

Give Us a King

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, please keep your Bibles open at that page, 218 in the Pew Bibles, and 1 Samuel chapter 8, and let's pray.
- God, our Father, you have caused all of Holy Scripture to be written, to make us wise for salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to equip us for every good work. We pray now that you'll fulfill that purpose as we come under your word tonight.
- For Jesus' sake, Amen. Well, my guess is that it's 41 sleeps to go. 41, and that is not till Christmas, not till my holidays, it's a bit less than that, thankfully.
- 41 sleeps, I reckon, till Election Day. November 24th, that's my guess. Who are we going to ask to govern us on November the 24th, or whatever day it turns out to be?
- I'm not trying to be a prophet or the son of a prophet in saying that, I'm just guessing, really. Well, like ancient Israel, we may want to think that our current leader is too old, and that we may want another.
- [1 : 1 1] Verse 5, after all, in this passage today, the people come together to Samuel and say, You are old, your sons do not follow in your ways. Appoint for us a king to govern us like other nations.
- We may think that about the current leader. I'm not sure how old Samuel was. I don't know whether he was 68 or younger or older, for that matter. Or we may decide that we want to place our trust and experience in old hands, as indeed we keep being exhorted to do by the so-called government advertisements.
- Who do we want to rule over us? Is it that the grass is greener on the other side? Does discontent with the current mean that we would prefer a new broom?
- Well, in the story in the Old Testament, in 1 Samuel 8, we come in effect to a transition of government. We come to a bloodless revolution.
- Countless countries change governments. Many change with a lot of bloodshed. Many change political systems with a lot of bloodshed, from monarchies to republics, from communist totalitarian regimes to democracies.
- [2 : 1 9] Sometimes it's through outside intervention. Sometimes it's through internal turmoil. Israel here is, in a sense, in the throes of a revolution. The elders, the leaders of the people have come in effect with an ultimatum to Samuel.
- You're too old. We're not happy with your sons. We want a change of system, not just a change of leader. We want a king. We're not happy to just have a prophet or a judge over us.
- The time's about 1,000 BC, maybe just before 1,000 BC. And to this point, Israel in the land has been led, at least sporadically, by people called judges.
- Not white-wigged affairs that sit in oak-panelled courtrooms, but rather judges who are more or less military leaders, but who do nonetheless exercise a judgment over the people as well.

And the preceding book in the Old Testament is the Book of Judges. It spans perhaps about 400 years nearly of Israel's history. And from time to time, God raised up judges for particular periods to bring them usually deliverance from their enemies around about.

[3 : 23] And if you know the Book of Judges, you'll know that many of them were oddball characters. Most of them were strange or weak, compromised in some way. The worst, perhaps, was the last, Samson, a person who was infatuated with women and boastful and so on, a bit of an odd character in the end, a sort of suicide terrorist at the end of his life.

Jephthah, a peculiar sort of character, made a strange vow and ended up killing his daughter because of the vow. Gideon, who's fairly gutless in a way, and so on.

Now, maybe the best of all those judges is actually the one who's not in that book, but is in this book, Samuel. Samuel is, it seems in a sense, the last of the line of judges. It's not a dynastic line.

It's not one judge to the son to the son. But Samuel seems to bring together all sorts of aspects of leadership in his role over ancient Israel. And in 1 Samuel 1 to 7, the chapters preceding this, by and large, he's a godly person.

He's a miracle birth, in effect, for his mother, Hannah. He's entrusted to God with a Nazarite vow. He grows up knowing God and loving God, despite the absence, in effect, of godly leadership in the nation at that time.

[4 : 40] But like Eli the priest, to whom Samuel was entrusted as a young boy, whose own sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were pretty rebellious and apostate, Samuel's own sons, in his later life, are also, in the end, no good, it seems, from verse 5.

They don't follow in your ways, verse 5 tells us. The chapter opens, when Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel.

That sort of dynastic moving on to the next generation is something new, in effect. And perhaps the people didn't like that either. The name of his firstborn son was Joel.

The name of his second, Abijah, they were judges in Beersheba, which is way down south, at the very southern extremity, in fact, of the Promised Land, into the desert, in towards the Sinai Peninsula.

His sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice. Well, they're loaded terms.

[5 : 49] They're clear in what they mean, of course. They're bad eggs. They're out to fleece the people. They're out to receive ill-gotten gain, through probably means of corruption. They're out to become wealthy for themselves.

