

## A KING LIKE THE NATIONS

1 Samuel 8:1-22

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, March 22, 2009

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Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah 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 (1 Sam. 8:5).

**S**amuel was one of the great leaders of the Bible, who "judged Israel all the days of his life" (Judg. 8:1). He played a historically pivotal role in the nation's transition from a tribal confederation to a monarchy. The years after his great victory over the Philistines saw a return to peace, prosperity, and national vigor. But there was one problem with Samuel. Being a man, he was mortal. Chapter 8 begins with this troubling reality: "Samuel became old" (1 Sam. 8:1).

The period of history covered by the books of Judges and Samuel were dominated by leadership crises. Judges laments, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Jud. 17:6; 21:25). God raised up judges to lead, and the people tried to make at least one of them king. Gideon rejected this offer, reminding them of the privilege of having the Lord as their king: "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you" (Jud. 8:23). But the kingship of the invisible God strained the peoples' faith, so through Samuel God provided a human kingship, by which ultimately he established his sovereign rule over his people.

Churches today often suffer from leadership crises, especially during pastoral transitions. Like the Israelites of old, Christians must learn

that God has appointed the means for governing his people and God provides the leaders to do his will in the church.

## GIVE US A KING!

One solution to the problem of leadership is hereditary rule, whereby children follow their father into office. Samuel did this: “When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba” (1 Sam. 8:1-2). The names that Samuel gave his sons suggest high expectations: Joel means “Yahweh is God,” and Abijah means “Yahweh is our Father.” We can easily understand why Samuel would want his sons to shoulder the difficult load of leading God’s people. Likewise, many prominent ministries and churches engage in hereditary rule, with sons stepping directly into their father’s shoes.

The problem is that the sons of great leaders are seldom great leaders themselves. Moreover, it is God who provides leaders for his people, and the practice of nepotism runs contrary to the idea of God’s special calling in his church. Four of Israel’s judges were succeeded by their sons (Gideon, Jair, Eli, and Samuel), and it is no surprise that the result was negative in three of these cases. The Bible says that Christ provides leaders by his gracious distribution of spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:7-12), and that godly character, not bloodline, qualifies men to lead the church (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:7-9). By this standard, Samuel’s sons fell short: “his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice” (1 Sam. 8:3).

It was with these leadership concerns on their minds that the elders of Israel came to Samuel. Given the earlier debacle with Eli’s wicked sons, we can understand their anxiety: “Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways” (1 Sam. 8:5). If we remember the lessons taught earlier in First Samuel, we know that the elders should now await a word from the Lord by his prophet. But, as so often happened in those days (and in our own), the elders did not come to listen to the prophet but to dictate this idea to Samuel.

Earlier, Israel’s leaders had concocted the idea of bringing the Ark of the Covenant up to the battlefield, sure that God’s holy box would give them a fighting edge (1 Sam. 4:4). On that occasion, God was

angered and gave them into their enemies' hands. Once again, the Israelites have their own idea about what needs to happen: "Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5). Their reasoning is easy to follow: the system of periodic judges wasn't working and now Samuel was nearing his death; the constant military threat from the Philistines and Ammonites argued for consistent executive control (see 1 Sam. 12:12). Finally, since his sons had disqualified themselves and since a leadership vacuum could jeopardize the nation, Samuel should provide the kind of ruler that other nations enjoyed: "appoint for us a king." John Woodhouse explains that a king "offered a strong, stable, and predictable center of political authority for a nation that otherwise had to depend on an unseen God to unite them. Furthermore, the kingship held out the promise of efficient central organization to a nation that, lacking such structures, tended to lurch from one crisis to the next."<sup>1</sup>

The elders reasoned that the solutions proven in worldly institutions would work just as well for a divine institution like Israel. The same logic is displayed today when the church is urged to imitate the practices that make corporations so effective and efficient. How often is it said today that by copying worldly approaches to recruitment, marketing, and product delivery, the church can expand God's market share in the world! The reasoning of Israel's elders continues to be heard among God's people: "Give us a king... like all the nations."

How should we understand the elders' demand? Bill Arnold describes it as sinful in its motives, since their request represented a rebellion against God's rule, selfish in its timing, since they demanded God's provision at the time of their own choosing, and cowardly in its spirit, since they sought a system that would remove the need for their faith in the Lord.<sup>2</sup> The alternative to their demand was a true seeking after God, including their willingness to walk in his ways. But, as before, it was too much easier to seek a new gimmick, a new device, rather than the repentance need to be restored to the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 145.

