

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 16, Theology of Kingship, Audio Podcast Overview

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All right, welcome to another Deep Dive. We've got a really interesting topic today that I think you're going to find pretty fascinating. Yeah, I'm really looking forward to this one.

This is one of those topics that kind of turns some of the typical assumptions you might have about the Old Testament on its head. Right. We're going to be talking about the theology of kingship.

Okay. And we're diving into a lecture by Dr. Fowler on Old Testament backgrounds. And let me tell you, this lecture is full of surprises.

It is. Dr. Fowler always brings a lot of really thought-provoking perspectives to the table. Yeah.

And the one that he brought in this lecture, I think, is particularly relevant, I think, for all of us, right? Because we all live in a world where even if we don't have kings and queens in the traditional sense, we still have to deal with authority and power and leadership. Yeah, that's so true. And the way that kingship is portrayed in the Old Testament, especially when you get to the story of 1 Samuel 8, where Israel asks for a king, a lot of us remember that story as being, you know, it's a bad thing, right? They're rejecting God.

They're wanting a king like all the other nations. They're turning away from God's leadership. It's seen as a moment of rebellion, isn't it? Yeah, it's rebellion.

But Dr. Fowler actually argues something quite different. Oh, really? Yeah. He suggests that kingship is actually part of God's plan all along.

It's woven into the fabric of the Abrahamic covenant itself. Okay, I'm intrigued. That sounds kind of counterintuitive at first glance.

It does, doesn't it? Yeah. Because you think, well, if God wanted them to have a king, why is it such a big deal when they ask for one? Right, exactly. So how does Dr. Fowler make that connection? How does he connect kingship to the Abrahamic covenant? Well, he starts by kind of taking us back to the ancient Near East and looking at how kingship was viewed in that broader cultural context.

And in the ancient Near East, kings weren't simply political leaders. They were seen as divine representatives. They were chosen by the gods to rule on their behalf.

So their authority, their power, everything flowed from that divine connection. Oh, so they were kind of like intermediaries between the human and the divine realms. Precisely.

Their role was to mediate between those two spheres. And that really helps us understand the grandeur and the opulence we often associate with ancient kings. Right, but they're representing the gods, so they have to have that majesty.

Exactly. And when we bring this back to the Old Testament, Dr. Fowler points out that in Genesis 17, God specifically promises Abraham that kings will come from his lineage. So right from the start, kingship is presented as a positive thing, something that's part of God's blessing.

That's right. It's not an afterthought or a concession. It's woven into the very fabric of God's covenant promises.

But then that raises the question: if it's part of God's plan, why is there so much tension surrounding the Israelites' demand for a king in Samuel 8? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? And Dr. Fowler offers a really compelling answer, and I think it's an answer that really speaks to us today. He argues that the problem wasn't in asking for a king per se, but in asking for a king like all the nations. Right.

Give us a king like all the nations. That's the key phrase. They were looking to the surrounding pagan cultures and wanting to emulate their systems of power, their values, their way of doing things.

It's almost as if they were saying, "We want a king who will operate according to worldly standards, prioritize military strength, political power, prestige, all those things. Exactly. They weren't seeking a king who would represent God's justice and righteousness.

They wanted a king who would make them look good in the eyes of the world. So it's not about kingship being inherently bad, but about the Israelites desiring the wrong kind of kingship. Yes.

They wanted a king who would conform to the patterns of this world rather than reflecting God's unique design for Israel. So to really understand what's going on in 1 Samuel 8, we need to kind of rewind a bit and look at the historical context, right? Definitely. What's happening in Israel before they make this demand for a king? What leads up to that moment? Well, we often think of the period of the judges as this chaotic time.

Right. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Exactly.

No king, no central authority; everyone just doing their own thing. Leading to all sorts of problems. Right.

But Dr. Fowler presents a more nuanced perspective, and he suggests that the real issue wasn't simply the absence of a king, but the consistent disobedience and lack of faithfulness on Israel's part. So even when they had leaders, they were still messing up. Oh yeah.

The Book of Judges is full of these cycles of sin, judgment, repentance, and deliverance. It's like they just couldn't get it right. They kept turning away from God, facing the consequences, crying out for help, experiencing God's mercy and restoration, and then doing it all over again.

