

Who is King?

Devotional Reading: Psalm 93

Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 8:1-9; 10:17-26

1 Samuel 8:4-7

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 follow 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.”

1 Samuel 10:17-24

¹⁷ Samuel summoned the people of Israel to the LORD at Mizpah ¹⁸ and said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you.’ ¹⁹ But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your disasters and calamities. And you have said, ‘No, appoint a king over us.’ So now present yourselves before the LORD by your tribes and clans.”

²⁰ When Samuel had all Israel come forward by tribes, the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. ²¹ Then he brought forward the tribe of Benjamin, clan by clan, and Matri’s clan was taken. Finally Saul son of Kish was taken. But when they looked for him, he was not to be found. ²² So they inquired further of the LORD, “Has the man come here yet?”

And the LORD said, “Yes, he has hidden himself among the supplies.”

²³ They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others. ²⁴ Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.”

Then the people shouted, “Long live the king!”

Key Text

You have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your disasters and calamities. And you have said, “No, appoint a king over us.”

—1 Samuel 10:19a

God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 2: Out of Slavery to Nationhood

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List circumstances that caused the nation of Israel to demand a king.
2. Explain why Israel's wanting a king was a rejection of the Lord.
3. Identify one item that represents a rejection of the Lord in his or her life and write a plan for changing this.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Ultimate Authority
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Call for a King (1 Samuel 8:4–7)

- A. Rejection of Samuel (vv. 4–5a)
Wayward Sons

- B. Rejection of the Lord (vv. 5b–7)

II. The Acclamation of a King (1 Samuel 10:17–24)

- A. Gathering the Tribes (vv. 17–19a)
"The Ultimate Fulfillment"
- B. Choosing Benjamin (vv. 19b–20)
- C. Choosing Saul (vv. 21–24)

Conclusion

- A. Planning in the Priesthood
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Kish *Kyesh*.

Matri *May-try*.

Mizpah *Miz-peh*.

theocracy *the-ah-cruh-see* (*th* as in *thin*).

Introduction

A. The Ultimate Authority

Parents wear many hats. One of these requires rendering judgment between siblings on the basis of parental authority in the household. When siblings disagree, they can seek a word straight from the top that might fall in their favor.

For instance, in the case of two daughters, their mother might have to decide whether the older had the right to donate a hoodie from her ex-boyfriend, even though the younger desired to keep it for herself. The older daughter would argue that it was hers to do with as she pleased; and furthermore, she had a right not to see it in her own home as a reminder of her former boyfriend. The younger would counter, saying it was still a good hoodie, no matter where it came from. Their mother would rule to decide the fate of the hoodie.

When Samuel gathered the people together, the fate of an entire nation was at stake. But would the people recognize his authority? And would they recognize the authority *behind* Samuel—the Lord himself?

B. Lesson Context

In the Christian arrangement of the books of the Old Testament, 1 and 2 Samuel are included with the 12 historical books (Joshua–Esther). They record the transition from theocracy (being governed by the Lord) to monarchy (being governed by an earthly king). The books of 1 and 2 Samuel can be divided into these sections:

- I. End of judges' period (1 Samuel 1–8)
- II. God's selection and rejection of Saul (1 Samuel 9–15)
- III. God's selection of David and Saul's fall (1 Samuel 16–31)
- IV. Establishment of David's throne (2 Samuel 1–10)
- V. David's sin and flight from Jerusalem (2 Samuel 11–18)
- VI. Reestablishment of David in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 19–20)
- VII. David's legacy (2 Samuel 21–24)

The period of the judges lasted more than 300 years, from 1380 to 1050 BC (see [lesson 7 Lesson Context](#)). The judges administered justice and served as God's chosen military leaders when the people were oppressed by foreign invaders. This is told briefly in [Judges 2:6–19](#) and recorded in detail in the rest of that book (see [lesson 7](#)). Samuel's prophetic ministry began during the latter part of those deplorable years, in 1067 BC; this was a time when Israel had no king ([Judges 18:1; 19:1](#)). This was also a time when moral conditions among the people were chaotic: "everyone did as they saw fit" ([21:25](#)).

In his transitional role, Samuel is sometimes referred to as the last of the judges ([1 Samuel 7:6, 15–17](#)) and the first of the prophets ([3:20; Acts 3:24; 13:20](#)). Samuel was one of the greatest of Israel's judges. After freeing the country from oppressors, he established a circuit court to administer justice ([1 Samuel 7:16](#)). His decisions were respected, for they were according to the law.