The actual terms of perverting justice and taking bribes are explicitly used, or prohibited, I should say, for the judges of Israel. If you go back to Deuteronomy 16, where rules about judges are given, explicitly these things are prohibited.

And in Deuteronomy 10, and other places, God himself is one who does not take bribes. God is impartial, and God does not pervert justice. So the language that's used here is both clear and strong.

The sons of Samuel are bad eggs, and they are thoroughly not following the character of God at all. Samuel, in effect, has, it seems, fallen for nepotism, in a way, jobs for the boys, something that so many leaders end up doing in our world's history.

The elders then make the demand. They come together, and they say, your sons do not follow in your ways. Appoint for us then a king to govern us like the other nations. Now, on the whole, the elders don't come out all that well in this chapter.

[7 : 03] And though here they're objecting to corruption, is it that they're objecting on principle? Or is it perhaps that they're not benefiting from the corruption? Maybe they don't like this threat of dynastic entrusting of the judgeship to Samuel's sons, and beyond that, presumably, to other sons and grandsons, and so on.

Maybe they feel left out. Their request is a bit like an ultimatum, but it's not simply that they want a correction of abuse. They don't say to Samuel, correct your sons.

They don't say, get rid of your sons. They shouldn't be judges. They're doing the bad thing. That is, what they actually ask for is a complete change of system, but itself, the way they ask for it, and what they ask for, is itself compromised.

They are not exactly sort of taking the moral high ground all the way in what they demand. It may be that it's a reasonable request to ask for a king.

After all, back in Genesis, the promise to Abram in Genesis 17 included kings that would follow in the line of Abram. There are laws about kings in Deuteronomy 17. So in itself, it's not necessarily a bad thing to request a king.

[8 : 16] But in their request, in a sense almost unnoticed, they let slip, in fact, their faithless, hidden agenda. We want a king, they say, in verse 5, like other nations.

Like other nations. But Israel is not like other nations. Israel is different from other nations. Israel is the chosen people of God, unlike the other nations.

Israel has received God's love set upon it, unlike the other nations. Israel is to be a holy people set aside by God, unlike the other nations.

Israel has been redeemed by God from Exodus, from slavery in Egypt, unlike the other nations. It's been bought with a price by God, unlike the other nations.

It's God's treasured possession, unlike the other nations. Israel is to be a light to the world, a magnet that draws the other nations to God, unlike the other nations.

[9 : 20] Israel is to be ruled by God, by God's word, and therefore demonstrate a striking righteousness in their behavior, unlike the other nations. But they want a king like the other nations.

All of God's grand plan and purpose for the salvation of the world through Israel is imperiled by this demand, like the nations.

You see, God chose Israel to be different from the nations so that the other nations would become like Israel, and therefore like God. But Israel's request for a king shows we don't want to be different from the nations.

We want to be like the nations. Rather than being different from the nations so that the nations become like us and like God, we want to become like the nations. And in effect, they're forfeiting their privileges and they're imperiling God's promises and purposes for history.

See, if you follow through the significance of what they're saying, they're saying, in effect, it's the king whom we're going to trust. We want a king who will rule over us.

[10 : 35] We want a king like the other nations in whom we'll find security and significance and safety and strength and purpose. It's the king that we need.

The very thing, in fact, that will make them like the nations is what they're wanting. And they're rejecting the fact that God is the king. Imagine if they rewrote their psalms.

The king will be our strength and refuge. Where does our help come from? Our help comes from the king. Oh God, our hope, yes, in ages past, but it's the king who's our hope for years to come.

The issue, you see, is actually not simply having a king. It's not so much a system issue. It's what type of king, what sort of king, and the king that they want is a king like the nations.

Not a king under God, but a king like the pagan nations kings are. And their rejection, therefore, is not so much of Samuel's leadership.

[11 : 36] It may be a rejection of Samuel's son's leadership, but ultimately it's a rejection of God. The response to this demand in verses 6 and 7, the thing displeased Samuel when they said, give us a king to govern us.

Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they've not rejected you, but they've rejected me from being king over them.

And a rejection of God is actually idolatry. Verse 8, 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're doing to you.

That is their request for a king, which is a rejection of God, is actually a statement of idolatry. That is, we're placing a king, a human king, like the nations, first and foremost.

He's the one we need, not God. That's old sins, idolatry, with a new twist. Our idolatry will be expressed by wanting a king like the nations, placing their trust in something other than God.

[12 : 48] It's not the institution that's the problem. It's not monarchy per se that's the problem. It's their trust in a king rather than trusting in God that's the problem.