So it was a deeper, harder issue than just the lack of a centralized authority figure. Exactly. They weren't truly submitting to God's leadership, regardless of whether they had a judge or not.

That's a really important point, isn't it? They were looking for external solutions to internal problems. Exactly. And it's in this context of repeated disobedience and failed leadership that their desire for a king takes on a whole new meaning.

So they're looking for a human solution to a spiritual problem. That's a great way to put it. And to understand the complexities of their request, we have to look at the events leading up to 1 Samuel 8. Specifically, we need to delve into the story of Samuel's childhood and the state of the priesthood at that time.

Okay, let's talk about that. All right. So we're introduced to Samuel, who's raised in the tabernacle under Eli, the high priest.

But there's a big problem. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are portrayed as deeply corrupt. Corrupt priests.

Now that's definitely not something you want to hear. No, not at all. They were not upholding the sanctity of the tabernacle.

Let's just say they were engaging in some, let's just say, inappropriate behavior, and they were treating the sacrifices with a lack of respect, you know, taking the best portions for themselves, things that were supposed to be for God. So basically, they were abusing their position of authority and profaning the very heart of Israelite worship. Exactly.

And what's even worse is that their father, Eli, he rebukes them, but he doesn't actually remove them from their positions. So you've got corrupt priests, and you've got the person in charge who's not holding them accountable. A recipe for disaster.

And that's exactly what happens. The Philistines, you know, they're always a thorn in Israel's side. They defeat them in battle.

Hophni and Phinehas are killed, and the Ark of the Covenant is captured. So the Israelites are facing this, like, spiritual and military crisis. And the very people who are supposed to be their spiritual leaders are failing them.

It's a bleak picture. It's no wonder they cry out for a king. They're desperate.

They need someone to restore order, to protect them, to lead them. But as we've been discussing, the problem isn't just that they want a king. It's that they want the wrong kind of king.

They're looking to the nations around them instead of looking to God. They want a king who will make them look powerful and successful in the eyes of the world, not a king who will lead them in righteousness and faithfulness. And that's where the warnings that Samuel gives in 1 Samuel 8 become so important.

Exactly. He lays out very specific concerns about what will happen if they get a king like all the nations. OK, I'm really curious to hear about those warnings.

What does he tell them? He starts by saying that this kind of king, a king like all the nations, is going to establish a standing army. And guess what? Your sons are going to be drafted. Ooh, right off the bat, he's hitting them where it hurts.

Yeah, this is personal. This isn't some abstract political theory. This is going to impact their families directly.

It's going to impact their lives, their sons' lives. And then he goes on. He says, this king, he's going to take your best fields, your vineyards, the best of what you have, and it's going to be his.

And you know why? To support his lavish lifestyle. You got it. And to fund his wars.

So they're risking their economic freedom and their prosperity. Exactly. They could lose their land, their livelihood, all the fruits of their labor.

And it doesn't stop there, does it? Nope. Samuel warns them about forced labor. The king can essentially force them to work on his building projects, his pet projects, whatever he wants.

So they're risking their freedom, their land, their wealth, their time, all for a king, like all the nations. A king who operates according to the world's system, not God's. And this is where Dr. Fowler brings in this really fascinating point.

OK, what's that? He points out that when we look at the reign of Solomon, who is often considered the pinnacle of Israelite kingship, the Golden Age, right? Right, the wisest king. He embodies many of the very practices that Samuel warned about. Oh, wow.

That's interesting. You're right. Solomon, all those wives, the massive building projects, the taxes, the forced labor- it's all there.

It's like a case study in what happens when you desire the wrong kind of king, even if that king starts out with the best of intentions. It's a cautionary tale. Be careful what you wish for.

Because even a king who begins with wisdom and prosperity can be corrupted by power and compromise. Exactly. And that leads us to another important question.

If kingship was part of God's plan, but the Israelites were asking for the wrong kind of king, how do we reconcile that tension? That's a great question. And I think we need to dig into that a little bit further. Yeah, let's do that.

But we'll have to save that for our next segment. Sounds good to me. I'm ready for part two.