I. The Call for a King

(1 Samuel 8:4–7)

The events recounted in this section were precipitated by the desire to avoid a crisis of leadership in Israel, such as was often seen following the death of a judge (example: [Judges 3:7–4:7](#)).

A. Rejection of Samuel (vv. 4–5a)

4. So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah.

Ramah was a village in the hill country belonging to the tribe of Benjamin ([Joshua 18:20b, 25](#)). Its exact location is unknown, though it was likely 5–12 miles north of Jerusalem, which was still a Jebusite stronghold ([15:8, 63](#)). Ramah was Samuel’s birthplace and served as one of his primary sites for judging ([1 Samuel 1:19–20; 7:16–17](#)). He offered sacrifices on behalf of Israel ([7:9](#)) and served as a “seer,” one who received words from the Lord directly ([9:19](#)).

It’s unclear whether *the elders of Israel* went straight to Ramah or met elsewhere and traveled together after an initial meeting about their shared concerns. As their title suggests, these men were the heads of families and leaders in their clans and so were older, seen as having gained wisdom throughout their lives. They formed the councils that governed day-to-day life in the tribes of Israel. Describing this group as *all* the elders suggests there were representatives from each of the 12 tribes ([Exodus 3:16–18; Numbers 11:16–30; Joshua 8:33](#)). Though we frequently think of a united Israel, in many ways the tribes operated independently, making their uniform desire all the more remarkable (see [1 Samuel 8:5a–b](#), below).

5a. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways;

Samuel’s age caused the elders (rather ironically) to worry about the future following his death. Perhaps they knew the stories of how Israel repeatedly fell into sin and was overtaken by enemies following a judge’s death (example: [Judges 2:6–19](#)). Maybe they simply wanted to be sure, before Samuel died, of the leadership they would inherit.

Or the elders could have been primarily concerned for their children and grandchildren, not wanting to see them under the leadership of Samuel’s *sons*. These two, Joel and Abijah, were acting as judges. But they failed spectacularly in their roles because of their greed ([1 Samuel 8:1–3](#), not in our printed text; compare [3:11–14](#)). They did not follow in their father Samuel’s *ways* and could not be trusted to guide with righteousness and justice.

Wayward Sons

King George III (1738–1820) reigned in England during the American Revolution. For all his flaws, King George III led a pious life and took his role as king seriously. After all, he believed God had put him in his position.

In contrast, his son George IV (1762–1830) proved an immoral and vain ruler. He fathered numerous illegitimate children with multiple women. He was a heavy drinker and threw lavish, expensive parties. King George IV was known as a cavorting, wasteful ruler who cared more about himself than

his people.

Like George IV, Samuel's sons were immoral men. Their ungodly leadership led the elders to ask for a king, which led to the division of Israel and finally to becoming exiles in Assyria and Babylon.

Think of the leaders in your life. Do they show the fruit of the Spirit, growing in relationship with God and leading in a Christlike manner? Or are they grasping for power, money, and influence? Who you follow determines where you're going. Choose wisely.

—L. M. W.



Visual for [Lesson 8](#). While discussing the questions associated with verses [5b–6a](#), ask how identity in Christ is connected to holiness.

B. Rejection of the Lord (vv. [5b–7](#))

[5b–6a](#). “now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel;

Even before Israel's entry into the land of Canaan, the Lord knew there would be a time when the people would desire a king. This was foreseen by Moses, who warned Israel of the consequences

(Deuteronomy 17:14–20). To have a king made the nation more like their neighbors instead of less (1 Samuel 8:20, not in our printed text). The elders’ stated desire to be like *all the other nations* disturbs the reader. God specifically chose Israel and made the nation holy so that it *wouldn’t* be like the nations (Exodus 19:5–6)! Trying to blend in by having *a king* as other peoples was a faithless response (see 1 Samuel 8:7, below).

In the time of the judges, Israel functioned as a theocracy (see Lesson Context). But the eldership was not interested in waiting for God to raise up another judge as he had been doing for many generations. Their demand to Samuel can very well be seen as one of grave disrespect toward the prophet. They needed him to act because no one else in Israel had the gravitas of Samuel and hope to unify the nation behind a new king. But they did not want the benefit of his wisdom regarding whether or not to have a king, having come to him with a solution already in mind. *Samuel* was understandably *displeased* by this, as he saw the elders’ desire as a rejection of the Lord’s intentions for them.

