

1. Should Israel Have a King? (8:1-9)

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ² The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. ³ Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.

Samuel’s sons do not follow in their father’s steps.

We have seen this problem of the “next generation” before.

Eli’s sons had become like Canaanite priests –
treating the women who served at the tent like prostitutes.
Now Samuel’s sons become like Canaanite judges –
taking bribes and perverting justice.

The prophet Jeremiah would say generations later:

“Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way is;
and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Jeremiah 6:16)

What does he mean by “the ancient paths”?

In the following chapter, Jeremiah warns against thinking of the temple as a magical talisman:

“Do not trust in these deceptive words:
‘this is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD’
(in other words – the same magical thinking as in 1 Samuel 4 –
when they thought that the ark would save them...).

And yes, Jeremiah is referring to 1 Samuel 4, as he makes clear in Jer 7:11-12 –

“Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?
Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.

Go now to my place at Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first,
and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel...”

and the LORD says through Jeremiah in 7:14 –

“therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust,
and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers,
as I did to Shiloh.

And I will cast you out of my sight...”

The ancient paths are the ways – the word – and the Law – of the LORD.

But when we neglect to draw near to God himself – we forsake his ways –
as Jeremiah says in 8:8 –

“How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us’?
when the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely.

The wise men shall be put to shame; they shall be dismayed and taken;
behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD,

what kind of wisdom do they have?" (8:8-9)

Jeremiah is describing what will happen in the coming exile of Jerusalem –
but he uses the exile of the ark as the pattern and paradigm.

And the refrain in Jeremiah 6:13-15 and Jeremiah 8:10-12
is “from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for gain;
from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely...”

just like in the days of Eli and Samuel...

*⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah ⁵ and said to him,
“Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us
like all the nations.”*

Notice that they are correctly identifying the problem:
Samuel’s sons do not walk in his ways.

But they think that they know how to solve the problem.
How often do we do this.
We have a problem...
I know, let’s do this!!!

But notice Samuel’s response:

⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.”

How does Samuel fix the problem?

And Samuel prayed to the LORD.

Samuel understands that he is not able to “fix” the problem –
and so he goes to the one who can!

And listen to what the LORD says:

*⁷ And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey 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. ⁸ According to all the deeds that
they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving
other gods, so they are also doing to you. ⁹ Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn
them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”*

Many people have read 1 Samuel 8 as being hostile to the idea of a king for Israel.

And at first blush it is easy to see.

Samuel is displeased with the request (8:6)

And God himself says that their request is their rejection of himself as king! (8:7)

Finally, God warns them that their king will oppress them (8:11-18).

So it is easy to conclude that 1 Samuel is against the monarchy.

According to this account, Israel should have continued under the judges, trusting in God as their king to rule over them.

But God was gracious to Israel and turned even their rebellion to his glory by making a covenant with David, establishing a different sort of kingship.

There are two problems with this approach.

The first is the theological problem:

God had said back in Deuteronomy 17 that Israel *could* have a king.

When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say,

“I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,”

You may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose.

One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you.

You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. (Dt 17:14-15)

So God’s purposes for Israel included the kingship.

Okay, so Dt 17 says Israel could have a king,

but then how do you account for the hostility of 1 Samuel 8 to the kingship?

Then you also have to deal with the second problem.

The second is a literary problem:

because the book of Samuel is all about the kingship from first to last.

Hannah prays for a king in 2:10!

The whole problem with the judges is portrayed as a lack of continuity:

both Eli and Samuel have rebellious sons.

Now perhaps you can see why I was sympathetic to Eli.

You cannot view Samuel as anything but a good and faithful prophet, priest and judge.

Samuel is one of the great heroes of the faith in the OT.

But his sons did not walk in his ways.

Can you think of a single father from the days of Joshua, Judges, or Samuel whose sons walked in his ways?

There may well have been poor families where faithfulness endured,

but the point of 1 Samuel (as with Judges before it)

is that Israel’s judges could not provide continuity of faithful leaders.

And 1 Samuel sets up the kingship by exposing the inadequacy of the judges,

but then has this stinging rebuke of Israel for wanting a king!

Some have handled this dilemma by saying that the problem was not that Israel asked for a king, but that they asked for a king *like all the nations*.

This was my own view for many years.

In this view, the problem is the *way* in which Israel asked for a king. It is the dominant position among both Jewish and Christian commentators. The law said that it was okay to have a king, but you shouldn't have a king "like all the nations."

But this doesn't work.

Because if you are going to appeal to Deuteronomy 17 as the reason why it is okay to have a king, then you have to recognize that Dt 17:14 says that Israel may ask for a king "like all the nations that are around" them (Dt 17:14).

The language of Israel in 1 Samuel 8 is *precisely* the language of Deuteronomy 17.

Some have tried to say that Israel should have waited for God to provide them with a king. But that is not what Dt 17 said to do. Dt 17 said that Israel could take the initiative, so long as they let God select the king.

In other words, 1 Samuel 8 reads like a textbook case of Israel obeying the law! Israel asks for a king in precisely the way that God had told them to do it.

And yet they are rebuked by both Samuel and God! Israel's obedience to Dt 17 results in God saying that they have rejected him as king!