<sup>2</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 153-154.

## SAMUEL'S PRAYER AND GOD'S ANSWER

Samuel, having learned from his years of experience, did what the elders should have done: he turned to the Lord in prayer. “The thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to judge us,’” but instead of acting in anger, “Samuel prayed to the LORD” (1 Sam. 8:6). He provides an example of wisdom, reminding us to respond to every challenge or need by first turning to God in prayer.

The Lord's answer was somewhat surprising, especially since he did not seem as indignant as his prophet. God had three replies for Samuel. First, he ministered to his servant by assuring him that the fault did not lie with him. Samuel had not failed Israel and the people were not rejecting him: “they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Sam. 8:7). In fact, this was merely the latest in a long history of Israel rejecting God's rule: “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” (1 Sam. 8:8). From the moment Israel stepped free from the bondage of Egypt, the Lord had been their king. Unbelief and rebellion were recurrent problems, so Samuel should not think himself the cause. These words should console every pastor, teacher, or parent whose charges refuse to follow in the way of the Lord: so long as we have been faithful to teach and lead, the failure is not ours and we share our sense of rejection with the Lord.

With this in mind, God knew how to answer the elders: by agreeing to their request. God frequently responds this way to rebellion among his people: demanding a substitute for God, the Lord will allow them to experience worldly and unbelieving rule. This is not because God was thwarted by the elders' obstinacy or that God found himself at his wits end. Rather, God intended a humbling lesson that might result in future repentance and restoration.

This reminds us that we should not always be encouraged when God seems to answer our prayers. Here, God's relenting was a sign not of his blessing but his chastisement. The more we realize how sinful are our hearts and how frequently our thoughts and desires run awry, the

more we will humbly desire God to overrule in our prayers so that his wisdom will overcome our folly, and his holiness will correct our sin.

## THE WAYS OF KINGS

God's third response was to command Samuel: "Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them" (1 Sam. 8:9). This was remarkably patient of God to provide his obstinate people with a detailed warning of what they were demanding. Accordingly, "Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him" (1 Sam. 8:10).

What follows is an extraordinary accurate depiction of the ordinary results of human lordship. Samuel describes not just human kingship at its most depraved but in its very nature, featuring two verbs: take and serve. The king will take, and they will serve:

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. 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. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. 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. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves" (1 Sam. 8:11-17).

The word "take" occurs four times. A king will "take your sons" to serve in his armies and die in his battles. If not that, the king will take their sons as virtual serfs "to plow his ground and reap his harvest" or to wearily work in his factories. But that is not all, for a king will "take your daughters" as well. Do not think that your daughters will be able to stay at home tending to the family. They will be needed for government work as "perfumers and cooks and bakers." Then the king "will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards," so that he can reward his most successful servants. There will be an extra tithe of all produce so that high ranking officials can live in proper luxury. Finally, a king will

take your servants so that they work no longer in your fields or in your house, but in his fields and at his work. In short, whenever a people appeal to a human leader to save them from all their problems the inevitable result is that they are reduced to Israel's former status in Egypt: "you shall be his slaves" (1 Sam. 8:17).

This was Samuel's message then, and it is true today as well. If they did not want divine rule, but the kind of leaders who rule "all the nations," then Israel would experience the usual lot of mankind: slavery to oppressive masters. Likewise today, those who want national government to provide for all their needs must be ready to sign away their rights as free people. If the government is to solve all our problems, then the government must be obeyed in all things and all that we have must be given to it. And however much a king may accomplish for the nation, it is certain that he will take more than he gives. He will take and you will serve: such is the despotism whenever sinful men are set in the place of God over our lives.

This is even more true when it comes to our yielding to sin, the great slave master of our world. Jesus said, "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (Jn. 8:34). We think we will dabble in sin while retaining control over our passions, but it is not true. Sin takes and we serve, until finally sin destroys us in the holy judgment of God.

Undoubtedly, Israel wanted to have their cake and eat it too. They were willing to observe God's religion only if they had a secular government; they wanted a faith of private piety, not one of public reliance. Likewise, the trappings of religion are permitted by secular governments today, enlisting God's endorsement of man's sovereign rule, so long as God agrees not to have any say in our affairs. But God does not accommodate such a scheme. He told the Israelite elders that if they wanted a human king, they would have to rely on him without help from the Lord: "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." (1 Sam. 8:18).

