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# Samuel, Kings & Chronicles and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## Samuel, Kings &amp; Chronicles and Work

## Introduction to Samuel, Kings and Chronicles

The books of 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, and 1&2 Chronicles take a deep interest in work. Their predominant interest is in the work of kings, including political, military, economic, and religious aspects. Governing, in the form of “having dominion”, is one of the tasks God gave human beings at the very beginning (Genesis 1:28), and leadership, or governance, issues take center stage in 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, and 1&2 Chronicles. How should the Israelites be governed, by whom, and for what purposes? When organizations are governed well, people thrive. When good governance is violated, everyone suffers.

But kings are not the only people we see at work in these books. First of all, the work of kings affects the work of many others, such as soldiers, builders, craftspeople, and priests, and the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles pay attention to how the kings’ work affects these other workers. Secondly, kings themselves have work other than ruling, of which parenting is of particular interest in these books. Finally, as histories of Israel, these books take an interest in the people as a whole, and in many cases this means recounting the work of people not connected to the work of kingship.

Following the lead of the books themselves, we will pay greatest attention to the leadership and governance tasks of the kings of Israel, while also exploring the many other kinds of workers depicted. Included among these are soldiers and commanders, judges and civic leaders (often called “elders”), parents, shepherds, farmers, cooks and bakers, perfumers, vineyard keepers, musicians and artists, inventors, entrepreneurs, diplomats (both formal and informal), protestors or activists, political advisers, artisans and craftspeople, architects, supervisors, stonemasons, bricklayers, metal workers, carpenters, armorers, well-keepers, oil dealers, healers, slave girls, messengers, lumberjacks, and accountants. Prophets and priests are also included, although in keeping with the Theology of Work Project’s focus on non-religious work, we will limit ourselves to their role in work outside the religious sphere. They actually play a significant role in political, military, and economic affairs, as we shall see.

Virtually every kind of worker today is either represented in the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles or can find practical applications to their work in them. Generally speaking, we will discover how good governance and leadership apply to our work, rather than finding instructions about how to do our

particular jobs—unless governance or leadership is our job.

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## The historical background of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles

The overarching interest of the books is the work of the king as Israel becomes a monarchy. They begin at a time when the twelve tribes of Israel had long been violating the rules, ethics, and virtues of leadership that God laid out for them, which can be found in the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy. After almost 200 years of increasingly bad governance by a succession of “judges” (temporary leaders), Israel is in shambles. Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles narrate God’s intervention in Israel’s governance as his people move from a failing tribal confederation to a promising monarchy, which declines into failure as succeeding generations of kings abandon God and his ways. Regrettably, the story ends with destruction of Israel as a nation, never to be restored during the biblical period. This may not seem like a promising backdrop for a study of governance, but God’s guidance is always in evidence in the narrative, whether people choose to follow it or not. Reading the story thousands of years later, we can learn both from their success and their failures.

The books’ fundamental theological position is that if the king is faithful to God, the nation thrives economically, socially and militarily. If the king is faithless, national catastrophe ensues. So the history of God’s people is told primarily through the actions of top governmental leaders, to use modern terms. Yet governance is needed in every sort of community or institution, whether political, civic, business, non-profit, academic, or anything else. The lessons of the books apply to governance in all sectors of society today. These books offer a rich study of leadership, demonstrating how the livelihood of many depends on what leaders do and say.

Scholars believe that, originally, each pair of books (1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles) was a single entity split between two scrolls. The scrolls of Samuel and Kings form an integrated political history of the Israelite monarchies. Chronicles tells the same history as Kings, but with a focus on the priestly or worship aspects of Hebrew history. We will follow the narrative as in three acts: (1) From Tribal Confederation to Monarchy, (2) Monarchy’s Golden Age, (3) From Failed Monarchies to Exile.

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## From Tribal Confederation to Monarchy: 1 Samuel

The first book of Samuel marks the transition of Israel from a fractious coalition of tribes to a monarchy with a central government in Jerusalem. The story begins with the birth and calling of the prophet Samuel and continues with the call to kingship and the reigns of Saul and David. This is the story of state formation, the centralization of power and of worship, and the establishment of a new political, military, and social order.

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## The perils of inherited authority (1 Samuel 1-3)

From the closing words of the book of Judges and the opening chapters of 1 Samuel we know that the Israelites are both leaderless and disconnected from God. The closest thing they have to a national leader is the priest Eli, who with his sons runs the shrine at Shiloh. The Israelites' political, military, and economic prosperity depends on their faithfulness to God. So the people bring their offerings and sacrifices to God at the shrine, but the priests make a mockery of interaction with God. "Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels...for they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt" (1 Samuel 2:12, 17). They are untrustworthy as human leaders, and they do not honor God in their hearts. Worshipers find that those who should direct them toward an experience of worship are instead stealing from them.

Somewhat ominously for a nation about to become a monarchy, the first thing we observe is that inherited authority is inherently dangerous for two reasons. The first is that there is no guarantee that descendants of even the greatest leader will be competent and faithful. The second is that being born to power is often a corrupting influence itself, resulting all too often either in complaisance or—as the case of Eli's sons—entitlement. Eli performs his work as a sacred charge from God (1 Sam. 2:25), but his sons see it as a personal possession (1 Sam. 2:14). Growing up in an atmosphere somewhat analogous to a family business, they expect from a young age to inherit their father's privileges. Because this "family business" is God's own shrine—giving the family a claim to divine authority over the populace—his sons' malfeasance is all the more injurious.

Family businesses and political dynasties in today's world have parallels to Eli's situation. The founder of the business or polity may have brought great good into the world, but if the heirs view it as a means for personal gain, those whom they are meant to serve suffer harm. Everyone wins when founders and their successors are faithful to the original, good purpose. The world is a better place, the business and community thrive, and the family is well provisioned. But when the original purpose is neglected or corrupted, the business or community suffers, and the organization and the family are in jeopardy.

The sad history of inherited power in governments, churches, businesses, and other organizations warns us that those who expect to receive power as a right often sense no need to develop the skill, self-discipline, and attitude of service needed to be good leaders. This reality perplexed the Teacher of Ecclesiastes. "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 2:18-19). What was true for him is true for us today. Families that gain wealth and power from the success of an entrepreneur in one generation often lose these gains by the third generation and also suffer devastating family quarrels and personal misfortunes.<sup>[1]</sup> This is not to say that inherited power or wealth always leads to poor outcomes, but that inheritance is a dangerous policy for governance. Families, organizations, or

governments that do pass authority via inheritance will do well to develop a multiplicity of means to counteract the perils that inheritance entails. There are consultancies and organizations that specialize in supporting families and businesses in inheritance situations.

If not his scoundrel sons, who would succeed Eli as priest? First Samuel 3:1-4:1 and 7:3, 17 reveal God's plan to raise up young Samuel to succeed Eli. Samuel receives one of the few audible calls from God recorded in the Bible, but notice that this is *not* a call to a type of work or ministry. (Samuel had been serving in the house of the Lord since he was two or three years old, and the choice of occupation had been made by his mother. See 1 Samuel 1:20-28 and 2:18-21.) Nonetheless it is a call to a task, namely to tell Eli that God has decided to punish him and his sons, who are soon to be removed as God's priests. After fulfilling this calling, Samuel continues to serve under Eli until he is recognized as a prophet in his own right (1 Sam. 4:1) and succeeds Eli after Eli's death (1 Sam. 4:18). Samuel becomes the leader of God's people, not because of self-serving ambition or a sense of entitlement, but because God had given him a vision (1 Sam. 3:10-14) and the gifts and skills to lead people to carry out that vision (1 Sam. 3:19-4:1). See [Vocation Overview](#) for more on the topic of calling to work.