It seems like we are back to the theory that 1 Samuel 8 is against the monarchy!

But there is at least one other option.

1 Samuel 8 is not anti-monarchy. It is anti-Israel!

Deuteronomy 17 was not exactly gung-ho about the kingship. It presents the kingship as a dangerous institution that is fraught with peril. The only time you adopt the kingship is at the uttermost end of need. When Israel has reached the nadir of its existence, *then*, and only then, do you turn to the last resort: the kingship.

Look back at God's warning (verse 7):
Obey 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.

Okay.

This sounds like God is saying that *their request for a king* is the rejection of him,
but that is not what verse 8 says:
*According to all the deeds that they have done,
from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day,
forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you.*

They are doing to you, Samuel, what they did to Moses
(And remember that God told Moses that the people were not rejecting Moses, but Yahweh,
whenever they rebelled),
and what they did to the judges.

The request for a king was simply the logical outcome of the failure of Israel.
Israel had failed to be and to do what God had called them to be and to do.

It wasn't the request for a king that was the problem.
For that matter, it wasn't even the way that they asked for a king.

It was the fact that with the exception of Joshua's generation,
the people of Israel had continued to forsake the LORD
more and more in each generation.

God had called Israel "my firstborn son," (Ex 4:22)
and had called his son to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6).

What should the son of God have looked like?
What would a kingdom of priests look like?

A holy nation would have been faithful to God's law.
A kingdom of priests would have been a place
where the surrounding nations would have marveled at the righteous laws
which characterized Israel,
and would have repented of their sinful ways and joined with Israel!

Of course, a holy nation would also have endured the mockery and scorn of the unrighteous.
Israel would have suffered at the hands of the nation—
but they would have suffered for righteousness' sake!

In other words,
a kingdom of priests and a holy nation would have looked an awful lot like Jesus!

Because that is what the firstborn son of God is supposed to look like!

And so when Israel asks for a king,
they are confessing that they have failed to be the son of God.

Israel is supposed to be holy.
Israel is supposed to be a people set apart to the LORD.

But Deuteronomy 17 had recognized that the only way that Israel would need a king is if Israel had failed.

And of course, Moses' sermons in Deuteronomy make it clear that Israel *would* fail!

So 1 Samuel 8 is simply saying that what Moses had said in Deuteronomy 17 has happened. Israel *has* failed.

This is why we spent so much time on Ebenezer and Ichabod in chapters 4-7!
God has forsaken Shiloh –
the ark of the covenant was captured –
because Israel has degenerated into a Canaanite nation!

Eli's sons, the priests, were acting like pagan priests.
And now Samuel's sons are acting like pagan judges.

The glory has departed from Israel!
Prophet and priest alike – all practice deceit.

But now Israel is making the same mistake they made in chapter 4.
In chapter 4, Israel thought that the ark was a magic box –
if they just brought the ark of the covenant – God would give them victory!
In chapter 7, it appeared that Israel had learned from their mistake!
In chapter 7, Israel recognized that they had to turn away from their sin –
and turn to God himself.
Samuel had said “if you are returning to the LORD with all your heart,
then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you
and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only...”

But Israel's heart is fickle.
Sometimes they serve him only – and sometimes they don't.

(Be Careful What You Ask for...)

But there is a warning for future generations that is clear from these verses.
There is a warning for *us*.

Beware of a fickle heart!
And be careful what you ask for.
God might actually give it to you!

What is it that you want?
Do you think that you know what God should do to “make things better” for you?
Be careful.
Are you sure that you know what is best for you?

2. What Will the King Be Like (8:10-18)

¹⁰ So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him.

Verses 10-18 are favorites of modern-day libertarians.

They like to point out that Samuel condemns a 10% income tax,
conscription of labor, and “big government”!

What libertarians usually neglect is the context!

Israel already had a king!

Israel was to be a kingdom of priests—a holy nation.

Yahweh himself was to rule in Israel.

No other nation had such a promise.

It is also important to note that Samuel does not say that this is a description of a *bad* king.

It is the description of “the king who will reign over you.” (8:11)

It is not just Saul, Rehoboam, or Manasseh,
but David, Solomon, and Josiah as well!

If you want a king, then recognize that this is what a king does.

¹¹ 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. ¹² And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵ He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶ He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men^[a] and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

In order for your king to go before you into battle, he needs to have an army –
so he will take your sons and conscript them into his army (v11).

And in order to provide for his army, he needs to have food and equipment –
so he will conscript your sons into his service for forced labor
(whether farming or manufacturing) – v12.

And it won’t just be your sons.

He will take your daughters to be “perfumers and cooks and bakers.” (v13)

(And let’s not forget that Solomon had 300 concubines – Rehoboam had 60.

These are ordinary Israelite daughters,

who will never get married, but are in a form of sexual servitude to the king).

He will take your male and female servants for his labor force. (v16)

Indeed, “You shall be his slaves” – Samuel says. (v17)

Changing your government will not save you.

It may solve one problem!

You won't have to wonder who your next ruler will be!

But it doesn't guarantee that you will have a good ruler!

