

ideal kings

Deut. 17:14-20

17:14 When thou art come unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set **a king** over me, like as all the nations that are about me; **17:15** Thou shalt in any wise set him **king** over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set **king** over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother. **17:16** But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the LORD hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way. **17:17** Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.

17:18 And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: **17:19** And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: **17:20** That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.

ideal kings for Israel?

When Israel came out of Egypt, they had no human king. (Moses was their leader, of course, but he was never a king.) The same was true in the wilderness and during the time of Joshua and the judges.

In Deut. 17:14-20, however, shortly before the nation entered the promised land, Moses spoke about future ideal kings, about what they should be like. This was prophetic. Kings would come, and hopefully they would live by the standards that Moses set down in these verses. Yet, Deut. 17:14-20 was also a warning about the various temptations that future kings would face and sinful lifestyles that they would likely fall into.

The first half of the passage (17:14-17) is mostly negative, about what the ideal kings were not to do. King Solomon failed in nearly all of the areas described in these verses. He had many wives, excessive wealth, and many horses from Egypt. This led to the divided kingdom. (See 1 Kgs. 10:14-11:13.)

The second half of the passage (Deut. 17:18-20) is much more positive, mostly about what the ideal kings should do. They were to read God's word every day and live accordingly. In this way, they would be able to rightly relate to their countrymen (17:20). (Interacting with the people in a biblical way is stressed in the final verse.)

negatives

Obviously God and Moses did not believe in the natural goodness of human nature. Otherwise, there would not be so many laws in Deuteronomy chapters 17 through 26, including the rules regarding the future kings of Israel in 17:14-20. There are also rules regarding prophets in 18:15-22.

The nation needed the leadership of God himself through the Messiah who would come in the future (18:15-19, John 1:21, 6:14, 7:40), but in the meantime the nation would have less than perfect kings. The various rules and standards for ideal kings are covered in the “A” section lines below.

The historical record in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles shows that God and Moses were correct about fallen human nature, since king after king failed to live up to God’s standards. A few of the kings, David, Solomon, and Josiah, are directly mentioned in “B” section lines, and Saul is indirectly referred to in B-4.

The essence of the Law was to fear the Lord, to love him, and to keep his commandments. (See 10:12-13.) Yet, specific laws and rules, such as those in 17:14-20 regarding kings, reveal human sinfulness and sins without eliminating the problem. Paul wrote about this sad truth in Rom. 7:13-25.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() There were many prohibitions regarding a future king.
A-1	() He should not be a foreigner (17:15).
A-2	() He should not seek to have many horses (17:16).
A-3	() He should avoid Egypt and buying Egyptian horses (17:16).
A-4	() He should guard his heart by not marrying many wives (17:17).
A-5	() He should not greatly multiply silver and gold for himself (17:17).
A-6	() The order of the various prohibitions in 17:15-17 is significant.
A-7	() The king should only reign for two ten-years terms (17:20).
A-8	() He should not abuse his authority (17:19-20).
B	() The passage (17:14-20) did not solve the problems it addressed.
B-1	() Solomon was one of Israel’s worst kings.
B-2	() Even “good” King David failed in various ways.
B-3	() Josiah’s biblical reforms did not last (2 Kings 23:1-37).
B-4	() The desire to have a king was sinful (17:14-15, 1 Sam. 8:4-22).
B-5	() Deut. 17:14-20 was more of a prediction of failure than a solution.

positives

Although Moses was sceptical about human nature (17:14-17), he believed in the power of God's Word. This point is made in 17:18-20 regarding kings as well as earlier in 6:6-9 regarding children. When Scripture is read day by day, God can use it to make a big difference.

That said, *how* do the Scriptures work? Jesus spoke about the Holy Spirit's ministry in the Church Age (John 16:7-15), but this was not exactly the same in the Old Testament. Pride has always been the core problem, however, and the Scriptures help overcome this through the fear of the Lord (17:19-20).