This scenario played out within two generations, as Israel experienced the very oppression Samuel had predicted under King David's son and successor, King Solomon. Solomon spent seven years building the Lord's temple (1 Ki. 6:38), but he took thirteen years building an even more spectacular palace for himself (1 Ki.

7:1). To accomplish this, Solomon pressed much of Israel into forced labor (1 Ki. 5:13-18). Solomon took and they served, and when Solomon died the elders appealed to his son, Rehoboam, for leniency. They pled, “Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service... and we will serve you” (1 Ki. 12:4). Rehoboam responded as any king would, refusing to begin his reign with a sign of weakness. He boasted, “My little finger is thicker than my father’s thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke” (1 Ki. 12:10-11). In this way, God gave his people over to the misery of their own unbelieving folly, and their cries for relief went unanswered. “No!” they had insisted, as they rejected Samuel’s warning. “There shall be a king over us, 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” (1 Sam. 8:19-20). The Lord relented, sealing on them his judgment: “Obey their voice and make them a king.” So Samuel dismissed the elders, saying, “Go every man to his city” (1 Sam. 8:22).

## TWO INTER-RELATED PRINCIPLES

**T**his episode reveals two related aspects of faith in the Lord and, correspondingly, two related forces that act against our faith.

The first aspect of our faith is our calling to be exclusively devoted to the Lord. Moses commanded, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Dt. 6:5). Jesus referred to this as “the great and first commandment” (Mt. 22:37-38). At the heart of the covenant relationship was this obligation of mutual devotion: God has shown his love to you, now love and honor him in all things. Thus the demand for a king was an affront to the very heart of their covenant relationship with God.

The second great obligation of the old covenant was Israel’s calling to holiness: “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Dt. 14:2). This meant that they were to be different from the nations in practically every way: their way of thinking, their patterns of behavior, their goals, and their methods were to be godly and not worldly. By

demanding a king “like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5), the Israelite elders rejected God’s call for them to be holy and set apart from the unbelieving world.

Both of these principles are fully valid for Christians today. The insight we should take from the elders’ rejection of exclusive devotion to the Lord and of holiness before the world is that these two principles either stand or fall together. It is not by chance that in rejecting the Lord, the Israelite elders were demanding to be like the nations, or that by longing to conform with the world they ended up repudiating the true God. There is a synergy between the vertical dimension of our faith – our devotion to and delight in the Lord – and the horizontal dimension – our separation from worldliness and sin. What is it, after all, that emboldens Christians to stand firm in the ways of the Lord, accepting the difficulty of always being opposed by the prevailing winds of the world? The answer is that our calling to holiness can only be empowered by our awe for God’s glory and our gratitude for God’s saving grace. This is why Paul says that it is “the grace of God” that teaches us “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:11-13). It is the wonder of grace and the glory of God that seals our hearts for holy living.

We might say the same thing backwards: by separating our hearts from the pleasures and treasures of a sin-stained world, by keeping our minds free from the lies of false religion and vain philosophy, we strengthen ourselves for faithfulness to the Lord. Faithfulness to God and holiness before the world are inseparable and mutually supportive. But in reverse they are equally supportive in spiritual failure. Israel forgot the Lord and thus pursued the false gods of the world. Idolatry then drew their hearts further from God and corrupted their spiritual appetite through pagan ways. In this way, God’s holy people became an unbelieving nation, demanding a king “like all the nations” in the place of God.

While these two principles are mutually related, we must always give priority to the vertical dimension. The spiritual decline that led to God’s rejection began decades earlier when “there arose another



generation... who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel” (Jud. 2:10). This reminds us that there is no higher or more urgent calling in the church than for preaching that is about God and not man, that focuses on God’s great saving deeds in history, culminating in Jesus Christ, and not the issues and problems reported in newspapers and magazines. What is true for church is true for individuals: those who do not know the Lord or his saving work will inevitably fall into the ways and worship of the world. Thus “churches that lose their focus on God inevitably become worldly in their practice, which leads them further from God until there is hardly anything distinctly Christian left. But those who make the knowledge and glory of God their prime focus are pulled back from the world with its methods and its idols and are thus drawn close in reliance on and fellowship with the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

## BIBLICAL STANDARDS FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Despite Samuel’s negative opinion and God’s own condemnation of the elders’ motives, it was not strictly contrary to God’s Word for Israel to have a human king. The sinfulness of the elders’ attitude is obvious, yet their idea for a king may well have come from God’s Word. For instance, God had told Abraham, “I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you” (Gen. 17:6). Moreover, Moses’ final directions included God’s instructions for future kings in Israel. We know that God saw the elders’ demand as a rejection of himself and a plea for worldliness (vv. 7-8), yet earlier he had anticipated this very event: “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” (Dt. 17:14-15). This allowance was designed to promote godliness, not worldliness in Israel’s kings. These principles are valid and vital today for establishing godly leadership in the church.

