

Samuel to King David 1 Samuel Ch.8 – Israel wants a King

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New King Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

A few years ago, at work, I went on a training course to learn how to make videos to describe the research we were doing. As part of the course, we watched a short YouTube video about a woman who was considered an “influencer.” She made daily videos and put these on her YouTube channel. She’d managed to build up a huge following and as a result made a lot of money through advertising. She’d done so well that she had made enough money to buy a large house and plenty of other things as well. As I was sat on this course, I couldn’t help but wonder whether I was in the wrong job. Certainly, my research video has not made any money for me so far!

At the time, I thought this whole concept was daft. In this particular video, the woman we were watching was just walking along, filming herself on her mobile phone, and as far as I could tell, was just saying whatever came into her head during the walk. There was nothing especially profound about anything she was saying. She wasn’t even saying it in a uniquely engaging way. I couldn’t understand the appeal she had. And yet, clearly a lot of people did. In the years since that training course, social media influencers have become much more of a thing in Western society. Lots of people make very good livings by essentially advertising products of various types. Companies will pay good money to have popular influencers wear their clothes, or eat their food, or use their gadgets, and post pictures on YouTube or Instagram. They do it because, evidently, lots of people want to see it and will go out and buy whatever product is being promoted, so that they can be like the “influencers” they look up to on social media.

Most people don’t want to stand out in a crowd. They want to fit in and, at least to some degree, be like everyone else around them. This is definitely not just a social media trend. It’s a tendency that’s been around for thousands of years. We come across an example of it in our studies in 1 Samuel chapter 8 today, where the people of Israel wanted to be just like “all the nations” around them and have a king. As we go through the chapter, we’ll see that this was a bad choice on Israel’s part. It’s not always good to be just like everyone else. God had a warning for the people of Israel in Samuel’s day. They were wrong in wanting to be just like the nations around them. God has a similar warning for us today. Paul says in Romans 12, verse 2:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

Today, we’ll go through 1 Samuel chapter 8 in four sections, and we’ll explore together their desire for a king; and we’ll think about what was wrong with their request. All the way through let’s keep in mind the instruction we’ve just read from Romans 12 – “Do not be conformed to this world.”

Let's start off by reading the first 5 verses of 1 Samuel chapter 8, where we'll see the immediate problem in Israel that led to this request for a king.

"Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. But his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice. Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.""

Samuel had been a faithful leader of the people of Israel for many years. At the end of the book of Judges, things had deteriorated in Israel. At least four times we come across the statement that, "There was no king in Israel" (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25), with two occasions adding that, "Everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 21:25). As you read the last chapters of Judges, you'll see from the number of wicked and evil events recorded in them that this didn't work out well for Israel.

But as we move into 1 Samuel and are introduced to Samuel the prophet, things became better for the nation, at least in some ways. Samuel's life was characterised by personal integrity and faithfulness in following the LORD. When the time came to appoint a king, Samuel summed up his life's ministry by saying that the people could find no fault in his leadership. Consider these words in 1 Samuel 12:2-5,

"I have walked before you from my childhood to this day. Here I am. Witness against me before the LORD and before His anointed: Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken, or whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed, or from whose hand have I received any bribe with which to blind my eyes? I will restore it to you." And they said, "You have not cheated us or oppressed us, nor have you taken anything from any man's hand." Then he said to them, "The LORD is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand." And they answered, "He is witness.""

So Samuel had faithfully served God. But the verses we read at the start of 1 Samuel 8 show us that a problem had arisen at the end of Samuel's life. When Samuel was old he made his sons judges over Israel. And this had backfired. Joel and Abijah did not follow their father's godly ways. They chose to pursue dishonest gain. They took bribes. As judges, they actually perverted justice.

This sounds very similar to something we've already come across in our studies in 1 Samuel. Do you remember Eli, the priest, who brought up Samuel. In 1 Samuel chapter 2, we saw that Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, were wicked men. Instead of serving in the tabernacle of meeting, they engaged in all sorts of immorality. Whilst Eli himself was not so bad, he didn't seem to be able to control his wicked sons, or take from them their positions of influence. Had something similar happened in Samuel's case? Perhaps he was so busily engaged in the Lord's service, travelling throughout the land, that he had neglected disciplining his sons. No doubt there's some truth in that. But I notice a difference in the description of Joel and Abijah, compared to that of Hophni and Phineas. Eli's sons are plainly described as wicked men. In 1 Samuel 8, it's clear that Samuel's sons had failed to judge the nation, but it rather suggests that their heads and hearts had been corrupted once they were appointed judges. They "turned aside", verse 3. I don't know for certain, but I wonder if this suggests that they perhaps seemed like fine upstanding candidates to follow on from Samuel. But once in a position of influence, they were swayed by the bribes and the power went to their heads and they turned away from the path of their father. They certainly wouldn't be

the last to be corrupted by positions of authority. Maybe their elevated position revealed sinful tendencies that previously hadn't had such visible exposure.

