

The Background to David Becoming King over Israel

Part 5

As chapter 8 begins, Samuel is now old and his sons, who normally would succeed him in judging the nation, become corrupted, thus disqualifying them from carrying out the role. That sets the stage for the next phase in the chronology of Israel's history.

The Shift to Monarchy and The People's Choice (1 Samuel 8-12)

- **The Setting:** In spite of the Philistines being defeated at Mizpah through the power of Adonai, they returned to their five heavily fortified cities along the southwestern Mediterranean coast. Because their cities strategically flanked the Via Maris ("The Way of the Sea"), the most lucrative international highway connecting Egypt to Mesopotamia, that gave the Philistines massive economic wealth, trading networks, and an elaborate olive oil monopoly.
- **The Theme:** Be careful what you wish for. God gives the people exactly what they want—a king who looks perfect on the outside but lacks the deep character required on the inside.

The Demand for a Human King (1 Samuel 8)

- **Summary:** When the elders of Israel look at the Philistines and see a highly disciplined, wealthy machine with advanced iron chariots and unified lords, they concluded that Israel was vulnerable with just a loose confederation of tribes. This context explains *why* the elders of Israel are panicking and demanding an earthly king to fight their battles. They don't just want a king out of vanity—they are looking at the Philistines and crying out for military security instead of trusting their invisible God.

Two things stand out in this passage: In verse 4, they want to be "like the (other) nations." But there was no other nation that had a relationship with the true God of the universe. In verse 7, Adonai tells Samuel that this is all about the covenant nation rejecting Adonai as their actual king. And that should lead us to ask why are we so easily tempted to trade God's unique calling on our lives for the security, trends, or structures of the culture around us?

Samuel warns them that a human king will draft their children, tax their lands, and take their best livestock, but the people refuse to listen. God confirms their decision and instructs Samuel in v. 22 to give the people the king they desire. This outcome is consistent with other passages of Scripture:

"But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me. So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices" (Psalm 81:11-12).

"And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper" (Romans 1:28).

In each case, they confirm that when people choose to rebel against God in some manner, He grants them their desires and then allows them to experience the full, natural consequences of their choices.

The connection to David

Saul is given in judgment because the people rejected God. David, on the other hand, is chosen by God's own initiative to be a shepherd who represents God's grace. While Saul's kingdom will quickly crumble, God promises that David's line will endure forever because it is rooted in God's covenant promise, not a human power grab.

The Introduction of Saul (1 Samuel 9)

- **Summary:** Saul is introduced as a handsome, impressive Benjamite who stands a head taller than anyone else in Israel. The narrative begins with him performing a simple, mundane task: searching for his father's lost donkeys.

The connection to David

Saul is the epitome of what human beings look for in a leader—tall, imposing, and visually striking. When God later sends Samuel to find David, Samuel expects another tall king, but God explicitly warns him: "Do not consider his appearance or his height." The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

As the narrative continues, Saul goes to the place where Samuel lives, thinking that the prophet will help him find his donkeys. But God was using the situation for a very different reason—the anointing of Saul to be king over Israel.

- **Summary:** The anointing of Saul by the prophet Samuel is a monumental shift in biblical history. It marks the official transition of Israel from a loose confederation of tribes led by judges to a centralized monarchy. By having Samuel anoint Saul privately, God shows that even though He is granting the people's request, He retains ultimate sovereignty. Saul does not seize power, nor is he elected by popular vote; he is chosen and set apart by God.

Samuel explicitly reminds Saul that he is being made a ruler over "His [God's] inheritance". This phrase serves as a strict warning to the new king: the people of Israel do not belong to Saul; they belong to Adonai. Saul is not an absolute, independent monarch like the pagan kings around him; he is a covenant steward who must answer to God for how he treats God's possession.

The connection to David

Previously, only priests and high priests were anointed with oil prior to serving God. What makes Saul's anointing in 1 Samuel 10:1 so significant is that it expanded a holy ritual previously restricted to the priesthood and applied it to political leadership. By using the same type of ritual oil on a king that was used on priests, God was signaling that the office of the king was not secular. The king was expected to be just as holy, dedicated, and submissive to God's law as the priesthood. The anointing of Saul establishes a profound pattern of messianic kingship that connects directly to King David and ultimately finds its fulfillment in Yeshua as the King Messiah.

One profound distinction stands out: When Saul was anointed, the Holy Spirit came upon him to equip him to rule, but because of his rebellion, the Spirit later departed from him (1 Samuel 16:14). In contrast, when David was anointed, the Bible says the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David from that day forward (1 Samuel 16:13).

Saul is Chosen King (1 Samuel 10)

- **Summary:** Samuel gathers Israel at Mizpah to publicly present their new king. When the lot falls on Saul, he is nowhere to be found because he is hiding among the baggage out of fear or insecurity. When he is brought out, the people shout, "Long live the king!"

The connection to David

Saul hides from his public calling among the baggage. Contrast this with David's first public appearance on the battlefield in Chapter 17: when David sees Goliath defying God, he doesn't hide. He runs toward the giant because his confidence rests entirely in God, not in his own strength.

Saul's First Military Victory (1 Samuel 11)

- **The Setting:** Nahash, King of the Ammonites, besieged Jabesh Gilead, an Israelite city located east of the Jordan River in territory allotted to the half-tribe of Manasseh. When the town asked for a peace treaty, Nahash offered a barbaric condition: he would only make peace if he could gouge out the right eye of every single man to disgrace Israel.
- **Summary:** The Spirit of God empowers Saul, who rallies a massive Israelite army, cuts down the Ammonites, and graciously prevents his critics from being executed in the aftermath. This rescue of the city solidified Saul's authority as Israel's undisputed first king. But, before this victory, Saul was a king in title only. Saul's military triumph over the Ammonites proved to the entire nation that he possessed the divine empowerment required to protect them.

Because the political landscape had completely shifted from doubt to enthusiastic support, Samuel seized the moment by calling upon the people to "go to Gilgal and renew the kingdom there." The term "renew" is vital here. This was not a secondary crowning, but rather a nationwide confirmation. They chose Gilgal because it was a sacred site loaded with historical memory—the very place where Israel first camped after crossing the Jordan River under Joshua. By gathering there, the nation was collectively agreeing to transition out of the era of the Judges and formally step into the era of the Monarchy.

The connection to David

This text proves Saul wasn't entirely evil; he was genuinely empowered by God's Spirit for military victory. David will experience a similar empowering, but with a tragic twist. In Chapter 16, the Spirit will come powerfully upon David, and *simultaneously depart* from Saul. Saul's early victories show us what he could have been if he had remained submissive to God.

Samuel's Final Warning to Israel (1 Samuel 12)

- **Summary:** Samuel gives his farewell address, reminding the people that even though they have a king, both the king and the nation must still fear and obey the Lord. To prove God's displeasure with their demand, Samuel calls down a miraculous thunderstorm during the dry wheat harvest.

The connection to David

Samuel establishes the strict spiritual standard that any future king must meet. Saul will fail this test by putting his own desires above God's commands. David, despite his severe moral failures later in life, ultimately sets the standard for kingship because his heart's core orientation remains tethered to the fear of the Lord and absolute repentance.