Well, the idolatry of virtually deifying human leaders is not something confined to extremes, really. I mean, there are the extremes. I mean, this is an idolatry in a sense, and we see it in ancient civilizations, some of them, where the king is regarded as a semi-divine, a god to be worshipped.

But you see it in England in Stuart times in the 17th century where the Stuart kings claimed the divine right of kings as though somehow they were almost like gods. Not quite. They would have refrained from people worshipping them, but they're heading towards that sort of path.

We see it a little bit in the sort of pop deification of people like Diana, Princess of Wales, that is. We see it in countries where King Jong-il or Stalin or Idi Amin or Gandhi even, to pick somebody who's perhaps a better sort of character, almost lifted up in godlike ways and revered by people.

Idolatry occurs whenever we trust a king, a ruler, a government, or even a system of government over and above almighty God himself. So on November the 24th, if that's polling day, vote, if you're 18 or over.

[14 : 15] Vote wisely. Vote generously. Vote thoughtfully. Not foolishly nor faithlessly. And don't vote idolatrously.

Don't think that our prosperity ultimately depends on who is treasurer. Don't think that our national security ultimately depends on who is the foreign minister. Don't think our stability depends on who is the prime minister.

Samuel is charged to warn the people what a king will be like. It's told in verse 9, 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.

And what follows is his description of that. It's not a prophecy particularly about what a particular king will be like. It's more a description of reality what the kings of the ancient Near Eastern times were like.

It's a pretty grim picture. Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who are asking him for a king and he said, These will be the ways of the king who will rule over you.

[15 : 24] And we could summarize this with one word. A word that occurs many times in the verses that follow. The first verb. Take. He will take.

He'll take your sons. He'll take your daughters. He'll take the best and the tithes of your crops and he'll take the best and the tithes of your animals. He'll take your slaves.

Take, take, take. That's what a king will be like. That's what kings were like in the ancient Near Eastern world. That's what so many rulers of our world today are like. They'll take, take, take.

He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots and he'll 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.

Take, take, take all your sons to be employed as basically soldiers on national conscription or as public servants and their job is to plow his ground to reap his harvest to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

[16 : 29] They're all in the service of the king, the human king. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. Again, it's a sort of extended public service for the glorification, if not the deification, of the king.

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. That is, to keep his government officials happy. He'll just take them from you.

He'll take your best. He doesn't want the worst. He'll take the best that you've got. He will take a tenth of your grain and your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. And yes, we might argue, well, that's a fair tax to pay for public service in a bureaucracy that's needed.

It's probably not insignificant that it's taking a tithe, a tenth. Is there a hint here of the king setting himself up in the place where God alone should be? He will take.

He will take your male and female slaves. He'll take the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. He'll take a tenth of your flocks. And the result, you shall be slaves, his slaves.

[17 : 41] And in that day you'll cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves. But the Lord will not answer you in that day. It's an amazing irony, really, here.

Ever since the day that Israel came out of Egypt, according to verse 8, they've committed idolatry. Now their expression of idolatry in the way they want a king, like the nations, will lead them exactly back where they came.

Slavery, just like they had in Egypt, maybe not explicitly to Egypt, but the result at the end of verse 17, you will be slaves and you will cry out. That's exactly the picture you get at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

When Israel is enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt, they are his slaves and they cry out. Then, in Exodus 2 and following, God answered.

Here, God will not answer. They'll be in a worse situation than they were before their liberation from Egypt. You see, idolatry unravels and goes exactly the opposite direction from the salvation and redemption that God brings his people.

[18 : 59] And the irony, I suppose, is added because the one who will orchestrate this will actually be an Israelite king, not a conquering pagan king. Israel in the land was to have been prosperous, egalitarian, joyful.

This is a picture of the opposite. It's oppressive, it's corrupt. It's a picture of what kings were typically like. Sadly, it's all too common even in our world today where kings and regimes feast in sumptuous banquets while their people grovel in poverty.

Some Old Testament history bears this out. It's not a picture of a particular king, but we think of times like Ahab who takes Naboth's vineyard and takes his life as well at the end of One Kings.

We think of David who takes Bathsheba in an adulterous relationship. We think of Solomon who took from his own people even, forced labor to build his palaces.

And still today, what we see in Burma, Zimbabwe and so many other countries as well. If you reject God's rule as Israel was requesting to do, then the result will be evil and dismay, oppression and disaster.

