

Judges 21:25

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[0 : 0 0] Today is a momentous day for equality in our nation. Now, who said that and when? Answers on a postcard. Well, it was the Health Secretary, Alec Neal, on Tuesday, following the passage of the same-sex marriage bill in the Scottish Parliament by 105 votes to 18. Now, forgive me for another footballing allusion or illustration, but if you convert that into a football score, maybe I should do it into a rugby score given yesterday's fiasco, but if you convert it into a football score, you're talking 10-1 or 10-2. A right good hammering is what was suffered in the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday in the matter of the passing of this bill.

But our Parliament in the matter of enacting newfangled laws is nothing if not industrious. In November, the Parliament received for the second time a bill, a private member's bill, presented by Margo MacDonald that would, if passed, legalize assisted suicide.

This bill is, in my opinion, you may have a different one and you have every right to a different one, but in my opinion is more chilling in its potential for harm than the same-sex marriage bill recently passed. So, there you have it, just in a matter of a few weeks, same-sex marriage and assisted suicide. It's quite a trajectory from the bizarre to the barbaric. What's going on and what can we do? I want to try and answer those questions, no doubt, partially and inadequately, but I want to try and answer those two questions, and what I want to do is to try and answer the first question, what's going on this morning, and then try and answer the second question, what can we do this evening?

We'll try and answer the first question by considering how Israel, in the time of the judges, is described by God, a description that is striking in the manner that it serves to describe our own circumstances as a nation today. In Judges chapter 21 and verse 25 we read, and I'm going to read from the English Standard Version that captures, I think, more literally what it is that is said in that verse.

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

[2 : 57] Now, before moving on, it is important to make clear that we are not contending that Scotland, or any other nation for that matter, can or should be viewed as a parallel modern equivalent to Israel in the time of the judges. If we were to identify the modern day equivalent to Israel from the perspective of the Bible's progressive revelation of God's purposes and dealings with mankind, it would be the church universal, it would be the church universal, that is, the new or spiritual Israel, rather than any one nation, be that Scotland or any other. Put another way, in the time of the judges, the nation of Israel constituted the people of God. Well, today the church, the church of Jesus Christ constitutes the people of God, and we have to be aware of that distinction and be careful about careless parallels being drawn where they ought not to be drawn. That said, there are elements in the description of Israel and principles that underlie that description that we can apply to a nation like our own. This is perhaps especially so, given the gospel privileges that we have enjoyed that led Scotland to be known in the past as the land of the book. What we're going to do is to examine the description given of Israel, and in the measure that we think it legitimate to do so, note the parallels and the lessons that can be drawn for Scotland today. And three questions will serve to give some order to what we have to say. So, these are the three questions we'll pose of Israel in the time of the judges as it is described by our text, and then see in what measure we can apply some of the principles to our current situation and to Scotland. So, the three questions are as follows. What was missing in Israel? What was missing in Israel? And the second question is, what was happening in Israel?

And then the third question is, what was needed in Israel? So, these are the three questions. What was missing in Israel? What was happening in Israel? And what was needed in Israel? First of all, then, what was missing in Israel? Well, the text is very clear, very explicit. In those days, Israel had no king. There was no king in Israel. Now, we read that, and we think, well, that's simple enough. But when we just dig a little deeper, not very much deeper, we have to concede that this is, in some regard, a very intriguing statement, especially as it is quite clearly intended to provide an explanation for the chaos that reigned in Israel. Summarized in the choice words of our text, and illustrated by the bizarre account with which the book of Judges ends, the chapter that we've read. Why do I say it's intriguing that it would be declared that Israel had no king, and by implication, that was the reason for the chaos that was reigning? Well, it's intriguing because it was not God's intention that it would be. It would be the intention that Israel had no intention that Israel, at this stage in its history be governed by a king. In 1 Samuel 8, which historically is just a short time after the events described in the book of Judges, we have recorded the occasion when the people of Israel demand a king, and God Himself identifies the shameful foundation for this demand. In chapter 8 of 1 Samuel and verse 7,

