

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Samuel Judges Israel; "Give Us a King"

1 Samuel 7:1–8:22

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson moves the class along two arcs that belong together. The first is the bright arc of chapter 7: repentance, the putting away of idols, the gathering at Mizpah, the Lord's deliverance, and the memorial stone Ebenezer. Help the class feel the warmth of a God who waits twenty years and then answers swiftly when His people return. Press home that biblical repentance is not a mood but a turning, a setting aside of rival gods and a preparing of the heart unto the Lord only (7:3–4). Tie this to the New Testament call to repentance and to the joy of forgiveness, and use Ebenezer to encourage every Christian to build memory markers of God's faithfulness.

The second arc is the shadowed one of chapter 8: Israel's demand for a king like all the nations. The aim here is to expose the heart of that request as a rejection of God's rule (8:7) and to let the class see themselves in it, for the longing to be like the world is not ancient history. Walk carefully through God's warning about the cost of human kingship (8:11–18) and through the sobering truth that God granted the request anyway. Be clear, in church-of-Christ fashion, that this points forward not to a future earthly political kingdom but to Christ who reigns now (Acts 2:30–36; Colossians 1:13). Avoid any reading that defers His kingship to a coming millennial throne.

Keep the application personal and pastoral. The goal is not merely to analyze Israel but to lead each person to surrender afresh to the rightful King, to name and put away their own idols, and to remember, with Ebenezer in view, how far the Lord has already brought them.

Question 1

Student Question:

According to 1 Samuel 7:3, what did Samuel say Israel must do to be delivered from the Philistines, and what does this teach us about the way God brings genuine restoration to His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Samuel's first recorded word to a backsliding nation is not a battle plan but a call to the heart: "If ye do return unto the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve him only; and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines" (7:3). Notice the order. Deliverance from the enemy is

real, but it follows return to the Lord; it does not replace it. Israel wanted relief from the Philistines, and God offered them something deeper first, Himself.

Return is the great prophetic word, and it carries the idea of turning the whole self around and walking back the way you came. It is not a feeling that washes over a person on a hard night; it is a decision worked out with the hands. That is why the very next verse reports action: "Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the Lord only" (7:4). Repentance that changes nothing in the schedule, the wallet, or the relationships has not yet happened.

For our instruction (Romans 15:4), this scene previews the gospel call. John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles all began with repentance (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38). The God who waited for Israel waits still, ready to forgive the one who truly turns. But the turning must be real, and it must put away rivals.

The phrase "with all your hearts" forbids a divided loyalty. God does not ask to be one idol among many on the shelf; He asks to be the only One. That is the hinge of the whole lesson, and it sets up, by contrast, the tragedy of chapter 8, where the people's hearts will turn toward a king like the nations.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Restoration with God always begins with a returning heart, not merely with a change of circumstances.
- Genuine repentance is a turning of the will that produces visible action (7:4), not a passing emotion.
- God's call to return is patient and gracious; He had waited twenty years (7:2).
- Idolatry is anything we serve in God's place; the strange gods must be put away, not merely added to.
- This Old Testament call anticipates the gospel summons to repentance (Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between wanting relief from consequences and truly returning to God?
- Why does Samuel insist on putting away idols before promising deliverance?
- How would you explain biblical repentance to someone who thinks feeling sorry is enough?

Question 2

Student Question:

Israel “put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the Lord only” (7:4). What idols compete for your loyalty, and what does putting them away actually require of you, not in feeling only but in action?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The text is blunt: “Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the Lord only” (7:4). Baal was the storm and fertility god of Canaan, Ashtaroth the goddess of love and war. These were the respectable, productive idols of the surrounding culture, the gods you turned to for crops, security, and success. Israel did not abandon the Lord with a fist in the air; they drifted toward whatever the neighbors trusted to make life work.

That is exactly how idolatry comes to us. Few of us bow to a carved image. But many of us quietly serve the gods of our culture, the bank balance that promises safety, the applause that promises worth, the screen that promises we will never have to sit alone with our thoughts. An idol is simply anything we look to for what only God can give.

Putting them away is costly. For Israel it meant physically removing objects and breaking habits of worship. For us it may mean canceling something, closing an account, ending a relationship, deleting an app, having a hard conversation. Jesus spoke of cutting off a hand and plucking out an eye (Matthew 5:29–30), the language of decisive, sometimes painful, removal.

And notice the goal: not emptiness but a new master, “served the Lord only.” The heart was made to worship. We do not merely subtract an idol; we replace it with wholehearted service to the living God, who alone is worthy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Idolatry usually mirrors the culture's trusted sources of security and success.
- An idol is whatever we look to for what only God can provide.
- Putting away idols is a deliberate, often costly act, not a vague intention.
- Worship abhors a vacuum; idols must be replaced by wholehearted service to God.
- Self-examination must be specific, naming the rival rather than confessing in general.

