FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 8

*Israel Asks for a King*

**When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. 2 The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. 3 But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice. 4 So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. 5 They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” 6 But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. 7 And the Lord told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. 8 As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. 9 Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do.” 10 Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. 12 Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for 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 groves and give them to his attendants. 15 He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. 16 Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. 17 He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. 18 When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day.” 19 But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. 20 Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.” 21 When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. 22 The Lord answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.” Then Samuel said to the men of Israel, “Everyone go back to his town.”**

**8:1–12:25** See Introduction: Contents and Theme. (CSB)

Samuel was the last of the judges but the first kingmaker. We witness the events of this transitional time in these significant chapters. (TLSB)

**8:1** *When Samuel grew old.* Probably about 20 years after the victory at Mizpah, when Samuel was approximately 65 years old (see Introduction: Chronology). (CSB)

**8:2** *Beersheba*. Samuel’s sons were given responsibility for this extreme southern region, while Samuel maintained his established judicial circuit headquartered in the central region held by the Benjaminites, north of Jerusalem (7:15–17).(TLSB)

**8:3** *accepted bribes.* Perversion of justice through bribery was explicitly forbidden in Pentateuchal law (see Ex 23:8; Dt 16:19). (CSB)

Samuel’s sons openly rejected the way of the Lord. Samuel tried to establish a judicial dynasty by declaring Joel and Abijah his successors, something God had not commanded (cf Jgs 8:22–23). Samuel’s sons had pious names (Jo El, “Yahweh is God,” and Abi Yahweh, “My father is Yahweh”), yet their lives were far from godly. Though Samuel had witnessed Eli’s poor fathering of Hophni and Phinehas, he fell into the same predicament. (TLSB)

*turned aside after gain*. Summarizes the unethical acts the Lord had forbidden. (TLSB)

**8:4–5** Senior members of the community come to Samuel at his judicial headquarters and express their concerns, citing his age and his sons’ misconduct. (TLSB)

**8:5** *appoint a king to lead us.* The elders cite Samuel’s age and the misconduct of his sons as justifications for their request for a king. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the more basic reason for their request was a desire to be like the surrounding nations—to have a human king as a symbol of national power and unity who would lead them in battle and guarantee their security (see v. 20; 10:19; 12:12; see also Introduction: Contents and Theme). (CSB)

**8:7** *Listen to all that the people are saying to you.* Anticipations of kingship in Israel are present already in the Pentateuch (Ge 49:10; Nu 24:7, 17; Dt 17:14–20); Samuel is therefore instructed to listen to the people’s request (see vv. 9, 22). (CSB)

*it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.* Cf. Jdg 8:23. The sin of Israel in requesting a king (see 10:19; 12:12, 17, 19–20) did not rest in any evil inherent in kingship itself, but rather in the kind of kingship the people envisioned and their reasons for requesting it (see Introduction: Contents and Theme). Their desire was for a form of kingship that denied their covenant relationship with the Lord, who himself was pledged to be their savior and deliverer. In requesting a king “like all the other nations” (v. 20) they broke the covenant, rejected the Lord who was their King (12:12; Nu 23:21; Dt 33:5) and forgot his constant provision for their protection in the past (10:18; 12:8–11). (CSB)

Hbr emphasizes “you” and “Me.” Samuel felt his leadership was being questioned, but there was a greater problem. Luth: “Their sin was not their desire to have a king, for after all God gave them one, but rather, that they set their trust on human help and government when they should have trusted in God alone. This was a grave sin” (AE 52:187). The Lord had promised a king for Israel centuries earlier (Gn 49:10; Nu 24:7, 17; Dt 17:14–20). (TLSB)

**8:8–9** Judges were recognized and respected because the Lord established them as leaders (i.e., as those endowed with administrative gifts by the Spirit and also as those embraced as natural leaders by popular support). As judges were raised up, God conferred the gifts of the Holy Spirit on them (Jgs 6:34; 11:29; 14:6, 19; 15:14). A king, as a unifying political leader for the loose tribal federation, would not necessarily be God’s earthly representative. The Israelites already had such a hereditary office in the priesthood. (TLSB)