God is speaking to Samuel, who has been the one to whom the people had approached and said, we demand a king, and he doesn't know what to do, and God assures Samuel that they're not rejecting Samuel, but rather, and I quote, they have rejected me as their king. So, this is what God identifies as the reason why they're demanding a king. They have rejected me as their king. Now, a superficial reading of that might lead us to think that, well, God didn't want them to have a king, that that wasn't God's purpose that they have a king, but that would be mistaken. It's important to stress that from God's perspective, the prospect of a king over Israel was not, per se, a problem or a less than ideal situation. Quite the reverse. Going right back to God's covenant with Abraham, it is clear that it was God's intention for Israel to be governed by kings. Going back that far to the very genesis of the nation of Israel, of God's people, and the covenant that He made with Abraham, made in chapter 17 of Genesis, and in verse 6, we read, I will make you very fruitful. This is God giving His promises to Abraham.

I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. Now, clearly, those kings would be kings not only over Israel, but of the many nations that are made reference to, but implicit is a recognition that God didn't have a problem, per se, with kings governing, and certainly not His own people.

But just to reinforce that perhaps even more clearly, in God's law, given through Moses, provisions are made for a king, and what's more, it is established when such a king would be chosen and installed by God. And that's the passage that we read in Deuteronomy, and precisely it was God's intention that at this point, even though the reasons that the people demand a king were worthy of condemnation, that they should have a king was God's purpose for His people at this time, but not, intriguingly, in the time of the judges that we are looking at this morning.

[9 : 20] But back to the time of the judges. Given what we have said, why was the absence of a king a problem, given that it was not God's intention that they have a king in the time of the judges? Why then is it a problem that they didn't have a king? And why is the absence of a king seemingly the cause of such chaos in Israel? Well, I think the issue or problem wasn't the absence of a king, but the absence of what a king represented. A king represents authority, authority given by God and exercised under God.

What Israel needed and did not adequately have in the time of the judges was leadership or authority exercised according to God's design. There was not a complete absence of leadership. The book is called, After all, the judges, they did exercise authority in a measure, but what was lacking was authority exercised in the manner that God had determined. Well, what is God's design for leadership or authority?

Well, we can find that design or elements of it in the Mosaic legislation that we read there in Deuteronomy chapter 17. And time this morning only allows us to summarize the model, if we can call it a model, by identifying the three key components of authority as designed by God. The king or the leader, whatever the particular system that operates is, the king or the leader is to govern, first of all, under God's rule, under God's rule. Just to ensure that we're being true to what we read, it probably would be useful for you to have your Bible open there in Deuteronomy chapter 17 just for a moment.

So, the first principle of this model, the first component of this model, is that the king or leader is to govern under God's rule. Verse 15 of chapter 17 makes very clear that the king to be appointed is the one that has been chosen by God, answerable to God, under God. God is the one who chooses because he is the one who has authority over the king. So, the king is to govern under God's rule, but he also, he is after all a king, he is to govern over God's people. Be sure to appoint over you the king, the Lord your God chooses. And so, the people are being told very clearly, if you appoint a king, and if you have a king, what goes with that is the requirement that you submit to the king, because he has authority over you. But then the third element, the third key element, no doubt we could identify other elements, but the third key element is that the king was to do God's law, to know, very interestingly, he has to write it all out, he has to keep it by his side, but ultimately all of that in order that he would know and do God's law. In verse 19, I'm going to read again verse 19. You can follow the reading in your Bible, but I'm going to read it from the ESV, where you have this use of the verb to do, which I think is very strong and striking, that he, the king, may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and doing them. So, three aspects of government, of authority, of kingship as designed by God. The king is under God's rule, over God's people, doing God's law. As we fast forward to today, the question that emerges is, can we apply these three key principles to the exercise of all leadership or authority over nations? Indeed, we might broaden the question and ask if it can be applied to all authority, but let's limit ourselves to the authority exercised over nations. On the basis of what we find in the New Testament on this subject, and very particularly what Paul teaches in Romans chapter 13 concerning the magistrates, I think we can legitimately apply these principles as principles that ought to be respected in the exercise of authority over nations and nations today, for example, our own nation.