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## The perils of treating God like a good luck charm (1 Samuel 4)

It's not clear whether the corruption of the leader, Eli, causes the corruption of the people or vice versa, but chapters 4-6 depict the disaster that befalls those who are poorly governed. Israel has been engaged in a centuries-long struggle against the neighboring country of the Philistines. A new attack is made by the Philistines, which routs the Israelites, resulting in 4,000 casualties (1 Sam. 4:1-3). The Israelites recognize the defeat as a sign of God's disfavor. But instead of examining their fault, repenting, and coming to the Lord for guidance, they try to manipulate God into serving their purposes. They fetch the ark of the covenant of God and charge into battle against the Philistines, assuming that the ark will make them invincible. Eli's sons lend an aura of authority to the plan. But the Philistines slaughter Israel in the battle, killing 30,000 Israelite soldiers, capturing the ark, slaying Eli's sons and causing Eli's own death (1 Sam. 4:4-19).

Eli's sons, alongside the leaders of the army, made the mistake of thinking that because they bore the name of God's people and possessed the symbols of God's presence, they were in command of God's power. Perhaps those in charge believed they could actually control God's power by carrying around the ark. Or maybe they had deceived themselves into thinking that because they were God's people, whatever they wanted for themselves would be what God wanted for them. In any case, they discovered that God's presence is not a warrant to project God's power, but an invitation to receive God's guidance. Ironically, the ark contained the greatest means of God's guidance—the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 10:5)—but Eli's sons did not bother to seek any kind of guidance from God before attacking the Philistines.

Can it be that we often fall into the same bad habit in our work? When we are faced with opposition or difficulty in our work, do seek God's guidance in prayer or do we just throw up a quick prayer asking God to do what we want? Do we consider the possible courses of action in the light of scripture, or do we just keep a Bible on our desk? Do we examine our motivations and assess our actions with openness to transformation by God or do we simply decorate ourselves with Christian symbols? If our work seems unfulfilling or our careers are not progressing as we hope, is it possible that we are using God as a good luck charm, rather than following him as the master of our work?

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## The opportunities that arise from working faithfully (1 Samuel 5-7)

The Philistines fare no better with the ark than the Israelites did, and it becomes a dangerous property for both sides until it is retired from military use and Samuel calls Israel to recommit themselves to the Lord himself (1 Sam. 5:1-7:3). The people heed his call and turn back to worshipping the Lord, and Samuel's career expands rapidly. His role as priest soon grows to "judge" (meaning a military governor) and he leads the successful defense against the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:4-13). His roll soon encompasses holding court for legal matters (1 Sam. 10:16). Behind all his tasks lies his calling to be "a trustworthy prophet of the Lord" (1 Sam. 3:20).

Skilled, dependable workers who are true to God's ways often find their work overflowing their job descriptions. In the face of ever-expanding responsibilities, Samuel's response is not, "That's not my job." Instead, he sees the crucial needs in front of him, recognizes that he has the capacity to meet them, and steps in to resolve them. As he does so, God increases his authority and effectiveness to match his willingness.

One lesson we might take from this is to respond to God with a willingness to serve as Samuel did. Do you see opportunities in front of you at work that, strictly speaking, don't fit your job description? Do your supervisors or colleagues seem to expect you to take further responsibility in areas that aren't formally part of your job? These are often chances for growth, development, and advancement (unless your supervisors do not appreciate your taking on additional responsibility). What would it take for you to step forward into these opportunities? Similarly, you may see needs around you that you could help meet if you had the trust and courage to respond. What would it take to develop your trust in God and to receive the courage needed to follow his leading?

The final account of Samuel's governance (1 Sam. 7:15-17) says that he went on a circuit of the cities of Israel year by year to the cities of Israel, governing and administering justice. The chapter closes with, "And he built there an altar to the Lord." His civic and military services to Israel were founded on his life-long faithfulness and worship of the Lord.

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## When children disappoint (1 Samuel 8:1-3)

As Samuel ages, he repeats Eli's error and appoints his own sons to succeed him. Like Eli's sons, they turn out to be greedy and corrupt (1 Sam. 8:1-3). Disappointing sons of great leaders is a recurrent theme in Samuel and Kings. (The tragedy of David's son Absalom occupies the bulk of 2 Samuel chapters 13-19, to which we will return. See "[David's Dysfunctional handling of family conflict leads to civil war \(2 Samuel 13-19\)](#)".) It reminds us that the work of parenting is as challenging as every other occupation but far more emotionally intense. No solution is given in the text, but we can observe that Eli, Samuel, and David seem to have given their troubled children many privileges but little paternal involvement. Yet we also know that even the most dedicated parents may face the heartbreak of wayward children. Rather than laying blame or stereotyping causes, let us simply note that parenting children is an occupation requiring as much prayer, skill, community support, good fortune, and love as any other, if not more. Ultimately to be a parent—whether our children bring delight, disappointment, or some of both—is to depend on God's grace and mercy and to hope for a redemption beyond what we see during our lifetimes. Perhaps our deepest comfort is to remember that God also experienced a parent's heartbreak for his condemned Son, yet overcame all through the power of love.

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## The Israelites ask for a king (1 Samuel 8:4-22)

Seeing the unsuitability of Samuel's sons, the Israelites ask him to "appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." This request displeases Samuel (1 Sam. 8:4-6). Samuel warns the people that kings lay heavy burdens on a nation.

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. (1 Sam. 8:10-17)

In fact, the kings would be so rapacious that eventually the people would cry out to God to save them from the kings (1 Sam. 8:18).

God agrees that asking for a king is a bad idea because it amounts to a rejection of God himself, as king. Nonetheless, the Lord decides to allow the people to choose their form of government, and he tells Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but

they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam. 8:7). As biblical scholar John Goldingay notes, "God starts with his people where they are; if they cannot cope with his highest way, he carves out a lower one. When they do not respond to the spirit of Yahweh or when all sorts of spirits lead them into anarchy, he provides...the institutional safeguard of earthly rulers." Sometimes God permits institutions that are not part of his eternal purpose, and the monarch of Israel is one of the most glaring examples.

Both God and Samuel showed great humility, resilience, and grace in allowing Israel to make choices and mistakes, learning from the consequences. There are many institutional and workplace situations where leadership must adjust to people's poor choices, yet at the same time try to provide opportunities for growth and grace. Samuel's warning to Israel could easily serve as a warning to nations, businesses, churches, schools, and other organizations of today's world. In our fallen world, people abuse power, and we have to adjust while at the same time doing what we can to change things. Our aspiration is to love God and treat other people as God commands in the law given to Moses, which God's people have had an extremely hard time doing in every age.

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## The Task of Choosing a King (1 Samuel 9-16)

### SAUL CHOSEN AS ISRAEL'S FIRST KING

God's first choice to be king is Saul (c. 1050-1010 B.C.), someone who looked the part—he literally stood "head and shoulders above everyone else" (1 Sam. 9:2). Furthermore, he won military victories, the main reason for having a king in the first place (1 Sam. 11:1-11). In the beginning, he served faithfully (1 Sam. 11:13-14), but he quickly became disobedient to God (1 Sam. 13:8-15) and arrogant with his people (1 Sam. 14:24-30). Both Samuel and God became exasperated with him and began to look for his replacement (1 Sam. 16:1). But before we measure Saul's actions against 21st-century leadership expectations, we should note that Saul simply did what kings did in the ancient Near East. The people got what they asked for (and what Samuel had warned against), a militaristic, charismatic, self-aggrandizing tyrant.

