

1 Samuel 8:1-22 – “Israel Demands a King”

(Pew Bible Page: 230-231)

Intro: What a curious passage of Scripture we have before us tonight! At first reading it doesn't seem to accord with our expectations at all, for we find God's people plainly rebelling against God, and yet, God says to His servant, Samuel, *“Obey the voice of the people in all they say to you.”* That phrase, *“Obey the voice”* comes up four times in this passage, and three times it is God saying to Samuel, *“Do what they are demanding, even though their demand is based in unbelief.”* Their demand? They want a king. Why do the people demand a king? What is the cost of the thing they are demanding? And above all, why does God accept their demand? Those are the questions before us tonight.

Proposition: Mistrusting God leads to slavery, but trusting God maintains the believer's freedom.

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| Billboard: | (vv.1-9) | Man's Wisdom vs. God's Wisdom |
| | (vv.10-18) | Man's King vs. God's King |
| | (vv.19-22) | Man's Choice vs. God's Choice |

(vv.1-9) Man's Wisdom vs. God's Wisdom – Our first question, *“Why do the people demand a king,”* is addressed in these verses where we find Israel rejecting God and His wisdom in favor of Man and Man's wisdom. The situation: **1 Samuel 8:1–3** - **1** *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, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba.* **3** *Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.* Probably around 20 to 25 years have passed since the last verses of chapter 7 described the routine ministry of Samuel as Judge among the people.¹ As Scripture tells us Samuel had been faithful in all the Lord had given him to do through all those years (cf. 12:1-5). However, it was becoming obvious to the people that Samuel's ministry was closer to its end than its beginning. We are told that *“Samuel became old.”* Time had passed and Samuel was now past the age considered normal for service for Levites, 25 to 50 years of age (cf. Numbers 8:23-26). Furthermore, we are told that Samuel was showing signs of getting weary in the work. Like Eli before him, Samuel commissioned his sons, Joel and Abijah, to assume the ministry of judging the people in his place, stationing them in Beersheba. Samuel seems to have done this without God's authorization. Unlike Eli, whose position as High Priest was hereditary, the office of Judge did not automatically pass to an ordained man's son when he died. In fact, Gideon after his victory had specifically rejected Israel's request for this, saying: **Judges 8:23 - 23** [...] *“I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.”* The result of Samuel's freelancing was predictable: **3** *Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.* Ironic, isn't it? Samuel now faced the same failure that Eli had faced before him. Like Hophni and Phineas, Joel and Abijah were not worthy of the duties their father had assigned to them.

The people were having none of it: **1 Samuel 8:4–5** - **4** *Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah* **5** *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.”* One gets the feeling that the nation, burnt by their experience with Eli & his sons and the disaster their end had brought, had determined not to let the same thing happen again in Samuel's case. The Elders of the people confronted Samuel at Ramah and demanded their solution be enacted: *“Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.”* Their solution? *“We've had enough of God's way; now we want to try doing it man's way. Give us a king like all the other nations around us!”* Comparing these verses to verses 19-20 below, we see exactly what they are after: They wanted an hereditary leader who would maintain a standing army for the defense of the nation. They no longer wanted to live directly under God's rule through

¹ Warren Wiersbe

1 Samuel 8:1-22 – “Israel Demands a King”

(Pew Bible Page: 230-231)

occasional Judgeships commanding temporary soldiers. **1 Samuel 8:6 - 6** *But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. Samuel did what Samuel ALWAYS did when confronted with sin: he took it to the Lord in prayer. The Lord’s answer is at once perceptive and surprising. Perceptive because He understands the spiritual problem at the heart of the people’s demand, and surprising because even though their demand is sinful, God commanded Samuel to accept it and name a king. God understood the real issue: **1 Samuel 8:7–8 - 7** *And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey 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** 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.* The problem wasn’t a new one. It was the same issue that had dogged the nation since their Wilderness journey: The people didn’t trust God. Unbelief was their disease. Not that they didn’t know God was there. They were not atheists. They had seen too much under the Judges to have fallen into that trap of Satan. For the same reason, it couldn’t have been that they doubted God’s power. Gideon’s story alone would rule that out. No, their problem was deeper still. They knew God was there and they knew He was powerful. They just didn’t trust Him to keep His promises. They had faith, but their faith was of a very weak sort. Because of this they did what weak faith always does: They turned from God’s wisdom to man’s wisdom. They said, “Give us a king like all the nations around us! That makes sense to us. No more of these endless cycles of repentance and renewal, ad-hoc Judges, and temporary armies! God’s way isn’t working. Let’s do it man’s way!” Surprisingly, God said to Samuel, “I understand the problem and it is sin; but go ahead and give them what they are demanding. Only be sure that they really understand what they are asking. Warn them of what is coming!” **1 Samuel 8:9 - 9** *Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”* Here is the answer to our first question: Why do the people demand a king?*

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Weak faith turns to man’s wisdom and rejects God’s wisdom.