Stay tuned. OK, so we left off with that big question, right? If God promised kingship, but the Israelites were asking for the wrong kind of king, how do we make sense of all that?

That's where Dr. Fowler's idea about these interconnected covenants really helps. Covenants, OK.

He talks about the Abrahamic, the Sinaitic, and the Davidic covenants, and how they all relate to this whole idea of kingship. All right, so three covenants, how do they all kind of fit together? And what do they tell us about kingship? Well, Dr. Fowler kind of suggests that each covenant sort of builds on the one before it, you know, with this thread of kingship running through them all. A common thread? Yeah, like a golden thread.

OK. We've already talked about the Abrahamic covenant, right? Where God promises that kings will come from Abraham's descendants. Right.

Right from the start, that promise is there. That's the seed, you know, the initial seed. So then you've got the Sinaitic covenant, the one at Mount Sinai with Moses.

Right. How does that fit into this whole kingship thing? The Sinaitic covenant, it emphasizes law, obedience, all that stuff. Right.

Really establishes these principles of justice and righteousness. Yeah. And those are supposed to be the guiding principles for a king's rule.

So it's not just about having a king. It's about having a king who reflects those principles. Exactly.

It's about having a king who embodies God's character, governs according to his standards. Not just somebody who's just wielding power for their own benefit. Exactly.

Exactly. OK. And here's where Dr. Fowler brings in this really interesting idea.

He suggests that Moses himself was actually the first king of Israel. Whoa, hold on a second. Moses, a king.

I know, right? We don't usually think of him like that. It's a bit of a mind bender. He's the lawgiver, the prophet, the guy who led them out of Egypt.

Right. Right. But a king.

But think about it. His role as a mediator between God and the people. OK.

Yeah. His authority to establish laws, administer justice, all that stuff. He's definitely leading them.

Leading them, guiding them. So even though he doesn't have that official title of king. Right.

He's functioning in a way that anticipates kingship. Exactly. Foreshadowing what's to come.

OK. I see what you're saying. And Dr. Fowler even suggests that there was, like, a dynastic succession plan, you know, with Joshua as Moses' successor.

Oh, wow. So it was supposed to continue. But then something happened.

Yeah. What happened? Disobedience, unfaithfulness. Oh, right.

The same old story. Israel's sin. It disrupted the plan.

They weren't ready for the kind of king God had in mind. Not yet. A king who reflected his character ruled according to his law.

And that's how they ended up in the whole mess of the period of the judges. All those cycles of sin and repentance. Right.

Because they hadn't really learned that lesson of surrender and obedience. So kingship in Israel, it's way more complicated than we might have initially thought, isn't it? It's a journey. Divine promise, human failure, God's faithfulness, Israel's struggles.

OK. So we've got the Abrahamic covenant with the promise of kings. We've got the Sinaitic covenant with the principles of righteous leadership.

Right. What about the Davidic covenant? How does that fit into all this? Well, the Davidic covenant, you know, it's made with King David. And it takes that whole kingship idea another step forward.

In what way? God promises David that his descendants will rule over Israel, like, forever. So this is where we get the whole idea of a dynasty. A continuous line of kings coming from David.

And this is also where the concept of a messiah really starts to take shape. Right. A future king coming from David's line.

Who will restore Israel and establish God's kingdom. Exactly. So the Davidic covenant, it's not just about earthly kings.

Wow. It's pointing to something much bigger, something ultimate. It's about God's ultimate plan for his people.

And all of that helps us understand why the Israelites' request for a king, like all the nations, was so problematic. Right. Because they were rejecting God's model.

Choosing a path that would ultimately lead them away from him. They were settling for something far less than what God had in mind for them. OK.

So let's talk more about this idea of a king like all the nations. We've touched on Solomon's reign and how he kind of ended up embodying a lot of those things that Samuel warned about. Right.

Can you give us some specific examples of how Solomon's rule reflected those patterns? You know, those patterns that the nations around them. One of the most striking examples is Solomon's whole approach to marriage. Oh, yeah.

All those wives. He had, like, hundreds of wives. 700 wives and 300 concubines.

And many of them were from surrounding nations. It was all about forming these political alliances, you know, securing his power, expanding his empire. From a political standpoint, I guess it made sense.

