

Eastwood Baptist (AM, 29/7/'18) **"GIVE US A KING TO LEAD US"** (1 Samuel 8-11)

**Introduction** Can you remember asking a question, and being told that the answer is "yes and no"? How did you feel about it? Or perhaps the boot was on the other foot, and you were the one who was asked a question and felt that the truthful answer was "yes and no". Did you feel differently then? That's my situation this morning. In 1 Samuel 8-11 we have the record of the people of Israel asking for a king, and of Saul becoming their first king. The narrative prompts a thoughtful reader to ask, "Did God want Israel to have a king?" And it seems to me that the answer is "yes and no".

**The Question Arises** (8:1-5) The first few verses of today's long passage clearly establish Israel's demand for a king. **Read 8:1-5.** The situation makes their demand understandable, at the least. Samuel is their leader, and a good one according to the Scriptural record. But he has appointed his sons to share the role of leadership, and they have not performed well. A similar experience with Eli's sons is fresh in their memory, and they are looking for a more reliable leadership structure than God's providing of occasional leaders, traditionally known as "judges". So it makes sense to look back further, to the Book of Judges. Here we see that these leaders were a mixed bag, so we can understand the Israelites' looking for a better way. So far the evidence suggests that it was good for Israel to ask for a king. But verse 5 introduces the first hints of a contrary view. **Read 8:5.** Note the rudeness of their words to Samuel. Of course, this doesn't make their demand wrong, but it does give us reason to question the spirit in which they made it. And there is also their justification for their demand: "such as all the other nations have". This line of argument rings alarm bells. Does it follow? Just because other nations have kings, should God's chosen nation have a king? So as we read on, we need to read thoughtfully.

**Samuel's Response, and God's Response** (8:6-22) Both Samuel's response and God's response cast doubt on whether their demand for a king was a good one. **Read 8:6-9.** Samuel was displeased. His response is not a sure guide to what ours should be, since he had a strong personal stake in the matter, but neither is it a response to be easily dismissed, given all we know about Samuel. God's response is not so simply negative. In particular, he tells Samuel to listen to the people. But he also interprets their demand as a rejection of his own kingship, and he tells Samuel to warn them about the risks involved in having a king. What comes next is Samuel's warning about these risks (vv.10-18). It is a serious warning, including things like their sons being taken to be soldiers and their daughters to be servants, and their having to hand over a sizeable share of their produce to the king. The response of the people to this warning is not one which gives us great confidence in their wisdom -

**read 8:19-20.** We are back with the adolescent wisdom of “all the other kids are allowed to have this”. But the chapter ends with God clearly saying that Samuel is to give the people a king – **read 8:21-22.** At this point, we have to say that God does want the Israelites to have a king. But it looks more like a concession than the best possible thing.

**God Gives Israel Saul as King (9:1-10:25)** In these next two chapters we see that God goes beyond merely giving permission, and provides Israel with a king. He provides them with Saul, a man whom God can use, although he eventually proves to be a seriously flawed man. A lot happens in these two chapters, and I’m not able to go into detail, but I will outline the stages of God’s providing Israel with Saul as their first king. The narrator introduces us to Saul in the opening verses – **read 9:1-2.** Clearly, he was an impressive-looking young man. It is tempting to say that this is unimportant, and to think ahead to what God says when leading Samuel to choose David as the second king: “People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” But there is no hint of this at this stage in the narrative. It may well be that God knows that the first king needs to be impressive in appearance in order to be accepted. We now come to the events which lead to Saul’s becoming king. The first step occurs (in 9:3-10:1) when Saul goes looking for his father’s missing donkeys and seeks help from a seer. The seer is Samuel, and God has told him that the man who should be king is going to come to him. When Saul comes God reveals to Samuel that he is the man, and Samuel anoints him, saying, “Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance?” God then further uses Samuel to confirm to Saul that he is God’s choice to be king (10:2-16). Samuel predicts what will happen to Saul, and his predictions are proved correct. Among these things is Saul’s experience of the Spirit of God coming upon him with power, and causing him to prophesy. At the end of this incident Saul reports to his uncle what has happened to him, including Samuel’s assuring him that the donkeys have been found, but he makes no mention of the kingship. This suggests that Saul is a reluctant candidate for kingship, and that God is therefore providing him with reassurance. Finally, Samuel summons God’s people together at Mizpah, and conducts a public process of discovering God’s choice for king by means of the drawing of lots. It is no surprise to Samuel, or to us, when the lot falls on Saul. When he is found and brought before the people, Samuel hails him as the man chosen by God and draws attention to his impressive appearance, which provokes shouts of “Long live the king!”

**Saul Begins Well as King (10:26-11:15)** When we read on we soon discover that these shouts do not represent unanimous support for Saul as king. **Read 10:26-27a.** Apparently there were some who did not want Saul as king. Perhaps they wanted someone else, or perhaps they wanted to continue with having judges. Certainly their question reflects the task which God gave to the Judges. How does Saul respond to this? **Read**

**10:27b.** We are not told why Saul behaved in this way, and more than one interpretation is possible, but I am inclined to think that it is a wise response. Certainly the next incident shows Saul performing well, rather like the better Judges. Saul rescues the people of Jabesh Gilead by successfully leading an army of Israelites against the Ammonites (11:1-11). He then behaves well in the aftermath of the battle, and is confirmed as king. **Read 11:12-15.** So what are we to say? That all is now well? Yes, for the time being. But we will soon see that Saul does not continue to do as well as this.

**Conclusion** So, did God want Israel to have a king? Yes, he did. But neither Israel's reasons for wanting a king nor its manner of seeking one were altogether healthy. I think that it is fair to say that the biblical narrative shows that the form of Israel's leadership was not the most important question. Much more important was the attitude of both leaders and people to God. This is still true for us. It is not what kind of leadership structure we have which matters most, but what kind of people we have as our leaders. And what kind of people we all are, people who serve God faithfully and love one another.