

# Beati Pauperes Spiritu

1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15 | Psalm 138 | 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 | Mark 3:20-35

## 1 SAMUEL 8:4-20, 11:14-15

<sup>4</sup>Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, <sup>5</sup>and said to him, 'You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.'<sup>6</sup> But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the LORD, <sup>7</sup>and the LORD said to 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. <sup>8</sup>Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. <sup>9</sup>Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.'<sup>10</sup> So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. <sup>11</sup>He said, '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, and to run before his chariots; <sup>12</sup>and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. <sup>13</sup>He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. <sup>14</sup>He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. <sup>15</sup>He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. <sup>16</sup>He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. <sup>17</sup>He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. <sup>18</sup>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.'<sup>19</sup> But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! but we are determined to have a king over us, <sup>20</sup>so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.' ... <sup>14</sup>Samuel said to the people, 'Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.'<sup>15</sup> So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

## INTRODUCTION

The *Purgatorio* is the middle volume of Dante's allegorical *Divine Comedy*, where we find Dante climbing up the Mount of Purgatory. Much of Dante's journey focuses on seven terraces—seven levels—corresponding to the seven deadly sins, wherein Dante encounters many who are suffering, learning lessons of a spiritual nature, and working toward purging themselves of their sins. On the first terrace, Dante finds people who exemplify the sin of *pride*.<sup>1</sup> As he climbs, Dante meets 13 people or groups of people, some with large stones on their backs, signifying the weight of their pride. And as Dante reaches the end of the terrace, an angel approaches him. This angel speaks, offering to lead him up the mountain to the next terrace. And along the way the angel quips: "O sons of man, born to ascend on high, how can so slight a wind-puff make you fall?"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In a picture of irony, the entrance to this terrace is lined with statues of those who exhibit the opposite virtue—humility—including the Virgin Mary.

<sup>2</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory* (trans. J. Ciardi; New York: Penguin, 1954), 385.

This simple little line conveys an incredible tension that is, I think, intrinsic to humanity. We aspire. We believe ourselves destined for greatness, always reaching up, always wanting and hoping and working toward and trying to find and enjoy something beyond ourselves. Something good. Something satisfying. Something that separates us from the other animals, something more than just the next meal or a safe place to rest. Something transcendent even. And yet, we are a combination of both fragile in our constitution, and yet somehow prone to overestimate what we deserve and even that of which we are capable—so much so that a little wind-puff, a small measure of pride or arrogance, inevitably knocks us down. The Romans call it *superbia*. The Greeks call it *hubris*.

This, brothers and sisters, is precisely the story of God’s people in 1 Samuel 8. Here we find God’s people at a turning point, a point of choosing to have a king. And in their pride, mixed with a little envy and, a dose of unfathomable stupidity, they make a tragic decision that plagues them for the next 500 years. What lesson should they have learned? Let’s take a look.

### 1. REJECTING SAMUEL

The reading from 1 Samuel opens with a discussion between Samuel, the prophet, and God. Immediately, we are introduced to the dramatic tension of the passage—the people are dissatisfied with Samuel and demanding a king. Two reasons are offered why. First, to this point, Samuel had been the acting ruler of God’s people, serving as judge. And yet, like Eli before him, his sons turned out to be worthless.<sup>3</sup> It seems, hereditary monarchies are not always great. (*And yes, I realize that I am an American saying that in a church full of Brits.*) Secondly, notice what Samuel has relayed: They want a king to govern them *like all the other nations*.<sup>4</sup> It is even restated at the end of the passage.<sup>5</sup>

Let me be clear, this first part is a good reason. Who wants somebody immoral, terrible, and intractable to rule over them? (*And Americans, this where we pretend like our Presidential elections always turn out great.*) That second reason, however, shows their foolhardiness. The consistent message of the Law, especially as it is found in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, is that God’s people are to be holy—to be set apart.<sup>6</sup> For them to want to be like the other nations is the exact opposite of what they should want, to be set apart, to be holy. Why are they to be holy? Because their God is holy. He is far above other gods—and so they should be set apart as well, in how they live, in what they want, on whom they rely. Being like the other nations in this way is a downgrade.

### 2. REJECTING GOD

And this brings us to the climax of the story. In wanting a king to rule over them, as we see in the next line, they are giving up their actual king. Notice what God says to 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.*”<sup>7</sup> Let that sit for a moment. Samuel, poor Samuel, in a moment of self-absorption that foreshadows the people—thinks they are rejecting him. But God says: ‘No.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Sam 2:11-17.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Sam 8:5.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Sam 8:20.

<sup>6</sup> See Lev 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:26, 21:8, and Deut 23:14.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Sam 8:7.

Calm down. They aren't rejecting you. They are rejecting me.' They have apparently forgotten—or determined to ignore—that God is their king, and so go looking for something else.<sup>8</sup> They want a king who will provide for them, a king who will protect them, a king will organize them and make their lives better—forgetting that for the last thousand years or so, and especially the last 4 chapters of this book, God has done just that. O, sons of man, reaching upward. Their folly is revealed as idiocy.

