1 Samuel 8 The People Demand a King October 25, 2026

"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 was Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. [3] Yet his sons did not follow in his ways but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

[4] Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah [5] and said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." [6] But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us."

Well, here we are again. A man has raised sons and set them up to succeed him and they've turned out to be unethical disappointments. Where have we heard that before? Oh yeah, last week. In last week's scripture, Eli the priest had two sons were the reason for Samuel's first prophesy, and here Samuel is with two scoundrels of his own in his old age. Some things just don't change, do they?

And the people call him out on it. They say, "your sons are wicked. We don't want them to lead us." But their solution is even more ridiculous. In their lifetimes, they've seen a priest who was good, but his sons were bad. Then a prophet who is good, but his sons were bad; so let's have a king?!?!? Like their neighboring countries have? A king who, by nature, is more powerful and runs a greater risk of unethical sons and grandsons down the line becoming more of a problem than the sons of a priest and a prophet? What are these people thinking? How can they think that this is a solution?

But they are a fearful people, and I need to explain why, so we have to go back a bit.

The people of Israel have been doing things differently than their neighbors for hundreds and hundreds of years. They started out as a single family – Abraham's family, and then his grandson Israel's family. And they were close-knit. They traveled together and helped each other. It's more complicated than that, obviously, but they

were a cohesive unit. Then they all became slaves in Egypt together. And then they all escaped together. And then they all wandered around in the desert together. They were identified as the twelve tribes of Israel. Different offshoots from one family tree. One family, uniquely in relationship with an invisible, singular God.

But in the desert, they began to imagine what life would be like when they were settled and free, and they decided to live in a unique structure. Each family group, or tribe, would get a parcel of land, and they would live semi-independently as tribal states, not as a single nation. Much like the colonies of this land did many years ago.

You see, there was no one who was the “head” of the whole family anymore. Moses had led them out of Egypt, and Joshua, who was not the son of Moses, had followed after him, but now that they were settling down, they asked for tribal autonomy. They didn’t want to establish any monarchy or put any single family in charge forever. They agreed that God would be their leader. The technical term for it is a theocracy – a government headed by God, rather than a monarchy like Britain or a democracy like New Zealand.

And it worked pretty well. For the most part, they lived without drama. Occasionally, a problem would arise, like a threat from a neighboring country, and the tribe under threat would send messages to the other tribes and they would send help. Sometimes, the threat would require a charismatic leader to rise up among them and rally the people and guide them in their defense, and this person was called a judge.

There’s actually a whole book in the Bible called Judges, which contains the stories of these leaders who would be called upon to meet the latest challenge. There’s Othniel, the first judge, and Shamgar and Deborah – she was both a judge and a prophetess. There’s Gideon, whose story is fascinating, and Samson with the beautiful flowing hair like Fabio, and Abdon, who had 40 sons. Personally, having 40 sons doesn’t sound like something a wise judge would do, but those were different times.

And the amazing thing about the judges is that they were all temporary leaders. A judge would rise up to face the moment, and then, when the problem had subsided,

they would relinquish their power and withdraw back to their home and life prior to the event. They remained popular and respected, of course, but they never expected to reign as a king or queen. In fact, after Gideon's victory, the people begged him to become their king, and he refused, saying, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you."

This was the way of the people of Israel for 400 years or so.

And Samuel was the most recent judge of Israel. He would travel every year in a particular path and make stops at certain towns and hear about people's problems. He was respected and recognized, but by the time he was an older man, something had changed. The people were scared.

Typically, when an external threat would arise against one of the tribes of Israel, nothing else would be particularly dangerous to other tribes and they could all rally together and respond, but at this time in history, there were multiple dangers from multiple directions.