The behaviour of Samuel's sons led the people to come to Samuel and ask for a king to judge them. This is an interesting request, and we should pause and think about it. We'll see in our next section that Samuel was displeased with their request. And I've already made clear that I think there was something problematic in the desire for a king. But what exactly was wrong with it?

The people of Israel had had rulers for many years. Although they are not called kings, Moses and Joshua certainly ruled over the people in a way that is not completely un-king-like. Similarly, although the book of Judges describes the spiritual decline amongst God's people, there were judges whom God raised up to lead the people. They had authority, which was not exactly kingly, but wasn't so different.

In fact, in Deuteronomy 17, verses 14 to 20, rules are given to Moses that would govern the behaviour of kings once they were in the promised land. So God clearly envisioned, even in those early days that there would be kings in the future. The period from Moses to Samuel was different to the period from Saul onwards, but it wasn't so different. So what exactly was the problem? The problem was that they wanted a king like all the other nations. That is they wanted their ruler to rule just like all the kings around them. They saw the powerful rulers of nearby nations and wanted that kind of governance for themselves.

Most of these neighbouring kings had dynastic kingdoms. Their sons reigned after them. But this wasn't how God had operated until then. He had provided leaders for the people of Israel. People like Moses, Joshua, Samson, Gideon and Samuel. He provided those people at just the right time, and with just the right abilities to lead the people. Those leaders were directly under God's authority. 1 Samuel 12:12 says that in those days "the LORD God was your king." God ruled, and those leaders were subject to Him. They led Israel only in accordance to His directions. When they died, their children didn't automatically inherit their leadership, but God raised up others suitable for the time. Interestingly, in Judges 8:22-23, Gideon specifically rejects the invitation to set up a form of rule that would allow his sons and grandsons to rule after him, because that wasn't God's way at that time.

It's a little surprising that when Samuel moves away from this pattern and set his sons up as judges, and it didn't work out, that the people want to have a king like everyone else. Was a hereditary family of kings any better than what they had under Samuel? In any case, they wanted a king like all the nations. Let's read verses 6-9 of 1 Samuel 8 to continue the story.

"But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." So Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day—with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also. Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behaviour of the king who will reign over them.""

Samuel was displeased at their request for a king. He knew it was a departure from the dependence on God that they should have had as a nation. But Samuel does a good thing and prays to the LORD. There's a good example for us. When we're discouraged, let's pray to the Lord. He is able to encourage us!

The LORD encourages Samuel by telling him that the people have not rejected him personally. Rather they were rejecting God's rule over them. They wanted to be like all the other nations. Perhaps they wanted to limit the religious aspects of life in Israel, observance of the law, etc. They wanted more freedom to do as they pleased, just like the kings of the nations around them.

We shouldn't leave this section without noticing the very serious charge that God brings against the people of Israel. "They have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them." It's a serious thing to reject God. In 1 Samuel 8, the focus is at a national level. The nation had rejected God and didn't want His influence on their daily lives and their national politics.

It's dangerous for us to reject God as well. It's dangerous in a number of ways. When the Lord Jesus came to this Earth, John writes (John 1:11-12):

"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name."

Most people the Lord Jesus came to rejected Him. They missed out on the opportunity to become children of God. As you read through the Gospel of John, you'll see they missed out on the opportunity to have everlasting life and to enjoy abundant life, thereby avoiding condemnation and the wrath of God because of their sin. Rejecting Jesus is dangerous because it leaves us to face the consequences of our sinfulness – it leaves us facing God's judgment. Jesus came to offer us a way of escape. He died to deal with the problem of our sin. If we receive Him, God will forgive our sin, and give us new life. Don't miss out on that by rejecting Jesus, His Son.

But rejecting God's rule in our daily lives also is dangerous, just like it was for the people of Israel. No matter what human authority is in government, God is the ultimate Ruler of each person. If you're a Christian, let's be challenged by the Lord's words in Luke 6:46, "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" If you're a Christian, are you allowing the instructions of the Bible, the things that God says, to control your behaviour each day. Are you doing what God says?