Yeah, strategically. But from a religious perspective? Disaster. Why? What was the problem? All these foreign wives, they brought their own gods, their own religious practices.

Ah, so it's introducing all this foreign influence. And Solomon, to appease them, he even built temples to these foreign gods. So he's compromising the religious integrity of Israel.

Exactly. Blending all these different beliefs and practices, directly contradicting God's command for them to stay separate, to stay faithful to him alone. It's like he's trying to have it both ways.

And it just doesn't work. You know, it erodes their identity, their faith, their commitment to God. A slippery slope.

Very slippery. And it wasn't just a personal thing, right? No, no. This affected the whole nation.

It set a precedent. His actions had far-reaching consequences, you know. His reign, it starts out great.

Prosperity, grandeur, all that. But it ends in division and decline. So even with all his wisdom, even with all that initial success, Solomon ends up being a cautionary tale.

Be careful about compromise, even when things seem to be going well. Yeah, because power and ambition can really corrupt even the best of us. That's the lesson, isn't it? Now, there's another aspect of Solomon's reign that Dr. Fowler talks about that I think is really interesting.

OK, what's that? His decision to reorganize Israel into these administrative districts. Oh, right. And those districts, they kind of ignored those traditional tribal boundaries.

Yeah, it's like he's trying to reshape the whole social fabric of Israel. And Dr. Fowler suggests that Solomon was trying to solve a real problem. You know, tribalism caused all sorts of issues during the period of the judges.

Oh, yeah. So he's trying to centralize power. Streamline things.

Create a more unified, more efficient system. OK, sounds logical enough. But it backfired.

Of course it did. It created resentment. People don't like change.

Especially when it comes to their traditions, their identities. And it ultimately contributed to the division of the kingdom after Solomon's death. So even though his intentions might have been good, you know, trying to bring order, trying to create unity.

He ends up making things worse. He disrupted those established social structures without really thinking through the consequences. It's another example of how Solomon, even when he's trying to do the right thing.

He ends up going about it in a way that's just not in line with God's design. And then, of course, you've got those massive building projects. Oh, yeah, they were huge.

The palace, the temple. Incredible feats of architecture and engineering. I mean, the temple especially was such a significant landmark in their history.

A symbol of their faith, their national identity. But those projects, they must have come at a huge cost, right? Oh, absolutely. Vast amounts of resources, manpower, and forced labor.

Forced labor. Yeah. Solomon levied heavy taxes.

To pay for all of it. And conscripted laborers from among the people, you know, to get all that work done. So not only is he disregarding tribal boundaries, but he's also burdening the people with these heavy taxes and this forced labor.

It's like this classic example of how even well-intentioned projects can become oppressive. When they're pursued at the expense of the people. Exactly.

And it's not just about the economic burden either. There's a spiritual dimension to it too, right? Absolutely. All those international projects, the trade, the alliances, they brought a flood of foreign influence into Israel, eroding its religious and cultural identity.

It's like he's building an empire based on worldly power and prestige. Instead of focusing on God's unique calling for Israel. And that's ultimately what leads to the downfall of his kingdom.

The pursuit of worldly success at the expense of faithfulness. What a sobering lesson, isn't it? It is. It reminds us that true success, that lasting legacy, is not found in power or political maneuvering.

It's about obedience to God. Alignment with his will. So we've seen how Solomon's reign, even though it had all this glory at the beginning, ultimately went off track.

Yeah, it's a tragic story. What does a positive example of kingship look like then? That's a great question. And I think the answer is found in the reign of King David.

We'll talk about that in our next segment. So welcome back to our deep dive into the theology of kingship. It's been quite a journey.

Yeah, it has, hasn't it? Exploring, you know, the divine promise of kingship, the dangers of wanting the wrong kind of king. The cautionary tale of Solomon. And I think for many of us, Solomon's story is a little bit unsettling, right? It is, isn't it? Because he starts out.

So much potential. So much potential. All that wisdom.

Yeah, prosperity. But he falls into the very traps that Samuel warned about. He compromises, centralizes power, burdens the people.

And his kingdom crumbles. Powerful reminder that, you know, even the most gifted leaders can be corrupted. By success, by ambition.