The principles apply to all leaders. When Israel, going back to Israel, when Israel was governed by those who acknowledged that they were under God's rule, over God's people, and doing God's law, be that by a prophet like Moses or subsequently by a king like David, the nation enjoyed order, stability, and cohesion, and consequently, security and prosperity. When such authority was absent, as it largely was in the time of the judges, the result was crisis upon crisis, chaos, and disintegration. What was missing in Israel?

[14 : 46] Israel. That's the question we're trying to answer our first question. What was missing in Israel? A king, or the exercise of authority as designed by God and in submission to God? What is missing in Scotland today?

The exercise of authority as designed by God and in submission to God. That is what is missing. Now, is it hopelessly utopian to imagine that we will ever enjoy such leadership or authority in our nation, or indeed in any nation? Well, possibly it is. However, the point is that the further that we are from God's model or design, the greater the chaos that will ensue. Really what I'm saying is, even if you say, well, it's utopian, it's unrealistic to think that in Scotland we will have leadership as designed by God and as described in God's Word, that's simply not going to happen. And even if I concede and say, well, maybe you're right, maybe it's unlikely that that will happen. Nonetheless, what we can say is that the further we are from that model, the worse things will be, and the closer we are, though never perfectly so, the better things will be. Let me just illustrate that. We're talking about God's design for authority. Well, let's think about the design of something else to illustrate, the design of a table.

Let's imagine that the design of a table requires, you don't need to imagine it, four legs of equal length. Now, those of you who know about furniture, bear with me. No doubt you can have tables of a different design, but for the purposes of this illustration, let's imagine that for a table to function, it has to follow that design, four legs of equal length. That's the perfect design for it to function. Now, what happens if you have a table with four legs, but three are of equal length, and one of them is two or three inches shorter? What happens? Does it still function as a table? Well, yes, it still functions as a table. It will be wobbly, and, you know, you'll have complaints from your wife about not fixing it, and what have you, but the point is it will function, because it approximates to the design. It's not perfect. You know there are flaws in it, but it basically works, because it's close to the design.

But what happens if you have a table with two legs, and there are two legs missing? Well, what happens then? Well, then everything, it just collapses. It simply cannot work. So, the closer you are to the design, okay, it's not perfect, but at least it does the job. But the further you go from the design, well, chaos ensues. And I think we can see that happening in the matter of authority and how it is exercised, even in our own nations, while recognizing that we have to be careful in drawing these parallels, as I was highlighting at the beginning. The further we go from God's design, then the more chaos that will ensue. And that is what we are seeing today. Well, let's move on to the second question. The first question was what was missing in Israel, and the second question is what is happening in Israel, or what was happening in Israel at the time of the judges? Well, in the absence of a king, and as the consequence of the absence of a king, or God-designed authority, one king was replaced by a multitude of little kings.

It's a frightening thought. But instead of there being one king, there was suddenly, or not suddenly, because these things don't happen overnight, but what emerges is a multiplicity of kings, a multitude of little kings. That's really what we're being told in verse 25. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

[18 : 47] You see, in God's model, the king, who is the one who is the holder, if you wish, or the one who has written out God's law and knows God's law and ensures that the laws of the kingdom reflect God's law, so that the people know, well, this is what is right and this is what is wrong, you remove the king, and everybody decides that they can decide what's right and what is wrong. And that is what we're told was happening. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. When the king is dethroned or absent, two things happened that can be expressed in two claims made by the little kings, as this is captured in our text.

I think two claims are being made by the people, and that is captured in these words. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. And the two claims that are being made are as follows, or could be described in this way, I'm in charge and I decide what's right for me. They're very much related, but we can distinguish them. I'm in charge and I decide what's right for me. Now, such a scenario, where everybody's a king, did not in Israel and will never be played out in an absolute manner.

Because a society where every single individual is king and every single individual is his own personal lawmaker simply cannot function. But in the measure that this was the dominant perspective of the population, then chaos and disintegration and crisis upon crisis will follow and did follow as sure as night follows day. This is what was happening in Israel at the time of the Judges.