How are we to evaluate Israel's first king? Did God make a mistake in leading Samuel to anoint young Saul as king? Or was the choice of Saul an object lesson to the Israelites not to be seduced by outward appearances, handsome on the outside but hollow on the inside? In asking for a king, the Israelites showed their lack of faith in God. The king they received ultimately demonstrated that same lack of faith in God. Saul's primary task as king was to assure security for the Israelites from attack by the neighboring Philistines and other nations. But when faced with Goliath, Saul's fear overcame his faith and he proved unequal to his role (1 Sam. 17:11). Throughout his reign Saul similarly doubted God, seeking counsel in the wrong places, and finally dying a suicide as his army was routed by the enemy (1 Sam. 31:4).



## DAVID CHOSEN TO SUCCEED SAUL

As Samuel searches for Saul's replacement, he nearly makes the mistake of judging by appearances a second time (1 Sam. 16:1-4). The boy David seems inconsequential to Samuel, but with God's help, he finally recognizes in David God's choice for Israel's king. On the surface David does not project the image of gravitas people expect in a leader (1 Sam. 16:6-11). A little later in the story, the Philistine giant Goliath is similarly dismissive (1 Sam. 17:42). David is a non-traditional candidate for reasons beyond his youth. He is a last son in a society based on primacy of the first-born. Moreover, he is ethnically mixed, not a pure Israelite because one of his great-grandmothers was Ruth (Ruth 4:21-22), an immigrant from the kingdom of Moab (Ruth 1:1-4). Though David has several strikes against him, God sees great promise in him.

As we think about leadership selection today, it's valuable to remember God's word to Samuel: "The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). In God's upside-down kingdom, the last or the overlooked may end up being the best choice. The best leader may be the one nobody is looking for. It can be tempting to jump at the initially impressive candidate, the one who oozes charisma, the person that other people seem to want to follow. But high self-confidence actually leads to lower performance, according to a 2012 *Harvard Business Review* article.<sup>[2]</sup> Charisma is not what God values. Character is. What would it take to learn to see a person's character through God's eyes?

It is significant that David was out doing his job as shepherd, conscientiously caring for his father's sheep, when Samuel found him. Faithful performance in the job at hand is good preparation for a bigger job, as in David's case (1 Samuel 17:34-37, see also Luke 16:10; 19:17). Samuel soon discovers that David is the strong, confident, and competent leader the people craved, who would "go out before [us] and fight [our] battles" (1 Sam. 8:20). Throughout his career David keeps in mind that he is serving at God's pleasure to care for God's people (2 Sam. 6:21). God calls him "a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22).

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## David's rise to power (1 Samuel 17-30)

Unlike Saul who had begun his reign soon after Samuel anointed him (1 Samuel 11:1), David has a long and difficult apprenticeship before he is acclaimed as king at Hebron. His first public success comes in slaying the giant Goliath, who is threatening Israel's military security. As the army returns home, a throng of women begin singing, "Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7). This enrages Saul (1 Sam. 18:1). Rather than recognizing how both he and the nation can benefit from David's capabilities, he regards David as a threat. He decides to eliminate David at the earliest opportunity (1 Sam. 18:9-13). Thus began a rivalry that eventually forces David to flee for his life, eluding Saul while leading a band of brigands in the wildernesses of Judah for ten years.

When given opportunities to assassinate King Saul, David refuses, knowing that the throne is not his to take. It is God's to give. As the Psalms express it, "It is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another" (Psalm 75:7). David respects the authority God has given Saul even when Saul acts in dishonorable ways. This seems like a lesson for those today who work for difficult bosses or are waiting to be acknowledged for their leadership. Even if we sense we are called by God to a particular task or position, this does not authorize us to grasp power by contravening the existing authorities. If everyone who thought God wanted them to be the boss tried to hasten the process by seizing power on their own, every succession of authority would bring little more than chaos. God is patient, and we are to be patient, too, as David was.

Can we trust God to give us the authority we need, in his time, to do the work that he wants us to do? In the workplace, having more authority is valuable for getting necessary work done. Grasping at that authority prematurely by undercutting a boss or by pushing a colleague out of the way does not build trust with colleagues or demonstrate trust in God. At times it can be frustrating when it seems that it's taking too long for the needed authority to come your way, but true authority cannot be grasped, only granted. David was willing to wait until God placed that authority in his hands.

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## Abigail defuses a crisis between David and Nabal (1 Samuel 25)

As David's power grows, he comes into conflict with a rich landowner named Nabal. As it happens, David's band of rebels against Saul's rule has been encamped in Nabal's area for some time. David's men have treated Nabal's shepherds kindly, protecting them from harm or at the very least not stealing anything themselves (1 Sam. 25:15-16). David figures this means Nabal owes him something, and he sends a delegation to ask Nabal to donate some lambs for a feast for David's army. Perhaps realizing the weakness of his claim, David instructs his delegation to be extra polite to Nabal.

Nabal will have nothing of it. Not only he does he refuse to give David anything for the feast, he insults David publicly, denies knowing David, and impugns David's integrity as a rebel against Saul (1 Sam. 25:10). Nabal's own servants describe their master as "so ill-natured that no one can speak to him." David immediately sets out with 400 armed men to slay Nabal and kill every male in his household.

Suddenly David is about to commit mass murder, while Nabal cares more about his pride than about his workers and family. These two arrogant men are unable to resolve an argument about sheep without spilling the blood of hundreds of innocent people. Thank God, Nabal's wise-hearted wife Abigail steps into the fray. She quickly prepares a feast for David and his men, then rides out to meet David with an apology that sets a new standard for courtesy in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 25:26-31). Yet wrapped in the courteous words are some hard truths David needs to hear. He is on the verge of shedding blood without cause, bringing on himself a guilt he could never escape.

David is moved by her words and abandons his plan to kill Nabal and all his men and boys. He even thanks Abigail for diverting him from his reckless plan. “Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from bloodguilt and from avenging myself by my own hand! For as surely as the Lord the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there would not have been left to Nabal so much as one male” (1 Sam. 25:33-34).

The incident shows that people need to hold their leaders accountable, although doing so may come at the cost of great personal risk. You don’t have to have authority status to be called to exercise influence. But you do need courage, which fortunately is something you can receive from God at any time. Abigail’s intervention also demonstrates that showing respect, even while making a pointed criticism, provides a model for challenging authority. Nabal turned a petty argument into a life threatening situation by wrapping a minor dispute in a personal insult. Abigail resolves a life-threatening crisis by dressing a major rebuke in a respectful dialogue.

In what ways may God be calling you to exercise influence to hold people in positions of higher authority accountable? How can you cultivate a godly attitude of respect along with an unwavering commitment to telling the truth? What courage do you need from God to actually do it?

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## The Golden Age of the Monarchy: 2 Samuel 1-24, 1 Kings 1-11, 1 Chronicles 21-25

After Saul's death, David is anointed king over the southern tribe of Judah, but not until much blood has been shed is David finally anointed king over all Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-10). When David finally comes into his own, he invests his talent in developing others. Contrary to Saul's fears of a rival, David surrounds himself with a company whose exploits rival his own (2 Sam. 23:8-39, 1 Chronicles 11:10-47). He honors them (1 Chron. 11:19), encourages their fame and promotes them (1 Chron. 10:25). God uses David’s willingness to sponsor and encourage people to build David’s own success and to bless the people of his realm.

