

Be Careful What You Ask For

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1 Sam 12:17b

(BHS)

וְדַעוּ וּרְאוּ כִּי־רַעַתְכֶם רַבָּה
אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה
לְשׂאוֹל לְכֶם מֶלֶךְ:

(YLT)

and know ye and see that your evil is great
which ye have done in the eyes of Jehovah,
to **ask** for you a king.

Line 1 uses first-year Hebrew vocab, albeit with weak verbs. Young’s translation makes it easy to follow. I picked Young’s for line 3; it preserves the syntax of the preposition with an infinitive—“to **ask**”—whereas most translations render it, “in asking.” No problem with that, except it is harder to see the Hebrew basis when glossed that way.

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Change of subject. There is something that is rather puzzling. The name “Saul” means “inquire, question, ask.” What is that about? Did he dress like the Riddler, with question marks all over him? (The fifth and sixth Doctors in the BBC show, *Doctor Who*, also had question marks on their lapels. There is also a conspiracy theorist comic book character called The Question. You can google them.) I believe his name plugs in to the overall narrative in a big way; it points away from itself to larger issues.

At this time in history, Israel had effectively thumbed their collective noses at Yahweh by demanding a human king. Yahweh was their divine King, but they didn’t want that. They wanted to be “like all the nations” (1 Sam 8:5). Their punishment in asking for a government was that they would get one.

And some day, God said, they would cry out to him for relief from their government, but God won't listen (8:18). Samuel forcefully impressed on them their evil in asking for a king until they exclaimed, "Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to **ask** for ourselves a king" (12:19a).

Take a look at the Hebrew text above now. Sound out the word for "ask."

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It is "Saul"! "We have added to all our sins this evil, to **saul** for ourselves a king." I think that *this* is how his name connects with the overall story. Saul doesn't mean "ask" in the sense of asking a question. It means asking *for* something. It is a reminder that this king was particularly asked for by a rebellious people—in contrast to the godly "asking" of Hannah (1:20).

Saul's career is an object lesson of the old adage, "Be careful what you ask for." Because you may get it. And sometimes, God allows people to have what they want to their own hurt.

Paul talks about God giving people over to their own foolish idolatry and related dishonorable lusts (Rom 1:18 – 27). Unfortunately for them, when God abandons people to themselves, they never come to saving faith. But even Christians are, for a time, left alone to pursue wayward paths. This is how chapter 5 of the *WCF* puts it,

God often allows his own children to be tempted in various ways and for a time to pursue the corruption of their own hearts. God does this to chastise them for their previous sins and to reveal to them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness in their hearts, so that they may be humbled.

Be careful what you ask for. “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (Jms 4:3). If you passionately want something which is out of accord with the truth of the gospel, you are better off if God never lets you have it.

But God didn’t leave Israel with a defective king forever. He next gave them David, and in the fullness of time, Jesus. If we know what is good for us, Jesus is what we should ask for. Not these other things that we think we need so badly. “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Luke 11:13).

The challenge of the Christian life is to learn to ask for the right things. We are called to be content with the material things that God has given, but to keep desiring that which makes us holy. We learn to repent of good things that we want in order to grow into the sort of people who delight in Jesus.

And that delight will be satisfied. Someday, when Jesus returns, we will want the right things—and we shall have them. It is to that day that we press on. Amen, Come King Jesus!