Chapter 21, the final chapter of the book of Judges, is a bizarre and revealing snapshot of a kingless nation, of a nation where God has been removed from the picture. He is still formally recognized, the chapter makes that clear. They would seem to be concerned as to his opinion, but their actions make clear that that is not the case. In any practical or for all practical purposes, God has been removed from the picture. The king has been replaced by kings. The truth has been displaced by truths. And right and wrong makes way for shades of gray and blurred lines. The account of the search for wives for the Benjamites is very bizarre and the circumstances are so alien to us that we think, what is going on? But the account, it would be almost comical were it not so tragic. The men of Israel, and note the telling absence of any figure of authority, the men of Israel are just making it up as they go along. The tribe of Benjamin, they need wives. They haven't got the women they need in order to continue existing and to reproduce. And so, what do we do? How do we get wives for them? And they, you know, they make it up as they go along. They have one plan, it's not enough, so then they come up with another plan, and it's just chaos. They just are making it up as they go along.

But what about Scotland today? What is happening in Scotland today? The parallels, though not exact, are striking. How did we translate or paraphrase the words of our text that everyone did what was right in their own eyes? Well, with these two affirmations, I'm in charge and I'll decide what is right for me.

[22 : 31] And these two claims or power grabs that emerge in a kingless nation are reflected in two of the most fundamental tenets of our society, personal autonomy and moral relativism. These are two fundamental tenets of our society today. Personal autonomy, I'm in charge, and moral relativism. I'll do and I'll decide what is right for me. And these two tenets underpin the very two pieces of legislation that we began the sermon by referring to. Assisted suicide is grounded in the tenet of personal autonomy. It's my life, and I can do what I want with it. I'll end it when I decide. The concept of personal autonomy, even the language of personal autonomy, was used by Margot MacDonald as the key principle underpinning her first bill. And no doubt it also serves as the key principle underpinning this second attempt. Though interestingly, as far as I can find, the language isn't actually present in this new bill or in the introduction to it. Same-sex marriage is grounded in the second and related tenet of moral relativism. There's no absolute right. What's right for you may not be right for me.

It's perhaps best captured by the seemingly plausible challenge often made to opponents of same-sex marriage. If you don't approve of gay marriage, then don't marry a gay person. You know, superficially, it seems quite plausible, but behind that it's simply this idea, well, it's not right for you, that's okay, you know. Or the other very tired and tedious mantra, live and let live.

So, in a kingless nation, everyone does what is right in their own eyes, and personal autonomy and moral relativism take center stage. And in time, laws are passed that reflect this new perspective or reality. Now, for some, this might seem to be a libertarian utopia. Indeed, the way that Israel is described, some might say, hurrah, everyone does as they see fit. What a wonderful world to live in.

I can do what I want. I decide what's right and wrong. Some might celebrate such a circumstance. But is this some kind of libertarian utopia? You see, what actually happens when a nation decides to go down the road of rejecting God's design for kingship or authority, what happens is that there are two consequences. There are certainly two consequences that we can detect. There may be many more. But the two that I want to highlight are these two consequences. First of all, tyranny, and secondly, chaos.

Why do I say tyranny? Well, I say tyranny because the seeming utopia of personal autonomy and liberty in actuality becomes a tyrannical imposition of a new model of authority. The reality is that no society can operate without authority. It simply cannot happen. So, if you reject God's design or model, authority under God, over the people, doing God's law, you need to replace it with another one.

[25 : 47] And that is what is happening in Scotland today. The new model involves the imposition of the authority and the morality of the powerful, the decision makers over the rest of us. Remember the mantra repeated ad nauseam by the Scottish government in the matter of same-sex marriage. This is with the argument with which they began and that they held firm throughout the process. It's the right thing to do.

I remember at the very beginning, Nicholas Surchin says, we're going to do this because it's the right thing to do. Not that it's a good thing to do, not that it's a reasonable thing to do, it is the right thing to do. By necessary implication, any other view is wrong if it is the right thing to do. And I think it is significant in this regard how John Mason's amendment, one of the MSPs, to the same-sex marriage bill that sought to establish that to hold to the traditional view of marriage as between a man and a woman as, and in the language of the amendment, as being worthy of respect was soundly defeated on Tuesday. Well, of course, if it's the right thing to do, then why would you respect a position that is wrong?