[ILLUSTRATION] It is always worthwhile to watch someone who is good at what they do. Experience is the best teacher, we are told, because through experience men learn the wisest ways to conduct their business. Conversely, it is the unexperienced and inattentive man who does things awkwardly, slowly, and with less than desirable results. Following the wisdom of someone more experienced is one of the ways we learn to be good at doing the things we want to do.

[APPLICATION] By now, the people of Israel should have learned this lesson. They’d had plenty of opportunities to observe God at work since leaving Egypt. They knew He was there. They didn’t doubt He was powerful. They knew He was skilled, but they didn’t trust Him to keep His promises. Without trust, everything falls to pieces. Right now, we are living in a moment of deep mistrust toward traditional authorities. Many mistrust leaders. Not a few mistrust news sources. Others reject scientific and medical authorities, preferring internet “sages” they have never met to their doctor they know personally. The list goes on and on. It remains to be seen if we can recover from this plague without disastrous consequences, but there is one Authority we can never lose our trust in without catastrophic results: When we turn to man’s wisdom rather than God’s we are in for trouble. Learning to rely on God’s wisdom comes through experiencing God’s presence in our daily lives. When we watch Him at work in the little things, we know His ways when it comes to the bigger things. The tragedy among so many believers today is that we’ve been so unconscious of God’s living presence for so long, that we only trust now in the power of man’s wisdom. We reach for it with the same unconsciousness that we reach for a saltshaker, salting our food before we even give it a tasting. Dear ones, we ought to intentionally break this cycle. Let’s remind ourselves that there is another kind of wisdom available to

1 Samuel 8:1-22 – “Israel Demands a King”

(Pew Bible Page: 230-231)

believers. We have access to God’s wisdom if we care to turn our hearts and minds toward learning from Him.

(vv.10-18) Man’s King vs. God’s King – These verses contain the answer to our second question: “What would be the cost of the thing they were demanding?” They were demanding to have a king like all the nations around them, so Samuel detailed for them what that really meant. He described for them in vivid detail what life under those *pagan* kings was like: **1 Samuel 8:10–11 - 10** *So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. 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. He will make your children his lackies, in other words. Instead of being free men, your children will become servants of his pretentions. 1 Samuel 8:12 - 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. He will turn your leaders into mere servants to supply his luxuries and promote his powers, in other words. 1 Samuel 8:13 - 13* *He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. Your daughters won’t be safe either. He will coopt them to satisfy his desires. 1 Samuel 8:14 - 14* *He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. Your stuff isn’t going to be your stuff anymore. He’ll take the best of it for himself. 1 Samuel 8:15 - 15* *He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He’ll tax your wealth to pay his bills. 1 Samuel 8:16 - 16* *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. Your needs will become secondary, his will be primary. 1 Samuel 8:17 - 17* *He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. You will be his slaves.* You are asking for diminishment. You are presently living in freedom with God as your King but you are demanding to become man’s slaves. What is the cost of following Man’s wisdom rather than God’s wisdom? A loss of freedom; we enslave ourselves to man’s wisdom. **1 Samuel 8:18 - 18** *And 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.”* God concluded by saying, “I’m going to give you what you want, but there is a cost to your rebellion that I will not reverse because you are choosing this willfully knowing the consequences.”

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Mistrusting God’s wisdom inevitably leads to slavery.

[ILLUSTRATION] Stop signs warn us of potential danger. Stop signs are not optional. You can probably run through them successfully for a while, but sooner or later the crash is going to come, and perhaps with tragic consequences that cannot be undone. It is one thing to accidentally cause a crash, but it is another thing entirely to cause a wreck when you’ve been warned that you are making a mistake.

