God Rejects a King

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God is our one true King in whom His people should place their full trust.

MAIN PASSAGES: 1 Samuel 8:4-9,19-20; 13:6-9,13-14; 15:10-11,22-23

Our perception of the weather and the seasons is a curious thing because so often we find it hard to be content in the weather we are experiencing. When it is winter, we want the heat of summer. When it is summer, we want the cool of fall or winter. When the sun is beating down, we long for a rain cloud. But when the sky has been pouring, is it too much to ask for a break to see the blue sky and the sun once more?

What is your favorite season and/or weather pattern? What season or weather pattern do you least enjoy?
Group Time

Point 1: The people reject God as their true King
(1 Sam. 8:4-9,19-20).

4 So all the elders of Israel gathered together and went to Samuel at Ramah. 5 They said to him, “Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Therefore, appoint a king to judge us the same as all the other nations have.”

6 When they said, “Give us a king to judge us,” Samuel considered their demand wrong, so he prayed to the Lord. 7 But the Lord told him, “Listen to the people and everything they say to you. They have not rejected you; they have rejected me as their king. 8 They are doing the same thing to you that they have done to me, since the day I brought them out of Egypt until this day, abandoning me and worshiping other gods. 9 Listen to them, but solemnly warn them and tell them about the customary rights of the king who will reign over them.”

19 The people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We must have a king over us. 20 Then we’ll be like all the other nations: our king will judge us, go out before us, and fight our battles.”

The Israelites experienced a déjà vu moment as Samuel’s two sons took advantage of their position as judges, just like Eli’s sons (1 Sam. 8:1-3). The last time, they lost in battle, lost the ark, and lost God’s presence and glory. Naturally, the Israelites wanted to change their path, so they asked Samuel for a king. The people’s request was not necessarily bad, but the heart behind it was—to be like the other nations around them.

What are some reasons we struggle with wanting to be like the world?

The Israelites’ request was problematic for another reason—they were rejecting God as their King. The people wanted a human king to judge them and lead them in their battles, but the Lord Himself had commanded them, led them, provided for them, fought for them, and ruled over them. They needed no one else, but that didn’t stop them, so God gave them what they wanted.

Voices from the Church

“God was Israel’s king. Israel was warned that to establish a human monarch was to spurn God. Israel did not heed the warning but preferred visible, human flesh to an invisible God.”

—Kay Arthur and David Arthur
Point 2: The people’s king fails to trust God (1 Sam. 13:6-9,13-14).

6 The men of Israel saw that they were in trouble because the troops were in a difficult situation. They hid in caves, in thickets, among rocks, and in holes and cisterns. 7 Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul, however, was still at Gilgal, and all his troops were gripped with fear. 8 He waited seven days for the appointed time that Samuel had set, but Samuel didn’t come to Gilgal, and the troops were deserting him. 9 So Saul said, “Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings.” Then he offered the burnt offering.

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13 Samuel said to Saul, “You have been foolish. You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you. It was at this time that the LORD would have permanently established your reign over Israel, 14 but now your reign will not endure. The LORD has found a man after his own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over his people, because you have not done what the LORD commanded.”

Saul looked the part of a king, and his first actions as king secured the approval of his people. But faithful leadership is more than skin deep—it is a matter of the heart. Saul was commanded by Samuel to wait for him for seven days in Gilgal, when he would come to offer sacrifices and give instructions for the battle (10:8). Saul waited, but all the while his troops were deserting him in fear. When he couldn’t take it any longer, he gave up waiting and made the sacrifices himself; in his own fear, Saul took into his own hands a responsibility that belonged to priests alone. And then Samuel arrived (13:10).

What is the relationship between fear and patience?

Samuel listened to Saul’s excuses: he saw his people deserting, he had not yet seen Samuel, and he feared the Philistines (13:10-12). But no excuse justified Saul’s rash action. He disobeyed Samuel’s command and thereby disobeyed God. The people’s foolish request for a king like the nations’ had resulted in a king who made a foolish decision on behalf of his people. Saul’s lack of faith led to disobedience and to consequences—there would be no dynasty for Saul and his descendants.

What is the relationship between faith and obedience?
Point 3: The people’s king fails to obey God (1 Sam. 15:10-11,22-23).

