



Lesson 1: Introduction

“Never meet your heroes, lest you find they have feet of clay.”

What do we do when people fail the nice, neat categories we give them? We like to think of people as good or evil, heroes or villains. But how do we process it when our villains do something right? What should our response be when our heroes fail us? Good and evil are black and white, but people often end up being a mixed bag. As one writer put it “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts.”

In this study, we will be looking at the history of Israel’s kings. As we will be giving special attention to the lives of these men, we will find ourselves reminded that they were just that – men. Even with power and wealth, and although they lived in an entirely different world than we do today, the way they behaved and the way God interacted with them will at times seem eerily similar to the lives we live today. In the pages of the history of the kings we find heroes who were men of great faith, and we find villains of despicable character. But we find many who are both: great men of God making stupid and foolish choices, and wicked men who humble themselves and find mercy.

What we find in these books are character sketches of real people. As we look at their lives we will at times be warned by the foolish choices they make and the disastrous outcomes. At times we will be encouraged by the grace of God that they find and know that the same God is still offering such mercy and

grace to us today. In the end we will see a mirror, often an uncomfortable one at that, which shows us our own hearts and tendencies. Above all we will see God, patiently, kindly, determinedly working out his purpose through the stumbling and stuttering of men with feet of clay.

Why do we often struggle when people fail to fall into the obvious category of “hero” or “villain”?

How do we continue to hold God’s holy and high standard and yet realize that we all fall and even wicked people can sometimes get it right?

In this introductory lesson, we will begin by getting a big picture view of the books that we will be covering. We will then talk about what a king is and what a king does. Finally, we will end by looking at how this section of our Bibles is designed to point us to the ultimate King, Jesus Christ.

Getting the Big Picture

Teacher’s Note: [This is a longer section of speaking with fewer opportunities for interaction. If you have a group that knows its Bible well, you might want to give them the opportunity to try and fill in as much of this picture on their own as they can. It’s also possible that you teach it yourself and move through it at a quick pace, so as not to get too bogged down on the material.]

One of the great values of a study like this is the history we pick up along the way. The prophetic literature generally assumes you know what is going on in the history of Israel at the time the prophet is writing. Studying through the lives of the kings gives believers the chance to learn what the history of Israel is and prepares us to study the other major portions of our Bible as well.

The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are part of what we call the historical books. Since these books are history, knowing what's been going on before and where this story is headed will help us better understand the books themselves.

- **A Brief History of Old Testament**

- **The Pentateuch** – God creates the world pure and holy and good, man in his sin corrupts the world and brings God's judgment. God picks one man named Abraham and promises to bring a nation from him through whom he will bless the world. After being enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, they are delivered and enter into a special relationship with God. He gives them his laws and they promise to keep them. God then brings them to the land he had promised to Abraham all those years earlier.
- **The Conquest and Judges** – Once in the land Israel made a good strong push to take it over (Joshua), but didn't quite complete the task. Instead, their unbelief and disobedience left other people in the land who became a test as to whether or not the people would obey God. Sadly, time after time they chose to rebel. God would punish them, they would repent, God would send someone to deliver them (a judge), and they would follow him for a while but then just repeat the whole process over and over. By the end of the book, things are pretty bad.
- **The United Kingdom** – Israel demands a king, and God allows it. The first king, Saul, looks impressive but spirals pretty low before dying in battle. Following a brief civil war David, one of Saul's former

generals, wins and is set up as king over all Israel. He does well overall, although he did make some pretty major mistakes. His son Solomon builds the temple and has an impressive reign. He built much and brought much wealth to Israel, but his building projects did put a heavy tax burden on the people and the end of his life was disappointing to say the least.

- **The Divided Kingdom** – The people demand that Solomon’s son Rehoboam lessen their tax load, and Rehoboam foolishly ignores them. Over half the nation breaks away and follows Jeroboam and the two nations enter a very tense and awkward relationship. At times they cooperate in trade and war, at times they fight against one another. In the North, Jeroboam sets up golden calves as an alternative to the worship in Jerusalem (he didn’t want his people going to the southern kingdom’s capital three times a year to worship God, for obvious political reasons) and Israel in the north never recovers. In the south, Judah fluctuates between following God and following idols.
- **The Single Kingdom** – The northern kingdom of Israel eventually fell to the Assyrians in 722. While God miraculously spares the southern kingdom of Judah, they don’t do too well going forward. After several more wicked kings, God warns that the nation will also be carried away captive for a time.
- **The Exile** – During a time of great political intrigue, Judah becomes a vassal (servant) to Babylon and was

forced to surrender many of her citizens to the kingdom (605 B.C.). She then tries unsuccessfully to rebel on two occasions (597 and 586 B.C.). On the second occasion Nebuchadnezzar razes the temple and leaves the land totally decimated. On all 3 occasions many of the most skilled laborers and best educated rulers are taken away, leaving only the poor in the land to try to keep things running. For 70 years many Israelites live in Babylon.

- **After the Exile** – Babylon would eventually be toppled by the Medio-Persian Empire, and Cyrus the great would allow the people to return. He famously allowed many of the deported people in his kingdom to return to their home countries, and around 538 B.C. Israel returned. After several years they eventually rebuilt the temple (finished around 516 B.C.), thus roughly fulfilling the 70 year prophecy twice (first deportation to first return – 605-538; destruction of temple to consecration of new temple – 586-516).
- **Overview of Biblical Books** – Each of the sets of books (Samuel, Kings, Chronicels) that we find in our Old Testament has a slightly different purpose and perspective.
 - **Samuel:** 1 Samuel details the rise and fall of Saul, followed by the rise of David. 2 Samuel is focused exclusively on the life of David. These give the critical foundation for thinking about the monarchy in Israel and Judah.

