

Last Words  
II Samuel 23:1-7

If there was anyone in the Bible who was an authority on political matters, it would be David, right? He started off in life at the bottom of the ladder. In his own family he was insignificant – the youngest of his brothers. As a shepherd, he knew what it was like to work hard for a living. Today, we might say he was a real “Joe the Plumber” type.

And he knew what the abuse of political power looked like. He had spent years as a fugitive from justice, hiding from a king who kept trying to kill him even though he had done nothing wrong. He thus knew the dangers that power can pose.

But David had also ascended to the top of the ladder. He was a soldier who fought and won many battles and campaigns. He was a commander, the sort of leader who inspired the loyalty and devotion of the mightiest of men, some of whose exploits you can read about later in this same chapter.

And after David became a king, he experienced both the greatest victories and the greatest defeats. He conquered Moab and Edom, and placed garrisons as far as Damascus (II Sam 8). On the other hand, his own son Absalom declared war on him and drove him from his capital.

And having lived through all of this, and having in his spare time written many of the songs in the Book of Psalms, at the end of his life, the “sweet psalmist of Israel” sat down to write his last song. This song would be a meditation on leadership and responsibility, on what a good king should be and what he should do.

Now, by the grace of God we Americans have no earthly king over us. But we Mississippians will go to the polls this fall, to decide who will serve as our governor. And the President of the United States has already announced that he is running for re-election next fall. No, our governors and President are not kings. But they command our state national guards and the armed forces of our Federal republic. They are ultimately responsible for the enforcement of our state and Federal laws. They thus wield many of a king’s powers.

And don’t forget, we also have the opportunity to choose those who make the laws at every level of government. And by virtue of their office, they will have the power to tax us, and to regulate many things about our corporate and individual lives. They will thus have much to say about whether our businesses thrive or wither. They will have much to say about how our children and grandchildren will be educated. They will not be kings, but they will wield many of a king’s powers.

So, as we go to the polls, perhaps we should listen to this last song, to these last words of King David. What sorts of leaders should we choose? And how should they wield the power we entrust to them?

The first thing we notice in this song is the way that David introduces himself. Kings, after all, usually have grandiose titles, listing the places over which they rule. At the end of her reign, for example, Victoria was styled “By the grace of God Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, and Empress of India.” At the beginning of this psalm, therefore, we might expect David to proclaim himself to be, “King over Israel, Moab, Edom and Aram, ruler of all the lands from the River to the Great Sea,” or some similar formulation.

But the title he picks to introduce his last words is simply “David the son of Jesse.” Oh, he alludes to his power and authority, but only in the passive sense. He says he is the “man who was raised up on high,” not the man who conquered mighty armies. He calls himself the “anointed of the God of Jacob,” not the man who seized power for himself. He thus gives all the credit for his successes to God.

And we see this theme repeated in the song itself. Verse 5 says that God “has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things.” David thus admits that he only holds power because God has entrusted it to him. And having seen the example of Saul, who abused his power and therefore lost it, David knows that no man has the ability to hold on to any amount of success or achievement. No, those things come from the hand of God and are preserved only by God’s power and by God’s covenant promises.

And so the first lesson we should learn about leadership is the need for humility. We should look for leaders who aren’t proud or puffed up, but who know within the core of their being the lesson that Jesus taught

His disciples in our responsive reading: “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Jesus led not with a crown, but with a cross. Christians should thus seek to be humble, servant leaders, and they should look for those traits in those they would follow.

The next thing we learn about a godly leader is the source of his ideas. Now, we’ve all seen candidates boast about the learning or experience of their counselors. For example, when George W. Bush was running for President, he impressed many people by picking Richard Cheney to be his Vice-President, because Mr. Cheney had so many years of public service and so much experience in foreign policy. In the same way, candidates often cite the wisdom of their advisors in hopes that people will respect what they say.

But when David sat down to write his final words, he did not point to the many mighty men whom he led. Nor did he appeal to the considerable wisdom of Abigail his wife. He did not cite the wise teachings of Hushai the Archite who had helped to save him during his son Absalom’s insurrection. He did not quote the perceptive counsel of Nathan the prophet, who showed him the reality of his terrible sin with Bathsheba.

No, instead of appealing to any earthly warrior or counselor to bolster his credentials, David instead looks to the God of Israel for wisdom and inspiration. Just as he always looked to the Rock of Israel to protect him and to provide him shelter from all his enemies, now he insists that the Spirit of the Lord gave him the words he needs to say.

What lesson should we draw from this? Should Christians only elect prophets to public office? If so, we will be hard pressed to find one, for the era of authoritative prophecy has long since ceased.

But if God no longer gives individual people the power and authority to write Scripture, that is only because God has already given the complete, inerrant Word of God to us. David himself alludes to the special status of the Scriptures in verse 2, saying that they are given by the power of the Holy Spirit. And so today, if Christians can’t look to living prophets to guide us, we can still look to the words of the prophets and apostles, to the Word of God as a source of infallible truth and wisdom.

