swallow every sorrow. Teach me how to take refuge in you—in your forgiveness through Jesus, in your wise will and in my assured, glorious future. Amen.”