**Israel Asks for a King**

Chapter 7 of 1st Samuel recorded a high point in the life of Samuel as well as the history of Israel. Samuel presided over a rededication by the people to serve God only and to renounce their idols. God responded by giving them a victory over the Philistines. Since this happened about 20 years after the death of Eli, Samuel was still a relatively young man and the end of chapter 7 says that he continued to judge Israel all the days of his life. As chapter 8 begins, Samuel is an old man so a substantial gap in time separates chapters 7 & 8. It is regrettable that instead of reading about the positive years he served as judge, we see that toward the end of his life, he repeated the mistake of Eli by naming his sons Joel and Abijah as judges. Samuel had no right to do this since judges were raised up and call by God to serve a specific purpose at a specific time. Like Eli’s sons, Joel and Abijah used their office for personal gain.

The behavior of Samuel’s sons caused the elders to confront Samuel and demand a king. While they were right to rebuke Samuel for what his sons did, they were wrong to ask for a king. It is likely that they saw their future under the leadership of Samuel’s sons and decided that they needed to act before Samuel’s death. Their stated reason for asking for a king was astonishing, they wanted to be like other nations. Perhaps 400 years had elapsed since the Israelites prepared to go into Canaan. During that time, God had defeated countless nations and kings (see Josh. 12:24) yet they stood before Samuel professing their jealousy of those same nations. There was a self appointed king in Israel’s past who ruled at least part of the nation. Abimelech seized power after the death of Gideon and ruthlessly terrorized the people of Shechem for 3 years beginning by murdering 70 of his brothers (see Judges chapter 9). Apparently, sufficient time had gone by for the Israelites to forget what happened under their first king.

Samuel realized their request was wrong and he prayed to God for guidance. God told Samuel that it was God Himself whom they rejected instead of Samuel. God told Samuel to honor their request but first he was to warn them of the consequences. Samuel described the following that what would happen under a king: He would conscript their sons into his service, some would act as his personal slaves and some would serve in his army. Their daughters would also enter his service performing household chores. A king would confiscate their best fields and vineyards then demand a tenth of what they had left produced. Finally, they themselves would become the king’s slaves and they would cry out to the Lord for relief but God would not answer. Their minds were made up and the bleak picture Samuel painted for them was no deterrence. The repeated their demand for a king saying that he would go out and fight their battles. It is ironic that they did not stop to think that it was God who had fought their battles in the past. In the future, it would not be their king but their sons who would fight their battles. God told Samuel “Listen to them and give them a king”. The chapter ends with Samuel dismissing the people and sending them home.

Matthew Henry noted that a king would require a great retinue with a multitude of attendants. He would require a great table, not content to dine with his neighbors. He would require a great army with many garrisons. He would have great favorites who he would enrich at their expense. He would have great revenues to maintain his grandeur and would get those revenues from the people. Under the law, God expected a tenth to be paid voluntarily to support the church, the tenth required by the king would be levied with more rigor.

God predicted that Israel would demand a king (see Deut. 17:14) but He intended that the king would be chosen by Him and that he would not consider himself better than his brothers and would carefully follow the law (see Deut. 17-18-20). He said that if the king met those requirements then he and his descendants would reign a long time. As we will see in the coming chapters and the next few books, most of the kings who ruled did not fulfill the role as God intended