

## Who's in Charge Here?

1 Kings 1

The United States of America did not have a fully functional president during the administration of President Joe Biden. If I had said that a year ago, it would have been considered a polarizing, partisan statement. Members of the administration and journalists assured us repeatedly that behind closed doors, President Biden was sharper than he had ever been, that he was clearly in command, and that he was well suited to serve a second term as president. Today, those same people are writing tell-all books about the coverup of the president's mental decline. And we all saw what happened last summer when insiders in President Biden's own party forced him out of the presidential race for this very reason. Now we are left with the realization that from January 20, 2021, until January 20, 2025, we don't know who was really in charge of the executive branch of the United States of America. And that is a very unsettling thought.

When we move into the book of 1-2 Kings, we come upon a similar situation. The narrative, continuing from 1-2 Samuel, immediately confronts us with the question, "Who's in charge here?" with regard to the kingdom of Israel. The once mighty warrior-king David whom we followed through the story of 1-2 Samuel is now an old man, severely weakened by the effects of age, and his weakness has left a power vacuum in Israel. Will the weakness of King David leave his kingdom after him in the hands of an arrogant, wicked usurper and thus bring God's promises about his kingdom crashing to the ground? The story before us is not just a dispute about succession in a small, ancient, middle eastern kingdom. This story is ultimately about the promised Messiah and the redemption he will bring to the world.

In the chaos of this world and of our own lives, we may often ask the question, "Who's in charge here?" The church of Jesus Christ can often seem weak, compromised, divided, and corrupt. The history of God's people is a messy one, and it can make you ask sometimes, "Is following Christ worth it? Is it worth the disappointment, the struggle, the pain, and the repeated sense of failure?" In his grace, God has prepared us to face these questions by showing us that this has always been the case. Messiness has been built into the story all along, and God's purpose for his kingdom has never failed, nor will it ever fail. Who's in charge here? Walk with me through this story, and let's find out.

Every story turns on a conflict, and the conflict of this story begins in the first section, which concerns

### **1. Adonijah's power grab (vv. 1-10)**

King David is now an old man, and in his weakened state he cannot get warm. Covering up with more clothing doesn't help. His blood is simply not circulating well enough. So his servants (meaning his doctors) have an idea: "Let's find a beautiful young woman who can attend to the king and lie in bed next to him. That should warm him up." Now, if you hear that idea and think, "It sounds like there is a sexual element to that suggestion," you are not wrong. Yes, that sounds bizarre and immoral, because it is. But in the world of David's kingship, it made some sense. Remember that as king, David was already a polygamist with a number of wives. Adding one more wife to his harem wouldn't be a scandal to his servants or his kingdom. That bridge had already been crossed. So his doctors assumed that if there is any way to get the old man's blood circulating again, it would be to have the most beautiful young woman they could find lying next to him, making her, in that process, another wife or concubine to the king. Yes, the Law of

Moses forbade kings from multiplying wives for themselves (Deut. 17:17), but what harm is there in adding just one more, right?

And yet, it doesn't work. The king's servants go on a search for the best young woman they can find, and they bring to him Abishag the Shunammite. She was young. She was beautiful, and she attended to the king. And yet, the end of verse 4 tells us, "but the king knew her not." The verb "knew" there is a sexual reference: the king did not have sexual intimacy with her, because he was simply too old and too weak to do so. The once virile David, who in his younger days saw a woman from his rooftop and altered the course of his life and kingdom by giving in to sexual desire, has no ability in his old age to desire the beautiful young woman who lies in bed right next to him. But the author plays on the verb "know" throughout the rest of this chapter, showing us not only that David did not "know" Abishag sexually, but also that he does not seem to "know" what is going on in his own kingdom. In verse 11 Nathan says to Bathsheba, "Have you not heard that Adonijah the son of Abishag has become king and David our lord does not know it?" In verse 18 Bathsheba says to David, "And now, behold, Adonijah is king, although you, my lord the king, do not know it." David is out of it. There is no one in charge. The point of verses 1-4 is to show us that David is weak, and thus the kingdom of Israel has no acting king at the moment, putting at risk the fulfillment of God's promises in the covenant he made with David.