Or to use more inflammatory language that people are happy to use, bigoted and homophobic and, well, you've heard it all yourselves. Now, the imposition of this new morality is also rearing its disturbing head, at least potentially, in another piece of legislation going through the Scottish Parliament, a piece of legislation that's kind of crept under the radar. The Children and Young People Scotland Bill, you maybe haven't even heard of this bill. It's at stage three, which is at the final stage. It could become law this month, by the end of the month. Now, in making a comment on this, let me be clear that I have no reason to doubt that the intentions behind the bill are worthy to be applauded, namely the protection of our children and young people from abuse and harm. Of course, we applaud those noble intentions. But what does the bill do? Well, a central aspect of the bill is that the bill legislates that for every child in Scotland, there would be allocated a state guardian. It's not the language that is used. The language used is a named person, a lot less threatening, a named person. But effectively, it's a state guardian. And this state guardian would enjoy wide-ranging powers to, and I quote, promote, support, or safeguard the well-being of the child or children under their guardianship. Now, again, you might say, well, what's wrong with that? Is that not a good thing to promote the support or safeguard the well-being of every child in Scotland? Well, the issue is that the potential—and I suppose at this stage we can only speak in terms of potential—the potential for these state guardians to be pawns, willing or unwilling, in imposing the new morality in every home in the land is really quite chilling. So, rejecting God's design for authority leads to tyranny, the imposition of a new authority, a new morality, but also to chaos. The new morality is necessarily a moving target. It has got to be a moving target because it's not grounded in absolute, so it must be a moving target. What is right today may be wrong tomorrow, and vice versa. Again, if we take the topical example of same-sex marriage as an example, 105 MSPs voted in favor of that legislation on Tuesday. Now, I wonder if those 105 named individuals had been asked 20 years ago if they would have supported that legislation, how many of them would have supported it? I don't know the answer to that question, but I would wager that a significant majority of those who voted in favor 20 years ago would have said, no, we certainly don't support that. And that speaks volumes. You see, this is the problem with the new morality. It's a moving target. What's right today is wrong tomorrow. What was wrong yesterday is fine tomorrow to be celebrated. And so, the consequence of rejecting God's authority is not only tyranny but chaos. And we can only wonder what is around the corner, given that that is a necessary consequence of what is happening. We end with the third question. The third question was what was needed in Israel. What was missing in Israel was a king. What was happening in Israel was the the consequences of being kingless that we've discussed a little. And then thirdly, and really, this is just the flip side of the first question, what was needed in Israel. Israel needed a king.

Israel needed authority according to God's design. The whole book of Judges, and very especially the words of our text, are intended to provoke in the godly reader a yearning for a God-given and God-fearing king. And that, of course, is what God did in due course give to Israel. This is, I don't know if we can call it the happy ending, but this is that which we can celebrate as we consider this very desperate circumstance that is being described in the time of the Judges. Israel needed a king, and God provided a king. Indeed, very soon after the events described in Judges. A king was provided.

God gave Israel a king after his own heart. He gave to Israel King David, a king who exercised authority under God, over God's people, and doing God's law. A king who led the people of God away from doing what was right in their own eyes to doing, to use covenant language, what was right in God's eyes.

[31 : 46] This is what is required of us, especially as God's people. Listen to the words we read in Deuteronomy chapter 12, the obligations of those of us who are God's people. Be careful to obey all these regulations I am giving you so that it may always go well with you and your children after you because you will be doing what is good and right in the eyes of the Lord your God. Do you see the contrast? In the time of the Judges, everyone did what was right in their own eyes. But what is required of us that we might live lives that are blessed is that we would do what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord our God.

And there's a question, a very personal question for us. We've been thinking perhaps beyond the realm of our own individual lives, but let me, if you wish, draw the matter to a more personal point.