As long as you have a generally good king, you can put up with his flaws –

“because at least the trains run on time...” –

but a bad king will be intolerable!

*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. (8:18)*

Just remember that you chose this path.

You asked for this – you got what you wanted!

So what is it that you really want?

Idolatry follows a predictable pattern.

We think of our problems in mechanical terms – not spiritual terms.

We think of our problems in terms of horizontal relationships –
not our vertical relationship with God.

In chapter 4 – the problem was the onset of the Philistine army –

so the solution was to figure out how to get God to show up and defeat them!

In chapter 8 – the problem is that Samuel's sons are lousy bums –

so the solution was to figure out how to get a king!

And so because we are thinking horizontally –

“instead of looking to God for help

we are more interested in prescribing what form God's help must take.”

(Davis, 86)

Not surprisingly, God does not find our scintillating brilliance all that impressive...

As one wise pastor put it,

“Our proposals and solutions then can be completely reasonable, clearly logical,
obviously plausible – and utterly godless.” (Davis, 87)

3. “Obey Their Voice and Make Them a King” (8:19-22)

¹⁹ *But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, ²⁰ that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” ²¹ And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. ²² And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey their voice and make them a king.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “Go every man to his city.”*

Notice that in verses 19-22, obedience is turned upside down.

We were told in 1 Samuel 3:19 that the LORD was with Samuel
“and let none of his words fall to the ground.”
You might think that this would have some effect on the people!

But now we hear that the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel –
and so God tells Samuel to obey the voice of the people.

Sometimes people want things that are bad for them –
And sometimes God gives us what we ask for!

After divorcing my father, my mother wanted a husband in the worst way.
And so she finally got one – in the worst way...

She had prayed that if God wanted her to remarry,
that he would have a man approach her in a very specific way.
(She knew that the Bible forbade her to marry someone other than my dad –
but she also knew that lots of Christians disagree with that interpretation,
and so she hoped that God would disagree with that interpretation too!
So she figured that if she asked God for such a particular sign,
that would mean that God approved of her desire to marry someone else!)

Within a week of marrying this guy, she realized that she had made a terrible mistake –
but she didn't know what to do with God giving her such a clear sign!

If God gives you the sign you ask for, doesn't that mean God wants you to do it!?!??

I was in college at the time.
I had resolved not to say anything – because she was already married
(she had deliberately avoided telling me the story in advance –
because she had a hunch I wouldn't approve).
So when they came for a visit, I didn't say anything.

But she really wanted to know what I thought!
When I tried saying, “But Mom, you are already married –
there's no point in saying anything” –
she replied by insisting that she really wanted to know my thoughts.

So I said, “Mom, Israel once asked God for a king...”

Sometimes we ask God for something that is *not good for us*.
Now God is a good Father –
and so when we ask for fish, he will *not* give us a viper.
If we ask for a viper, he will say – no, that is not good for you!
But if we keep asking for a viper,

“Dad – I want a viper, please, please, please!!!”
maybe – eventually – if we utterly refuse to believe him –
maybe – as a last resort – he will give us what we ask for,
in order to show us the foolishness of our own ways,
in order to show us how much we *need him*.

If you will not follow Jesus – if you refuse to do what he says –
then maybe – just maybe – God will give you what you really, really want...

because he *loves you!!*

And he wants *you* for himself!
And he will not be satisfied with anything less.
So if the only way you will learn how much you need him
is for him to give you a viper –
then he will give you what you ask for.

It is important for me to add that my mother needed God to do this.
And because God loved her enough to do this –
she came to a renewed love for Him.

She died twelve years later at the age of 63.

And in the last few years of her life, she had begun to learn the secret of contentment!
To be so satisfied with God
that she was content with whatever he chose to give her – or not give her!
because she had him!!

What is it that *matters to you?*

Israel was not content with God.

This is why I am not satisfied by those who say that “if Israel had been faithful”
then God would have given them David anyway.

If Israel had been faithful,
then there would have been no need for David.

Because the whole point that Moses had made in Dt 29-30
was that Israel was not going to be faithful!

Or to use Paul’s image from Galatians 3-4,
Israel was the son of God in his minority–
but Israel was a rebellious son!

The only hope for Adam’s rebellious race was focused on Israel–the son of God–

but Israel rebelled!

And the story of the book of Samuel is how Israel failed –
and so God chose David – and called him to succeed where Israel failed.

The hope of Israel was focused on the sons of David—the son of God—
but – as we see in the book of Kings – the sons of David rebelled!
And so the only hope for the sons of David was the one man, Jesus—the son of God—
and there the hopes of the world came to fruition!

The whole history of the OT is a progressive narrowing from the whole of the humanity in Adam
to the Seed of Abraham –
to the people of Israel –
to the house of David –
to the one man – Jesus Christ, who is himself
the Son of David,
the true Israel,
the Seed of Abraham,
and the Second Adam.

He recapitulates the whole history of the people of God in himself –
and thus brings us to God.

And because Jesus is King – because he sits at the right hand of the Father –
he goes before us to defeat all of his and our enemies.

And you can have confidence that Jesus will win the battle!
He will complete the work that he has begun in you!