David's oldest living son Adonijah saw that there is a power vacuum and moved in to fill it. He exploited David's weakness to assume the throne for himself. Note verse 5: "Now Adonijah the son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, 'I will be king.'" So far in its history Israel has had two kings, Saul and David, and neither one of them appointed himself to that position. But Adonijah, whose name ironically means "Yahweh is my Lord," decided that royal authority was simply his to claim, and in an act of stunning arrogance exalted himself to the throne. With ominous notes, the author presents Adonijah as a new Absalom. You may recall from 2 Samuel 15-19 that Absalom was a son of David who led a rebellion against his father and almost stole the kingdom away from him. Adonijah mimics Absalom in a number of ways. He is described as a very handsome man (v. 6), just as Absalom was (2 Sam. 14:25). He acquired chariots, horsemen, and fifty men to run before him, just as Absalom had done at the beginning of his conspiracy (2 Sam. 15:1). He recruited some of David's loyal servants to his cause (including the high priest Abiathar and the military commander Joab, v. 7), just as Absalom had done (2 Sam. 15:12). He held a sacrifice and feast to mark publicly the occasion of his coronation (v. 9), just as Absalom had done (2 Sam. 15:7-12). History is repeating itself as yet another usurper of David's throne has arisen. The kingdom is under threat.

David's failures enabled this sad state of affairs. Verse 6 notes that David had never stood against any desire of his son Adonijah, cultivating through the years in his son the expectation that he could have whatever he wanted at any time. David failed as a father. And he also failed as a king, because he had not implemented a clear succession plan, leaving the throne up for grabs. Was it simply a failure of foresight on his part, lacking the ability to see how weak he had really become until it was too late? Was it perhaps an unwillingness to pull back and let a younger generation take over in the proper way? We don't know, but whatever the case, David's failure and weakness created this situation. There is a lesson in leadership here. Many of us wield some measure of authority. Fathers, you have authority over your families. Some of you have authority over a team at work, or over a classroom, or even over an institution. In whatever sphere you

have authority, seek to lead proactively rather than reactively. David's failure to anticipate the threat of Adonijah put him in a position to react to a bad situation, whereas he should have led proactively to cut off that possibility from the beginning. If you wield authority, don't be passive and reactive. That's how Adam failed in the garden. Walk in the authority God has given you, with leadership that is wise, loving, and honoring to God.

So, it seems that all has been lost as a new Absalom has arisen. Somebody needs to do something, because David certainly won't. That brings us to a turn in the story:

## **2. Nathan's bold intervention (vv. 11-27)**

As a true prophet of God, Nathan shows a willingness to intervene with boldness in situations that changes the outcome. This happened the last time Nathan appeared in the story in 2 Samuel 12, when he confronted David over his sin with Bathsheba and brought David to repentance. Here he once again intervenes at a crucial moment to prompt David to a new course of action that will change Israel's future. We tend to think of the book of 1-2 Kings as an account of the kings of Israel and Judah. It is that, but it is much more than that. It is a story about the prophets who confronted those kings as representatives of God. And the central section of 1-2 Kings, we will discover, is much more about the prophets Elijah and Elisha than it is about any kings. Nathan is the first prophet mentioned in the book, representing the Word of God to the king.

Nathan knows that lives are at stake here. He tells Bathsheba in verse 12, "Now therefore come, let me give you advice, that you may save your own life and the life of your son Solomon." Why would Solomon's life and that of his mother be threatened? Remember that Adonijah did not invite Solomon to his coronation feast, even though he invited all the other sons of the king. That is proof that Adonijah knows that Solomon is a rival to the throne. Bathsheba and Nathan will refer to an oath that David had sworn to seat Solomon on the throne after him. Adonijah apparently knew about that oath, and thus to him Solomon was a threat and an enemy, and the moment he had an opportunity, Adonijah would eliminate Solomon and all who were connected to him. The stakes are high, so Nathan tells Bathsheba his plan: "You go in to the king to remind him of his oath concerning Solomon and to alert him to what Adonijah has done. I will come in right after you to confirm your words, so that by the mouth of two witnesses the king will know what we have said is true." So Bathsheba goes to the king's chamber. And when she gets there, of course, beautiful young Abishag the Shunammite is attending to the king. That had to be an awkward moment for Bathsheba, who had been a wife to David for decades now. Nevertheless, she said what she needed to say, pressing the disconnect between David's oath and the reality of the situation and urging him to act so that she and Solomon can avoid becoming outlaws under a new administration. While she is still speaking, Nathan the prophet's arrival is announced, and he comes in, confirming her words. Nathan likewise urges King David to resolve this situation with clear action.

Of all the characters in this story, Nathan is God's representative. Nowhere in this chapter does Nathan deliver a "Thus says the Lord" message, but his actions are entirely consistent with what God had spoken before. If we go back to 2 Samuel 12, after Nathan's confrontation of David about his sin with Bathsheba, you may recall that the child conceived from that adulterous encounter died as an act of judgment from God. But then we read in 2 Samuel 12:24-25: "Then David comforted his wife, Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her, and she bore a son,

and he called his name Solomon. And the LORD loved him and sent a message by Nathan the prophet. So he called his name Jedidiah [beloved of the LORD], because of the LORD.” Nathan knew Solomon had been chosen by God, and the oath that David had sworn about Solomon, though it is nowhere recorded in 2 Samuel, must have been David’s response to the word that Nathan the prophet had delivered to David about his son Solomon. Nathan saw that the situation with Adonijah was out of step with what God had spoken, so he acted to bring reality back into line with the Word of God.