- **Kings:** These books start with Solomon and go all the way to the exile. They focus on both Israel and Judah, but much time is spent on the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The lives of Elijah and Elisha, two northern prophets, get considerable attention. These books strongly emphasize that God's Word will come to pass.
- **Chronicles:** These books cover David through the exile. They focus almost exclusively on the southern kingdom and strongly emphasize that God blesses obedience and punishes disobedience.

What Does a King Do?

Given the fact that we live in a democratic republic, and one that got its start by rising up against a king, we may struggle with thinking about kings like a Jew living in the 11th century B.C. would have thought about a king. What does the Bible teach a king's job was?

What roles do you think a king would be expected to play in Israel's monarchy?

- **Military Leader**

One of the main tasks of the king was to lead the nation into battle against their enemies. This was one of the first tasks of Saul, the first king (1 Samuel 11). Kings were the generals of the day. They were often fierce warriors who would rally the troops to battle.

- **Domestic Leader**

When we think about judges, we are programmed to think about separation of powers. The people who make laws (legislative), the people who enforce the laws

(executive), and the people who interpret the laws (judicial) all have their lanes and are expected to stay in them. While separation of powers has been helpful for American politics, such a concept is totally foreign to the idea of a king. Kings were expected to lead the nation into battle and also to settle disputes among the people.

There was no supreme court. The king was the final court of appeal. This is why wisdom was often associated with kings (1 Kings 3:28), and why Proverbs warns kings not to get drunk (Proverbs 31:4-5). The most famous example of a king acting as judge came when Solomon decided between two women who were arguing over a child (1 Kings 3:16-28). This example illustrates a common function of kings – to bring justice and fairness to the land (1 Kings 10:9).

- **Spiritual Leader**

God actually included a how-to manual on how to be a successful king in his law. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 tells us what kings should do and what they shouldn't do:

- **Kings are to avoid multiplying horses, wives, and gold.**

This would sound strange to the ears of anyone living at the time of Israel. Chariots were the equivalent of the tanks of the day. Multiplying wives often was the result of making strategic military alliances and was a sign of power. Multiplying gold is self-explanatory. God told kings to not do the very things that every king was expected to do.

One of the big reasons for all of these was to make sure the kings were trusting in God. Over and over

God confronts his people in the prophetic books for trusting in foreign nations and their own military might rather than him. Israel's national defense program was the most powerful one that could be imagined, but also one that required great faith: just trust God.

- **Kings were supposed to write, study, and know the Law**

The kings in Israel were expected to know God's laws and enforce them. They were supposed to be covenant watchdogs, making sure the people did what God expected of them. They were supposed to personally know and follow and then lead others in following God. The king was supposed to be a spiritual leader, making sure that God's justice was followed in the land.

How would these 3 roles overlap and interact?

Kings and the King

One final, important point to consider is how these books point us to the King, King Jesus. If all Scripture points to Jesus, than these stories must point to him as well. There are actually several different ways in which Christ is highlighted.

The Old Testament points to Jesus in several ways:

- **Problems - The Old Testament shows us our need of Christ**

These six books can be a depressing read. King after king makes disappointing choices. Most kings end up doing

evil in the Lord's sight. Then kings who are described as doing right consistently make huge mistakes. As we come to the end of these books, we are left realizing we need the perfect king to lead us, but wondering if we will ever find one. The greatest king of Israel is her second one, David, and he certainly made some major mistakes! All of this is preparing us for the King of kings and Lord of lords. The Old Testament will often do this: present a problem that can only be solved by Jesus.

What are some other problems we see in the Old Testament that point to a need Christ ultimately fulfills?

There will be many frustrating moments in this study. Realize that all of those moments are designed to point us to the need for Jesus to reign over us and lead us perfectly in obedience to and faithfulness to God.

- **Patterns/Pictures – The Old Testament gives examples of Jesus.**

Commentators will often call these “types.” Often in the Old Testament we find a picture or a pattern that is later applied to Christ. For example, Solomon is described as the wisest man who ever lived. Yet in the New Testament, Jesus tells his listeners that “a greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42). In this way, Solomon paints the picture of the wise ruler, a picture that Jesus fulfills and exceeds. Likewise, David is the picture of the great ruler, a picture Jesus will fulfill and exceed.

In what ways do we see the wisdom of Jesus and in what ways will we see his great rule?

- **Promises – The Old Testament shows us what God has said he will do.**

There are many promises God made in the Old Testament. So many in fact, that by the end it is beginning to look like he might not be able to pull it all off. Paul tells us that “all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen” (2 Corinthians 1:20). In other words, God fulfills all his promises through Jesus Christ. One of the main promises made to a king was that made to David that he would have a descendent who would have an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7), a promise that obviously finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

What are some of the promises that God has made that he either will or already has fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

- **Prophecies – The Old Testament shows us what Jesus will look like.**

Probably the most familiar prophecies that we know of are the ones proclaiming what Jesus would look like and what he would do. Occasionally the prophets would specifically tell us certain things about Christ, and often these prophecies would be given to kings and were intended to impact the way they lived at the time (see for example Ahaz and Isaiah in Isaiah 7, the promise of the virgin birth).

What other prophecies do we find in the Old Testament that point to Jesus?

There is much to be learned from these six books. They are a story of God's faithfulness and man's fickleness. Of heroes and villains, and those in between. We learn much about God, his world, and our own hearts as we study the lives of the Kings of Israel and Judah. But most of all, these stories point forward to the great King of Kings and Lord of Lords who will one day rule and reign forever.