And just as we seek the Bible’s guidance in determining what good and godly leaders should be and do, can we doubt that those we choose to lead us should also seek their inspiration and direction from its pages? For if the Bible contains words spoken by the Spirit of the Lord, would it be wise for any leader to neglect its precepts? Would it be safe to follow someone who is not seeking in the Holy Scriptures the direction of the Lord?

David goes on to make exactly this point at the end of verse 3. He says that those who rule over men should rule in the fear of God. Now, this fear really includes the previous two points we’ve already discovered. Of course someone who fears God will be humble, recognizing both his own limitations as well as God’s power and providence. Of course someone who fears God will seek His will in the pages of His holy word.

But this fear of God must not simply comprise personal piety, or even personal conviction. No, David says that those who rule over men must be just. That means they must rule righteously. And since righteousness is defined as whatever is in accordance with God’s will, it is the responsibility of rulers to put into practice, to the extent that they can, the principles and teachings that they find in God’s Word.

To a great extent, this is what our society as a whole and our leaders in particular have sought to do over the 400 years since the first settlers landed at Jamestown, Virginia. In this country, for example, stealing and murder are not only immoral breaches of the Ten Commandments – they are illegal breaches of the law of the state. When the sword of the state punishes those who bring harm to other people or their property, our rulers are thus ruling in righteousness.

And what is the effect of such godly rule on a nation? David expresses it in beautiful poetic terms. A righteous ruler is like the light of a clear sky at sunrise. He nourishes his people the way the sun and rain feed the tender grass that springs out of the earth. It’s an image of clarity and purity, of life and health, of protection and peace.

And any casual student of history has to admit that to the extent that rulers and people do choose follow the principles of life and government we find in the Bible, to the extent that rulers choose to walk in the

light of God's Word, their people will indeed be like the tender grass springing up out of the moist earth, growing in the light of the sun.

Unfortunately, it also stands to reason that to whatever extent leaders and peoples ignore God's Word in areas of their common life, to whatever extent leaders and peoples choose to walk in darkness, they seldom find any life or health or growth.

Need examples? Starbucks Coffee, a company not noted for its social conservatism, is closing six stores in Seattle and two in Portland, citing concerns for the safety of its workers due to drug use and other disruptions. We should not be surprised when cities which either will not or cannot follow the sixth commandment and the eighth commandment, cities which either will not or cannot protect the life and property of their people, are losing population all across America.

And having endured the 50 years of chaos brought to us by the social experiment called the "sexual revolution," can we doubt that nations which spurn the seventh commandment, nations which tolerate adultery, will not have healthy families? Having seen greed run amok in the housing market, can we doubt that people who spurn the tenth commandment, people who are covetous, will not long enjoy the blessings of wealth?

How much less should we expect God to bless people and leaders which, in the name of pluralism, break the first commandment, affirming or even participating in the worship of false gods? For we must pay careful attention to the words of David, the words of the Holy Spirit, in verse 5. For make no mistake: God has indeed made an everlasting covenant with the Son of David, ordered in all things and secure. Jesus, God's anointed Messiah, having risen from the dead and having ascended into heaven, is in fact seated at the right hand of God. Jesus really does have all authority in Heaven and on Earth. And no matter how bitterly His enemies might object, Jesus' kingdom shall have no end.

So how can it be right or safe to ignore His will? How can it be right or safe for voters to ignore the words of Jesus when they enter the voting booth? How can it be right or safe for legislators to ignore the words of Jesus when they make the laws of the land? How can it be right or safe for governors or presidents to ignore the words of Jesus when they seek to carry out those laws?

For how does David describe those who would ignore the Word of the King of Kings? He says that instead of giving light and life as the rays of the sun do, those who turn away from God are sons of Belial. They will be as useless and dangerous as thorns, providing no benefit to the people they rule, but pricking and wounding all who would come near them.

Unfortunately, history is replete with examples of leaders like this, leaders who ignored or despised God, leaders who walked instead in the light of their own imaginations, seeking to impose their own will on the multitudes who followed them. The last century alone saw Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Mao, all of whom inspired nations with their godless words and plans – and all of whom murdered millions of their countrymen who refused to follow their godless schemes.

One day, their wickedness will become obvious to everyone. For on the day that King Jesus comes to judge the world in all His glory, all those who refuse to bow the knee to Him will feel His wrath. And on that day, He will destroy all His enemies, in the same way that useless, treacherous thorns are cut down with iron tools and thrown into the fire.

So, when we go to the polls, whom should we seek to follow? David has made it clear: those who are humble, those who seek to serve others, those who are guided by the Word of God, those who rule in the fear of God will bring light and life to us. For such leaders are following the example and the principles of the King of Kings, the One Who brings salvation and light and life and growth, the One Who invites everyone to trust Him and to follow Him.