

How to Choose a Leader

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on 1 Samuel

When the Israelites ask Samuel to give them a king, the prophet warns that a king would lay a heavy burden on their nation. Nonetheless, the Lord allows the people to choose their own form of government. Sometimes God permits institutions that are not part of his eternal purpose. There are many situations, both in institutions and in workplaces, where people must cope with poor decisions of the past.

In Saul, people get what they asked for, and what Samuel had warned against. Saul was a militaristic, charismatic, self-aggrandizing tyrant. But he looked the part of King—he literally stood head and shoulders above everyone else. Furthermore, he won military victories, the main reason for having a king in the first place.

Was God's choice of Saul as king an object lesson to the Israelites not to be seduced by outward appearances? Contrast Saul with his replacement, the boy David. David is a young, ethnically mixed, last-born son who did not on the surface project the image of gravitas people expect in a leader. But God sees great promise in David.

As we think about selecting leaders today, it's valuable to remember God's word to Samuel: "The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). In God's upside-down kingdom, the last or the overlooked may end up being

the best choice. It can be tempting to jump at the initially impressive candidate, the one who oozes charisma. But high self-confidence actually leads to lower performance, according to a 2012 Harvard Business Review article.

When Samuel finds David, David is out doing his job as a shepherd, conscientiously caring for his father's sheep. Faithful performance in the job at hand shows character. God values character over charisma.

What would it take for us to learn to see our leaders through God's eyes?