At last, the loose confederacy of Israelite tribes has come together as a nation. For eighty years, under the rule, first of David (c. 1010 - 970 B.C.), then of his son Solomon (c. 970 - 931 B.C.), Israel experiences a golden age of prosperity and renown among all the nations of the ancient Near East. But amidst their successes, these two rulers also violate God's covenant. While this does only limited damage in their own times, it sets a pattern for those who come after them to turn away from the Lord and abandon his covenant.

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## David’s Successes and Failures as King (2 Samuel 1-24)

The Bible regards David as the model king of Israel, and the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles describe his many successes. Yet even David, "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), abuses his power and acts faithlessly at times. He tends to succeed when he does not take himself too seriously, but gets into serious trouble when power goes to his head—for example when he takes a census in violation of God's command (2 Sam. 24:10-17) or when he sexually exploits Bathsheba and orders the assassination of her husband, Uriah (2 Sam. 11:2-17). Yet despite David's failings, God fulfills his covenant with David and treats him with mercy.

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## David's dysfunctional handling of family conflict leads to civil war (2 Samuel 13-19)

Most people feel uncomfortable in situations of conflict, so we tend to avoid facing conflict, whether at home or at work. But conflicts are a lot like illnesses. Minor ones may clear up even if we ignore them, but major ones will work their way deeper and more catastrophically into our systems if we do not treat them. This is true for David's family. David allows conflict among some of his sons to plunge his family into tragedy. His oldest son, Amnon, rapes and then shames his half-sister, Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-19). Tamar's full-brother, Absalom, hates Amnon for that crime, but does not speak to him about it. David knows of the matter but decides to ignore the situation (2 Sam. 13:21). For more on children who disappoint their parents, see "[When children disappoint \(1 Samuel 8:1-3\)](#)."

For two years everything seems fine, but unresolved conflict of this magnitude never fades away. When Amnon and Absalom take a trip into the country together, Absalom plies his half-brother with wine, then has his servants murder him (2 Sam. 13:28-29). The conflict draws in more of David's family, the nobles, and the army, until the entire nation was engulfed in civil war. The destruction brought about by avoiding the conflict is many times worse than the unpleasantness that might have resulted from dealing with the issues when they first arose.

Harvard professors Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky describe how leaders must "orchestrate conflict," or else it will boil up on its own, thwart their goals, and endanger their organizations.<sup>[3]</sup> Likewise, Jim Collins gives the example of Alan Iverson, who was CEO of Nucor Steel at a time when there were deep divisions about whether the company should diversify into scrap steel recycling. Iverson brought the divisions in to the open by allowing everyone to speak their opinion, protecting them from reprisal from others who might disagree. The "raging debates" that ensued were uncomfortable for everyone. "People yelled. They waved their arms around and pounded on tables. Faces would get red and veins bulged out." But acknowledging the conflict and working through it openly prevented it from going underground and exploding later. Moreover, by bringing out a variety of facts and opinions, it led to better decisions by the group. "Colleagues would march into Iverson's office and yell and scream at each other, but then emerge with a conclusion.... The company's strategy 'evolved through many

agonizing arguments and fights.”<sup>[4]</sup> Conflict well-orchestrated can actually be a source of creativity.

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## David’s disobedience to God causes a national pestilence (1 Chronicles 21:1-17)

David also suffers another failure that, to us in the 21st century, may seem strange. He takes a census of the people of Israel. Although this seems like a prudent thing to do, the biblical text tells us that Satan incited David to do this against the advice of David’s general Joab. Furthermore, "God was displeased with this thing, and he struck Israel" (1 Chronicles 21:6).

David acknowledges his sin in taking a census against God’s will. He’s given three choices, each of which would harm many in the kingdom: (1) three years of famine, or (2) three months of devastation by the sword of his enemies, or (3) three days of a pestilence on the land. David chooses the third option and seventy thousand people die as an angel of death passes through the land. At this David cries out to God, "Was it not I who gave the command to count the people? It is I who have sinned and done very wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray, O Lord my God, be against me and against my father's house; but do not let your people be plagued!" (1 Chron. 21:17).

Like David, we probably find it hard to understand why God would punish 70,000 other people for David’s sin. The text does not give an answer. We can observe, however, that the transgressions of leaders inevitably harm their people. If business leaders make poor product development decisions, people in their organization will lose their jobs when revenues plunge. If a restaurant manager doesn’t enforce sanitation rules, diners will get sick. If a teacher gives good grades for poor work, students will fail or fall behind at the next level of education. Those who accept positions of leadership cannot evade responsibility for the effects of their actions on others.

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## David’s patronage of the musical arts (1 Chronicles 25)

1 Chronicles adds a detail not found in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. David creates a corps of musicians “to make music at the house of the Lord.”

They were all under the direction of their father for the music in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres for the service of the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were under the order of the king. They and their kindred, who were trained in singing to the Lord, all of whom were skillful, numbered two hundred eighty-eight. (1 Chronicles 25:6-7)

Maintaining an ensemble the size of two modern symphony orchestras would be a major undertaking in

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an emerging nation in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC. David does not regard it as a luxury however, but as a necessity. In fact, he orders it in his role as commander in chief of the army, with the consent of the other commanders (1 Chron. 21:1).

Many militaries today maintain bands and choruses, but few other kinds of workplaces do, unless they themselves *are* musical organizations. Yet there is something about music and the other arts that is essential to work of all kinds. God's creation—the source of human economic activity—is not only productive, it is beautiful (e.g., Genesis 3:6; Psalm 96:6; Ezekiel 31:7-9), and God loves beautiful handiwork (e.g., Isaiah 60:13). What is the place of beauty in your work? Would you or your organization or the people who make use of your work benefit if your work created more beauty? What does it even mean for work in your occupation to be beautiful?

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## Assessing David's reign (1 Kings)

How are we to evaluate David and his reign? It is noteworthy that while Solomon gained more wealth, land, and renown than his father David, it is David whom the books of Kings and Chronicles acclaimed as Israel's greatest king, the model against which all other kings were measured.

We may gain hope for ourselves from God's response to the very positives and negatives we see in David's life and actions. We are impressed by his fundamental piety even as we blanch at his political manipulation, lust, and violence. When we see a similar ambivalence in our own hearts and actions, we take comfort and hope in the God who forgives all our sins. The Lord's presence with David gives us hope that even in the face of our faithlessness, God stays with us as the relentless Hound of Heaven.

Like Saul, David combined greatness and faithfulness, with sin and error. We may wonder, then, why God preserved David's reign, but not Saul's. Partly, it may be because David's heart remained true to God (1 Kings 11:4, 15:3), however errant his deeds. The same thing is never said of Saul. Or it may be simply because the best way for God to carry out his purposes for his people was to put David on the throne and keep him there. When God calls us to a task or position, it is not necessarily us he is thinking about. He may choose us because of the effect we will have on other people. For example God gave Cyrus of Persia victory over Babylon not to reward or benefit Cyrus, but to free Israel from captivity (2 Chronicles 36:22-23).

