King Demanded

Israel insisted on having an earthly king like the other nations.

I remember learning the verse in Sunday School as a child: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Prov. 3:5-6, KJV). Also, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (Jas. 1:5, KJV). Thus, I have carried those verses virtually my entire life. Trust the Lord, seek His wisdom, and know that He will never mislead you. It is so easy to say, but how many times do we let our own thoughts and "wisdom" lead us in the wrong direction?

In today's session, Israel had to learn the foolishness of choosing their own desires over those of the Lord. Some lessons must be learned the hard way. Might we be able to learn from their mistakes?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 Samuel 8:1–11:15

Chapters 8 through 14 pertain to the establishment of the monarchy in Israel—a transition from being led by judges and Levites to being led by kings. These chapters are a kind of historical commentary on Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22, the Mosaic regulations on leadership in Israel. It deals specifically with civil and religious authorities. It speaks of judges and legal officials (16:18–17:13), the king (17:14-20), levitical priests (18:1-8), and the role of the prophet (18:9-22).

Several pertinent factors led to Israel's demand for a king. Israel's judges had become corrupt (Deut. 16:18; 1 Sam. 8:3-5). The leaders wanted a national government rather than a local or regional one (1 Sam. 8:4-5). Even though Samuel judged over "all Israel," his territory was limited to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah (7:15-17). Thus, Samuel

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is presented as a transitional figure, preparing Israel for a more formal leadership. The Israelites felt a need for a military leader to fight against other nations (8:20). A national government modeled after "the other nations" (vv. 5,20) would lead to catastrophe.

The biggest issue, however, was a spiritual problem. Israel had rejected the Lord as their King (v. 7). Yahweh's kingship over Israel was the very foundation of Israel's identity as a distinct people (Num. 23:21; Deut. 33:5). If Israel wanted an earthly king who would in any way encroach on Yahweh's rightful place over His people (1 Sam. 8:20), the nation would face disaster.

The Lord gave Israel their request to have a king like the other nations had (vv. 5,20). The fact that they did not wait on the Lord's timing shows an intense lack of trust in God's wisdom. We should not equate God's permission with His blessing.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

The Demand (1 Sam. 8:1-5)

Having led the people of God well all of his life, Samuel appointed his sons, Joel and Abijah, as judges in Israel. However, they did not follow in Samuel's spiritual footsteps. Instead, they ruled dishonestly and did not lead with justice. In response to the failures of Samuel's sons, the elders of Israel demanded a king so Israel could be like other nations.

VERSE 1

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges over Israel.

There is nothing like bad leaders to make people wish for good ones. The writer gives a clue to the time frame here that otherwise might be lost to us—**when Samuel grew old.** Samuel was just a boy when God first called him into his prophetic ministry (3:1–4:1). The next mention of Samuel was in chapter 7, just prior to this passage, in the victory over the Philistines, when Samuel was obviously an adult, and he judged all of Israel. Now, quite some time had passed because Samuel had now grown old. So, it must have been several decades later.

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Samuel had **appointed his sons as judges over Israel.** This is unusual because a judge was usually raised up by God not appointed by one's father. In Israel, judgeship was not hereditary such as the priesthood. Eli "judged Israel forty years" (4:18), but he never handed this role to his sons. Samuel *appointed* his sons (8:1), the same term used in verse 5 ("appoint a king"). Might it be that Samuel was trying to set up a kind of dynasty?[1]

VERSE 2

His firstborn son's name was Joel and his second was Abijah. They were judges in Beer-sheba.

In the biblical world, a person's name was carefully chosen by the parents. Many times the name expressed a testimony to God, with the hopes that the child would grow into that name and wear that name well. Samuel gave his sons good names. **Joel** means "Yahweh is God," and **Abijah** means "My father is Yahweh." However, Samuel's sons did not live up to their names.

They were judges in Beer-sheba. *Beer-sheba* was traditionally seen as being the southern edge of Israel's territory, and it eventually became an important center of worship for Israel, although it was condemned by the prophets (Amos 5:5). The important point here is that Beer-sheba was nowhere near Samuel, who lived in Ramah (1 Sam. 7:17) in the territory of Benjamin about five miles north of Jerusalem.

VERSE 3

However, his sons did not walk in his ways—they turned toward dishonest profit, took bribes, and perverted justice.

