

I’ve read Israel’s sad story in 1 Samuel many times. I’ve yelled at the people in the story like they were clueless characters in a horror movie about to go through a door that leads to danger, which could have been avoided. But over time, I’ve realized that I have done the same thing myself when I look back and see how I could have avoided destructive situations. As the inimitable C.S Lewis has observed, we’re quite good at resenting others while excusing ourselves for the very same behaviors. Or as Lewis once wrote, “In our own case we accept excuses too easily; in other people’s we do not accept them easily enough...We must love [the other person] more; and we must learn to see ourselves as a person of exactly the same kind.”

Rob Henderson is a Ph.D. student at the University of Cambridge. Last year he wrote in *Psychology Today*: It may seem that we are in control of our thoughts and behavior. But social psychology tells a different story. Social psychology is defined as, “the scientific study of how we think about, influence, and relate to one another.” We are social beings. Most of us spend between 70 to 80 percent of our waking hours in some form of communication. On average, we spend 30 percent of the day speaking, and 45 percent listening.

One lesson from social psychology is the influence others have on us. Research shows we do not have as much control over our thoughts and behavior as we think we do. We take cues from our environment, especially other people, on how to act. Consider the concept of group polarization. This means that a group of likeminded people reinforce one another’s viewpoints. Group polarization strengthens of the opinions of each person in the group.

When we see our uncertain opinions reflected back to us, our beliefs are strengthened. Many of us enjoy being with others who share similar beliefs. In one experiment, researchers invited people to discuss issues including same sex marriage, affirmative action, and climate change. People in one group came from predominantly liberal Boulder, Colorado. People in another group came from mostly conservative Colorado Springs. The discussions on controversial topics led to increased agreement within the groups. Beliefs we hold are strengthened when we associate with others who hold similar views.

Why do other people influence us so much? If other people are doing it, it’s got to be right. Right? There is a behavior most of us use to determine what to do, think, say, and buy: the principle of social proof. To learn what is correct, we look at what other people are doing. In his bestselling book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, psychologist Robert Cialdini writes, “Whether the question is what to do with an empty popcorn box in a movie theater, how fast to drive on a certain stretch of highway, or how to eat the chicken at a dinner party, the actions of those around us will be important in defining the answer.” Social proof is a shortcut to decide how to act.

Why do we tend to follow the crowd? Clearly, others affect our behavior. One reason for this is that we live in a complex world. We use the decisions of others as a mental shortcut to navigate our lives. A second reason others influence us is that we humans are *social beings*. We have survived because of our ability to band together. Early humans who formed groups were more likely to survive. This affected our psychology.

As Julia Coultas, a researcher at the University of Essex, puts it, “For an individual joining a group, copying the behaviour of the majority would then be a sensible, adaptive behaviour. A conformist tendency would facilitate acceptance into the group and would probably lead to survival if it involved the decision, for instance, to choose between a nutritious or poisonous food, based on copying the behaviour of the majority.” Thoughtful reflection of social influence may lead us to a greater awareness of ourselves and our relationships with others. (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/after-service/201705/the-science-behind-why-people-follow-the-crowd>)

How many of you have wanted something that someone else has? You’re not alone if you have. Envy and coveting have been around since the beginning of time. One of the Ten Commandments says, “*You shall not covet...*” It’s unfortunate that the Israelite elders that we read about in 1 Samuel 8 didn’t pay more attention to that particular commandment.

The elders of Israel went to Samuel and said, “*...now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.*” We’re not too familiar with kings in this country. What does a king do? In ancient times a king was a barrier between civilization and chaos. A king is a strong wall protecting us from whatever we fear most: marriage problems, a faltering economy, illnesses, crime, or nuclear war, for example. Anything that threatens to destroy us is chaos. A king promises to bring order out of chaos. Whatever we are afraid of in this world, there is a king to tell us why we don’t need to be afraid. I’m not necessarily talking about the king that Israel wanted. For us Christians, we have a King and his name is Jesus. He came to give us the protection we need in the form of a restored relationship with God.

