

Part 11 – "Give Us a King"

1 Samuel 8:1-22

The people, desiring to be like the other nations, demanded that Samuel give them a king. It is likely that they believed this would give them the security and stability they desired. Their demand meant the change from the kingship of God to that of man, and for the rest of the history of the Israelites, the results would be disastrous, as a great many of their kings would be wicked men. And yet, the Lord is merciful, for he also gives them King David, who will be a foreshadow of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the everlasting King. In spite of ourselves, the Lord has given us the King we need, the King who saves.

"When Samuel became old…"

Vv. 1-2 – Quite a long time has passed since the events described in Chapters 6 and 7. Samuel is now an old man with grown sons whom he has already appointed as judges. It must be pointed out that while the priesthood was hereditary, the office of judge was not. The judges were appointed by God at various times for the overthrow of the oppressors of God's people. Why Samuel appointed his sons as judges is not made clear. However, his sons are, in terms of moral quality, not unlike the wretched sons of Eli. Samuel's experiment with hereditary succession was certainly a foretaste of the terrible consequences of that same practice among the kings.[1]

Vs. 3 – Samuel's sons did not walk in his ways. While the condition of Eli's sons was at least partially due to his lack of action, there is no suggestion in the passage that Samuel was derelict in his duties as a father. Indeed, he set before his sons a godly example which they rejected. "They took bribes and perverted justice," undermining the very purpose for which they had been appointed.

- These circumstances form the backdrop of the people's demand for a king. As we will see, they demand a king for other reasons that likely figured more prominently in their motivation. However, Samuel's age and the moral condition of his sons provided the people a ready excuse to demand a king.

"Give us a king"

Vv. 4-5 – "Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." – The failure of Samuel's sons was a pretext for the people's demand. The real interest behind their demand for a king was conformity to the world. They wanted to be a nation like all the other nations, a motivation confirmed by the restatement in verse 20. They use the term "to judge us", in verses five and six (what Samuel had been doing for many years), perhaps to make their request seem less revolutionary.

- The people's desire for a king was not a problem in itself. Indeed, going back to Deuteronomy 17, Moses anticipates that the Lord will give his people a king. But the king the Lord will provide them will be significantly different from the sort of king the Israelites were demanding from Samuel. The "tell" is in their motive. They desired to be like the other nations. The various peoples surrounding them all had kings. Egypt, from whom the Lord had freed them, had a king. The ways of those kings were directly influenced by their pagan worldview. The kings of the nations related to their gods in manipulative and transactional ways. So long as the kings housed and fed the gods, the gods could be counted on (or so they believed) to act on their behalf against their enemies. As was seen in Chapter 4, this was the sort of relationship Israel had come to expect with Yahweh.[2]
- "The people wanted to become like all the other nations, but God had called them uniquely to be his people, under his special care. But in their demand for a king, they were exchanging their true glory for status in the eyes of the world. Just as the Israelites were the people of a God who is unique and incomparable with any other god; so they were supposedly incomparable with any other nations: that is, 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6), set apart for service to their divine monarch."[3]

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[1] R.P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986) p. 109

[2] V. Philips Long, *1 & 2 Samuel*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020) pp. 104-105

[3] David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) p. 249

Vs. 6 – The term indicating Samuel's displeasure is a strong word indicating a reaction against evil. Surely Samuel was very familiar with the Deuteronomy passages pointing to a future king, so it is most likely that his revulsion was due to the people's motive for desiring a king. Notice that the writer records Samuel's first response is to pray to the Lord. His *feeling* is acute displeasure. His *response* is to pray.
Vv. 7-8 – The Lord, knowing the hearts of the people, explains to Samuel that their demand for a king is a rejection of Him as their king. This had been a pattern of the people going all the way back to the Exodus, through the era of the Judges, and up to the present time (vs. 8). Even though they had put away their idols to Baal and Ashtaroth, their hearts were once again idolatrous.
Vs. 9 – The Lord gives reluctant permission for Samuel to grant the demand of the people. This should not be understood as the Lord surrendering his sovereign will to the will of his people. Rather, what is being demonstrated is the Lord's reluctance to judge his people. Remember that the Lord is not quick to judge. His patience is great. He even instructs Samuel to give them one more "out," by warning them what they will have to look forward to under most of their kings.