What Do You Think?

What situations tempt you to embrace cultural norms that contradict your identity in Christ?

Digging Deeper

How can you strengthen your sense of identity in Christ in order to resist the temptations you named?

6b. so he prayed to the LORD.

Rather than engage with the elders in a shouting match or shut his door in disgust, Samuel *prayed to the Lord*. This was a pause with purpose rather than an avoidance of conflict. Samuel’s displeasure and anger would not get the best of him. We do well to follow his example—not avoiding conflict or simply giving in to demands, nor responding in the heat of the moment, but seeking the Lord and his will.

What Do You Think?

What strategies can you employ to go to the Lord with your anger and frustrations instead of losing your temper in the moment?

Digging Deeper

How do you ensure that these strategies are not simply ways to avoid needed confrontation?

7a. And the LORD told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you;

This was not the first time God adjusted his plan to accommodate the actions or desires of his chosen people (example: Genesis 21:13). Even so, God had never chosen a king for Israel (compare Judges 9), so the Lord’s command to *listen to all that the people are saying to you* represented a break from their entire history of governance. The Law of Moses had included guidelines for an eventual king, assuming a monarchy one day would be formed (Deuteronomy 17:14–20; contrast 28:15, 26–27).

7b. “it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.”

This rejection may have felt like a referendum on how Samuel raised his sons, if not also on how he

had led Israel. Such personal affront is easy to understand. But the Lord set the prophet straight: the people's demanding a king was primarily about rejecting God's reign as it had been carried out to that point (compare [Judges 8:22–23](#); [1 Samuel 8:8](#), not in our printed text).

Then as now, trusting in God's governance requires great faith in the face of all that sin has wrought in the world. It is much easier to look to a king or president for direction than to wait on the Lord. Even the apostles feared what would happen when Jesus was no longer physically with them (see [John 14–17](#)). Resting in the uncertainty of when and how God will choose to act is not for the faint of heart ([Isaiah 40:28–31](#); [2 Timothy 1:7](#)).

What follows in [1 Samuel 8:10–20](#) reveals the elders' lack of comprehension concerning what it would mean to be ruled by a monarch. They failed to consider that a king or dynasty was likely to become tyrannical. They thought a king would give the nation more stability, especially in terms of military might—forgetting that the only source of true strength is the Lord ([Exodus 14:12–31](#); [Isaiah 12:2](#)). Although God had delivered Israel from Egypt, he would not hear their cry when the king they wanted oppressed them. With these warnings, the men went back to their homes.

What Do You Think?

What implications does Israel's rejection of God in favor of a king have for your attitudes toward national leaders?

Digging Deeper

What other biblical texts inform your thinking about your responsibility as a citizen of an earthly nation and possible tensions with your citizenship in the kingdom of Heaven?

II. The Acclamation of a King ([1 Samuel 10:17–24](#))

After Israel's elders expressed their desire for a king, Samuel met Saul, whom God had revealed to be his choice for their first king ([1 Samuel 9:15–19a](#)). Samuel secretly anointed Saul ([10:1–16](#), not in our printed text).

A. Gathering the Tribes (vv. [17–19a](#))

17. Samuel summoned the people of Israel to the LORD at Mizpah

How much time passed between the meeting with the elders and this one with *the people* is unclear, though the events did not happen back-to-back given what occurred in between them (see [1 Samuel 8:8–10:16](#)). Perhaps several thousand people would be expected to come. *Mizpah* was where Samuel had orchestrated a victory over the Philistines that solidified his leadership role as the judge of Israel ([7:6](#)). Specifying that the meeting was *to the Lord* suggests that *Samuel* did not call this gathering of his own volition.

18. and said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you.’

Samuel's address echoed Moses' own farewell speech, giving *Israel* insight and instruction for a future without Samuel (compare [Deuteronomy 1:1–5; 7:12–24](#)). The people were not vulnerable without a king; look at all that God had done without one! Not only had he *brought Israel up out of Egypt* (compare [Numbers 21:1–3, 21–26](#)); he had protected them from *all the kingdoms that oppressed* them since then (examples: [Joshua 10](#); [Judges 3:12–30](#)).

What Do You Think?

What memories of God's goodness have encouraged you in times when trusting the Lord was especially difficult?

