

June 6, Ordinary 10B (1 Samuel 8:4-20)

What happens when Samuel reads his people the fine print?

by [JoAnn A. Post](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue

She didn't read the fine print. Or maybe she simply chose not to believe it.

Entering the second year of treatment for a cancer that could not be cured, she started talking with her family about last things. Plans for her funeral. Distribution of her estate. Last wishes. Always a realist, she seemed ready to accept the imminent end of her life. It was tremendously sad to those of us who loved her, but no one tried to talk her out of it. Accepting mortality—making friends with finitude—seemed wise.

But then a friend showed her a full-page magazine ad for a new drug that offered the one thing for which she most longed: time. Time with children and grandchildren. Time for books she'd not yet read. Time for coffee with friends she'd not seen since before the pandemic. The glossy ad dangled the promise that cancer patients who used this drug might prolong their lives. "Unpronounceable Made-up Drug Name is not a cure," the ad admitted, but "why not live all the life you can."

Of course, the fine print at the bottom of the ad listed dozens of potentially deadly side effects, along with the caveats that patients should consult their doctor and that the cost might be prohibitive. But the downsides were no deterrent. Like the beaming grandmother in the ad, she wanted to live all the life she could. Against the wishes of her children, and in spite of her oncologist's caution, she began the course of treatment. Within two months she was dead, from an avalanche of side effects caused by the drug that offered time.

Cancer didn't kill her. It was the fine print.

Weary of priests and prophets, unhappy with God's answers, the people of Israel are casting about for alternatives. They look across the border at neighboring nations and long for the majesty of monarchy, the reliability of royalty, the certainty of succession. *We want a king!* they announce to Samuel. *Like everyone else!* They imagine a king is the cure for all that ails them.

Poor Samuel. His wayward sons have ruined their reputations and his. Any authority or respect he might once have enjoyed has been robbed by his inability to manage his own house. In fact, decades of failed leadership have ruined any respect the people might once have had for God's prophets.

Samuel turns to God for a second opinion. God shrugs and says, *I'm tired of them. They are tired of me—and of you. Let them have their king. But read them the fine print first.*

The warnings are dire. The dangers are real. The fine print runs for nine chilling verses.

Their sons will be forced to run ahead of the army, cannon fodder for enemy infantries. Their daughters will be confined to kitchens to cook and perfumeries to delight the queen. Their land will be confiscated, their crops commandeered. Their livestock and servants will be poached. In sum, Samuel warns, "You will be slaves." And, in the finest of fine print: "If you give yourselves over to a king, God's ears will be closed to you."

But the allure of better life under a king remains irresistible. Samuel reads them the fine print, but they refuse to believe it. Instead they roar their wishes: *We want to be like other nations! We want a king to fight our fights!*

They get their way. And for four centuries, Israel is governed by kings who, with few exceptions, rule them into ruin. It's the fine print that does them in.

I don't read the fine print when I buy or agree to something online. Does anybody? We scroll through it as fast as we can, check "I agree," and naively accept whatever terms of service are hidden there. We spend more time clicking on shifting images of crosswalks on the bot sensors than we do considering the consequences of our signature.

Why do we so glibly agree to terms we have not read? Why do we so easily sign our rights away to strangers? And why do you think the most important, deal-breaking information is hidden at the bottom of the page in gnat-sized font?

Perhaps, like my dying, time-hungry friend, we want to believe there is one more chance. Perhaps, like internet users, we want to believe that the consequences of not reading can't be all that bad.

Or perhaps, like the elders of Israel, who have had it up to here with the corruption of the religious class and God's seeming inattentiveness, we are simply worn out. *Anything but this!* the people cry, as they turn their backs on God and on Samuel.

If only they had read—and believed—the fine print. Sadly, everything Samuel warns, every clause of the fine print, comes to pass.

It could have turned out differently. If only Samuel were not such an inept parent. If only God were more attentive. If only God's people were able to recognize their role in their dissatisfaction. If only, if only, if only.

Though we may not have learned our lesson, God has. No longer burying the lede in microscopic type at the bottom of the page, the resurrection of Jesus Christ—God's victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil—is heralded with trumpet blast, shattered stone, and angelic announcement in bold, all-caps text. The resurrection comes with no fine print at all.