Let's move on to verses 10 to 18 of 1 Samuel 8, where we see Samuel warn the people of what to expect if they have a king.

"So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who asked him for a king. And he said, "This will be the behaviour of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen, and some will run before his chariots. He will appoint captains over his thousands and captains over his fifties, will set some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and some to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. And he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage, and give it to his officers and servants. And he will take your male servants, your female servants, your finest young men, and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take a tenth of your sheep. And you will be his servants. And you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day."

The warnings of these verses are clear. If the people wanted a king, then he would tax them heavily. He'd take land from them for his own purposes. He'd take their children to work for him.

He'd take some of them to form a national army. That's what all governments do to some extent. They create jobs at various levels of bureaucracy in government departments. They tax the people. They require a lot of the people they govern. The people of Israel would have a lot less individual freedom under a king, than they had currently enjoyed. If they wanted to have a king that was just like the nations around them, rather than a ruler that God raised up, this is what they should expect.

As you read through the books of Kings and Chronicles, you'll see that this is exactly what happened. Solomon essentially taxed the people very heavily to fund his vast building projects. This was a contributing factor to the break-up of the kingdom of Israel into the 10 northern tribes and the southern kingdom of Judah in the days of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. I'm not sure it directly applies, but I'm reminded of Psalm 106:15, "[God] gave them their request but sent leanness into their soul." There were good times under various kings of Israel. But the kings ultimately oversaw the downfall of the nation of Israel. The warning Samuel gives in chapter 8 is a reminder to us to be careful what we wish for.

Let's finish off chapter 8 by reading verses 19-22:

"Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, "No, but we will have 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." And Samuel heard all the words of the people, and he repeated them in the hearing of the LORD. So the LORD said to Samuel, "Heed their voice, and make them a king." And Samuel said to the men of Israel, "Every man go to his city."

Despite Samuel's warning, the people insisted that they still wanted a king. They refused to obey the voice of Samuel and repeated their desire "that we also may be like all the nations." They wanted a king to lead them in battle, as a sort of hero leader figure. And God said to Samuel that he should make them a king. We'll pick up that story in future broadcasts in this series.

And so we've arrived at the end of 1 Samuel 8. It certainly serves an interesting purpose in describing an important event in the history of the nation of Israel. But besides the history lesson, what can we learn from this chapter? I'd like to finish by offering three brief suggestions.

- Don't reject God's rule in your life. God had given the people of Israel instructions on how to live. He'd always provided the right leaders to rule over them at just the right time. But in today's chapter we learnt that they wilfully rejected His reign over them. Let's be careful not to do that as we go about our daily business.
- Be careful who influences you. The people of Israel had decided they didn't want to stand out from all the nations any more. They didn't want to follow God's rule, but they wanted to be like the nations around them. I started off today by speaking about social media influencers. The nations surrounding Israel were a bit like the influencers of their day. And Israel wanted to be just like them. But that was a bad decision, as their subsequent history showed. Today we should be careful who and what influences us. There's nothing especially wrong by being influenced by some social media person to go out and buy some clothes or some gadget. But it is dangerous if we start to think that unless we have whatever the influencers have, we won't be fulfilled, or we don't have any worth, or we can't be happy. Lots of things and people influence us. That's inevitable. But Christians must be very careful not to be squeezed into worldliness by non-Christian influences around us. Remember verse 2 of Romans 12 – "Do not be conformed to this world." Make sure that the thing that influences you most is God's word. Is what you're thinking and doing in line with what God says. If not, you need to think again.

- Remember who the best King is. In 1 Samuel 8 the people want to set up a king over their nation. But they wanted the wrong kind of king. They wanted a king like all the nations around them. And Samuel warned them what such a king would be like. God has plans for His King to rule over Israel in the future. But He won't be a king like any of the nations around Israel, past, present, or future. He won't be like Saul. He'll be better than David and Solomon. He's the King of kings, our Lord Jesus Christ. When He rules, it will be over a worldwide kingdom filled with blessing. Although I believe we will be in Heaven with the Lord, long before that, this reminds me that our Lord Jesus is so much greater than any of the rulers we may have in our various countries today. God's word tells us that we should submit to the rule of these authorities, but we must remember that we really serve God, and He is so much greater than any ruler!

In 1 Samuel 8, the people wanted a king. But the reality was, they already had one, and He was far greater than anyone they would get in the future. He still is!

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on 1 Samuel 8, "Israel wants a king", talk T1295.

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