Digging Deeper

How does sharing these stories with others strengthen both their trust in the Lord and your own?

19a. “But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your disasters and calamities. And you have said, ‘No, appoint a king over us.’”

Israel would receive what they asked of God, but it wasn't ideal. So why didn't the Lord stop Israel from this folly? The answer comes back to how we understand God's working out his will. There are events that the Lord desires and works to establish (we think especially of Jesus' incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection); that he desires and calls people to accomplish with him; and that people desire and God chooses to work through. Giving Israel a king falls in the latter category, and we see that God used it to pave the way for Christ ([2 Samuel 7:5–16](#); [Luke 1:30–33](#); [Acts 13:21–23](#)).

Samuel could not in good conscience proceed without reminding the nation of God's great deeds and of their rejection of him. This was likely a call to repentance. At the very least, Samuel would have hoped the people would not forget the Lord, even when they had an earthly king.

“The Ultimate Fulfillment”

“If you asked me, my life was hijacked by the lottery,” Donna Mikkin wrote in her article “How Winning the Lottery Led to Emotional Bankruptcy.” Before she won the New York State Lottery—then worth \$34.5 million—she was basically a happy person. When she won, she believed the money was “the ultimate fulfillment.” Donna did not realize how winning would affect her emotional health. She became preoccupied with others' perception of her and felt guilty for winning out over others.

The Israelites believed a king would be their ultimate fulfillment. God told Samuel to give the people what they wanted, knowing it was not what they really needed. How many times do we get what we want in life, only to realize it does not satisfy us? The dream job, relationship, or possessions can't take the place of God in our lives. Don't be fooled! Ultimate fulfillment is found only in the Lord.

—L. M. W.

B. Choosing Benjamin (vv. 19b–20)

19b–20. “So now present yourselves before the LORD by your tribes and clans.” When Samuel

had all Israel come forward by tribes, the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot.

Casting lots was a way of recognizing that God was making his choice (see [1 Samuel 10:20–21](#) and compare [10:22–23](#), below; [Joshua 7:14](#); [Jonah 1:7](#); [Acts 1:26](#)). [Proverbs 16:33](#) gives the view that it is the Lord who controls the outcome. In such a situation, one marked object was placed in a container with other items that were similar. The marked item identified God’s choice.

Benjamin was an unexpected choice, for it was the smallest and least influential of Israel’s tribes—Saul himself said as much ([1 Samuel 9:21](#)). Furthermore, Benjamin had been punished and ostracized by the rest of the nation in its recent history for a particularly notorious episode of savagery ([Judges 19–21](#)). From our vantage point, however, Saul’s connection to this tribe might be the first twinge of foreboding we experience.

C. Choosing Saul (vv. 21–24)

21. Then he brought forward the tribe of Benjamin, clan by clan, and Matri’s clan was taken. Finally Saul son of Kish was taken. But when they looked for him, he was not to be found.

Nothing more is known of *Matri’s clan*, lending credence to Saul’s protest of being from an insignificant family. But *Kish* was “a man of standing,” which could be understood to mean he was wealthy ([1 Samuel 9:1](#)), especially as he had both livestock and servants ([9:3](#)). Still, the choice of *the tribe of Benjamin* was strange due to its small size and checkered history ([Judges 20–21](#)).

22. So they inquired further of the LORD, “Has the man come here yet?” And the LORD said, “Yes, he has hidden himself among the supplies.”

If Saul had simply not come to Mizpah, he potentially would have retained some measure of dignity. Instead, Saul was hiding *among the supplies*, likely luggage the visitors brought with them for their stay. The text does not tell us why, leaving us to wonder—was he feeling great humility and the weight of responsibility falling on him (consider [1 Samuel 9:21](#))? Or was he afraid of the challenge before him, unsure that God would guide him ([17:1–11](#))? It could be a mix of both. Whatever the reason, it was a strange place to begin his reign.

23. They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, Saul’s stature would have been a reassuring sight for people hoping for a military leader. Judging by the outside, Saul was literally “*head and shoulders*” the best candidate for the job (contrast [1 Samuel 16:7](#); see [lesson 9](#)).

24a. Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.”

Samuel’s words can be taken as praise and delight in Saul, or they can be taken simply as a statement of fact regarding Saul’s imposing physical stature. Samuel probably intended this ambiguity, not speaking out directly against God’s chosen man but not giving him a glowing endorsement either.

