
We Want a King

1 Samuel 8⁷

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Personal security is big business. People will spend an extraordinary amount of money to protect their home and property and persons.

National security is also a big deal. We are watching the drama of a failure in Benghazi and now the subversion and slow-motion invasion of the Ukraine. In the months after 9/11 we felt a vulnerability we had never felt before.

After a long period of wars, unrest and anarchy, Israel finally had a period of safety, security and stability. We see this in the previous narrative in 1 Samuel 7:13–14.

So the Philistines were subdued and didn't invade Israel again for some time. And throughout Samuel's lifetime, the LORD's powerful hand was raised against the Philistines. The Israelite villages near Ekron and Gath that the Philistines had captured were restored to Israel, along with the rest of the territory that the Philistines had taken. And there was peace between Israel and the Amorites in those days. [NLT]

Samuel has brought a measure of quiet as a judge in Israel. Now this sounds a bit strange in our ears. How can a judge effect that? What about the judges in Israel? Deuteronomy 17:8–13 establishes the place and authority of Israel's judges.

"If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns that is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place that the LORD your God will choose. And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the LORD will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left. The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the LORD your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again.

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So Samuel's ministry is authorized by the Law. His ministry has provided effective leadership in the land. And God has seen fit to bring order and peace to the nation.

But now, the people have now become concerned about their future. How a person or a people view the future deeply affects their sense of peace and security. They get together and bring their concern and their request to Samuel. This turns into a series of confrontations.

Three Developing Conflicts

(v. 1-9)

A fairly long period has passed since the return of the Ark of the Lord and Israel's repentance. Samuel is faithfully carrying out his responsibilities as judge. But all is not well. Three conflicts develop around a request the leaders of Israel make.

Israel and Leadership Decline

(v. 1-3)

Israel does what they do in real difficulty. Two successive judge/priests sons have been disasters.

¹ 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 is concerned to provide a succession in the judges. So he appoints his two sons. They served together in the town of Beersheba. So the people came to them for decisions in regards to the Mosaic Law.

His sons were not like Samuel. They were materialistic. They loved money and what it would buy them.

They used the power given them to take bribes and distort justice. They failed at the very heart of their work. They were responsible to interpret and apply the law to the people so that God's justice would prevail. Instead, they accepted money to give a favorable decision.

Samuel and Israel's Demand

(v. 4-5)

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."

The elders of Israel present their request making basically three arguments.

Samuel is old. He is coming to the end of his time of serving. He will not be around to continue judging the people.

His sons are wicked. They are already in place and in power. But they are greedy and unjust. They are neither serving God nor the people well.

A king will give us standing in the nations. The elders, voicing the people's concerns, think that a king will be the solution. They look around and it seems like the nations who have kings do well.

The Lord and Samuel's Displeasure

(v. 6-9)

⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord. 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."

Samuel is not pleased with this request. He seems to be reacting to his own ministry being rejected by the people and by the elders. He has stood in a long line of judges over Israel who were authorized by Deuteronomy 17 to interpret and apply the Mosaic Law. The people were bound to their decisions. Now the long period of the judges was marked by many good and a few sinful judges. But the problem in the period of the judges was not so much the judges but the people. They were "doing what was right in their own eyes." They were not looking to obey the law. They were functioning often as a law to themselves. As in many countries today, there are law systems in place that are largely ignored, disobeyed and discredited until the person is wronged. And Samuel has been a good judge.

The Lord allows Israel to have the control. The authority to be obeyed was in the Scriptures, then in the priests, prophets and judges. Never in the Law was the authority given to the people. But notice the way God says it, "Obey the voice of the people..." Generally, in the Scriptures, the majority are simply wrong. But God often lets them have their way and gives them the consequences that come as a result of choosing that way.

The Lord corrects Samuel's understanding of what is going on. The people are not rejecting Samuel. The people are rejecting God as Lord. This demand for king *now* is a forsaking of God because of heart idolatry. This is thematic in their lives. They have done it since first coming out of Egypt. They worshipped a golden calf at Sinai and now they are worshipping a golden throne.

The Lord directs Samuel to do what they want. But God also directs Samuel to give a stern warning to the people.

God's Stern Warning

(v. 10-18)

God warns them about what their kings will be like.

A Legitimate Request

Deuteronomy 17

Let me point out that the desire to have a king is authorized by Moses in Deuteronomy 17. In the next section after authorizing the judges, God predicted that they would desire to set a king on the throne.

Deuteronomy 17:14–20 are God's guidelines for the king over Israel.

“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. Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never return that way again.’ And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.

“And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

So the problem is not so much that they wanted a king, but that they were unwilling to wait on God. A king is a good thing. God is a king. God is their king. But they were impatient for a king *now*. This is why God interprets their demand as idolatry. The essence of idolatry is to want something so bad that we reject God's purpose, plan and providences. We want what we want and we want it now. Whatever drives that in our hearts is formal and functional idolatry.

Deuteronomy establishes what the king must not do. These things will him different from the kings of the Gentiles. So the man God makes king will be a king like God, not a king like the nations.