As far as I can tell the Israelites wanted a king for three main reasons: First, all of the surrounding nations had kings, so the people of Israel wanted a king too. They were strongly influenced by the world and were no longer listening to Samuel. Second, the Israelites were concerned about who would lead them after Samuel died. You see, Samuel’s sons were leaders in other parts of the country, but they weren’t very good leaders. They made crooked politicians look honest! Third, the Israelites wanted a king who would represent power and security and lead them into battle.

The law as it was recorded in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 gave the Israelites the right to have a king as long as they chose a king from among themselves and not a foreign king. This same passage places restrictions on the king to prevent some of the abuses Samuel outlined to the people. The king was not to have many horses or wives or great amounts of silver and gold, and he was not to exalt himself above the people. Human nature being what it is, these restrictions were largely ignored, and most times they are not observed today.

The problem the Israelites had was two-fold—wanting to be like other nations and then forgetting about God. God saw the Israelites’ desire for a king as a rejection of him and everything he had done for them. They forgot (as we sometimes do) that God must be first and foremost in our lives. However, God can and does go along with the demands that are not in our best interests in order to teach us something.

The people were correct in that they saw an upcoming leadership void. Samuel was getting old and the people knew that his sons would not be capable of assuming his leadership role. They didn’t see a succession plan, and they saw no plan for leadership coming from God. They saw only chaos ahead. They made their decision with their hearts and not with their heads. They did not think things through. They

made an emotional decision; not a logical decision. We are no different. We often look at things through an emotional lens when we make important decisions.

Samuel apparently took the Israelites' request as a rejection of his leadership, and perhaps they were rejecting him. After all, part of their reason for wanting a king had to do with justice and good governance—something that they weren't getting from Samuel and his sons. In his response to their request, he apparently does not recognize their concern, either by defending his sons or by rationalizing past injustices. Or perhaps he is deflecting their legitimate concerns by making it about him!

No matter, Samuel knew that the decision to appoint a king was a rejection of God's authority (as noted in verse 7) and the decision would lead to dire consequences for Israel. To make matters worse, Samuel knew that his sons were not fit to succeed him. God warned the Israelites that most of the kings would pervert justice, levy taxes and help themselves to the best of everything in the land. In their 450 year history Israel had 43 kings, and how many of them were good kings, faithful kings? Only 8 of them followed God. Most of them created more problems for the Israelites than they solved.

The same situation exists in our world today. While there are some good human leaders, there are also leaders who begin with good intentions but over time become partisan and corrupt, concerned only for themselves and their political supporters and friends. We only have to look at whatever the latest Washington scandal is to see that this is still the case today.

But I think this biblical story is more about the doctrine of free will. God gave us the ability to choose between right and wrong and then suffer the consequences. Sometimes we choose the lesser of two evils, usually in an election. Once in a while we choose between the better of two good people. It seems that God limits his power to allow for us to make our own decisions, but he also shows the power of his grace by sometimes allowing good things to come as a result of our poor decisions. One such example was the kingship of Saul, followed by the dynasty of King David, which had long term historical significance.

We have been called by God to do good works, but something that hinders that work is *pride*. We must remember Samuel's words in this passage. God has called us to specific situations, not random occurrences. In this world, we are influenced by the political and cultural environment around us much more than we realize. Consequently, we often lose our ability to distinguish between what comes from our others and what comes from our relationship with God. When we turn away from God, God does not stop loving us.

Samuel's sons abused their power just like modern-day politicians abuse power. God warned the Israelites that most of the kings in their future would abuse their power. But the people wanted stability and security. Trouble is they left God out of the picture. We too leave God out of our plans and aspirations.

When we are faced with life's challenges we must learn to look to God for guidance. Imitating the world may seem like the right choice at first, but it often results in destruction. We need to ask God to give us the courage and conviction to stand apart from the rest of the world. We need to stop the conversations that begin and end with, "We want what everyone else has!" and pour out our souls to God in honest prayer, seeking God's plans and God's will. When we do that, the Holy Spirit will give us the faith and assurance we need to trust in where he leads us. Even those things that God allows, can be in the end what is best for us. Amen.