Professor Shaul Bar from the University of Memphis sums it up this way. "The temporary leadership that existed since the period of the judges could not deal effectively with the Philistine threat [from the southwest], or with the Ammonites who oppressed the Israelites [from the northeast]. The increased population and expanded [farming] productivity [in the north] were catalysts in transforming the Israelite social structure. The old system could not respond to the emerging new reality; only a new monarchial system that offered young people new opportunities [and could unite the resources of the whole land] could respond [to the variety of simultaneous threats]."

Or so they thought. The people who had not needed a king for 400 years – through years of famine and years of floods, through the threats of the neighboring armies and internal disputes, and who had witnessed corrupt sons follow in the footsteps of good and wise leaders were suddenly desperate for a king like their neighboring countries.

It was disappointing to Samuel. It revealed that their fear and anxiety was outweighing their faith, and it demonstrated that even practical, reasonable decisions can move people away from faith and trust in God to provide.

And that's a lesson we can take from this. We justify lots of our decisions in the name of practicality, or because we are just overwhelmed, or because that's what everyone around us does. We say that because of this threat, we need to take this risk, change course in this way, break tradition. But we really, really need to examine our own hearts and see if our decisions are based in fear or based in faith.

But Samuel takes the people's request to God. In verse 6, it says, "Samuel prayed to the Lord, **7** and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to 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** 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 are doing to you. **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."

Now, to be honest, this surprises me. It's like God throws their hands up in the air and says, "Fine. Whatever. Give them what they want."

But I don't want God to ever do that. I want God to keep jerking me back from standing too close to the edge. I want God to holler at me and tell me "Stop! I'm smarter than you! Listen to me! You can't play with that dynamite or hold that poisonous snake. It's dangerous. Put it down."

But if anything proves to me that we're made in the image of God, it's moments like this when God sounds more like the parent of a teenager who has to let their child have some freedom to make some bad decisions.

But God does instruct Samuel to warn them about what they're getting into, and he does – with one of the most detailed and accurate warnings in the history of warnings.

It says, starting in verse ten, "**10** So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. **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 [friends] courtiers. **15** He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his [friends] courtiers. **16** He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. **17** He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. **18** And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you on that day."

Do you hear these words? This king you so desperately want will create a standing army. Your children will be drafted to fight or made to support the army. There will be taxes levied to support him and his administration and this army. You'll lose land and livestock and crops. He will have monuments built to himself – adorned in gold. The rich will grow richer as the poor grow poorer. The king will appoint his friends to places of power. A powerful class of elites will rise and they will line their pockets and you will be powerless to stop them from engaging in corruption and bribery and endless war. And when you cry out to God in regret, God will not answer you. Do you hear these words, words that the prophet spoke over three thousand years ago? Do you hear them echoed through the years? Do you?

And they said in verse nineteen and twenty, "**19** But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! We are determined to have a king over us, **20** 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."

But that's just it, friends. Kings don't go out and fight battles. They send the working-class youth to fight the battles. We know that. The youth of the wealthy don't see combat. The children of the blue-collar workers and immigrants are the ones on the front lines. That's just a universal fact about military forces.

And, yes, there are some benevolent, selfless leaders out there in the world, but there are also people who seek to enrich themselves and line their pockets. The people in Samuel's day could see it with their own eyes. The sons of Eli and the sons of Samuel were all cruel, unethical men who used their positions of power for corrupt financial gain.

And yet, and yet, the people were more afraid of the threats they faced in the moment than the consequences of transitioning from a theocracy with temporary, leadership and faith in God to a monarchy.

It really hurt Samuel to hear this, but the chapter ends with these words. "**21** When Samuel heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. **22** The Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to their voice and set a king over them." Samuel then said to the Israelites, "Each of you return home."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Fear of the unknown is a powerful tool. We see it in political ads. We see it in white supremacist language that makes diversity seem dangerous. We see it in churches when new ideas are met with utter vitriol. Fear makes us forget our past experiences. Fear makes us distrust one another. Fear makes us doubt ourselves. Fear can be louder than the voice of God and can turn our prayers into pleas for help from unhelpful sources.

Next week, we meet the first king of Israel. Amen.