Especially if they lose sight of God's design. So if Solomon's reign is like the negative example, what does a positive example of kingship look like? That is the question. Who should we be looking to as a model? I think the most compelling example is King David.

King David. He's not perfect, obviously. Yeah, nobody's perfect in the Old Testament.

He has his own failings. Right. But he's consistently portrayed as a man after God's own heart.

What set him apart. What made him different from Solomon. What made him different, yeah.

One key difference was his humility. Oh, wait. A deep humility.

And this awareness of his dependence on God. He knew where his authority ultimately came from. Yes, he recognized that his authority came from God.

And he sought to rule in accordance with God's will. So it wasn't just about outward piety. Right.

Or religious rituals. Yeah, heart posture. A genuine heart posture.

It's submission to God. So how did it actually play out in his leadership? Well, think about this. He establishes Jerusalem as the religious and political center of Israel.

Okay, yeah. He brings the Ark of the Covenant to the city. Big deal.

Makes it a place of worship. Place of pilgrimage. Right.

Yeah, it's a huge symbolic move. It solidified Jerusalem's role as the heart of Israelite faith. And under David, you also have this period of unprecedented military success.

Right. You got it. He defeats all their enemies, secures their borders.

They expand. Establishes their dominance. But unlike Solomon, who uses that wealth and power to build this lavish empire.

Yeah. David seems to have a different focus. What's his focus? What's driving him? Despite his military victories and political achievements, he remained grounded.

Grounded in his faith. Yes, grounded in his faith. He recognized that his purpose, his ultimate purpose, was to serve God and lead the people in righteousness.

So it's not that worldly success or military power is bad in itself. Right. It's how those things are used.

The heart of the leader. The motivation. The motivation, yeah.

And David's reign shows that it is possible to achieve both. You can have worldly success and spiritual integrity. But it takes a constant awareness of your dependence on God.

Yes. And a willingness to submit. To submit to his guidance.

Now it's interesting, though, even with David's positive example. Kingship in Israel is never a smooth ride. No, not at all.

There are still all these ups and downs. There's always that tension. Between human ambition and divine will.

Right. Because even the best of kings. Even the best.

Are still human. They're going to make mistakes. They're going to be tempted.

They're going to fall short. So what does all this mean for us today? That is a great question. We live in a world where kings and queens.

Yeah. They're mostly a thing of the past. Yeah.

How does this ancient concept of kingship, how does it relate to our modern lives? Well, I think the answer is that the specific form of monarchy might have changed. Okay. But the underlying principles.

The challenges. They're still relevant. How so? We live in a world shaped by power, leadership, authority.

So it's not just about literal kings and queens. No. It's about how we understand.

And relate to authority. Yeah. In all its forms.

Whether we're talking about political leaders, religious figures. CEOs. Parents.

Parents. All those principles that we've been talking about. The desire for power.

The temptation to compromise. The importance of humility and integrity. Those are timeless struggles.

We all face them. In our own spheres of influence. In our own little kingdoms, you might say.

So we're all called to be kings, in a sense. In a sense, yeah. Dueling over our own domains.

Our own little spheres. With wisdom, justice, compassion. That's a powerful image.

It is, isn't it? Yeah. So it brings us back to that question that we posed earlier. Yeah.

What kind of leaders should we be looking for today? What should we be looking for? What qualities matter most? Well, after this deep dive into kingship, I think it's pretty clear. We should be looking for leaders who are grounded in those principles. Justice, righteousness.

And they need to be humble, accountable. They need to prioritize the well-being of the people. Not their own game.

Or their own ambition. They need to be like David. Yeah.

Who recognized that true authority comes from God. And who used their power to serve. Yeah.

Not to be served. To serve others. Yes.

So as we wrap up this deep dive, I'm left with one final thought-provoking question. Okay, I'm ready. What does it mean to be a king in your own life? That is a good one.

How can you exercise authority? In a way that reflects God's heart. And advance his purposes. That's the challenge, isn't it? It is.

It is. It's a call to action. For all of us.

To be kings and queens in our own right. Ruling our domain wisely and well. Amen to that.

And keep diving deep.