First, leaders over God’s people must be chosen and called by him: “you may indeed set over you whom the Lord your God will choose” (Dt. 17:15). In that time, God revealed his choice through special

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<sup>3</sup> Richard D. Phillips, *Turning Back the Darkness: The Biblical Pattern of Reformation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 47.

revelation by a prophet, as would happen when Samuel later anoints first Saul and then David as Israel's king. When the apostles sought to replace Judas with a new apostle, God revealed his choice through the casting of lots (Acts 2:). Today, God brings forth his leaders by having qualified men approved by the elders and their calling recognized as the church gives its assent. Divinely appointed men (the New Testament restricts church office to men only, see 1 Timothy 2:11-12), do not inherit eldership or ordination, they do not apply for the job, and they do not fall into ministry for lack of anything better to do. True spiritual leaders are chosen and equipped by God and their calling is affirmed by the Spirit speaking through the church.

Second, God ordained that Israel's kings must come "from among your brothers." "You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother" (Dt. 17:15). It goes without saying that pastors and elders must be Christians. But by repeating the word "brother", the Lord is making an additional point. Christian leaders must have a fellow-feeling for those under their spiritual authority. They should not be aloof from the trials and hardships of their flocks, so as to have sympathy on those who err or fall.

Third, "He must not acquire many horses for himself... And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold" (1 Sam. 17:16-17). The New Testament teaches that the worldly needs of pastors should be provided for so as to enable them to focus on the spiritual care and feeding of the flock. "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," Paul writes, for "The laborer deserves his wages" (1 Tim. 5:18). "If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?" he asks (1 Cor. 9:11). Yet there should be no trappings of excess or pursuit of worldly luxury, and the increasing practice of celebrity preachers receiving exorbitant sums far above any reasonable need is a scandal to our generation. While ministers should be paid generously, they should always remember that their income arises from the tithes and offerings of God's often-suffering people. Peter therefore emphasizes that church leaders must serve "not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3).

Last, a God-honoring leader will be under the authority of God's Word in all things. This was God's chief provision for godly kingship. He directed that the first thing any man would do upon ascending to the throne was to "write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests" (Dt. 17:18). He was literally to make his own hand-copy of God's Word, acceptable to the priests, which he was then to carry with him everywhere he went. "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" (Dt. 17:19). This, then, is the ultimate standard of Christian leadership: an observable commitment to God's Word that is reflected in careful obedience to all that the Bible teaches and commands. This standard – not a dynamic personality, not political influence, not managerial ability – is the key to all spiritual leadership. A true spiritual leader must be able to say with King David, "I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word" (Ps. 119:16).

#### THE GOVERNMENT ON HIS SHOULDER

God's true plan for reigning over his people involved a man who would reign as king forever. Indeed, the last tasks of Samuel would be to anoint young David and guide him in his struggling first steps. But David was but a forerunner of the true and great king, who would arise from his own line. God promised David: "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom... Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:12, 16). The very heart of the Old Testament is the promise of this saving Shepherd-King, who would fulfill the prophecies by being born both son of David and Son of God. Isaiah sang, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). Micah foretold: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" (Mic. 5:2-3). These prophecies were fulfilled, and our King provided, in the coming of Jesus Christ, who

was born of woman and also “Son of the Most High... the Son of God” (Lk. 1:32, 35).

What a contrast there is between Jesus and the kings described by Samuel! Jesus not a king who takes, but a king who gives. He said, “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 28:20). He gave his own life on the cross, dying in our place, that we might be freed from the guilt of our sin. He is the king “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). And when our King Jesus stood before the powers of this age, with the wounds of their scourges deep in his flesh, he stated clearly to Pontius Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36). Jesus Christ is a king like not “like the nations,” a king who serves the least in his kingdom and gives eternal life to those who love and trust in him. If we will take him for our king – this man who is also God – then we will enter with him into the glorious realm long prepared by his Father, and he will share with us the marvels and blessings of God, treasures that are not of this world but that will endure forever in the Promised Land of the age that is to come.