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## Preparing for a Successor to Israel's Throne (1 Kings 1; 1 Chronicles 22)

Because David had shed so much blood as king, God determined not to allow him to build a house for the Lord. Instead David's son, Solomon, was given that task (1 Chronicles 22:7-10). So David accepted that his final task was to train Solomon for the job of king (1 Chron. 22:1-16) and to surround him with

a capable team (1 Chron. 22:17-29). David provided the vast stores of materials for the construction of God's temple in Jerusalem, saying, "My son Solomon is young and inexperienced, and the house that is to be built for the Lord must be exceedingly magnificent" (1 Chron. 22:5). He publicly passed authority to Solomon and made sure that the leaders of Israel acknowledged Solomon as the new king and were prepared to help him succeed.

David recognized that leadership is a responsibility that outlasts one's own career. In most cases, your work will continue after you have moved on (whether by promotion, retirement, or taking a different job). You have a duty to create the conditions your successor needs to be successful. In David's preparation for Solomon, we see three elements of succession planning. First, you need to provide the resources your successor needs to complete the tasks you leave unfinished. If you have been at least moderately successful, you will have learned how to gather the resources needed in your position. Often this depends on relationships that your successor will not immediately inherit. For example, success may depend on assistance from people who do not work in your department, but who have been willing to help you in your work. You need to make sure your successor knows who these people are, and you need to get their commitment to continue helping after you are gone. David arranged for "all kinds of artisans" he had developed relationships with to work for Solomon after he was gone (1 Chron. 22:15).

Second, you need to impart your knowledge and relationships to the person who succeeds you. In many situations this will come by bringing your successor to work alongside you long before you depart. David began including Solomon in the leadership structures and rituals of the kingdom shortly before David's death, although it appears he could have done a much better job of this if he'd started earlier (1 Kings 1:28-40). In other cases, you may not have any role in designating your successor, and you may not have any overlap with him or her. In that case, you'll need to pass on information in writing and through those who will remain in the organization. What can you do to prepare the work and your successor to thrive, for God's glory, after you've gone?

Third, you need to transfer power decisively to the person who takes over the position. Whether you choose your own successor or whether others make that decision without your input, you still have a choice whether or not to publicly acknowledge the transition and definitively pass on the authority you previously had. Your words and actions will confer either a blessing or a curse on your successor. A recent example is the manipulation that Vladimir Putin engaged in to maintain power after term limitations prevented him from seeking a third consecutive term as President of Russia. He arranged for some of the President's powers to be transferred to the Prime Minister, then used his influence to get a former subordinated elected President, who appointed Putin as Prime Minister immediately afterwards.<sup>[5]</sup> After one term as Prime Minister, Putin easily stepped in as President again, at the invitation of the incumbent, who stepped aside.<sup>[6]</sup> As a result, concentration of power in Putin's hands has continued unabated for decades, just what term limits are intended to prevent, quite possibly to the

detriment of Russia and its neighbors. In contrast, David arranged for Solomon to be publicly anointed as king, transferred the symbols of monarchy to him, and presented him publicly as the new king while David himself was still living (1 Kings 1:32-35, 39-40).

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## Solomon Succeeds David as King (1 Kings 1-11)

Upon succeeding David as king, Solomon faces the vastness of his duties (1 Kings 3:5-15). He is acutely aware that he is inadequate to the task (1 Chronicles 22:5). The work with which he is entrusted is immense. In addition to the temple project, he has a large, complex nation under his care, "a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted" (1 Kings 3:8). Even as he gains experience on the job, he realizes that it is so complex that he'll never be able to figure out the right course of action in every circumstance. He needs divine help: so he asks God, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this, your great people?" (1 Kings 3:9). God answers his prayer and gives him "very great wisdom, discernment and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore" (1 Kings 4:29).

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## Solomon Builds the Temple of the Lord (1 Kings 5-8)

Solomon's first major task it to build the Temple of the Lord. To achieve this architectural feat, Solomon employs professionals from all corners of his kingdom. Three chapters (1 Kings 5-7) are devoted to describing the work of building the Temple, of which we have space only for a small selection:

Solomon also had seventy thousand laborers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hill country, besides Solomon's three thousand three hundred supervisors who were over the work, having charge of the people who did the work. At the king's command, they quarried out great, costly stones in order to lay the foundation of the house with dressed stones. (1 Kings 5:15-17)

He cast two pillars of bronze. Eighteen cubits was the height of the one, and a cord of twelve cubits would encircle it; the second pillar was the same. He also made two capitals of molten bronze, to set on the tops of the pillars; the height of the one capital was five cubits, and the height of the other capital was five cubits. There were nets of checker work with wreaths of chain work for the capitals on the tops of the pillars; seven for the one capital, and seven for the other capital. (1 Kings 7:15-17)

So Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of the Lord: the golden altar, the



golden table for the bread of the Presence, the lampstands of pure gold, five on the south side and five on the north, in front of the inner sanctuary; the flowers, the lamps, and the tongs, of gold; the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense, and firepans, of pure gold; the sockets for the doors of the innermost part of the house, the most holy place, and for the doors of the nave of the temple, of gold. Thus all the work that King Solomon did on the house of the Lord was finished. Solomon brought in the things that his father David had dedicated, the silver, the gold, and the vessels, and stored them in the treasuries of the house of the Lord. (1 Kings 7:48-51)

From accomplished professionals to forced laborers, the people of the kingdom contribute their knowledge and skills to help build the Temple. In so doing, Solomon involves numerous people to help build and sustain his kingdom. Whether or not it is Solomon's intention, employing so many people from all walks of life ensures that the vast majority of citizens hold personal investment in the political, religious, social, and economic well being of the kingdom.

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## Solomon Centralizes the Rule of the Kingdom (1 Kings 9-11)

The massive national effort needed to construct the Temple leaves Solomon the ruler of a powerful kingdom. During his reign Israel's military and economic might reach their peak, and the kingdom covers more territory than at any other time in Israel's history. He completes the centralization of the nation's government, economic organization, and worship.

To assemble a large enough labor force, King Solomon conscripts workers out of all Israel. The levy numbers thirty thousand men (1 Kings 5:13-14). Solomon seems to have paid Israelites who were conscripted (1 Kings 9:22) in accordance with Leviticus 25:44-46, which forbids making slaves of Israelites. But resident aliens are simply enslaved (1 Kings 9:20-21). In addition, a multitude of workers are brought in from surrounding nations. Whatever their source, a wide variety of highly skilled professionals comes together, including the best artisans practicing at the time. The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles—primarily interested in the work of kingship—say little about these workers except as relates to the Temple. But they are visible in the background, making all of society possible.

Solomon sees that as the central government expands, it will need food for an increasingly large work force. Soldiers need rations (1 Kings 6:9-11), alongside the workers on all of Solomon's building projects. The growing bureaucracy also needs to be fed. So the king organizes the nation into twelve sectors and appoints a deputy as overseer of each sector. Each deputy is charged with providing all required food rations for one month each year. As a result, the nation's daughters are conscripted into labor as "cooks and bakers" (1 Samuel 8:13). Israel becomes like other kingdoms with forced labor, heavy taxation, and a central elite wielding power over the rest of the country.

As Samuel had foretold, kings bring a greatly expanded military (1 Sam. 8:11-12). Militarization comes into full flower during Solomon's reign as the military becomes an essential component of the kingdom's stability. Soldiers of every rank from foot soldiers to generals all need weapons including javelins, spears, lances, bow and arrows, swords, daggers, knives, and slingshots. They need protective gear including shields, helmets, and body armor. To manage such a large scale army, a nationalized military organization must be maintained. In contrast to his father, David, Solomon is called "a man of peace," but the peace is ensured by the presence of a well organized and well-provisioned military force.