"And in that day you will cry out"
Vv. 10-17 – Samuel obeyed the Lord and warned the people of the injustice and sorrow they would experience under the sorts of kings they were demanding. Remember that their motive was to have a king like the nations; a king they believed could give them more predictable, long-term security and prosperity. They did not want the burden of trusting the Lord day by day. They did not want God to rule over them directly through his own chosen judges. They saw what the pagan nations had and desired that same form of governance. However, what they did not see was the injustice and burdensome requirements of a worldly monarchy.
What the narrator records in verses 10-18 is a bit like a procedural analysis or "manual" that explains what the people can count on under a king.[4] It is a record of the king's rights that were typical in those days. What a contrast this is to the sort of king anticipated in Deuteronomy 17, which warns against having a great number of horses, wives, and gold. The rights of kings that Samuel describes here, with all the new taxes, conscription, and burdensome duties forced upon the people, was standard fare for what we know of the kings in the Ancient Near East.

- How foolish of the people to think that having a king like the nations would have a positive outcome. Augustine warned, "Take away justice, and what are governments but brigands [thieves] on a grand scale."[5] The sad catalog of injustices that the people would endure under the sort of king they demanded ends in this summary statement: "And you will be his slaves" (vs. 17). What a sadly ironic end for a people whom the Lord had freed from the house of slavery in Egypt.

Vs. 18 – The people will find out in the not-too-distant future that their oppressors will come from their own monarchy and not only from hostile forces outside their borders. Notice how Samuel describes the sort of king they are demanding: "*your* king, whom *you* have chosen for *yourselves*." And when it dawns on the people that they have made a terrible bargain, Samuel says, "And in that day you will cry out because of your king." Once they realize the heavy cost of their decision, they will not cry out to the king they believed they needed so badly. Rather, they will cry out *because* of the king. And in that day, Samuel tells them, "the Lord will not answer you." Under the judges, the Lord in his mercy always answered the people's cries for help once they turned from their sin, but under their wicked kings, the Lord will allow the people to experience the desolation of their sinful choices.

"But the people refused to obey"
Vv. 19-20 – The people rejected the wisdom and warnings of Samuel with a determined "No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations." Their interests were, they believed, best served by their own wisdom. A regal military leader, like the other nations had, would be to their advantage over divinely provided judges. They desired an earthly military leader "to go out before us and fight our battles." In other words, they demanded a king to do what the Lord, in fact, had been doing for them all along! Going forward, Israel's battles would no longer be the Lord's battles, but their own. "Instead of the Lord's kingship,

[4] Tsumura, p. 254
[5] *City of God*, IV, 4).

they look to the visible human kingship. This is the beginning of new distrust by the Israelites of their covenant God."[6]

- I cannot help but wonder whether a better portion of their motive in rejecting the judges in favor of kings was due to the fact that the judges were provided in response to the people's repentance. It was an arrangement that forced the people to see their conflicts and disasters through theological lenses. Specifically, it required that they reckon with their sins and repent. Perhaps they believed that a monarchy modeled after the nations would relieve them from thinking much about their sin.

Vv. 21-22a – The demands of the people now replace the intercession of their mediator. That is a dangerous outcome. Incidentally, verse 21 does not imply that the Lord was unaware of the people's demands. Rather, in his mercy, God continued to relate to them through a mediator.

Vs. 22b – In words that echo the aftermath of their humiliating defeat in Chapter 4, the people are told to go home. We are left wondering what will happen next. Ultimately, what we will see is that the Lord's mercy is not exhausted, nor has he forgotten his gracious covenant.

The King We Need

Though the people would be blessed under David's reign – a divinely anointed precursor to the Messiah – the history of the monarchy is one of increasing sin and dissolution. The people, like their kings (with few exceptions), became like the world. Eventually the kingdom was broken in two. Israel to the north was carried away and absorbed by the Assyrians while Judah to the south became an oppressed client state of Rome. And it was under Roman rule that the son of a carpenter would be pressed to answer the question of the governor: "Are you the king of the Jews?" To that Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36). Jesus' words unambiguously declared his kingship, but he was not a king like those of the kingdoms of man, nor was his kingdom of this world.

God's Word declares that there is indeed a great King who is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. His kingdom is everlasting. In serving this King, we are made free. In following this King, we are made secure. In trusting this King, we are saved. The justice of King Jesus is a justice that he satisfies, a justice that justifies sinners. He satisfied the holy requirement of Divine justice by becoming a curse for us. "It was to show his justice at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

Psalm 2:7–12

I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, "You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

[6] Tsumura, p. 261