Discussion Prompts

- What modern idols masquerade as harmless necessities?
- What concrete step have you been avoiding because putting an idol away would cost you something?
- How does serving the Lord only fill the space an idol leaves behind?

Question 3

Student Question:

At Mizpah the people drew water, poured it out before the Lord, fasted, and said, "We have sinned against the Lord" (7:5–6). What marks this as true repentance rather than mere regret, and how does the New Testament describe genuine repentance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

At Mizpah the people did something striking: "they gathered together, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord" (7:6). The poured-out water is a vivid picture of hearts emptied before God, holding nothing back, a public, embodied confession. Fasting joined the body to the soul's sorrow. And the words were plain: "We have sinned."

True repentance names the sin as sin, against God. David would later pray, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned" (Psalm 51:4). Israel did not blame the Philistines or the times; they took responsibility before the Lord. This is the difference between regret, which is sorry for the pain sin causes us, and repentance, which grieves the offense against God and turns from it.

Paul draws the line clearly: "godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Worldly sorrow weeps over getting caught; godly sorrow weeps over having sinned and then changes course. Mizpah is godly sorrow on display.

And mark the result. Their confession was met not with rejection but with God's saving hand in the verses that follow. The Lord does not despise a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). When we come this honestly, we come to a God who is faithful and just to forgive (1 John 1:9).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confession names sin specifically and owns it before God (7:6).
- Repentance differs from mere regret; godly sorrow leads to a changed life (2 Corinthians 7:10).
- Public, embodied acts of humility can express genuine inward turning.
- Sin is ultimately against God, even when it harms others (Psalm 51:4).
- God receives the contrite heart and is faithful to forgive (1 John 1:9).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between being sorry you were caught and being sorry you sinned?
- Why is it important to name sin honestly rather than excuse it?
- How does knowing God forgives the contrite free us to confess fully?

Question 4

Student Question:

Samuel set up a stone and called it Ebenezer, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us" (7:12). What are the "Ebenezer stones" in your own walk, and how could remembering them strengthen you in present trials?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the victory, "Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us" (7:12). Ebenezer means stone of help. Samuel planted a permanent marker so that everyone who passed that way would remember not their own strength but God's deliverance.

We are forgetful people. Israel could forget the Red Sea within weeks. We can forget answered prayer by the next afternoon. So God's people have always built memorials, stones, feasts, songs, written testimonies, anything that says, stop here and remember what the Lord did. The Christian life needs its Ebenezers.

Notice the word hitherto, this far. Samuel was not claiming every battle was won; he was marking that up to this moment, God had been faithful. That is a humble and honest confession. It does not pretend the road ahead is safe; it simply testifies that the God who has helped us this far is the God we will trust for the rest.

Personal Ebenezers might be a verse you cling to from a dark season, a journal entry, a date circled on a calendar, the spot where you were baptized, the chair where you prayed through a crisis. Building them is not sentimentality; it is spiritual discipline. Memory feeds faith, and forgetfulness starves it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's people are prone to forget His help; memorials guard against forgetfulness.
- Ebenezer points away from human strength to divine deliverance.
- "Hitherto" is an honest, humble testimony to faithfulness up to the present moment.
- Remembering past grace strengthens faith for present and future trials.
- Building memory markers is a spiritual discipline, not mere sentiment.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one Ebenezer in your life, a place or time where God clearly helped you?
- How might you build a memory marker so you do not forget God's faithfulness?
- Why does remembering the past strengthen present faith?

Question 5

Student Question:

When Israel cried to the Lord and He thundered against the Philistines (7:9–11), what does the contrast between earlier defeat and this victory reveal about where Israel's true strength lay?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The contrast with chapter 4 is deliberate. There, Israel dragged the ark into battle like a lucky charm and were slaughtered. Here, they cry to the Lord through Samuel, who offers a sucking lamb for a burnt offering, and as the Philistines draw near, “the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them” (7:10). The same God, two entirely different outcomes. The difference was the people's heart.

Earlier, Israel trusted the symbol while ignoring the Lord it represented. Now they trust the Lord Himself, having put away their idols and humbled themselves. The thunder makes the point unmistakable: this was not Israel's military genius but God's intervention. Their part was repentance, prayer, and sacrifice; the victory was His.

This is a recurring lesson across Scripture. “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God” (Psalm 20:7). When God's people lean on Him rather than on substitutes for Him, He shows Himself strong on their behalf.

