

The Fine Print  
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1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15

How often do you actually read the so-called fine print? You know, that big block of words in tiny letters at the bottom of an advertisement which explains exactly what a product, a drug, or a service actually does and the ill effects it can have? The fine print is a lot more telling than a catchy jingle or eye-popping graphic when it comes to things like side effects or the actual rights a consumer has when they use a certain product or service. In other words: sure, go ahead and consume this. However, you need to be warned that it might be hazardous to your health – and don't sue us if that ends up being the case, because we told you so. Ignoring that fine print is something we do at our own risk. And yet, somehow, even with all the warnings the fine print contains, and our higher thought processes flashing caution lights about its very presence, we still go after the new or different thing because we think anything has to be better than the *status quo*. Until it turns out not to be, that is.<sup>1</sup>

Ignoring the fine print is exactly we find the elders of Israel doing this morning. They've gone to see the prophet Samuel to tell them they want a new form of government. In the few hundred years that have passed between the days of Moses and Joshua and this particular story, things haven't seemed to have gone quite so well as they would have liked. As we heard about last week, times were hard and visions had become rare. Dishonesty and greed among Israel's leaders had become the rule rather than the exception. This particular group of unnamed elders has had enough of

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<sup>1</sup> Joann A. Post, "June 6, Ordinary 10B (1 Samuel 8:4-20): What happens when Samuel reads his people the fine print?" <https://www.christiancentury.org/print/pdf/node/38453> [accessed June 4, 2024].

Samuel and his two corrupt sons, Joel and Abijah. They want something different. And they want to stop being different from their neighbors who all had kings "to govern [them] and go out before [them] and fight [their] battles" (1 Sam 8:20, NRSV). In other words: Come on, Samuel! Everyone else is doing it, so why can't we? Please? We promise we'll be good! Please?

One can almost hear Samuel sigh as he asks God just what he's supposed to do about this. God's answer? Let them. This isn't about you. But please read them the fine print first, so they have at least some idea of what they're really in for. Included in that fine print are six warnings that a king will not be the just ruler the people think he will be. This king, and his heirs, will take the very best of their people and their property to be used in wars and as rewards for courtiers; and at least a tenth of their grain, wine, oil and livestock for the king's own use. Even after hearing the consequences laid out so clearly, the elders just don't care. So God sighs, and gives into them... and the rest is history.

The narrator of 1 Samuel has the benefit of what is likely several hundred years of hindsight. They're telling the story from the perspective of someone who has lived through all the consequences that Samuel describes. They clearly believe that the end result of the monarchy was not good at all. Nearly all of the kings, starting with Saul and ending with Zedekiah and Jehoiachin, did what was evil in the sight of God by allowing the people to violate the commandment to worship no other gods but God. They also committed other acts ranging from stealing property that wasn't theirs (just ask poor Naboth what Ahaz did to his vineyard), enslaving their own people to build the Temple (I'm looking at you, Solomon), and outright murder (was that you, David?). The end

result of this pattern of poor governance, according to the narrator, was the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. This is why Samuel warns the elders that the king they want is not what they think it will be. And, again, the elders just don't care about this particular block of fine print. Their desire to be just like everyone else – to have what they considered better leadership (because anything is better than a totally corrupt *status quo*) – is the only thing that matters to them. And so God sighs and lets them exercise their gift of free will, and has Samuel anoint a king for them anyway.

The issues underlying this story are two: fear, and trust. The people are afraid that keeping things as they are, with Samuel and his sons in charge, will mean they can't keep up with their neighbors. And, despite the history, they don't trust God, much less God's willingness to ensure that they flourish. A commentary by Beth Elness-Hanson, who teaches at a Lutheran seminary in Iowa, frames the issue like this:

*"First, the people want to put their trust in an earthly king. God's relenting to the people's desire for a king will allow—if not challenge—the people to demonstrate the core of their trust. Will it be placed upon political leaders? Or will their trust rightly remain in the God of covenantal promise, deliverance, and blessing?"*

*"More importantly, there is an underlying issue of fear. The elders are afraid that they will be stuck with Joel and Abijah, though clearly YHWH knew that Samuel's sons were unfit for leadership of God's people. Fear is a great strategy that the evil one uses to try to undermine trust. This is not just Old Testament stories from the past; it is the story of our lives today. Fear gets a foothold because the people do not trust YHWH to*

*rule as their true sovereign. In this text, the people did not trust YHWH to manage the ruling over them.*"<sup>2</sup>

A lack of trust in God, and institutions like the government the Church, is not something we've been able to let go of entirely in the 2500 years or so since 1 Samuel was recorded. If anything, there's less of both than ever before. Many of the reasons for that lack of trust are well-documented, and I will not get into them here. However, the skepticism we all seem to harbor about whether our time-worn and honored institutions are still able to do anything for us is one of the reasons this story still resonates. It describes very well how just about anyone reacts to being told that they can have what they want, with conditions. The conditions very often don't matter... as long as we get the thing or person on which we have set our heart's desires, that is. That desire is not a bad thing, in and of itself. However it tends to prevent us from actually considering what might be good or bad as a result of actually getting the person or thing we think we want. The inability to stop and think things through reminds me of the story of King Midas from Greek mythology. Midas was so greedy that the gods let him have his wish of turning everything he touched to solid gold. It was not until Midas went to hug his own daughter, turning her into gold, that he realized that maybe it wasn't so good after all. He didn't stop to consider the fine print before giving in to his lust for riches, and it literally cost him everything.

Pursuing the shiny object is part of being human. However, God has given us the gift of a rational mind – a mind which can help us to actually pay attention to the fine

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<sup>2</sup> Beth E. Elness-Hanson, "Commentary on 1 Samuel 8:4-11 [12-15] 16-20; [11:14-15]." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-10-2/commentary-on-1-samuel-84-11-12-15-16-20-1114-15-5> [accessed June 4, 2024].

print and use it to decide whether that shiny object is in fact what it's cracked up to be. Because if we do that, we can avoid the fatal mistake the people of ancient Israel did when they begged Samuel to give them a king. That mistake was to think they could make it on their own, without having to rely on anyone other than themselves. It ultimately led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its people. Which was, to the narrator of this tale, entirely preventable... if the elders and the people had only read the fine print when Samuel presented it to them.