**Sunday 13th June 2021**

1 Samuel chapter 8 and 1 Kings chapter 11

Into monarchy and a divided kingdom

I hope you all enjoyed our game of “Kings’ bingo”. Over the next few weeks we will be looking at some of the kings. Not all 44 of them! But I have in mind a 10 week series looking at some of the characters, their actions, relationship with God and consequences, whether good or bad – and try and apply some of the content to our lives today.

From the time that the Israelites were brought out of Egypt, out of slavery, God had been their sovereign ruler. Judges and priests had been appointed to maintain God’s desired community by way of mediating and providing justice.

We join the bible commentary when Samuel had been a judge for many years – a trusted and faithful servant of God. He had assumed the position of national leader, priest, and prophet.

As the years passed his sons were to take on the same positions that he had done – but we read that they were corrupt – taking bribes so desiring to better themselves rather than maintain justice and God’s desires (through His laws).

What answer did the people decide to combat this? To appoint a king. To appoint one person (sorry ladies, it would generally have been a man) to rule over them. My question – why did they think that appointing one other man to be a king would be any different than accepting Samuel’s sons? Or looking to replace them in their roles? However, do we notice that although Samuel was opposed to a king, he did not offer any alternative solution.

The truth was that they wanted to be like the other nations around them. We are told that Nahash, king of the Ammonites was moving against Israel, so there would have been genuine fear present – being led into a battle was a real possibility. The Israelites stated their ideal, for a king “To lead them, go out before them and fight their battles”.  Another question then – why had the Israelites stopped seeing God as the one who was for them and protecting them? Do we sometimes lose sight of God’s presence fighting for us and providing safety and refuge?

God gave them all clear warning, through Samuel, of what the reality would be like – “he will take your sons and make them serve with chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots”. So not only will they still have to be the ones leading the charge into conflicts – but they would become possessions of a man – so back into slavery, but their own nation as opposed to an adversary.

This is the first truth; when God reigns, He gives us a freedom to follow Him. God calls and we have freedom to respond. However, a tyrant ruler compels obedience.

The first king appointed and anointed was Saul. Well, that went well to begin with, but he eventually veered away from God. At that time Samuel had stepped down as national leader, but he had not resigned as a priest or a prophet, so God’s word was still being heard clearly during this time.

After Saul, David was anointed as king. However, most of the tribes rejected him for the first few years (except Judah) and succumbed to the sovereignty of Ish-Bosheth – was it 2 years or 6? This is where it can become confusing trying to calculate years as mentioned in the bible, because the calculation of time differed between Judah in the south and Israel in the north – so on occasions I will simply state “a few years”.

When Ish-Bosheth died (he was murdered) David became king over the whole of the nation. He was whole-hearted for God. He did commit sin, he became infatuated by Bathsheba, and his focus turned from God. However, when he was confronted, he confessed to God, he listened to the warnings and turned back to Him.

It was because of his faithfulness to God, because he had obeyed the instruction “If you do whatever I command you and walk in my ways and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and commands” that David was promised by God that his descendants would never fail to be on the throne of Israel.

Therefore, when David died it was his son, Solomon who took the throne. Solomon formed an alliance with Egypt and married the daughter of Pharoah.

None of these events were a surprise to God. In Deuteronomy 17: 14-20 God states “***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. He must be from among your fellow Israelites. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite.****16****The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.”****17****He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.*

***18****When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests.****19****It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees****20****and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel”*.

Even though Solomon had already strayed from God’s command and formed an alliance with Egypt by marriage he still appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked him “Ask for whatever you want me to give you”. Such grace exhibited by God – all the time through history. Solomon gave the answer “give me a discerning heart”. In other words, wisdom. He recognised that he needed help in leading the nation.

I believe that we all associate Solomon with wisdom. But he again succumbed to the temptations around him – he married many women – mainly from foreign lands, which we have read God had expressly commanded not to intermarry with them and not to take many wives. The reason that God gave these commands was not racism – to keep the bloodline of Israelites pure. It was to keep them Spirituality healthy and true – not to take their focus and trust from God.

And Solomon proved that God’s warnings had been provided for a reason. As he provided places of worship for his wives and concubines, for their own gods and idols, his devotion was not fully to God. He was distracted by pleasing those who surrounded him – individuals and nations.

Solomon claimed to worship God and indeed did visit the temple and follow Him. But it was not whole-heartedly. How many today do not act out according to God’s commands and yet still try to stay in His favour by being kind, giving to churches and sending up the odd prayer.