Moses was very clear regarding God's standards for being a judge (Deut. 16:18-20). The fundamental requirement for all judges was "they are to judge the people with righteous judgment" (v. 18), that is, they shall judge fairly. This is followed by three negative commands: "Do not deny [distort] justice" (v. 19). The Hebrew term means "to bend or turn aside." This carries two connotations, both of which may be meant here. The idea of twisting or distorting justice means that justice is perverted by the judge for their own personal benefit (24:17; 27:19). To "turn aside" justice is to prevent someone from receiving justice (Amos 5:12, KJV). The second command is that the judge should not "show partiality" to anyone (Deut. 16:19; Prov. 18:5). The Hebrew term for "show partiality" means to "regard faces," to determine what someone will receive based

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upon how he or she looks. The third command is "do not accept a bribe, for it blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous" (Deut. 16:19; see Prov. 17:23).

Samuel's sons were no better than Eli's sons. Samuel's sons **did not walk in his ways,** that is, they had no concerns for God's law and lived with no fear of God in their eyes. **They turned toward dishonest profit, took bribes, and perverted justice.** They were involved in bribery and political paybacks, and thus, they corrupted the legal system. When religious leaders twist justice around, society will soon fall apart.

As a father figure, Samuel resembled Eli (1 Sam. 2:29-30) more than Elkanah. While Samuel traveled around Israel decade after decade serving as a judge, his two sons were more than fifty miles away from Samuel's home, out of their father's sight and living wicked lives. In a lot of ways, Samuel failed to be a good father to his sons. At least Eli made a half-hearted effort at rebuking his sons (vv. 22-25).

VERSE 4

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and went to Samuel at Ramah.

Rather than simply being a regional judge, as were the judges in the book of Judges, Samuel was recognized as the chief judge in all the nation. **So all the elders of Israel gathered together and went to Samuel at Ramah.** These elders may have been the same sort of elders who decided to use the ark of the covenant as a good-luck charm in the war with the Philistines (4:3).

VERSE 5

They said to him, "Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Therefore, appoint a king to judge us the same as all the other nations have."

The Israelites' complaint was due to Samuel's advanced age and the wickedness of his sons. They decided it was time for a new form of government, **"appoint a king to judge us the same as all the other nations have."** When all God's people see are ungodly leaders, they will look to what the world has to offer every time. But the answer was not to look to everyone else but to look to God.

The idea of kingship had already been announced to Israel since the time of Abraham (Gen. 17:6-16). In many ways, the covenant God had with Abraham was linked to the role of the king. The fact that the Mosaic

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law described the requirements for the king (Deut. 17:14-20) presented the possibility of Israel having a monarchy in the future. Thus, the demand for a king was not wrong in itself. It was not *that* Israel wanted a king, it was *why* Israel wanted a king. They wanted to take their cues from the examples of *all the other nations*.

Their sin was not wanting a king but that they wanted to emulate the other nations, nations who did not follow the Lord. If Israel was to have a monarchy, they were not to look like the other pagan nations because they were to be a distinct people (Ex. 19:5-6; Lev. 20:26). God had placed them in the land and had consistently raised up leaders. Instead of trusting God's wisdom and timing, they wanted to force God to work in the way they wanted. Instead of seeking the Lord on the issue, they wanted the Lord to follow their lead.

Their request for a king was sinful in that they were accommodating their ways to the world's way of thinking. It was selfish in its timing because even if the monarchy was ultimately in God's plan, they refused to wait on God's timing. They wanted a king right now! Demanding "now" from God may be as rebellious as saying "no" to God. Instead of looking inside their own hearts and recognizing how unfaithful they had been to God (Judg. 2:10-13), they wanted an external solution. As wicked as Samuel's sons were, demanding a king was a convenient way to blame the political system rather than their own hardness of heart toward the Lord.

In chapter 7, Israel faced a crisis in the form of the Philistines. Samuel led them to repentance and prayer, calling to the Lord for help (7:9,12), and the Lord brought miraculous deliverance. They had no mighty king to lead them; instead, they had a man of God, a faithful intercessor, and their only weapon was prayer. In chapter 8, instead of crying out to God for help, they demanded a king as their answer. The help they sought was no longer in the strong name of the Lord but instead a new form of government. Having a king was not their problem, but trusting that the king was the answer to their problems was their problem. "It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in humanity. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in nobles [humanity]" (Ps. 118:8-9). "Do not trust in nobles, in a son of man [mortal man], who cannot save" (146:3).