Whose eyes matter most to you? Whose eyes matter most to you? Are you content to live your life doing what is right in your own eyes or doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord your God? But even David, graciously given by God as a king over Israel, even David, as we know, was flawed and fallible and principally served to point forwards to the one of David's seed, the one who was greater than David, the promised Messiah King, King Jesus. And Jesus is God's King. Jesus is the divine King over God's people.

He is the King who does now exercise authority over His kingdom. And here too, we need to ask a question that is very personal. Is He your King? For a moment, forget about Salmond and his cronies.

Forget about them for a moment. Have you bowed down before the absolute and gracious authority of King Jesus? Is that something that you have done? Is that something that you continually do? Bow down before His authority. The confession, Jesus is Lord, was in the early church and ought to be today the confession, the principal confession of every Christian. Jesus is Lord. Jesus rules. Jesus has authority over my life.

[34 : 10] What is needed in Scotland today? In some sense, this is where the parallels that we have contended are legitimate, even though we can't make an exact parallel. But in answering this question, this is where the parallels break down somewhat. We are not looking for Jesus to be a candidate for first minister in Scotland. Jesus is King of a far greater kingdom. But what about a goal or aspiration that those who do or will exercise authority in our nation should approximate to the divine design? Something I was playing around with and illustrating it with the picture of a table. What about aspiring to that? That we would have a government and leaders who approximate to God's design? That government should be under God, over the people, over the people, and doing God's law. This is surely a worthy aspiration. But how can we get there?

Or to return to the second question that we'll be dealing with this evening, what can we do? Can we try and fix the current system? Can we push and prod and pray in the hope that our leaders will see the folly of their ways and return to where they ought to be? Can we do that? I fear that such an endeavor, however worthy, would prove largely fruitless. Does that mean that there is nothing that we can do to make any difference? Well, by no means. The principal matter that we need to attend to as the church is, I would contend and I trust on the grounds of God's Word, not fixing Scotland, but fixing ourselves, or more accurately asking God to fix us. In the measure that this happens, and it is this matter that we will address this evening, we will be able to be used of God to fix or change or bless and better the nation that we are part of. But our principal responsibility is to look to ourselves and seek

God's help to reform ourselves and to renew ourselves. Then we can be an instrument of God in blessing the nation as we are intended to be. Well, we can give some more thought to that this evening. In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that in it we can find direction and instruction for our lives as individuals, as families, as Your church, and indeed instruction that is helpful and relevant and necessary for the conduct of the affairs of nations. Lord, we come to You and we confess our shortcomings. We confess our failings in the midst of what is happening all around us. We are not without fault. We are not victims. But in many ways, we are those responsible for so much of what we see, as we have failed to be the salt that we ought to have been, the light that we are called to be. And so, we pray that You would indeed help us to understand what it is that we can do.

And we pray that You would direct us in the light of Your Word as we would ponder on such an important matter. Lord, we do pray for our nation. We pray that You would look down in mercy upon us and that You would, despite ourselves, work in a way that is perhaps beyond our imagining or asking for the good of Your people and for the good of all who form part of this, our nation. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[38 : 06] Amen. Well, we'll close our service this evening by singing again, and we'll sing from Psalm 18. And sing psalms on page 22. Psalm 18, and we'll sing from verse 46 through to the end of the psalm. Page 22, Psalm 18 from verse 46, we'll sing to the tune, Church Triumphant. The Lord lives, praise be to my rock. My Savior God exalted be. He has avenged me and subdued rebellious peoples under me. Psalm 18, verses 46 to the end of the psalm.

We'll stand to sing. We'll sing. The Lord live, praise be to the end of the psalm. King of chapter 47, verses 46 through to the pandemic. Through our wish is finished, whereas we'll sing. He has avenged me and subdued these took iniquitous peoples under me.

The Lord will sing. He has avenged me and subdued in rebellious peoples under me. You sent me from my enemies, and sought in me above my foes.

You wrestled me from violent pain, and sought my kingdom to oppose.

Before the nations, Lord, your places, some I will proclaim.

[40 : 04] Before the peoples of the world, I'll sing the glory of your name.

You live your King, great victorious, your love in darkness you will pour.

On David, your Almighty one, and his descendants evermore.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.