



### **The Twenty-ninth Century of His-Story: The Church under the Judges Needs the Office of King**

This one hundred-year period includes a great deal of material and marks a shift from life under the judges to life under kings. The familiar stories of Eli and Samuel span this period—Eli serving as a priest and judge at Shiloh at the beginning, and Samuel serving as judge and prophet at the end. Nine judges served during this last hundred years under the judges, and many judged at the same time but at different places. This period also includes the story of Ruth as God reveals his sovereign work to prepare and bring his anointed king at last to the throne as a picture of Christ. The tapestry of stories that fill this period of time vary greatly, but all direct our attention to the need for the office of king among God’s people.

As the time for the anointing of a king drew near, the need for the strong exercise of a godly king became more and more clear. Along with the strengthening of the office of king, we also see God providing the blessing of his word and covenantal fellowship in the strengthening of the offices of prophet and priest. God’s people are getting closer to the time when God would set before them a full and complete picture of the church and the wonder of the deliverance from sin that God would work in Christ.

The land had enjoyed rest for forty years after the service of Deborah and Barak, but again plunged deeper than ever into sin. They kept up a superficial worship of God at Shiloh, but gave unashamed expression to their unbridled lust for earthly pleasure in Baal worship. Gideon, whom God would call to be judge, lived in a home and neighborhood where an altar had been erected to Baal. This altar had become the all-important focus of the neighborhood fun and entertainment, and anyone who dared to attack this altar would be sure to feel the wrath of Gideon’s father and the men of the city. In judgment God prepared the Midianites as well as Amalekites, who stripped the land of its crops and forced many in Israel to live in dens and caves (Judges 6:2). So severe was the oppression that Israel became “impoverished,” as we read in Judges 1:6.

This may well have been the famine that prompted Elimelech and Naomi to leave Israel with their two small boys and flee to Moab to find a place with decent shelter and food to raise their boys. What motivated them seemed to be chiefly a desire to have some earthly peace where they could take care of the earthly needs of a growing young family. Outwardly this would seem to be a reasonable and even wise move, but true godly wisdom would have sought the will of God at Shiloh, stayed where God was pleased to dwell with his people, and faced the enemy in God’s name like a king. Elimelech as the head of this home failed to be a strong spiritual head, and God brought severe judgment upon this family even in Moab. Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a widow with two boys. The boys grew up and

married, but they died too, leaving a desolate widow who appeared to have lost everything, even her spiritual heritage.

The story of Ruth is familiar, and we see how God was pleased to reveal his wisdom and strength even in the weakness and failures of man. God worked with the power of his grace in the heart of Ruth, the widowed Moabitess, wife of one of Naomi's sons, and she and Naomi returned to Israel. As we well know, this part of the story ends beautifully as God unveils his plan to raise up king David from the generations of Ruth and Boaz.

Meanwhile God had raised up Gideon, a poor farmer, to fight and deliver Israel from what appeared to be an impossibly powerful enemy. In Gideon we see many qualities of a godly king. His name was changed to Jerubbaal to reflect his calling as a "Baal-fighter." He began with great boldness and zeal for God by opposing Baal worship in his own house and neighborhood, undaunted by the rage of his neighborhood. He then gathered an army and used weapons to fight the Midianites, but God made the army small and the weapons strange to emphasize that the real power behind the king of God's people was God Himself (Judges 7:2). Unlike Elimelech's weak leadership, the men with Gideon displayed daring, disciplined, and self-denying kingly leadership.

When Israel saw the great value of Gideon as a leader, they wanted to make Gideon a king, but he refused because they saw only Gideon's bravery (8:22) and not the reality that it was "the LORD their God, who had delivered them" (v.23). The people were not ready yet for an earthly king in whom they would be directed to the spiritual kingship of Christ. Gideon also displayed his weakness. He understood the office of king, but brought trouble and sin into Israel by his foolish intrusion into the office of priest by making an ephod (8:24–27), which introduced worship and fellowship with God in a way God had not commanded. Blessing among God's people comes only in the way of exercising the offices in accordance with God's direction. Not until Christ comes and the Holy Spirit is poured out is God pleased to have the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king exercised in the heart of each believer.

At this time God is pleased to give us an intimate peek into two more covenant homes in Israel: Eli's and Elkanah's. As Elimelech's, these also were weak and sorely lacking in the godly spiritual direction of the husband as head and king. At the beginning of this period, Eli was about fifty years old. He was married, raising his family of two boys, and serving as priest in Shiloh. As the priest, his heart ached to see so much confusion and apostasy in Israel as the people came with their sacrifices and news from across the land. Though his heart ached, he seemed to lack the zeal and courage to exercise this office properly. Without the exercise of the office of prophet to bring God's word, and the office of king to enforce godly rule, even Eli's home life was in a sorry state. As Eli's own sons began to take up the work of the priesthood, they did what they wanted and gave no regard to the word of God concerning what parts of the sacrifice they might eat. Living for their own self-satisfaction, they eventually began to molest the women who came, and they made a complete mockery of the priesthood. This became the occasion for God to reveal to Eli that his family would soon be removed from the service of the priesthood. God has a purpose in this sad history too, as he turns the priesthood over to the last remaining family of Aaron to picture Christ as the one and only high priest.