God's will, revealed in His Word, should never be overridden by our personal desires. Our proposals may be completely reasonable, clearly logical, obviously plausible, and at the same time, utterly godless. The world says a king would be a logical and reasonable solution to the Israelites' leadership problem. But, according to God's view, they were rejecting His kingship over His people and replacing it with a worldly solution.

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Explore Further

Read the article "Judge (Office)" on pages 938–939 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How did the role of the judge shift during the period of the monarchy?

The Rejection (1 Sam. 8:6-9)

Samuel believed the people's demand for a king was wrong and initially resisted the idea. However, after Samuel spent time in prayer, God directed him to move forward with the plan for a king. He noted that the people had rejected Him, not Samuel—a common trait since the nation had been delivered from Egypt. He also told Samuel to warn the people what having a human king would require.

VERSE 6

When they said, "Give us a king to judge us," Samuel considered their demand wrong, so he prayed to the LORD.

When the people demanded a king, **Samuel considered their demand wrong.** The Hebrew phrase is literally "the matter was evil in Samuel's eyes." Samuel knew that the Mosaic law allowed the people to ask for a king one day so they would be like the other nations. Then why did Samuel object to their request/demand? The people were asking for a change in government, from the leadership of judges to the leadership of a king. Samuel had been their judge, and he likely had hopes for his sons to continue such leadership, but the people rejected it. It was either an indictment upon Samuel personally or upon his leadership in appointing his wicked sons to be leaders over God's people. Feeling his personal rejection, Samuel **prayed to the LORD.**

VERSE 7

But the LORD told him, "Listen to the people and everything they say to you. They have not rejected you; they have rejected me as their king."

The Lord told Samuel, **"Listen to the people and everything they say to you."** In other words, "Do what they say," but then the Lord added,

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"but don't take it personally." **They have not rejected you; they have rejected me as their king.** They were turning their backs on God (10:19; 12:12). Israel had a pathetic pattern of forsaking Yahweh for other gods with a history of constant rejection and constant rebellion. The people were missing the whole idea. Israel was supposed to be unique—they *were not* supposed to be like the other nations! The Lord was to be their King, and their King would raise up a human ruler in His time. The people took their eyes off God and placed their eyes on the world.

Much like facing the giants in Numbers 13, the people took their eyes off God and wanted to face a major crisis in the world's way. In this demand the people lost a great opportunity to let God rule them and lead His people into holiness. But for Israel, being like all the nations (1 Sam. 8:5) was more than an expression; it became their passion (vv. 19-20). With a king, they would fit in and belong with everyone else. But they wanted to fit into their culture rather than to be distinct from it. One of the most important lessons for God's people to learn is to have "a wholesome disregard for other people's ways."[2]

VERSE 8

"They are doing the same thing to you that they have done to me, since the day I brought them out of Egypt until this day, abandoning me and worshiping other gods."

The Lord pointed out that this rejection went all the way back to the exodus from **Egypt.** The Lord had rescued His people from bondage and brought them into a covenant relationship with Himself. He was the Lord over His covenant people. But ever since then the people had been **"abandoning me and worshiping other gods."** The terms *abandon* and *worship/serve* usually appear together in the context of the Israelites turning to other gods (Josh. 24:16,20; Judg. 2:13; 10:10,13; 1 Sam. 12:10; Jer. 5:19).

Joshua had given them this warning that they should choose carefully whom they would serve/worship, whether the Lord or the gods the other peoples worshiped. Joshua led the people with his personal example, "As for me and my family, we will worship the LORD" (Josh. 24:15). The people quickly responded, "We will certainly not abandon the LORD to worship other gods!" (v. 16).

Joshua then cautioned the people to consider carefully the pledge they were making so that they would not enter it flippantly (vv. 19-20). To serve the Lord was to serve Him based upon God's holy and righteous character. He would not tolerate any rivals and would not simply

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overlook their sin. Joshua sought to dampen their self-confidence that makes emotional commitments with empty words rather than to count the cost of what that commitment would mean. If the nation turned its back on the Lord, it would face His judgment and destruction. The people were to think carefully of the commitment they were about to make.

Why would Joshua warn the congregation so strongly? Right after the people pledged their loyalty to the Lord, Joshua said, "Then get rid of the foreign gods that are among you" (v. 23). What?!? After everything they had experienced by the hand of the Lord, how He had rescued them, led them, fed them, defeated their enemies, and all His blessings, they still carried around idols and worshiped them? As God said, ever since *Egypt*, the people had been *"abandoning me and worshiping other gods."*

VERSE 9

"Listen to them, but solemnly warn them and tell them about the customary rights of the king who will reign over them."