[APPLICATION] God warned His people that they were making a mistake and He assured them that the consequence of their mistrust would produce an irreversible situation. Would they run past His stop sign? We’ll consider that in just a moment, but let’s reflect first on the graciousness of God to warn His people of the slavery their demand would bring them under. God’s stop signs, His warnings in Scripture, are His invitations to change our course and avoid a crash. When He says, “*Thou shalt not bear false witness,*” He’s advising us to stay out of trouble. When He says, “*Honor your father and your mother,*” He’s telling us how to conduct ourselves wisely in the presence of the authorities He’s placed over us. When He says, “*Pay your taxes,*” He’s trying to keep us out of jail. God’s laws are God’s safeguards for His people. They are His stop signs. Every time we decide to use man’s wisdom, rather than God’s wisdom we run past His stop signs and end up enslaving ourselves, casting off the freedom our obedience would have safeguarded. God’s warnings are expressions of His grace designed to preserve

1 Samuel 8:1-22 – “Israel Demands a King”

(Pew Bible Page: 230-231)

our freedom and never to restrict it. Mistrusting them will lead us out of freedom and into slavery every time. Heed God’s wisdom; listen to His warnings.

(vv.19-22) Man’s Choice vs. God’s Choice – But, as these verses tell us, the people didn’t listen to His warning. Here is the answer to our third question: “Why did God accept their demand?” And the answer is: Because it was God’s choice for them all along. They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (cf. Genesis 50:20). **1 Samuel 8:19–22 - 19** *But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be 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 when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. 22 And the LORD said to Samuel, “Obey their voice and make them a king.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “Go every man to his city.”* God gave Samuel this direction because what the people were demanding God had already ordained for them. God was using their disobedience to further His redemptive plan. God had said to Abraham about Sarah: **Genesis 17:16 - 16** *I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” **Deuteronomy 17:14–15 - 14** *“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,’ 15 you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.”* These verses show beyond dispute that it was always God’s choice for Israel to have a king, and this teaches us an important lesson: Men make choices for better or for worse, and God holds them accountable for the choices they make. But no choice man makes fails to coincide perfectly with what God has chosen and established from the foundation of the world. Here is a holy mystery: We make real choices and God holds us accountable for what we choose; but no choice we make ever invalidates what God has already ordained from before time began. We can’t explain this, but we can bow before it. Bowing before this truth leads us into a place of great peace, because it assures us that we don’t have to understand – we don’t have to be able to work everything out using human wisdom. It is enough to trust the wisdom of God even when we don’t understand and when we do this, we maintain the freedom God has chosen for us to live in as His people.*

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Trusting God’s wisdom maintains our freedom as His people, but God has got us covered even when we blow it.

[ILLUSTRATION] Perhaps you have automatic overdraft protection on your bank account. Honest people don’t intentionally write checks for more money than they know they have in their accounts, but sometimes stuff happens we don’t anticipate and before we know it, we’ve overdrawn our account. Isn’t it nice to know that the bank “has our back” when we mess things up? In just that same way...

[APPLICATION] Even when we choose bone headedness, God in grace has got our back. Israel demanded a king in mistrust, but through that God gave them a king in graciousness. His name would be David; His name would ultimately be Jesus. Israel’s disobedience did not stop God’s plan of redemption in its tracks. God simply wove their stubborn insistence on using man’s wisdom into His redemptive wisdom for the ages in Jesus. Do your best not to be a knucklehead! But when you’ve been a knucklehead anyway, rest in the fact that as a believer, God’s got your back and His redemptive plan goes on undeterred.

Conclusion: Brennan Manning has written a memoir entitled, “All is Grace.” I’m not recommending everything in the book, but I certainly agree with the title, and I think our passage tonight adds an

1 Samuel 8:1-22 – “Israel Demands a King”

(Pew Bible Page: 230-231)

“Amen.” The people of Israel were stubborn. They mistrusted God and insisted on using man’s wisdom rather than God’s. And yet, through their stubborn unbelief, God furthered His plan to bring Jesus to you and me. Wouldn’t it have been better if they had *asked* God for a king rather than *demanding* one? Of course! *Asking* God for a king would have been intentional cooperation with Him in His work. *Demanding* a king was arrogance and sin. But God had it woven into His plan for our ultimate good. Manning is right. In the end, it’s all grace that makes the story of God’s children come out right. And that should be a great comfort to fallible people like you and me.