While Eli neglected to discipline his boys, a young wife, Hanna, was sinking into the misery of a home where she had to share a husband with a woman who mocked her for failing to bear children. Those in Israel who sought covenant fellowship with God came to Shiloh to bring their offerings to God and be reassured of God's covenant promise to send the Savior who would deliver His people from the bondage of sin. Some, like Hanna, prayed fervently, but had little in the way of instruction and guidance. Many of the people that the high priest Eli encountered at Shiloh were living ungodly lives, so much so that Eli's first thought concerning Hanna was that she was drunk. Eli listened to her desire for a child and her willingness to consecrate him to serve God in Shiloh, and God blessed his church with Samuel, who would grow up at Shiloh and become a great leader and prophet for the people of God. By the end of this period, God raises up Samuel to be a strong and faithful prophet and prepares the way for a strong and faithful high priest in Zadok, and a strong and faithful king in David.

The story of Eli, his sons, and the work of Samuel serve as a setting for the work of the remaining judges and the story of Ruth. In all this history, God directs our attention to his work of preserving his church and preparing his people for the coming king. God's people had now been in Canaan for about 250 years. If we can make an analogy with child development, this had been the time of emerging adulthood when the young person has left father and mother to live on his own. The prospect of entering into real life with a good job, paying one's own expenses, and having one's own place and property is exciting. "I'm free from the rules of living under the roof of mom and dad, and am able to establish my own life within the sphere of God's laws." After some years of living in independence and experiencing some troubles and hardships, the fun and excitement wears off and we begin to look again to mom and dad for advice. Israel too was gaining a new appreciation for the power of sin and the need they had for the promised Christ before they could enjoy covenantal fellowship with God. Every man had been living and doing what was right in his own eyes; but not having the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to live in each heart and the power of the resurrected Lord ruling as king in their hearts, life in Canaan had become miserable.

We have already taken a brief look at Gideon's work of deliverance from a powerful alliance of enemies and noticed how his godly leadership had given Israel a taste for the blessings of the office of king. One man in particular could see the value of having the offices of prophet, priest, and king combined—a man able to communicate with God through the ephod and priesthood and to lead boldly against all enemies – but this man tried to combine them apart from God for personal glory and ambition. His name, Abimelech, means "my father, [a] king." He tried to take the offices upon himself through his own wicked scheming and for his own glory and power (9:1-3), but it is God himself who will choose and establish these offices. Abimelech's way is the way of antichrist within the church—to use the offices of prophet, priest, and king for man's glory. Even though his motives and goals were entirely ungodly, God used his ambition and activity to judge and destroy the worship of Baal that had developed to the point that it had incorporated the doctrine of God's covenant and now Baal was worshiped as the covenant God.

God preserved his church through the work of a number of other judges all throughout Israel before he established the office of king. Tola (10:1) judged in northern Israel on the west side of the Jordan for 23 years while Jair served on the east side of Jordan for 22 years. Jephthah served in the east

against Ammon, bringing a period of about 50 years of rest during the middle of this century for this part of the land, a rest preserved by Ibsan, Elon, and Abdon.

As this twenty–ninth century of his-story comes to a conclusion, we find Samson in the southwest of Israel (10:7) displaying in a unique way the quality of a king that stands at the forefront of the office of king. In himself he is a weak and sinful man just like everyone else, but being ordained of God and serving under him in obedience to him, he leads with great boldness and strength to defeat the enemies of the church. Clearly his awesome strength did not reside simply in his muscle and bone, but it was to be found in obedience to God. Samuel needed to remind Saul and all Israel of this when Saul failed as a king in his pride and disobedience. When Samson looked to God, God used him to bring deliverance.

Samson died fighting, and even though the slaughter was great, the destruction of the Philistines was completed shortly after his death by Samuel at Mizpeh (1 Samuel). Samuel was chiefly a prophet who spent his time and energy bringing God’s word to the people, and as a judge he demonstrated the power of God to deliver his people from their enemies. “So the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. And the cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even unto Gath; and the coasts thereof did Israel deliver out of the hands of the Philistines. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places. And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and there he built an altar unto the LORD.” (1Sam. 7:13–17) To Samuel God spoke and gave hope to Israel that God had not forsaken his people. He battled hard against apostasy, and God used him to open the eyes of Israel and speak to them his word. His role as prophet came to its conclusion with the anointing of two kings: the first king, Saul, and then David. By the end of this century, the people of God are able to see more clearly the need and value of the office of king exercised according to God’s purpose for his people.

The time of the judges is now coming to a close, and soon God will reveal more about the glory and power of the coming Savior through the office of king. The earthly enemy is only a picture of our spiritual enemies of sin. Only in Christ our king do we find victory and peace from the oppression of sin. This time of the judges made more and more clear the depth of sin and the kind of Savior that would be necessary to deliver man fully from the bondage of sin. It also makes clear that we can begin to enjoy the blessings of deliverance from sin even while we live on this earth when the ministering offices of prophet, priest, and king are alive and well in our day-to-day life. When the judges restored the office of prophet and preached the gospel faithfully, God used this preaching in connection with the office of priest to restore covenantal fellowship with God. The covenant also needs the office of king actively ruling in the church. It is a rule of power over the wicked and a rule of grace within the people of God. May we also exercise the offices of prophet, priest, and king in our own lives and in our own homes as we wait for the final coming of our Lord and King.