**8:1–9** With an unseemly desire to be like other nations, Israel’s elders ask Samuel for a king, their action being a rebuke to Samuel and a rejection of the Lord as their King. Leadership should be tempered by faith, which calls on the Lord, His guidance, and His blessing. Nothing is as precious to us as the Lord, who treasures us and leads us by His only-begotten Son. Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. • Heavenly Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit, lead us to see how much we are worth to You in Jesus. Amen. (TLSB)

**8:10** Samuel was not called to be king, yet he was recognized as the divine authority in Israel, so elders conferred with him regarding their decision. (TLSB)

*asking*. Hbr *sha’al*, a wordplay on “Saul.” (TLSB)

**8:11–17** *he will take*. Repeated six times in these verses. The king extracts funds from the people and conscripts their sons and daughters for service. Government taxation, nearly unknown among the Israelites, would become exorbitant An additional 10 percent would be levied on top of the tithe already required for the Lord (Lv 27:30–32; Nu 18:26; Dt 14:22, 28; 26:12; 2Ch 31:5–6; Am 4:4; Mal 3:8). Within two generations, Solomon’s rule became extremely burdensome and oppressive (cf 1Ki 4:22–23; 12:4). Royal records discovered at Alakakh, Ugarit, and Mari show similar problems under kings in neighboring regions. Samuel demonstrates awareness of regional politics. (TLSB)

**8:11** *what the king … will do.* Using a description of the policies of contemporary Canaanite kings (vv. 11–17), Samuel warns the people of the burdens associated with the type of kingship they long for. (CSB)

**8:12** *commanders of thousands*. Military rank also known from Ugarit. (TLSB)

**8:15** *tenth.* This king’s portion would be over and above the tenth Israel was to devote to the Lord (Lev 27:30–32; Nu 18:26; Dt 14:22, 28; 26:12). In fact, the demands of the king would parallel all that Israel was to consecrate to the Lord as her Great King (persons, lands, crops, livestock)—even the whole population (v. 17). (CSB)

**8:17** *you shall be his slaves*. People saw only positive reasons for having a king. Here, Samuel describes the true relationship: they will be vassals, and the king will be their master. (TLSB)

**8:18** *cry out for relief from the king.* See 1Ki 12:4; Jer 22:13–17. (CSB)

Cries for deliverance will go unheeded because they chose the king over the Lord. (TLSB)

**8:10–18** The Lord tells Samuel to agree to the request for a king, but also to warn the people about what a king will do. Like the people of Israel, our actions often say to God, “Not Your will, but mine be done,” as we insist on things that may not be good for us. God is surprisingly flexible and generous. He often gives us what we want, but even more graciously, He gives us what we need—forgiveness, life, and salvation. • Dear Jesus, help me to see the blessings in my life, even when I do not get what I want. Strengthen me to join You in praying, “Not my will, but Yours be done.” Amen. (TLSB)

**8:20** *like all the other nations.* See notes on vv. 5, 7. (CSB)

Request for a king is based on two false, almost childlike premises. (1) They thought the king would act as a substitute agent and fight for them, despite God’s promises to fight (Ex 14:14; Dt 1:30). (2) They wanted to be more like their pagan neighbors, having a king to symbolize desired unity. Yet, they were breaking covenant with the Lord, who was their King (Nu 23:21; Dt 33:5). The promise of a king that God had made in the wilderness (Dt 17:14–20) is fulfilled, not by God’s initiative as Samuel expected, but by the people themselves.

**8:21** By repeating the people’s rejection, Samuel again seeks the Lord’s guidance. As in many prayers, our desires are repeated before the Lord not to inform Him but to show our submission to His will.

**8:19–22** People insist on a king, and God tells Samuel to go along with them. Some of those who seem most successful in the world refuse to acknowledge God or to follow His Son, our Lord. Even in the Church are those whose plans and teachings go against our Lord’s revealed will. Nevertheless Nevertheless, like a chess master, the Lord sees the larger picture and achieves His objectives even through human error. Similarly, Jesus’ death on the cross was brought about by human intrigue, yet it accomplished the very thing that God desired, the redemption of the world. • Thank You, Lord, for working through human instruments and accomplishing Your holy, divine, and good will for the world. In Jesus’ name. Amen. (TLSB)