There is a lesson for us in Nathan’s example, which is that God’s promises are always there. Sometimes they are in the background, where we may not notice them, but like Nathan, let us seek to live always as though they are true. Because they are. No matter what happens in our lives or our world, the promises of God will not fail, and we can bank our lives on them.

Up to this point in the story, David has spoken one time, and that is a measly two Hebrew words that translate, “What do you desire?” in verse 16. He has been remarkably weak and passive. But all of that is about to change in the next movement of the story, which tells us of

### **3. David’s kingly act (vv. 28-40)**

There is an irony that you can see in the Hebrew, but not in the ESV translation. It’s so good that I want to show it to you. David’s doctors wanted to get his blood going, so they said in verse 2, “Let a young woman be sought for my lord the king, and let her wait on the king and be in his service.” The verb translated “wait on” in the Hebrew is literally “stand before.” They wanted a woman to stand before the king and get his energy going, but it didn’t work. However, after hearing from Nathan the prophet, David called Bathsheba back in, and notice what verse 28 says, “Then King David answered, ‘Call Bathsheba to me.’ So she came into the king’s presence and *stood before* the king.” What the young, beautiful Abishag could not accomplish by standing before him, Bathsheba his wife did. She and Nathan together got his kingly power restarted, and all of a sudden David, who has said barely anything so far, is giving orders left and right.

King David summoned his loyal servants Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada (one of his mighty men), and he gave them a plan to execute in order to make a clear, unmistakable declaration that Solomon, not Adonijah, is king. He told them to put Solomon on the king’s mule, signifying his royal authority (after all, who else gets to ride the king’s mule?). He told them to bring Solomon to the springs of Gihon and anoint him king there in a public ceremony. He told them to blow the trumpet and shout, “Long live King Solomon!” And then he told them to have Solomon sit on David’s throne, which would signal that a period of shared rule between David and his son had officially begun.

Verses 38-40 tell us that Zadok, Nathan, and Benaiah carried out David’s plan as they had been instructed, and the people of Jerusalem loved it. Note especially verse 40: “And all the people went up after him, playing on pipes, and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth was split by their noise.” That’s not a literal statement. It’s a hyperbolic one. It’s like saying, “The whole world was watching the Final Four games last weekend.” We know what it means. Solomon’s coronation provoked a lot of joyful noise among the people, who had apparently been eager to know their king’s succession plan. David’s kingly act here is a decisive, public refutation of Adonijah’s plot to seize the throne.

But think about what this action would have meant for David. It meant that he was taking a clear, public stance against Joab, who had been a loyal and effective general throughout his reign. It meant that he was taking a clear public stance against Abiathar, a priest who remained loyal to him through Absalom's rebellion. And if that were not bad enough, it meant David was taking a clear, public stance against his own son Adonijah. In making Solomon king, David necessarily made Joab, Abiathar, and Adonijah public enemies. But given the situation, there was no way to wield his authority over Israel in a God-honoring way without rupturing long-standing relationships, even with his own son. Sometimes obedience to God requires us to rupture relationships with people we love. In Matthew 10:34-36, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household." Loyalty to Christ can, at times, divide us from friends and even family. But we must be willing to let that happen if it must happen. The kingdom of God must have our highest loyalty, as it did for David here.

So we have one son of David who coronated himself, and another son of David whom David appointed his successor. Two public ceremonies and two coronation parties were going on at the same time. How will that situation get resolved? We come to the final section of this story:

#### **4. Adonijah's fearful surrender (vv. 41-53)**

Meanwhile at Adonijah's party, the guests hear all the commotion and wonder what's going on. When Zadok the priest blew the trumpet heralding Solomon as king, Joab heard the trumpet blast and asked, "What is going on in the city?" At that very moment Jonathan, son of Abiathar the priest runs in and announces what is going on. It's interesting that the author chooses to record Jonathan's recounting of the exact of events of Solomon's coronation, because together with David's instructions and then the narrative of the events themselves, this is the third time the author has recounted the events of Solomon riding David's mule, being anointed with oil by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, being heralded as king, and sitting on David's throne. Solomon's enthronement is the central event of this story, because it represents God's continuing rule over Israel.