It is a well known fact that it is difficult to be a good ruler because power corrupts. Those who are in positions of authority have always been inclined to proudly look down on others and abuse their power in various ways. That said, the good news in Deuteronomy is that God had a plan to counter this in Israel.

Sometimes warnings work wonders. In 2 Kgs. 6:10 the king was often saved from his enemies because Elisha told him in detail where not to go. Similarly, in Deut. 17:14-20, Moses told all future kings what they should and should not do and where not to go. The Bible would help them; Egypt would not.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C	() The future king's life should be Bible based (17:18-20).
C-1	() He should make his own personal copy of the Law of Moses (17:18).
C-2	() He should read his personal copy of the Bible every day (17:19).
C-3	() He would not need to read other books (17:19, 2 Tim. 3:16-17).
C-4	() He should be old enough to understand God's word (17:18-20).
C-5	() He should attend weekly worship on the Sabbath (17:19-20).
C-6	() He should fear the Lord and fellowship with others (17:19).
C-7	() He should teach the Bible to his children (17:20).
C-8	() He should not be proud (17:19-20).
D	() This is a key passage on biblical leadership. (Deut. 17:14-20)
D-1	() There is little written in the New Testament about national leaders.
D-2	() Pride destroyed kings in both Testaments (2 Chr. 26:16-23, Acts 12:20-24).
D-3	() Deut. 17:14-20 is the top leadership passage in the Old Testament.
D-4	() Deut. 17:14-20 is somewhat like 1 Tim. 3:8-13 and 1 Pet. 5:1-4.
D-5	() Everyone should fear the Lord (Deut. 17:19-20, 1 Pet. 2:17).

conclusions

worksheet answers

Nearly all lines are correct, more so than in most studies. The only one that is obviously incorrect is the suggestion that kings be limited to two ten year terms (A-7). Mandatory term limits are obviously a modern democratic creation. God's desire and purpose was for there to be godly kings who would follow the rules set down in the passage and be able to reign for many years as a result (17:20).

Solomon reigned for many years, but in light of Deut. 17:14-17, he was indeed one of Israel's worst kings (B-1), despite the fact that he was also the author of some of the books in the Bible and is credited with building the temple. He did much that was praise worthy, but in the end he was a failure. because he did not live in line with 17:14-20. Therefore his son was not allowed to reign over most of the nation. (See First Kings chapters 11 and 12.)

Regarding Sabbath worship and line C-5, it is probably important to note that nothing is directly said about the Sabbath and public worship. Rather the emphasis in 17:18-20 is on personal devotion and obedience. Solomon arguably did more for the public worship in Israel than any other king. (See First Chronicles chapters three through seven.) Yet, Solomon failed miserably in his personal life. In general he had great wisdom and power, but building the temple and deciding difficult cases wisely did not save his kingdom.

So what?

What should we as believers in the Church Age think about Deut. 17:14-20? Since we know the perfect King of kings (Rev. 17:14, 19:16), the Lord Jesus, this Old Testament passage seems irrelevant in some ways. Moreover, it is at least partly correct to say that there is relatively little written in the New Testament about national leaders (D-1) compared to in the Old Testament.

The emphasis in 1 Tim. 3:8-13 and 1 Pet. 5:1-4 is on church leadership rather than on national leadership. Even so, there are various similarities between Deut. 17:14-20 and these two passages (D-4), since church leaders need to be on guard against covetousness, sexual sins, arrogance, and trusting in fleshly ability just as much today as kings did in Old Testament times. Therefore it is still important for us to study the principles laid down in Deut. 17:14-20.

One of the most basic principles in our passage is that the Lord was to choose and set up the king, although the people were to be involved in some way as well (17:14-15, B-4). The king was to be called of God rather than elected by the people, but at the same time the king needed to guard his heart lest he ruin his relationship with the people through arrogance (17:20). (See 1 Kgs. 12:1-17.) The key to it all was, and still is, the fear of the Lord which grows as a leader spends time in God's word (17:18-20).

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