It is sobering and freeing at once. Sobering, because no ritual, possession, or technique can substitute for a right relationship with God. Freeing, because once the heart is right, the outcome rests in hands far stronger than ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Israel's true strength was the Lord Himself, not religious symbols (contrast chapter 4).
- Victory followed repentance, prayer, and sacrifice, with God acting decisively (7:10).
- Trusting the symbol while ignoring God is a form of idolatry.
- God receives the glory when deliverance is plainly His doing.
- Right relationship with God matters more than any ritual or possession.

Discussion Prompts

- How do we sometimes trust religious symbols or routines rather than God Himself?
- What does it mean practically to lean on the Lord rather than on substitutes?
- How does it free us to know the outcome rests in God's hands?

Question 6

Student Question:

Samuel “judged Israel all the days of his life” and went year by year on a circuit (7:15–17). What does his steady, unglamorous faithfulness over a lifetime stir in you about your own quiet, daily service?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The narrative quietly honors a lifetime: “And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places. And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house” (7:15–17). No fireworks here, just a man going from town to town, year after year, doing the work God gave him.

We tend to admire the dramatic moment, the thunder over the Philistines. But the kingdom of God runs on the unglamorous faithfulness of people like the older Samuel, the teacher who shows up every Lord's Day, the elder who visits the sick, the parent who prays over children no one applauds. Faithfulness is mostly made of ordinary days strung together.

Notice too that he kept returning to Ramah, to his home and an altar he built there. A life of service was anchored in a settled walk with God. The circuit was sustained by the center. We cannot pour out year after year unless we are continually filled at home, in private worship and prayer.

Jesus honored this kind of steadiness: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). Not, well done, thou spectacular servant, but faithful. The long obedience in the same direction is what God blesses, and it is within reach of every ordinary Christian.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The kingdom advances largely through quiet, lifelong faithfulness (7:15–17).
- Ordinary, unglamorous service is honored by God (Matthew 25:21).
- Sustained ministry requires a settled, anchored walk with God.
- Steadiness over a lifetime outweighs occasional dramatic moments.
- Every Christian is called to faithfulness, not necessarily to prominence.

Discussion Prompts

- Whose quiet, faithful service has shaped your life, and have you ever thanked them?
- What unglamorous task is God calling you to do faithfully over the long haul?
- How do you keep your private walk with God anchored so you can serve others?

Question 7

Student Question:

In 8:5 the elders ask for a king “like all the nations.” Why does God call this a rejection of Himself (8:7) rather than a rejection of Samuel, and what does this reveal about the nature of all our sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The elders come with a request: “Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations” (8:5). On the surface it sounds practical. Samuel is old, his sons are corrupt, and a king would provide stability. But when Samuel prays, the Lord pierces to the heart of it: “they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them” (8:7).

Israel was unlike all the nations by design. The Lord Himself was their King; that was their glory and their distinction. To ask for a king like everyone else was to trade their unique calling for the world's pattern. The phrase like all the nations is the tell. They wanted to belong to the world more than they wanted to belong to God.

This unmasks the nature of all sin. Every sin is, at bottom, a refusal to let God reign, a quiet declaration that we would rather rule ourselves or be ruled by something more visible than the unseen God. The first temptation was a bid for autonomy, ye shall be as gods (Genesis 3:5), and the impulse never left us.

For the church, the warning lands close. There is a perennial temptation to want the Lord's people to look and operate like the world, to measure success by the world's metrics, to crave the world's approval. But Christ is King now (Acts 2:30–36), and to follow Him is to be, gladly, unlike all the nations.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Rejecting God's rule is the heart of Israel's request (8:7) and of all sin.
- Israel's calling was to be unlike the nations because God Himself reigned.
- “Like all the nations” exposes the desire to belong to the world over God.
- Sin is fundamentally a refusal to let God reign (Genesis 3:5).
- The church faces the same temptation to conform to the world (Romans 12:2).

Discussion Prompts

- Why is wanting to be like everyone else sometimes a rejection of God?
- Where do you see the church tempted to adopt the world's measures of success?
- How is every sin, at root, a refusal to let God reign?

Question 8

Student Question:

Samuel warned the people, in detail, what a human king would take from them (8:11–18). When have you wanted something so badly that you ignored a clear warning, and what did it cost you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God grants the request, but not before a sober warning. Through Samuel He spells out exactly what a human king will do: “This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons... your daughters... your fields... your vineyards... and ye shall be his servants” (8:11–17). Five times in these verses the word take appears. The king they crave to give them will mostly take.