[20 : 23] What makes this picture even worse is that these people are God's liberated people and what makes it even worse again is how stiff-necked they are.

It's interesting how quickly sin calcifies in us and hardens within us. It's intriguing how slow we are to heed the warnings about sin.

You see, the fool thinks that their own way is right. It's the wise who listen to advice. sin makes us fools. Sin darkens our minds.

And so here when Samuel issues the warning, how do the people respond? Are they responding, oh yes, we realize we've got it wrong. Oh Samuel, please be our king.

Make sure that your sons are righteous judges. No, not at all. Verse 19, the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel. They refused to listen to the bleak picture of a king who will take, take, take.

[21 : 31] They think somehow he's got it wrong or somehow that it'll be okay. It won't quite be as bad as what is painted. They said to him, no, but we are determined to have a king over us 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.

Exactly the things that God promises to do in the Old Testament, oh, we're not all that happy with God. Let's have a king who's going to do it. He'll go out and fight our battles. This is a very explicit rejection of God in these words.

And they're so determined. They're so blind to the reality. Their minds and eyes and hearts have been covered over by their sin.

Are we much different? You see, their great desire expressed in verse 20 is so that we also may be like other nations.

We don't like to be different. We like to blend in. It's only the sort of extreme extrovert who on good days likes to be different. But most of us don't like to be very different.

[22 : 41] Few of us like to stand out in a crowd, really. We don't like to be thought of as being somehow odd or strange. We don't like as Christians to look prudish or wowserish. We don't like to be thought of as being a bit fundamentalist.

How much easier it is to blend in blandly into our blind world. How much our hearts want to actually lead us into an aversion of holiness because our world is not holy and we don't really want to stand out in the ways God wants us to stand out.

We don't really want to be different. Let's be like the nations. Let's be greedy. After all, it's nice to be greedy. Let's be self-seeking.

Let's be racist. Let's be vulgar. Let's be faithless. And sometimes sadly, appallingly, Christians sometimes justify unholy behavior as being somehow interacting or engaging with the world at the world's terms.

The trouble is that when we're no different, all we offer is emptiness like the nations. Could be a slogan really for liberal Christianity. Like the nations.

[23 : 53] So the end result then to a people who are determined not to listen to the warning. What's happening? God says, I'm not going to give you a king.

You can't have him. Samuel will remain your judge. Full stop. No, in fact. Verses 21 and 22 at the end of this chapter are really astonishing.

When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he reported them in the ears of the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, listen to their voice and set a king over them.

Listen to their voice and set a king over them when they're wanting to commit idolatry, when they're wanting to reject God, when they're wanting to become like the nations and not holy and different from the nations.

Why does God say, set a king over them? Why does God accede to their request when it's so blatantly and downrightly wrong? Well, just because God answers a prayer in a certain way doesn't prove that that is a good thing.

[24 : 59] Praying can be a dangerous thing. We can pray sometimes with wrong motives or for wrong things and get what we ask for and think we're justified in it, but it may not be right as here.

See, ancient Israel, in a year or so after this or a few months or whatever it would be, could look back and say, well, we asked for a king, Samuel talked to the Lord, we've got a king, a king must be right, must be right to be like the nations.

It's wrong, in fact. God's providence is sometimes quite mysterious. we need to take heed. You see, persistent sin, deliberate sin, determined sin, as Israel was expressing here, is sometimes rewarded by its desires being granted.

And God's judgment and punishment is actually in the giving of what is asked. It's a horrifying thought in a way, way.

But it happens in scripture many times. When we're so determined to sin, God does not always stop us in our tracks.

[26 : 14] He does not always block what we ask. Sometimes, as part of his judgment, he gives us what we wrongly ask for and lets us career down the paths of our idolatry.

As we'll see in the weeks that follow, God gives them what they want, a king like the nations. Saul, the first king. It's a disaster. But out of the ashes of that disaster, he gives them a different king.

Not a king like the nations, though he's a fallible person, but a king after God's own heart. He teaches them a lesson. He gives them what they want. Firstly, it brings disaster.

But then he gives them a king after his own heart to teach them a lesson. King David. It's the type of king that matters.

And David is, in biblical terms, a type of an even greater king, a perfect king. The son of David, King Jesus, the king, who doesn't take other than taking our sins on the cross.

[27 : 32] The king who gives even his own life for us. This chapter is not primarily political. It's theological.

It's spiritual. And it forces us to ask the question of ourselves. Who rules me? me? Who rules me?

God or not? Who rules you? Thank you.