Perhaps Solomon confused his success in wealth and international politics and peace as being God’s blessing upon Him, proof that Solomon was doing all he needed to do. Solomon was successful – he had peace in the majority of his reign, he built the temple for God, but also built his own palace (as was the custom of other kings in the surrounding countries) which was even grander than the temple.

God’s command was “Do not consider yourself better than your fellow Israelites”. After Solomon’s death the people from the north complained to his son, the next king, Rehoboam “Your father put a heavy yoke on us”. This implies that Solomon furthered his own wealth at the expense of the people. This would have been through forced labour to build the temple, palace, royal buildings as well as military chariots etc. As well as gathering the income to pay for these things!

Solomon, although still visited by God on two occasions and given the opportunity to repent and turn back to God, remained caught up in his own importance.

The good things that Solomon had begun to rely upon began to unravel. During his reign peace had surrounded him – but by the end adversaries had been allowed to rise up. God’s promise of peace had been dependent on Solomon following His ways. When we choose to rely on God’s promises we must always be aware of the “if” that imparts our part to play in connected to them.

God had commended Solomon for not asking for the death of his enemies – but when Jeroboam rose up against him, Solomon was seeking his death – he had reverted to his own “wisdom” rather than that which God had promised.

Solomon’s alliance with Egypt was also now unreliable – Jeroboam sought sanctuary in Egypt – and it was granted. It was in fact only 5 years after Solomon’s death that Egypt attacked Jerusalem.

God determined what the consequence for the half-hearted devotion from Solomon would be. The prophet Abijah appeared to Jeroboam and used the tearing of his cloak as a visual depiction for Jeroboam; similar to when Saul reached out to Samuel and tore his cloak – a visual depiction that Israel would be torn from his family line.

Such was the consequence for Solomon, revealed to Jeroboam. The kingdom would be torn from Solomon’s descendants and given to Jeroboam, although not all the tribes. To keep His promise to faithful David, Judah would remain under the reign of the Davidic line.

When the nation was divided after Saul, and David was sovereign in Judah and Ish-bosheth was sovereign over Israel, this had been the decision of the people – they had not followed the one whom God had anointed as king – being David. This time, God was dividing the nation – anointing two kings.

Prophets will speak into a situation and forewarn of the consequences. History is governed by God – it is not the result of human actions and struggles; but governed by God as a consequence of the response from His people.

Despite the nation being split into two, in verse 38 God states “If you do whatever I command you and walk in my ways and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and commands, as David my servant did, I will be with you”. God is giving His affirmation that He remains concerned for all His people. He rules over them and will be with them, whether in Judah or Israel. The people were never divided in His eyes.

What can we draw from this? How do we apply it to our lives today?

Well, firstly God’s main desire given to His people throughout history is for them to keep His laws and commands. We read earlier God stating “when he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law.It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees”. If you write something down it means that you read it, you give attention to detail through the whole of it, and it helps us to learn. And it should be read often. It remains the same for us today – we need to refresh ourselves often with the word of God. Not just reading the bible for the sake of it, but wrestling with bits we do not understand so that we can gain discernment and apply the concepts into our daily lives.

In the NT we are told that Christ is the wisdom of God, who became poor so we might become rich. Christ is the temple into whom we are being built. If we receive the wisdom and generously share the riches he provides, we are following His commands. It is in direct contrast to how Solomon eventually lived – who strayed from the wisdom promised by God, who built up his own wealth at the expense of the well-being of the Israelites. Concentrating more on international politics and smooth running than his own people.

In Matthew 7: 24-25 Jesus said “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice, is like a wiseman who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock”.

We must stay firm to God, giving Him our focus and total, whole-hearted worship and trust. If we try to please everyone around us our way of living may become diluted and not reflect fully the Holy Spirit and character of Jesus. We should examine what our priorities are and what our motives are for doing things – is it to gain the affection for ourselves of those around us, to obtain financial security, to flex our power? Even if we succeed in these things, it does not mean that it is God’s blessing on our actions – just a reflection of His grace and mercy. Even a sand dune will take a while to be eroded. But for our own well-being we need to be self-examining and ensure we are still on the rock.

God said to Solomon “Ask and it will be given to you”. These words are repeated by Jesus in Matthew 7:7, so we have the same opportunity. Let’s take a moment to consider before Him what it is that we will ask for.