We see in Solomon's story how society depends on the work of myriad people, coupled with structures and systems to organize large scale production and distribution. The human capacity to organize work is evidence of our creation in the image of a God who brings order out of chaos on a worldwide scale (Genesis 1). How fitting that the Bible portrays this ability through the construction of God's meeting place with humanity. It takes a God-given ability to organize work on a scale large enough to build God's house. Few of us would care to return to Solomon's *methods* of organization—conscription, forced labor, and militarization—so we can be thankful that God leads us to fairer, more effective methods today. Perhaps what we take away from this episode is that God is intensely interested in the art of coordinating human work and creativity to accomplish God's purposes in the world.

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## Assessing Solomon's Golden Age (1 Kings)

Samuel's prophecy about the dangers of a king is fulfilled in Solomon's time.

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons...he will take your daughters...he will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards...he will take one-tenth of your grain and vineyards...he will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys... he will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day. (1 Sam. 8:11-18)

On the surface, Solomon's administration and building campaigns appear to have been very successful. The people are happy to make the required sacrifices in order to build the Temple (1 Kings 8:65-66), a place where all can go to receive God's justice (1 Kings 8:12-21), forgiveness (1 Kings 8:33-36), healing (1 Kings 8:37-40), and mercy (1 Kings 8:46-53).

But after the Temple is completed, Solomon builds a palace of the same scale and magnificence as the Temple (1 Kings 9:1, 10). As he becomes accustomed to power and wealth, he becomes self-serving,

arrogant, and unfaithful. He appropriates a large portion of the nation's productive capacity for his personal benefit. His already-impressive throne of ivory is overlaid with gold (2 Chronicles 9:17). He entertains lavishly (1 Kings 10:5). He reneges on agreements with allies (1 Kings 9:12), and he keeps a consort of "seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines" (1 Kings 11:3). This last is his ultimate undoing, for "he loved many foreign women" (1 Kings 11:1) with the result that "when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God" (1 Kings 11:4). He builds shrines to Astarte, Milcom, Chemosh and Molech (1 Kings 11:7). Given the covenant requirement that the faithfulness of the king to the Lord would be the key to the prosperity of the nation, Israel would soon descend rapidly from its peak. God, it seems, cares deeply whether we do our work for his purposes or against them. Amazing feats are possible when we work according to God's plans, but our work rapidly disintegrates when we don't.

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## From Failed Monarchies to Exile (1 Kings 11 - 2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 10-36)

Solomon is only the third king of Israel, but already the kingdom has reached its high point. Over the next four hundred years, one bad king after another leads the nation into decline, disintegration and defeat.

### Solomon's Mighty Nation Divided in Two (1 Kings 11:26-12:19)

After Solomon's death it soon becomes clear that unrest had been brewing beneath the veneer of equitable and effective management. Following the great king's death, Jeroboam (earlier the head of forced laborers) and "all the assembly of Israel" approach the king's son and successor, Rehoboam (c. 931 - 914 B.C.), to ask him to "lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke" (1 Kings 12:3-16; 2 Chronicles 10). They are ready to pledge loyalty to the new king in return for a reduction in forced labor and high taxes.<sup>[7]</sup> But for forty years Rehoboam has known only luxurious palace living, staffed and provisioned by the Israelite people. His sense of entitlement is too strong to allow for compromise. Rather than easing the undue burden placed on the people by his father, Rehoboam chooses to make their yoke even greater.

Further fulfilling Samuel's prediction (1 Samuel 8:18), a rebellion ensues and the monarchy becomes divided forever. As much as the people of Israel had been willing to perform their fair share of labor to support the state, the emergence of unrealistic and unreasonable expectations results in revolt and division. The ten northern tribes secede, anointing Jeroboam (c. 931 - 910 B.C.) as their king. Although he had been a leader in the delegation seeking tax relief from Rehoboam, his dynasty proves no better for its people.

### The northern kingdom's march toward exile (1 Kings 12:25 - 2 Kings 17:18)

For two centuries (910-722 BC) the northern kingdom of Israel is ruled by kings who do great evil in the sight of the Lord. These centuries are marked by constant war, treason, and murder, culminating in a catastrophic defeat by the nation of Assyria. To destroy all sense of national identity, Assyrian conquerors carry off the population, dispersing them in different parts of their empire and bringing in foreigners to populate the conquered land (2 Kings 17:5-24). As discussed under "[David's disobedience to God causes a national pestilence \(1 Chronicles 2:1-17\)](#)," the failings of leaders often have devastating effect on their people.

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## Obadiah saves a hundred people by working within a corrupt system (1 Kings 18:1-4)

At least two episodes during this period deserve our attention. The first, Obadiah's saving of a hundred prophets, may be of help to those facing the decision whether to quit a job in an organization that has become unethical, a decision that many face in the world of work.

Obadiah is the chief of staff in King Ahab's palace. (Ahab is infamous even today as the most wicked of Israel's kings.) Ahab's queen, Jezebel, orders the prophets of the Lord to be killed. As a high official in Ahab's court, Obadiah has advance word of the operation, as well as the means to circumvent it. He hides a hundred prophets in two caves and provides them bread and water until the crises abates. They are saved only because someone "who revered the Lord greatly" (1 Kings 18:3) is in a position of authority to protect them. A similar situation occurs in the Book of Esther, told in much greater detail, see "[Working Within a Fallen System \(Esther\)](#)" at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).

It is demoralizing to work in a corrupt or evil organization. How much easier it might be to quit and find someplace holier to work. Often quitting is the only way to avoid doing evil ourselves. But no workplace on earth is purely good, and we will face ethical dilemmas wherever we work. Moreover, the more corrupt the workplace, the more it needs godly people. If there is any way to remain in place without adding to the evil ourselves, it may be that God wants us to stay. During World War II a group of officers opposed to Hitler remained in the *Abwehr* (military intelligence) because it gave them a platform for trying to remove Hitler. Their plans failed, and most were executed, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian. When explaining why he remained in Hitler's army, he said, "The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation is to live."<sup>[8]</sup> Our responsibility to do what we can to help others seems to be more important to God than our desire to think of ourselves as morally pure.

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## Ahab and Jezebel murder Naboth to get his property (1 Kings 21)

King Ahab abuses his power further when he begins to covet the vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth.

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Ahab offers a fair price for the vineyard, but Naboth regards the land as an ancestral inheritance and says he has no interest in selling at any price. Ahab dejectedly accepts this appropriate limitation of his power, but his wife Jezebel spurs him to tyranny. “Do you now govern Israel?” she taunts (1 Kings 21:7). If the king has no appetite for abuse of power, the queen does. She pays two scoundrels to bring a false charge of blasphemy and treason against Naboth, and he is quickly sentenced to death and stoned by the elders of the city. We are left to wonder why the elders acted so quickly, without even conducting a proper trial. Were they complicit with the king? Under his control, afraid of standing up to him? In any case, with Naboth out of the way, Ahab takes possession of the vineyard for himself.

Abuse of power, including land grabs as blatant as Ahab’s, continue today, as a glance at nearly any daily newspaper will confirm. And as in Ahab’s time, abuse of power requires the complicity of others who would rather tolerate injustice, even murder, than risk their own safety for the sake of their neighbors. Only Elijah, the man of God, dares to oppose Ahab (1 Kings 21:17-24). Although his protests can do nothing to help Naboth, Elijah’s opposition does curb Ahab’s abuse of power, and no further abuses are recorded in Kings prior to Ahab’s death. More often than we might expect, principled opposition by a small group or even a single individual can restrain the abuse of power. Otherwise, why would leaders go to so much trouble to hide their misdeeds? What do you estimate is the likelihood that you will become aware of at least one misuse of power in your working life? How are you preparing yourself to respond if you do?