Deuteronomy also establish what king must do. Effectively, during his life time, the king is to make himself a handwritten, personal copy of the Scriptures. Though he is the king, he is not the ultimate authority. He is to submit himself to the Word of God. He is to learn it, understand it, live it and apply it in governing the kingdom.

A Tyrannical Ruler

(v. 11-17)

Sadly. Israel's impatience is not going to bring this kind of king.

¹⁰ So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. 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 and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

They say, "Give us." God says, "Here he is." The king comes and says, "Give me." God may give you exactly what you want... in spades.

God warns them what the king they are demanding will be like. Listen to the tyranny of the government they will get.

The king will draft their sons and daughters for his public and personal service. He will assert government control over their children. They will lose control of their families.

The king will confiscate their crops in order to provide for everyone he has made a part of his government. He will levy an onerous tax burden on the people. They will lose control of the best and the first of their labor.

The king will take ownership of their servants and slaves and put them to government work. He will assert control over their employees and workers. They will lose control of the means of production.

The king will take a percent of their flocks and herds. He will tax their income. Thus he will enslave the people.

You wanted a king like the nations? Here is the irony of God. They wanted a king to be like the world. God gave them a king who was like the world.

A Terrible Dilemma

(v. 18)

They cried for a king. Soon they will cry out because of the king.

¹⁸ 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."

In essence God says, "I can give you your request now, but I will not answer your prayers later." God will give them the king they want. But when they want deliverance from the kings they receive, God will not deliver them. The king they receive will be an instrument of chastening. Unbelieving Israel is unwilling to wait. They are stubborn and self-willed. So God gives them a stubborn and self-willed king. God will not remove him until God's true King is ready to rule.

This is a hard lesson for us. Yes, we live in the New Covenant under grace. But the wise ways of our Father God have little changed. He may well grant you what you demand. And then He will make you live with that until His purposes are accomplished.

Singles, think about this in regards to marriage. You really, really want that person. Now. Be careful. God may well allow it but also allow all the trouble they bring.

Beloved, think about this in reference to material things. Many of us have bought a car, a house, a “something” that we just had to have now. And oh the trouble that has been.

Some of you are impatient for a certain kind of ministry, or to be in leadership or for a certain kind of church. Do you really want that to be a tool of chastening, a rasp in God’s even loving hand to file away at your stubbornness and self-centeredness?

Israel’s Stubborn Rebellion

(v. 19-22)

After such a warning you would hope that the elders would go back to the people and they would withdraw their request. But no...

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.”

The People’s Refusal

(v. 19-20)

It is striking the two “obey the voice” in this text:

Samuel, in spite of everything bad about it, is to obey the voice of the people.

The people, in spite of everything bad about it, refuse to obey the voice of Samuel.

Their request has become a demand. A good desire has now become idolatrous demand. An idolatrous demand has led to disobedience. Disobedience is going to lead to disaster after disaster. Oh it will look great in the beginning. The new king will be big and beautiful, manly and majestic. But he does not end well.

So here is what is really up with the people. It may not have been said before, but it is sure on the table now.

They want a king to be like the nations. Check.

They want a king to judge them. Check.

They want a king to fight their battles for them. What? Yes, they are not feeling safe nor secure. They are looking for the safety and security that a king will bring them. Samuel has brought them peace and safety. His sons most certainly won’t. But of course, a king will.

The Lord's Response

(v. 21-22)

God hears the words of Samuel. Samuel is the mediator between God and His people. He speaks to God for the people. He speaks to the people for God. He hears and rehearses the words of God and the people. Faithful, faithful prophet and priest.

God grants them their request. He will appoint for them a king. He will not be from the tribe of Judah. He will be from the tribe of Benjamin. It is not possible for that king to have established the royal dynasty. The prophecy of Jacob on his deathbed pointed to Judah as the royal tribe.

But they are getting more than they bargained for. Hosea 13:9-11 says:

He destroys you, O Israel, for you are against me, against your helper.

Where now is your king, to save you in all your cities? Where are all your rulers— those of whom you said, "Give me a king and princes"?

I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath.

Samuel words to the people are sad. "You are going to get what you want. Now, *go home.*"

And so begins the downward trajectory of the first to establish the upward trajectory of second

Reflect and Respond

God uses an act of disobedience to initiate His plan for deliverance. God will establish the kingship and will bring His own King. Sin, evil, disobedience is all flowing from God's plan. The Old Testament is clearly showing how these acts of disobedience move God's plan forward. All aimed toward the cross. There, wicked people with wicked hands, crucified the Christ. Through their disobedience and Jesus' obedience, the redeeming work was done. Their wicked doing; His redeeming dying; our saving deliverance.

Learn to be patient for God's own agenda and timing. He may well let you have what you want, right now. But there may be a lot of trial and trouble that comes with it.

This ministry cannot have been easy for Samuel. He wants the people to be pleasing to God. He loves God and clearly and courageously speaks what God says. He goes back and forth. He does the work God has given him to do faithfully.

We all desire a king. We do seek to have a king who will fulfill our perceived needs. We all have thrones in our hearts and on our lives. We do serve and obey a king. We will bow to the king whose person and promises and provisions persuade us. Sadly, too often that is Prince Satan or King Self.

You want a king? Desire the True King, King Jesus.

