

Israel's Demand for a King

1 Samuel 8

¹ 1 Samuel 8 - *"Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel. ² The name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. ³ But his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, 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, "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."*

⁶ *But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." So Samuel prayed to the LORD. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them."*

¹⁰ *So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who asked him for a king. ¹¹ And he said, "This will be the behavior 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. ¹⁴ And he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage, and give it to his officers and servants. ¹⁶ And he will take your male servants, your female servants, your finest young men, and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your sheep. And you will be his servants. ¹⁸ 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."*

¹⁹ *Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, "No, but we will have 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 Samuel heard all the words of the people, and he repeated them in the hearing of the LORD. ²² 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."*

Background Notes

Samuel was a circuit-riding judge in Israel for the rest of his life. From year to year he traveled on a circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and he judged Israel in all those places. Samuel's annual round-trip would have been less than one hundred miles, but there were no modern roads, of course. You can trace his travels on the Bible map. We don't know how long he stayed in each town every year, but he always returned to his home in Ramah. For the rest of each year,

Samuel judged Israel from his hometown of Ramah. 1 Samuel 1 tells us that Ramah was Samuel's birthplace, and when he moved from Shiloh to Ramah he probably settled at the old family homestead.

Samuel built an altar at Ramah (7:17). Samuel was not a priest, but he was a Levite. We learn this from his complete genealogy in 1 Chronicles 6. Although Elkanah, Samuel's father, is called an "Ephraimite" (1:2), the fact that he was a Levite is not a contradiction in the Bible! The Levites didn't have a tribal territory, but were scattered throughout Israel in Levitical cities, and many times the Levites were looked on as part of a tribe in which their cities were located. Thus, Elkanah was a Levite who lived in a town in Ephraim, and Samuel was a Levite who was born in the tribal territory of Ephraim.

Although Samuel was not a priest, he did offer sacrifices on behalf of Israel (7:9). Remember, the priesthood was in sad shape at this point. Eli was dead and God had removed Eli's wicked sons, Hophni and Phinehas.

A number of years had passed between the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8 of 1 Samuel. *"Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel" (8:1)*. Samuel was now elderly, and he had decided to spread out his workload. He had his two sons appointed as judges, and Samuel sent them to Beersheba in the southern part of Israel, while he remained in the north. But Samuel's sons did not follow in their godly father's footsteps. *"But his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice" (v3)*.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers cannot pass on their spirituality.

Eli's spirituality was not passed onto his sons. In 1 Samuel 2 we saw that Eli didn't discipline his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. As a result, Hophni and Phinehas went from bad to worse. *"...the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD..." (2:17)*. And Samuel's spirituality was not passed on to his sons: *"...his sons did not walk in his ways..."* Perhaps Samuel's sons didn't follow in their father's footsteps because Samuel was on the road a good part of the time, and may not have spent enough time at home. Samuel was heavily involved in the ministry of judging Israel, and thus he may not have given enough time to the spiritual welfare of his family. This, by the way, is a problem that faces many men in the ministry today. It is essential for people in ministry (and for all parents!) to carefully and properly balance their ministry responsibilities and their God-given family responsibilities!

Samuel's sons didn't inherit their father's godliness because spirituality is not inherited. Unfortunately, there are no "spiritual genes"! Ephesians 6:4 says, *"...fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."* It's our responsibility as parents to instruct our children in God's Word and live a Christian lifestyle, but we can't make our children spiritual -- that's a matter of their individual walk with the Lord. Believers cannot pass on their spirituality.

2. Believers can settle for God's permissive will.

Verse 7 & 9 - *“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.... Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them.”*

It is quite clear that it was **not** God's perfect will for Israel to have a king. **God** was to be their king -- but they had rejected the Lord as their King! *“...they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them.”* How is this departure from God's will to be harmonized with the fact that God told Samuel to listen to the voice of the people and give them a king? This is a case of God's “permissive will.” In several places in the Bible, there is a clear distinction made between God's perfect will and God's permissive will. Believers can settle for God's permissive will, but there will be bad fallout and negative consequences. Here are three examples from Scripture:

1. Numbers 11:1 - *“when the people complained, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused.”* The Israelites complained about the manna, God's perfect provision for them in the wilderness. They wanted meat to eat, and in His permissive will, God gave them meat to eat – but there were negative consequences.
2. After Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, God's perfect will was for all twelve tribes to cross the Jordan River and enter the Land of Promise. But in Numbers 32 we read that 2½ of the 12 tribes told Moses that they wanted to settle on the east side of the Jordan. *“Do not make us cross this Jordan!”* was their request to Moses. In His permissive will, God allowed the 2½ tribes to have their choice – but there were negative consequences.
3. In 2 Kings 20, when good King Hezekiah was told to set his house in order because it was his time to die, *“Hezekiah wept bitterly.”* He begged the Lord to let him live. This was not God's perfect will, but in His permissive will, the Lord gave Hezekiah fifteen more years to live -- but there were negative consequences.

God had foretold in His Law that Israel would have kings, but it was not God's perfect will for Israel to have a king at that time. Deuteronomy 17:14-15 says, *“When you come to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,’ you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you...”* In these verses we see that even in His permissive will, God is gracious. Since God knew that Israel would insist on having a king like the other nations, God said that He would choose the king for them. In 1 Samuel 9 we'll see how God brought Samuel and Saul together.

However, the grace of God in allowing Israel to have a king does **not** mean that having a king was God's perfect will. When King Saul turned away from the Lord, God removed him. God said, *“I gave you a king in My anger, and took him away in My wrath”* (Hosea 13:11). Whenever God's permissive will is chosen instead of God's perfect will, there will always be bad fallout. It's a matter of choice. Believers can settle for God's permissive will.

Practical Application

Watch out for the “we want to be like other nations syndrome.”

In verses 10-22 Samuel told the people the problems they would face if they opted to have a king like the other nations. They would be taxed, and there would be a draft for military service and domestic servants, and the best of their farms, crops and animals would have to go to the king -- and they would regret their choice of God’s permissive will! *“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” (v18)*. But in spite of this warning, the people wouldn’t listen to Samuel, and they demanded a king so that they could be like the other nations. *“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” (v19-20)*.

Watch out for the “we want to be like other nations syndrome”! This has many applications for today for families, for ministries, and for churches. We want to be like other Christian families – we want to have more money and a bigger house and more material possessions! We want to be like other Christian ministries – we want to be well known and well financed, and have all the latest technological advances! We want to be like other churches – we want to enlarge and upgrade our facilities and have more entertainment in our services!

Watch out for the “We want to be like other nations syndrome.” Be aware! The Lord may give you exactly what you request -- but it may not be His perfect will, and there will be problems and bad fallout as a result. It’s better to humbly walk step-by-step with the Lord, and be guided in His perfect will, including timing. Watch out for the “we want to be like other nations syndrome.”