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## The Prophet Elisha’s Attention to Ordinary Work (2 Kings 2-6)

As the northern kings slide deeper into apostasy and tyranny, God raises up prophets to oppose them more forcefully than ever. Prophets were figures of immense God-given power coming out of nowhere to speak God’s truth in the halls of human power. Elijah and Elisha are by far the most prominent prophets in the books of Kings and Chronicles, and of the two, Elisha is especially notable for the attention he pays to the work of ordinary Israelites. Elisha is called to stand against Israel’s rebellious kings throughout a long career (2 Kings 2:13 - 13:20). His actions show that he regards the people’s economic life to be as important as the kingdom’s dynastic struggles, and he tries to protect the people from the disasters brought on by the kings.

### ELISHA’S RESTORATION OF A CITY’S IRRIGATION SYSTEM (2 KINGS 2:19-22)

Elisha’s first major act is to cleanse the polluted well of the city of Jericho. The chief concern in the passage is agricultural productivity. Without a wholesome well, “the land is unfruitful.” By restoring access to clean water, Elisha makes it possible for the people of the city to resume the God-given mission of humanity to be fruitful, multiply and produce food (Genesis 1:28-30).

## Elisha's restoration of a household's financial solvency (2 Kings 4:1-7)

After one of the prophets in Elisha's circle died, his family fell into debt. The fate of a destitute family in ancient Israel was typically to sell some or all of its members into slavery, where at least they would be fed (see "[Slavery or Indentured Servitude \(Exodus 21:1-11\)](http://www.theologyofwork.org)" at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org)). The widow is on the verge of selling her two children as slaves and begs Elisha for help (2 Kings 4:1). Elisha comes up with a plan for the family to become economically productive and support themselves. He asks the widow what she has to work with. "Nothing," she says, "except a jar of oil" (2 Kings 4:2). Apparently this is enough capital for Elisha to begin with. He tells her to borrow empty jars from all her neighbors, and fill them with oil from her jar. She is able to fill every jar with oil before her own jar runs out, and the profit from selling the oil is enough to pay the family's debts (2 Kings 4:9). In essence, Elisha creates an entrepreneurial community within which the woman is able to start a small business. This is exactly what some of the most effective poverty-fighting methods do today, whether via microfinance, credit societies, agricultural cooperatives, or small-businesses supplier programs on the part of large companies and governments.

Elisha's actions on behalf of this family reflect God's love and concern for those in need. How can our work increase the opportunity for people in poverty to work their way toward prosperity? In what ways do we individually and collectively undermine the productive capacity of poor people and economies, and what can we do, with God's help, to reform?

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## Elisha's restoration of a military commander's health (2 Kings 5:1-14)

When Elisha cures the leprosy of Naaman, a commander in the army of Israel's enemy, Syria, it has important effects in the sphere of work. "It is no little thing that a sick person is made well, especially a leper," as Jacques Ellul notes in his insightful essay on this passage,[\[9\]](#) because the healing restores the ability to work. In this case the healing restores Naaman to his work of governance, advising his king on dealings with the king of Israel. Interestingly, this healing of a foreigner also leads to the restoration of ethical culture in Elisha's own organization. Naaman offers to reward Elisha handsomely for the healing. But Elisha will accept nothing for what he regards as simply doing the Lord's will. However, one of Elisha's retinue, named Gehazi, sees an opportunity for a little extra remuneration. Gehazi chases after Naaman, and says that Elisha has changed his mind—he will accept a very significant payment after all. After receiving the payment, Gehazi hides his ill-gotten-gain, then lies to Elisha to cover it up. Elisha responds by announcing that Gehazi will be struck with the very leprosy that had left Naaman. Apparently, Elisha recognizes that tolerating corruption in his organization will rapidly undermine all the good that a lifetime of service to God has done.

Naaman's own actions demonstrate another point in this story. Naaman has a problem—leprosy. He

needs to be healed. But his pre-formed notion of what the solution should look like—some kind of dramatic encounter with a prophet, apparently—leads him to refuse the true solution of bathing in the Jordan River when it is offered to him. When he heard this simple remedy delivered by Elisha’s messenger—rather than Elisha himself—“Naaman went away angry.” Neither the solution nor the source seems grand enough for Naaman to pay attention to.

In today’s world, this twofold problem is often repeated. First, a senior leader misses the solution proposed by a lower level employee because they are unwilling to consider insight from someone they regard as unqualified. Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great* identifies the first sign of what he calls a “level five” leader as humility, a willingness to listen to many sources.<sup>[10]</sup> Second, the solution is not accepted because it does not match the leader’s imagined approach. Thank God that many leaders today, like Naaman, have subordinates willing to take the risk of talking sense to them. Not only are humble bosses needed in organizations, but courageous subordinates also. Intriguingly, the person who puts the whole episode into motion is the lowest-status person of all, a foreign girl Naaman had captured in a raid and given to his wife as a slave (2 Kings 5:13). This is a wonderful reminder of how arrogance and wrong expectations can block insight, but God’s wisdom keeps trying to break through anyway.

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### Elisha’s restoration of a lumberjack’s axe (2 Kings 6:1-7)

Cutting wood along the bank of the Jordan River, one of Elisha’s fellow prophets loses an iron axe head into the river. He had borrowed the axe from a lumberjack. The price of such a substantial piece of iron in the bronze age would have meant financial ruin for the owner, and the prophet who borrowed it is distraught. Elisha takes the economic loss as a matter of immediate, personal concern and causes the iron to float on top of the water, where it can be retrieved and returned to its owner. Once again Elisha intervenes to enable someone to work for a living.

The gift of a prophet is to discern God’s aims in daily life and to work and act accordingly. God calls the prophets to restore God’s good creation, in the midst of a fallen world, in ways that point to God’s power and glory. The theological aspect of a prophet’s work—calling people to worship the true God—is inevitably accompanied by a practical aspect, restoring the good workings of the created order. The New Testament tells us that some Christians are called to be prophets as well (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11). Elisha is not only a historical figure who demonstrates God’s concern for his people’s work, but a model for Christians today.

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### The Southern Kingdom’s march toward Exile (1 Kings 11:41 - 2 Kings 25:26; 2

## Chronicles 10 - 36)

Following in the footsteps of the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom's rulers soon began to decline into idolatry and evil. Under Rehoboam's rule the people "built for themselves high places, pillars, and sacred poles on every high hill and under every green tree; there were also male temple prostitutes in the land. They committed all the abominations of the nations" (1 Kings 14:23-24). Rehoboam's successors oscillated between faithfulness and doing evil in God's sight. For a while Judah had enough good kings to stave off disaster, but in the final years the kingdom fell to the same state that the northern kingdom had. The nation was conquered, and the kings and elites were captured and deported, by the Babylonians (2 Kings 24, 25). The faithlessness of the kings whom the people had demanded, against God's advice hundreds of years earlier, culminated in a financial meltdown, destruction of the labor force, famine, and the mass murder or deportation of much of the population. The predicted disaster lasts seventy years until King Cyrus of Persia authorizes the return of some of the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem's Temple and walls (2 Chronicles 36:22-23).