10 Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, 
11 “I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned away from following me and has not carried out my instructions.” So Samuel became angry and cried out to the LORD all night.

22 Then Samuel said:

Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams. 
23 For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and defiance is like wickedness and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.

The time had come for God’s judgment to fall on the Amalekites for attacking the Israelites during the exodus. According to God’s command through Samuel, Saul was to kill all the Amalekites and their animals (1 Sam. 15:1-3; see Ex. 17:14; Deut. 25:17-19), but he spared King Agag and the best of the animals to use as sacrifices to the Lord. When confronted by Samuel for his disobedience, Saul insisted that he had obeyed; he could neither see nor hear how he had fallen short of God’s command.

Sin as Missing the Mark: One aspect of sin is missing the mark of God’s ______________ set for humanity. This missing of the mark is not a simple mistake but a falling short of God’s ______________ through conscious ______________ of sin.

The Lord “regretted” making Saul king over Israel, not because He didn’t know the end result of his appointment but because Saul refused to obey the Lord’s commands. Further, Saul justified his disobedience in the language of worship and sacrifice. The Lord, however, was not pleased; He rejected Saul’s intended worship, Saul’s excuses, and Saul as king because the Lord delights in faithful obedience.

What are some characteristics that accompany faithful obedience?
My Mission

Because we have trusted in Christ, the King of kings, for our salvation, we seek to put away all disobedience and submit fully to Him, so that the world will experience redemption through Him and enter into God’s kingdom.

• What are some ways you will stop following your own heart to follow the Lord’s in faithful obedience?

• How can your group lead one another toward holiness and away from rebellion?

• Whom will you confront in their rebellion and call them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ?

Voices from Church History

“This is the greatest fault under which humanity labors, that after sinning they take refuge in excuses rather than prostrate themselves with repentant confession.”

—Cassiodorus (c. 490-583)
Daily Study

Day 1: Read 1 Samuel 8

The Israelites had been led by a series of judges and prophets for generations, but as they turned their gaze toward the nations surrounding them, they noticed that the nations were all led by kings. So they wanted this too—to be led by a king—and that was where they made their tragic mistake. The problem was not necessarily in wanting a king—God had said they would have kings (Gen. 17:6,16; 35:11; 49:10; Num. 24:7,17-19)—but in taking their eyes off of God and placing them on the nations around them.

The root reason why their demand for a king displeased God was because the people chose the pagan nations around them as a template for their lives rather than God and His word. They rejected their call to be a holy nation serving a holy God and instead sought to blend into their surroundings. God did not call His people to be cultural chameleons but countercultural lions who followed His lead and timing and looked forward to “the Lion from the tribe of Judah”—Jesus Christ (Rev. 5:5; see Gen. 49:8-12), and He has called us to be the same.

In what ways might you be tempted to blend in instead of stand out for your faith in God?
Let there be no doubt: Saul was an impressive man (9:2). When the Israelites thought of the archetype for a king, surely Saul was at the top of the list. He was impressive, and that is a core characteristic of a king. A king who is impressive is easier to follow and easier for other nations to fear.

Little did the Israelites know, although they should have, that God was teaching them an important lesson. God was showing His people that their hope should not based on the leader of their imaginations but rather on one of His provision. The Israelites did not need a king who was tall, handsome, or who would strike fear into their enemies. They needed a king who, through his humility, would lead them, the enemies of God, into restored relationship with Him. God would show the Israelites this through the failure of Saul, the king who looked like a king but failed; in this he pointed toward Jesus, the King who did not look like a king but who brought victory over sin and death.

? In what ways do you see Jesus reflecting the qualities of a king, and in what ways was He an unexpected king?

Saul had led God’s people to a great victory, and as the people basked in the aftermath, perhaps fueled by massive quantities of adrenaline left over from the fight, some called for those who had doubted their new king to be put to death (11:12). Hearing this, Saul could have heartily consented to this demand, thereby ridding himself of potential adversaries or at least resisters. Instead, he stood before the people and declared that no one would be executed; instead, everyone should focus on the victory the Lord had given them (11:13). In this critical moment, Saul demonstrated wisdom, mercy, and grace and pointed his people to the Lord. We should give credit where credit is due. But we should also look more broadly at Saul’s reign than just one moment. It’s not how you start, it’s how you finish that matters. We need to be careful never to rest on past accomplishments and moments of obedience. Yes, we should be grateful for them and recognize God’s kindness to give us these victories, but we should also never forget that our race is not done until we, by God’s sustaining grace, cross the finish line.