And then the chilling forecast: “And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you in that day” (8:18). God tells them in advance the bitter end of their demand, and still they insist (8:19).

How human this is. We often want something so badly that we wave away every warning, the friend's caution, the verse that pricks our conscience, the quiet check of the Spirit, the obvious cost. We tell ourselves it will be different for us. And later we stand in the wreckage the warning described.

The mercy here is that God warns at all. He does not let us walk into ruin uninformed. The tragedy is how often we hear the warning, count the cost, and choose the idol anyway. Wisdom listens before the bill comes due.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God warns clearly about the cost before granting Israel's request (8:11–18).
- The repeated word “take” exposes the true burden of human kingship.
- People often ignore plain warnings when desire is strong (8:19).
- God's willingness to warn is itself a mercy.
- Wisdom counts the cost and heeds the warning before acting.

Discussion Prompts

- When have you ignored a clear warning because you wanted something badly?
- What did pursuing it anyway end up costing you?
- How can we cultivate the wisdom to heed warnings before the bill comes due?

Question 9

Student Question:

God told Samuel, “Hearken unto their voice, and make them a king” (8:22), even though the request was sinful. What does it reveal about God's sovereignty and His justice that He sometimes grants what we wrongly demand and lets us live with the result?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends with a startling divine concession: “And the Lord said to Samuel, Hearken unto their voice, and make them a king” (8:22). God grants what He has just called a rejection of Himself. This is one of the most sobering truths in Scripture, that God sometimes gives us what we sinfully demand and lets us live with the consequences.

The psalmist describes it elsewhere: “he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul” (Psalm 106:15). And Paul speaks of God giving people up to the desires of their hearts (Romans 1:24). There is a judgment that consists not in God stopping us but in God stepping back and letting us have our way. Sometimes the most fearful answer to prayer is yes.

Yet God's sovereignty is never overthrown by human sin. Even in granting a sinful request, He remains in control of history. He will use the monarchy, in time, to bring forth David and ultimately the Son of David, the King who reigns now in righteousness (Acts 2:30–36; Colossians 1:13). Human rebellion does not derail the purposes of God; it is woven, mysteriously, into them.

This holds two truths together that we must not split apart. God is just, He warned them and held them responsible. And God is sovereign, He bent even their rebellion toward His redemptive end. We should tremble at the thought of getting our willful way, and we should rest in a God whose purposes cannot be defeated.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God sometimes grants sinful requests and lets us bear the consequences (8:22).
- A fearful form of judgment is God letting us have our own way (Psalm 106:15; Romans 1:24).
- God's sovereignty is never overthrown by human sin.
- The monarchy itself was woven into God's plan to bring forth the Christ (Acts 2:30–36).
- Divine justice and divine sovereignty must be held together, not split apart.

Discussion Prompts

- Why can a “yes” from God sometimes be a form of judgment?
- How does God remain sovereign even when He grants what we wrongly want?
- What comfort is there in knowing human rebellion cannot defeat God's purposes?

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific way Jesus, the true and rightful King, is forming your heart through this passage to trust His rule rather than to crave being “like all the nations.”

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Israel longed for a king they could see, one like the nations around them. The whole story aches with a desire that was, in part, right and, in the way they pursued it, deeply wrong. They were made to be ruled by a King; they simply wanted the wrong kind, on the world's terms. And the God who let them have Saul was, all the while, preparing a better King.

Every page of this chapter pushes us toward Christ. The King Israel truly needed was not a man who would take their sons and fields, but the One who would give His own life for His people, the Son of David enthroned now at God's right hand (Acts 2:30–36). To be His subject is not bondage but freedom, for He came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom (Mark 10:45).

So the forming question is personal. Where in your life are you still asking for a king like all the nations, looking to something visible and worldly to rule and secure you, rather than trusting the unseen King who reigns? Jesus is at work in honest hearts, gently exposing those rival thrones and inviting you to bow gladly to Him.

Becoming like Christ means letting Him reign, not as a distant idea but in the actual decisions of this week, the money, the relationships, the fears, the idols put away at Mizpah. Name one specific way He is doing that in you now, and let this passage be a stone set up, an Ebenezer of surrender to the rightful King.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Israel's craving for a visible king points to our need for the true King, Christ.
- Jesus is the better King who gives rather than takes (Mark 10:45).
- Christ reigns now at God's right hand over His people (Acts 2:30–36).
- Spiritual formation means letting Christ reign in concrete daily decisions.
- Surrender to the rightful King is freedom, not bondage.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you still looking to a worldly “king” to rule and secure you?
- What does it mean for you to bow gladly to Christ this week?
- Name one specific area where you sense Jesus inviting you to let Him reign.