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## Financial accountability in the Temple (2 Kings 12:1-12)

One example of the degeneration of the kingdom ironically serves to bring to light a model of good financial practice. Like virtually all of the kingdom's leaders, the priests had become corrupt. Instead of using worshippers' donations to maintain the Temple, they pilfered the money and divided it among themselves. Under the direction of Jehoash, one of the few kings "who did what was right in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 12:2), the priests devised an effective accounting system. A locked chest with a small hole in the top was installed in the Temple to receive the donations. When it got full, the high priest and the king's secretary would open the chest together, count the money, and contract with carpenters, builders, masons, and stonecutters to make repairs. This ensured that the money was used for its proper purpose.

The same system is still in use today, for example when the cash deposited in automatic teller machines is counted. The principle that even trusted individuals must be subject to verification and accountability is the foundation of good management. Whenever a person in power—especially the power of handling finances—tries to avoid verification, the organization is in danger. Because Kings includes this episode, we know that God values the work of bank tellers, accountants, auditors, bank regulators, armored car drivers, computer security workers, and others who protect the integrity of finance. It also urges all kinds of leaders to take the lead in setting a personal example of public accountability by inviting others to verify their work.

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## Arrogance and the end of the kingdoms (2 Chronicles 26)

How could king after king fall so easily into evil? The story of Uzziah may give us some insight. He ascends to the throne at age sixteen and at first “he did what was right in the sight of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 26:4). His young age proves to be an advantage, as he recognizes his need for God’s guidance. “He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God; and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper” (2 Chron. 26:5).

Interestingly, much of the success the Lord gives Uzziah is related to ordinary work. “He built towers in the wilderness and hewed out many cisterns, for he had large herds, both in the Shephelah and in the plain, and he had farmers and vinedressers in the hills and in the fertile lands, for he loved the soil” (2 Chron. 26:10). “In Jerusalem he set up machines, invented by skilled workers” (2 Chron. 26:15a).

“He was marvelously helped,” the scripture tells us, “until he became strong” (2 Chron. 26:15b). Then his strength becomes his undoing because he began to serve himself instead of the Lord. “When he had become strong he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was false to the Lord his God” (2 Chron. 26:16). He attempts to usurp the religious authority of the priests, leading to a palace revolt that costs him the throne and leaves him an outcast the rest of his life.

Uzziah’s tale is sobering for people in leadership positions today. The character that leads to success—especially our reliance on God—is easily eroded by the powers and privileges that success brings. How many business, military, and political leaders have come to believe they are invincible and so lose the humility, discipline, and attitude of service needed to remain successful? How many of us at any level of success have paid more attention to ourselves and less to God as our power increases even modestly? Uzziah even had the benefit of subordinates who would oppose him when he did wrong, although he ignored them (2 Chron. 26:18). What, or who, do you have to keep you from drifting into pride and away from God should your success increase?

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## Conclusions from Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles

Governance and leadership issues touch all of life. When nations and organizations are governed well, people have an opportunity to thrive. When leaders fail to act for the good of their organizations and communities, disaster follows. The success or failure of the kings of Israel and Judah in turn depend on their adherence to God’s covenant and laws. With the partial exceptions of David, Solomon, and a few others, the kings choose to worship false gods, which lead them to follow unethical principles and enrich themselves at the expense of their people. Their faithlessness leads to the eventual destruction of both Israel and Judah.

But the fault does not lie only with the kings. The people bring the woes of tyranny upon themselves

when they demand that the prophet Samuel appoint a king for them. Not trusting God to protect them, they are willing to submit themselves to rule by an autocrat. “Every nation gets the government it deserves,” observed Joseph de Maistre. [11] The corrupting influence of power is an ever-present danger, yet nations and organizations must be governed. The ancient Israelites chose strong government at the cost of corruption and tyranny, a temptation very much alive today, also. Other peoples have refused to make any of the sacrifices—paying taxes, obeying laws, giving up tribal and personal militias—required to establish a functional government and paid the price in anarchy, chaos, and economic self-strangulation. Sadly, this continues to the present day in various countries. An exquisite balance is needed to produce good governance, a balance almost beyond human capability. If there is one major lesson we can draw from Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, it is that only by committing ourselves to God’s grace and guidance, his covenant and commands, can a people find the ethical virtues needed for good, long-lasting government.

This lesson applies not only to nations, but to businesses, schools, non-governmental organizations, families, and every other kind of workplace. Good governance and leadership are essential for people to succeed and thrive economically, relationally, personally, and spiritually. Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles explore various aspects of leadership and governance among an array of workers of all kinds. Specifics include, the perils of inherited authority and wealth, the dangers of treating God like a good luck charm in our work, the opportunities that arise for faithful workers, the joys and heartbreaks of parenting, godly criteria for choosing leaders, the need for humility and collaboration in leadership, the essential role of innovation and creativity, and the necessity of succession planning and leadership development.

The books pay much attention to handling conflict, showing both the destructive career of suppressed conflict and the creative potential of open and respectful disagreement. They show need for diplomats and reconcilers, both formal and informal, and the essential role of subordinates with the courage to speak the truth—respectfully—to those in power, despite the risk to themselves. In these books populated with flawed authority figures, the few unambiguously good leaders include Abigail, whose good conflict resolution skills saved her families’ lives and David’s integrity, and the unnamed slave girl of Naaman’s wife, whose boldness in the service of the very person who enslaved her (Naaman) brought peace between warring nations.

The most prominent unambiguously good leader in the books is Elisha, the prophet of God. Of all the prophets he pays the most attention to leadership in daily life, work and economic matters. He restores a city’s water system, capitalizes entrepreneurial economic communities, reconciles nations through medical missions (at the instigation of the slave girl mentioned above), creates an ethical culture in his own organization, and enhances the livelihoods of widows, working men, commanders, and farmers. Bringing God’s word to humanity results in good governance, economic development, and agricultural productivity.

Regrettably, when it comes to the kings themselves there are far more examples of poor leadership and governance than good. In addition to handling conflict poorly, as described above, the kings, conscript labor, break apart families, promote an elite class of civil servants and military officers at the expense of the common people, lay unbearable taxes on the people to support their lavish lifestyles, assassinate those who stand in their way, confiscate property arbitrarily, subvert religious institutions, and eventually lead their kingdoms into subjugation and exile. Surprisingly, the cause of these ills is not failure and weakness on the part of the kings, but success and strength. They twist the success and strength that God gives them into arrogance and tyranny, with the result that they abandon God and violate his covenant and commands. The dark heart of disastrous leadership is the worship of false gods in place of the true God. When we see poor leadership today—in others or in ourselves—a good first question might be, “What false gods are being worshipped in this situation?”

Just as light shines more brightly in the darkness, the failures of the kings highlight some episodes of good leadership. Music and the arts flower under David’s rule. The construction of the Temple in Solomon’s time is a marvel of architecture, construction, craftwork, and economic organization. The priests in Jehoash’s time develop a system of financial accountability still in use today. Obadiah models the good that faithful people can accomplish within corrupt systems and evil situations.

Obadiah is a much better model for us today than David, Solomon, or any of the kings. The kings’ overarching concern was, “How can I acquire and maintain power?” Obadiah’s was, “How can I serve people as God wishes in the situation where I find myself?” Both are questions of leadership. One focuses on the goods needed for power, the other on the power needed for good. Let us pray that God will call his people to positions of power, and that he will bring each of us the power needed to fulfill our callings. But before and after we utter such prayers, let us begin and end with, “your will be done.”

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## ENDNOTES

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