And what's the resolution? A warning. God tells Samuel to warn the people. You want to trade God in for a human king because you think he will provide a better life? Well, you will get what you deserve. *"These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you..."*<sup>9</sup> Six times in what follows, Samuel warns the people: 'He will take. He will take. He will take. Sons and daughters. Servants. A tenth of your flocks. The produce of your fields. It's something like an ancient Hebrew stewardship campaign. Tithes and offerings will be forcibly appropriated, whether you like it or not. (Possibly something to learn here for our next stewardship campaign.) And then we get to that last phrase: 'You will become his slaves. He will take your very freedom.' The warning was issued. And did the people heed the warning? Did the people, in that moment, decide: 'No. God will remain our king. We will rely on him for provision and protection. We will not aspire to live our best lives now, but to be set apart as God's holy people. No king for us, thank you. Good day.'

We read on in chapter 11 that, in fact, they decided to move forward anyway, eventually naming Saul as their king. Samuel, who needed to get over himself, was the first example of arrogance in our passage. The people, in their decision, were the second. And now we have Saul, a third example. The story of Saul is very interesting, a man whose profound pride is not only his undoing, but a picture of how God's people continue to make this very same mistake. In fact, Dante, in his allegorical poem, actually meets Saul in purgatory, on the first terrace of pride, one of the 13—on there, Dante references Saul's demise.<sup>10</sup> And the bible tells how the people repeated this trade again and again—Solomon, the third king, chasing after the gods of his pagan wives...all the way to the generations who returned from exile 500 years later—if you recall from our *Soundings* on Ezra and Nehemiah—as the people continued to reject God. It is an astonishing commitment to idolatry, an epidemic that is endemic and becomes septicemic—which is just a fancy way of saying poisonous. God's people traded in God for something that would never satisfy and ends up being their downfall, over and over again.

### 3. REJECTING SIN

As we typically do, we have to ask then what it is we are supposed to learn. This passage is fundamentally asking us, as readers, who we want to be our king. Will we choose, every day, to be God's set apart people, those who have chosen him as their king? Will we strive to live in ways that demonstrate we are his people—morally, ethically, faithfully, spiritually? Will we truly rely on him for our needs—for his protection and provision? Or will we trade it in? Will we put our faith, our trust, our efforts, our lives in other sources of security? Will live as though professional and academic achievement is what matters most, or even all that matters?

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<sup>8</sup> See Judg 8:22-23. Here, it is established that God is the king over his people as Gideon rejects both the people's attempt at making him king and the idea of hereditary monarchy.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Sam 8:11.

<sup>10</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory*, 383-834. See also 1 Sam 31:1-13.

Will we live for family? Will we live for success or perfection? Will we live for amusement? Will we live for ourselves? Will we place our identity in anything less than God? Too often, I fear, the answer is yes. And in so doing, we choose to ignore the warning given to God's people that day. For as they chose a human king over God, they became slaves. This, brothers and sisters, is exactly what happens to us. When we make our professions or our degrees our kings—however noble they may be—when we make our spouses or our kids our kings—however much we love them—when we make anything but God our king, we end up slaves to that idol. What an amazing pride it takes—an incredible arrogance—to reject God.<sup>11</sup> For that kind of arrogance always meets a fall. And what an unsatisfying life that will always be.

It sounds like an impossible situation, doesn't it? How can we, in the words of our baptismal vows, 'reject sin and the devil, and turn to Christ?'<sup>12</sup> Ironically, it is through Jesus Christ. While God's people made an undeniably regrettable decision in 1 Samuel, God was already prepared to work through it. We learn in 2 Samuel that, in fact, he was going to work through the lineage of the kings, establishing an everlasting throne on which would sit not just a son of David, but the very Son of God.<sup>13</sup> And in establishing his kingdom, Jesus Christ restores God—for he is God—to being king of God's people. And what is the message of Jesus's kingdom? Mark 1:15: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* And so, what are we to do? Repent. Believe. Unlike in purgatory, we cannot work to purge ourselves of sin, but we must choose Christ Jesus as king—for he alone, in his death and resurrection, provides the purging of sin. We must strive to live every day under his rule. Don't reject God as king, but reject the slavery of idols and sin.

## CONCLUSION

Dante, in the conclusion of his canto on the terrace of pride in purgatory, describes a final conversation with the angel. You see, Dante had been marked with the letter *P* seven times, referring to *peccatum*, or sin. And as he travels through purgatory, making confession, these marks are wiped away. Dante inquires about this, with first angel responding:

... "When the Ps that still remain,  
though fading, on your brow, are wiped away  
as the first was, without a trace of stain—  
then will your feet be filled with good desire:  
not only will they feel no more fatigue  
but all their joy will be in mounting higher."<sup>14</sup>

Dante feels lighter as he climbs up an up, freed of the weight of sinful pride—a freedom we find only in Christ Jesus, our king.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to follow your son, our saviour and king, Jesus Christ, rejecting all that would keep us from you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

<sup>11</sup> Dante, again, calls it a wind-puff, that compels humanity to fall. I wonder if he was referencing 1 Corinthians 4, *"so that none of you will be puffed up."* See 1 Cor 4:6. Cf., 1 Cor 13:4.

<sup>12</sup> The Archbishop's Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 353.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Sam 7:1-17. God had been laying this foundation for the kingship all the way back in Deut 17:14-20.

<sup>14</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory*, 386.