? What victories has God given you in the past? How can these help you when you are tempted to give up or fall back into habitual sin?
Day 4: Read 1 Samuel 13–14

Samuel, the man of God, had given Saul clear instructions: “Wait for seven days, then I will come to you to make a sacrifice and show you what to do” (see 10:8). Easy enough, until everything began falling apart around Saul. The king’s army was in a bad place and his men began to leave. Saul had to do something. He had to act, so he did. He made the offerings to the Lord himself (13:6-10). And just as he was finishing, Samuel arrived, as he had said—on the seventh day. Samuel the prophet would not be happy with Saul the king. Saul had done what he should not have done—the king does not make the sacrifice, the priest does. In Saul’s moment of desperation, he sinned by stepping out of his God-given role and into that of another.

Sometimes doing something is the worst thing we can do. Sometimes the best thing we can do is nothing. That was what Saul should have done. He should have done nothing but wait on Samuel and, more importantly, trust in the Lord. Sometimes it takes more courage and faith to do nothing and prayerfully wait on the Lord than to do something.

What might you be trying to do in your own wisdom and strength instead of waiting on the Lord?

Day 5: Read 1 Samuel 15

Soon after Saul performed a sacrifice he should not have made, he failed to obey God’s explicit instruction to completely destroy the Amalekites and their possessions. Saul kept King Agag alive as well as some of the animals, presumably to perform a sacrifice to the Lord.

When Samuel confronted the king in his sin, he told him something quite profound, “to obey is better than sacrifice” (v. 22). Samuel was surely not saying that sacrifice—worship—is unimportant. We know that we were created to worship God and God expects worship from us. These words were not a matter of worship being unimportant but rather the centrality of obedience. If we truly are worshiping God, recognizing His great worth, then we will obey. We must. We cannot proclaim the glory of God from a posture of disobedience. Our disobedience disproves our worship. Obedience, on the other hand, affirms it. Saul’s supposed act of worship was nothing of the sort because he was in a state of disobedience. Obedience and worship are fused together.

In what ways might you be disobeying God and thus impairing your worship?
Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- The people reject God as their true King (1 Sam. 8:4-9,19-20).
- The people’s king fails to trust God (1 Sam. 13:6-9,13-14).
- The people’s king fails to obey God (1 Sam. 15:10-11,22-23).

How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?

In what ways do you feel the pull to want the same things as “the nations”? What do you find to be the most effective way to combat this pull and to reorient your desires with God’s purposes?

When have you been tempted to take action rather than wait on God to provide? Why is waiting sometimes difficult?

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In this volume of *The Gospel Project*, we cover the roughly one hundred and twenty years of Israel’s heyday: the united monarchy. After decades of the devastating cycle of sin and deliverance and being ruled by a series of judges, the Israelites called on Samuel to appoint a king for them—one like those of the nations around them. God warned His people that what they were requesting would lead to heartache and trouble, but they insisted. So God, in His kindness, gave them what they wanted in order to teach them to trust Him.

What followed was a series of three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon, each ruling for about forty years. In some ways, these kings provide us with examples to follow: the fierce determination of David not to stand for anyone impugning God’s character; the mercy and kindness David showed to a foe and his family; the wisdom of Solomon. But we also discover that each of these three men fell woefully short of being the king God’s people wanted and needed, each one proving God’s warnings true. Bookending God’s people crying out as one for a king at the start of this volume, by the time we finish, we encounter God’s people being divided into two kingdoms.

Our takeaway is clear: The hope of humanity does not rest in any human king or leader but is fixed solely and securely in the King of kings, Jesus Christ. But at the same time, we see that God delights in using His people despite their failings. God would fulfill His covenant with David, even though he committed adultery and murder. This reaffirmed the promises God had made to Abraham generations before. And though Solomon would succumb to polygamy and idolatry, God used him to build the temple, a place for God’s people to worship and be in relationship with God.

So consider as you study: What might God do through us?