What Do You Think?

What ratio of your compliments are in regard to a person’s outward appearance versus his or her

inward qualities?

Digging Deeper

What benefits can you anticipate in shifting this ratio to favor inward qualities? Do these benefits change based on the age of the recipient?

24b. Then the people shouted, “Long live the king!”

Long live the king is a prayer to the Lord. Though the people’s desire was at its heart a rejection of the Lord, they did not desire to lose the Lord’s blessings and protection. We may be tempted to judge the people for these mixed and seemingly opposing desires. But we need only observe our own mixed motives to realize how infrequently we act from totally righteous or totally flawed motivations. At such times, we do well to still cry out to God, who sees our hearts and can work to cleanse us of desires that are counter to the life of faith.

Conclusion

A. Planning in the Priesthood

Despite having been rejected by the people, the Lord chose not to abandon them. He sometimes punished them ([2 Chronicles 36:15–21](#)), but he continued to love his people and work through them (see [Genesis 12:1–3](#)). The same goes for us. Though we make decisions that grieve God, he does not abandon us or stop working through the church. He has the power to use even our worst decisions for his glory ([Romans 8:28](#)).

Samuel and the elders were concerned for Israel’s future, though they had very different plans to alleviate that worry. In the same way, leadership in churches—whether ministers, elders, or other leaders—do well to look to the future of their congregations and of the worldwide church. When considering our plans, however, we must not discount the warnings of godly people who do not share a majority opinion. We have an ally in this endeavor that Israel did not: the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer ([Acts 2:17–21](#)). May we seek clarity from the Lord in every decision, resisting worldly wisdom so that we can continue to live out our calling as the priesthood of believers ([1 Peter 2:4–12](#)).

B. Prayer

Lord God, forgive us when we value our judgment over yours. Help us examine our hearts and overcome those motivations that are a rejection of you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

There is room for only one King in our hearts.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Write on the board *Things Are Not What They Seem to Be*. Divide your class into groups of five members or fewer. Ask each group to think of at least one example from current events, from history, or from a personal experience. After five or six minutes, ask each group to share one example. As a whole class, talk about what perspective and choices keep people from seeing something as it really is.

Say, “Today we will look at a pivotal incident from Israel’s history, when outside influences and perspectives led God’s people to make a decision that didn’t honor God.”

Into the Word

Ask the class what they already know about Samuel. Write their answers on the board, consulting the Lesson Context to fill in any gaps.

Divide the class into small groups. Have the groups study today’s text, from [1 Samuel 8:4–7](#); [10:17–24](#), and decide whether each statement below is true or false. If the statement is false, they should rewrite it to make it true. (Note: every statement is false.) Distribute a handout (you create) with the following nine statements:

1. The elders knew that Samuel’s sons, although competent, were not available.
 2. Samuel wanted to be king, but the people didn’t want him.
 3. The Lord was happy to be the heavenly King while the people also had an earthly monarch.
 4. God didn’t want to give them a king, but Samuel talked him into doing so.
 5. The Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt would have happened sooner if only they’d had a king.
 6. Samuel didn’t want to tell the people how God really felt about their desire for a king.
 7. Saul seemed to all the people to be the obvious choice for king.
 8. Saul was as eager to be king as the people were eager to make him king.
 9. The people couldn’t accept such a little man to be their king, and they rejected Samuel’s choice.
- Give groups several minutes to work; then review as a whole class.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Diary of an Old Man” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work together to complete as indicated. After a few minutes, invite volunteers to read what they’ve written.

After completing either activity, have the class draw conclusions about how Israel’s choices reflected their relationship with God and his standards.

Into Life

Distribute handouts (you prepare) of the following list of principles:

- God loves us in spite of our bad decisions.
- External appearances may not indicate God's preferences.
- The will of the people or majority rule is not a clear indicator of God's will.
- God works through government when the governed give first allegiance to him.
- God allows us to go our own way, even when it leads to disaster.
- God uses imperfect people to do his work on earth.

In their groups, students choose at least two of the statements. Ask them to discuss how today's lesson illustrates the statements or principles. After several minutes, allow each group to report.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "What Do You Say?" exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete it in pairs before discussing conclusions as a whole class.

Have students identify one item in today's lesson that represents a rejection of the Lord in his or her life and take one minute to plan how to change this behavior or thought pattern. End class with prayer.