Samuel was to give the people what they asked for, but **"solemnly warn them and tell them about the customary rights of the king who will reign over them."** Samuel was to spell out for the people what having a king would be like. The *customary rights* of the king (vv. 9,11) are not extraordinary abuses a king may do but simply the usual practices of a king, practices which many times become abusive.

Verses 10-18 describe the custom, or customary rights, of the king. Samuel described the actions of the king with variations of one simple phrase, "he will take" (v. 11), and "he can take" (vv. 13,14,16). Kings are good "takers." He would take their young men and put them into military service (vv. 11-12), he would take their young women (v. 13), he would take their land (v. 14), he would take their possessions (vv. 15-17), and he would take their freedom so that the Israelites would become his servants (v. 17). Basically, taxes he would take from them would pay for the government. Their able-bodied young men he would draft into military and government service. The Israelites would need to support the royal court and families. Their land would become public lands, conscripted as military outposts and funding for government projects. They would come to regret this fateful decision as they became the king's "servants" ("slaves," ESV, NIV) (v. 17), terminology used for a people who had been conquered by a powerful foe. Finally, they would call to the Lord for help but He would not listen (v. 18). Once God was no longer their King, any other kind of king would become oppressive to them.

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God's people today are not immune from making demands from God. At times, instead of "Thy will be done" our prayer is "My will be done," or at best, "Thy will be done *my way*." We can trust God's wisdom for our lives and find His blessing or we can demand things dictated by our own "wisdom" and see the tragic destination to where such "wisdom" leads.

Explore Further

Read "King/Kingship" on pages 963–964 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What were the roles and responsibilities of the Israelite king? What was the relationship between this human king and God as the ultimate King of Israel?

The Result (1 Sam. 8:19-22)

Despite God's warning through Samuel (vv. 10-18), the people of Israel insisted on having a king to lead them. They wanted to be like the other nations. Again, God told Samuel to listen to their request and to appoint a king for them.

VERSES 19-20

The people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We must have a king over us. Then we'll be like all the other nations: our king will judge us, go out before us, and fight our battles."

Earlier, the Lord had confirmed every word of Samuel (3:19). With such a history, track record, and constant authentication from God, one might believe that the people would have heeded Samuel's words. But **the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We must have a king over us."** In this response to Samuel, the first-person plural pronoun "we/us/our" is used six times in two verses. The people's perspective was clearly self-centered. Instead of the Lord's kingship over them, they demanded a more visible, human king. They began relying less and less on the Lord. Their response reveals what was going on in their hearts. It shows their sinful desire, **"then we'll be like all the other nations."** It shows their misplaced faith, **"our king will judge**

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us, go out before us, and fight our battles." *King, judge, go out before,* and *fight our battles* are all terms that elsewhere were used for the Lord's role as their Ruler. The *battles* belong to the Lord, and He must fight them (1 Sam. 17:46; 2 Chron. 32:8). They wanted to replace the Lord as their King with a cheap substitute, a mere man as their king.

VERSES 21-22

Samuel listened to all the people's words and then repeated them to the LORD. "Listen to them," the LORD told Samuel. "Appoint a king for them." Then Samuel told the men of Israel, "Each of you, go back to your city."

Samuel **repeated** the people's words **to the LORD.** The Lord's response to Samuel was **"Listen to them,"** and **"Appoint a king for them."** The people refused to listen to Samuel, but God told Samuel to listen to the people. They want a king, so Samuel was to *appoint* one for them.

These verses should give us pause. Many times, God's people ask for the wrong things. Sometimes it is simply for lack of wisdom, and sometimes what we ask comes from selfish and sinful motives (Jas. 4:3).

The fact that God may choose *not* to answer our requests may be a sign of His tremendous mercy. Many times, God says "no" because He loves us. If God says "no" to a request there is a reason, and it may be a reason we may not understand this side of eternity. How much wiser, then, would it be to couch our requests to the Lord in the way our Lord Jesus did, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. *Yet not as I will, but as you will*" (Matt 26:39; emph. added).

Explore Further

Read "Obedience" on pages 1176–1177 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Spend some time in prayer reflecting on your life. Are there areas where you need to be more obedient to God? If so, make a commitment to do so and ask God to give you the strength to bring those areas of your life under His authority.

1. David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 245.
2. Alexander MacLaren, *Exposition of the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:295.

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