

## **Nation-Building, #4**

### **God is King: I'm not, you're not!!**

Nation. Citizenship, leaders, government. What goes into building a nation?

I'm David Rowe, co-pastor of the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in Fairfield, Connecticut, and we're on a 14-day journey of nation building. 14 episodes on what the Bible can teach us about being a good citizen in a good nation with good leaders.

This is part four. In part one, I described my sort of teenage, self-centered view of government that eventually wisened up to embracing the idea of government and citizens at their best. Part two followed the literal immigration of faith and nationhood that started with Abraham, which led to Israel. Israel led to Judaism, Judaism to Christianity, Christianity to Europe, Europe to America, until Israel. Here we sit on top of a little hill in Connecticut trying to be good citizens in a good country, nourished by the idea of Christ. Part three was the first of a few looks that we'll take at kings and kingship, good and bad and ugly. We began with King Solomon's famous prayer during which he humbly admits his own inadequacy and asked just as humbly for help, specifically help with wisdom and discernment. That's a good start for a king. Good start, yes. Today we'll look at the endgame of most kings. And by the way, I use the word **King** as an overall term for any who rule with ruthless selfishness and arrogant conceit by any name or title. Prime Ministers, Emperors, Presidents, Chairmen, Generalissimo, Supreme Leader, Caesar... God bluntly warns against any who would be above us for personal gain.

Some of the titles sound so benign. Chairman seems so simple until linked with Mao. A president is one who presides, and presiding seems innocuous. A prime minister, by definition, lets us know that there are others we should also look for for wise counsel. And if my repeated use of king seems outdated, go with ruler. Or from my college days, Gran Queso, the big cheese. Frankly, God looks at top-down leadership with a jaded perspective, which is why I call this episode, *God is King, and I'm not, and you're not.*

Here's the background, and then an incredibly spot-on scripture from 1 Samuel 8, verses 10-21. The background is that the people of Israel wanted a king. They finally had their own country, they were settling in, and the simple truth is that they wanted to be like everybody else, all the other nations in the neighborhood, and everybody else had a king. *We want a king*, the people actually demanded. God tried to warn them through these words of the prophet Samuel, and I quote, *This is what a king will do.* He will take your sons to serve in war. He will take your

daughters to serve him. He will take the best of your property and give it to his friends. He will take a tenth of all you produce and give to his supporters. He will take from everything you have for his own use, and you will become his slaves. Only then will you cry out to God, but God will not answer you. But the people refused to listen. We want a king, they demanded, to be like all the other nations.

So, how did things turn out? Turns out God was right. Consolidated power in a person, in a palace, in a position is a recipe for disaster. The temptations of greed, power, selfishness, and the ever-presence of sycophants, the bowing and scraping that go hand in hand with pomp and pageantry all lead to ruin.

Americans paid heed. By 1775, America was fed up with King George. All those early Americans came from places that were ruled badly and selfishly by kings. All that divine right of kings' malarkey soured on us. As a result, we set out on a new course of government. Leaving behind an old world of selfish tyrants, brutal class systems, violent religion, we dared to imagine... a governing system with unparalleled freedom and opportunity. Not perfect, but with no parallel at that time. And it would be governed by layers of representation empowering local voices to speak to power. They definitely turned their back on monarchy, mon-archy, ruled by one person, enforced by iron fist or inheritance or tradition, upheld by the ruled doing nothing about it. For the better part of 250 years, we have resisted a king and his trappings and his assumptions and the megalomania that comes with kingship.

Through today's scripture, God is brutally frank and historically accurate, Such rulers, by nature it seems, can't keep their hands off us or ours. In an upcoming episode, I'll try to convince you that Peter and Paul were sadly mistaken when they were thinking that kings only wanted our submission. No, they want more. They always want more. They want it all.

Yet kings and royalty and the trappings of majesties still tempt us. George Washington had to resist efforts to have him stay on as president with more power. Nixon was intrigued by the idea of what was called the imperial presidency. The modern presidency in the last few terms increasingly ruled by fiat, and some people worry about the dilution of the checks and balances originated by our founders through three separate branches of government. We came to these shores already tired of Versailles and Buckingham Palaces and pyramids and Taj Mahals, remembering the human cost of such splendor. All the gold leaf in the world cannot blot out the stain of tyranny on whatever scale. We learned our lessons from experience, history, and the Bible. Israel began as a nomadic people, wandering and stateless for centuries. When they

finally arrived at the Promised Land, they began to build a nation. For generations, they followed what is called the Great Man Theory of History. These are larger-than-life champions of history, ruling by sheer will, good or bad. Think Churchill, Mao, Martin Luther King Jr., and Gandhi, Mandela. Well, for Biblical Israel, it would be Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua.

Once settled, Israel was led by Judges, women and men chosen by popular acclaim on the simple basis that they could be trusted. Everybody else had a king. Kings have majesty and pomp and palaces and crowns. They embody a nation. Look at that phrase again, embody a nation. At their best, they are a unifying symbol of a nation's vision and values. Now, I'm Swedish, not Norwegian, but when the King of Norway visited the historically Scandinavian neighborhoods of Brooklyn some years ago, I'll admit my heart skipped a beat. Alida follows the royals of England more than she follows Bruce Springsteen, and that says a lot. We love a unifying presence that embodies the best of us. But God is only telling us what we already know. You give someone, anyone, too much power, adulation, sway, praise, room, say, influence, clout, give too much, and they will take more. It may be demanded, required, forced, voted, inherited, seized, bought, earned, or given. Chances are it's going to turn bad.

Perhaps, then, a major part of citizenship and governance is to create a system that protects us from our own worst instincts and the worst instincts of those who would lead us. I read an intriguing analysis of American politics. It suggested that we are moving from a nanny state, Democrats, to a daddy state, Republicans. In either case, we're letting others decide what's good for us. It is seductive to have someone larger than life, on a pedestal with a hint of divine right kingship, a decider, unencumbered by rules and restraints. Something needs doing, they do it. Thus, Mussolini made the trains run on time. China's Mao and Xi brought a billion people out of futile poverty into modern consumerism and technological success. Hungary's Orbán and Russia's Putin delivered national unity and pride, standing up to the so-called anti-Christian, pro-gay, so-called liberal excesses of the West, or at least that's what they say. It helps if we don't count the millions murdered, starved, and disappeared, right-squashed, press-censored, if we ignore the plight of the Uyghurs and Christians and artists and Navalny and Khashoggi and the lone man against the tank in Tiananmen Square. God knew the threat of too much power in too few hands. He tried to warn Israel against it in our scripture: an exceedingly blunt and thoroughly accurate summary of despotic, tyrannical, megalomaniacal, kingly governance, all backed up by history.

In summary, every overarching, power-hungry leader wants your sons and daughters for this or that, your property for themselves and their family and friends. It is ever thus. Wiser heads than mine declared, power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and everybody pays for allowing power to accrue. And yet, as the Bible teaches us to work with what we've got, we have to work with what we've got. Monarchy or democracy, right or left, coup or election, we are all governed by a combination of a system and a person.

In an upcoming episode, we will look at God's guidance for whatever system and person rule over us. But the next one is hometown territory for everybody. What do our favorite patriotic hymns say to us as we sing *America the Beautiful* and *My Country Tis of Thee*? Our choice is to choose the kind of nation we desire to be. the kind of government we want to guide the nation, and the kind of leaders who will follow the guidance and deliver what we desire. For now, I close with a verse of one of America's most majestic hymns: *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak, but thou art mighty. Hold me with thy powerful hand.*

You see, we're not opposed to the powerful and the mighty. but we need to be real picky whose hand holds the might and the power.