So what do you do if you are a guest at Adonijah's coronation party, and you hear the news that David has officially and publicly appointed Solomon to be his successor? You very quietly and quickly get out of there. It's like when the cops arrive at the teenage drinking party: everybody disperses. The party is over. As for Adonijah himself, he ran to take hold of the horns of the altar, seeking it as a place of refuge from the newly anointed King Solomon. It was nowhere stipulated in the Mosaic Law that the altar was a place of protection, but it had become a custom to seek refuge there, likely because of the assumption that no one would want to defile the altar with human blood or mix the blood of holy sacrifices with human blood. At the altar, you were presumed safe from being killed, at least by custom. From his place of refuge, Adonijah sent word to King Solomon. Note what Adonijah says in verse 51: "Then it was told Solomon, 'Behold, Adonijah fears King Solomon, for behold, he has laid hold of the horns of the altar, saying, "Let King Solomon swear to me first that he will not put his servant to death with the sword."'" By referring to himself as the servant of Solomon, Adonijah openly acknowledges that he has been beaten. Solomon shows him mercy, but he does so with wisdom. Solomon's promise to him in verse 52 has a condition: "If he will show himself a worthy man [loyal to my rule], not one of his hairs shall fall to the earth, but if wickedness is found in him, he shall die." And before

we look at the last verse, I want to note a pattern that has been building through this story. Notice all the bowing that has been going on. In verse 16, Bathsheba bowed and paid homage to King David. In verse 23, Nathan bowed down to King David with his face to the ground. In verse 31, Bathsheba bowed once again to King David with her face to the ground. In verse 47, King David himself bowed on his bed to honor the Lord at the time of Solomon's succession to the throne. All of that bowing climaxes in verse 53: "So King Solomon sent, and they brought him down from the altar. And he came and paid homage to King Solomon, and Solomon said to him, 'Go to your house.'" Solomon has triumphed over his rival, and in this event we have a prefiguring of what Paul declares will happen at a future day with another Son of David. Philippians 2:10-11 tells us that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. King Solomon is a type of Christ.

God had promised to build David a house, meaning a dynasty, in 2 Samuel 7:11. Of course, if Adonijah had reigned as king after David, that would have been a Davidic house, but it would have been wrong kind of house. It would have been reign of an arrogant, godless son of David who was too much like his older brother Absalom. But God had promised David a son who would build a house for his name (2 Sam. 7:13). If Absalom had inherited the throne, he would have built his own kingdom, not a house for the Lord's name. But that is not what happened in the end. Solomon, the Lord's chosen one, the future temple builder, was raised up to the throne, and not a moment too soon.

So who really is in charge here? Yes, David eventually takes charge, but only after he is goaded into action by Nathan and Bathsheba. Solomon is given the throne, but throughout this story he is a remarkably passive character who only speaks for the first time in the last two verses. Solomon didn't cause any of this to happen. The answer, of course, is that God is in charge and always has been. His providential hand may often seem invisible, but it is always there. Adonijah asserted kingship for himself. But Solomon was anointed by the high priest and the Lord's prophet, representing God's authoritative action. Look again at verse 39: "There Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon." The tent mentioned here is most likely the tent that David set up in Jerusalem to house the ark of the covenant. The oil taken from that tent was, therefore, taken from the very house of God, showing the stark contrast between Adonijah who made himself king and God, who chose and anointed Solomon with his Spirit. And David himself acknowledges this divine action in verses 47-48: "Moreover, the king's servants came to congratulate our lord King David, saying, 'May your God make the name of Solomon more famous than yours, and make his throne greater than your throne.' And the king bowed himself on the bed. And the king also said, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who *has granted* someone to sit on my throne this day, my own eyes seeing it.'" Solomon's enthronement is an act of God.

This story is yet another reminder to us: never bet against the kingdom of God, no matter how bad things look. When I read about Adonijah as a new Absalom, I am reminded of John's vision of a beast from the sea in Revelation 13. This beast has seven heads, and according to verse 3, "One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast." If you think about it, a mortal wound that is healed is a contradiction in terms. Mortal wounds don't heal. They kill you. So if one of the

beast's heads has a mortal wound that is healed, what is that saying? It is a dark picture of death and resurrection. The beast goes away and then comes back again and again and again. We thought Absalom was dead, but here comes another one. And whenever another beastly "resurrection" happens, it appears the whole world is ready to fall for it all over again and unite in rebellion against our Lord Jesus Christ.

May we take our stand with our rightful king, no matter how popular it may be at any given moment, and no matter how much it may cost us. Because no matter how weak the church may seem at any given moment, no matter how godless the world may become, the fact remains that he who sits in the heavens laughs at his enemies. He has set his King on Zion, his holy hill. And one day, just as Adonijah's guests heard the sound of the trumpet heralding the enthronement of another king and the end of their party, so will the last trumpet sound to tell all the powers of this age that their time is up, and the rule of King Jesus has been revealed. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Amen.