

1 Samuel 8:1-22

Introduction

On 23rd June 2016, a single question was put to the nation: “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”

As we probably all know, the result was a decision to leave, which the United Kingdom did at 11pm on the 31st of January 2020.

It became known as Brexit.

Now, I’m not commenting on whether that decision was good or bad, wise or unwise. The reason I mention it is that the result of that referendum has fundamentally changed how we think of ourselves and how we govern ourselves as a nation. Our national identity has changed. The way we conduct ourselves as a nation has changed now that we are no longer part of the EU.

North of the border, there are talks of a similar referendum asking whether Scotland should become a sovereign state, independent of the United Kingdom. If that should happen, then fundamental aspects of how the Scottish people think of themselves and govern themselves would also change.

I raise those examples because that is the level of change that the people of Israel are considering in chapter 8.

This is a big deal.

The decision they make here will fundamentally change how they think of themselves and govern themselves going forward.

They will cease to be a confederation of tribes, ruled by judges, and become a nation state, ruled by kings.

And it’s a complex matter. Let’s just step back and think about the situation they’re in.

Hannah’s song, in chapter 2, referred to a king, who seems to be connected in some way to Samuel. So, our expectations have been raised. And a good case could be made for having a king. There are internal problems of leadership in Israel. The current leadership is compromised. The priesthood is corrupt. And there are external problems too. The Philistines are growing increasingly aggressive and becoming more and more of a threat. There is some logic to appointing a king who can organise a standing army and lead the Israelites in battle.

Yet, this is no ordinary nation. This is a nation chosen and called by God to be his special possession and to reveal his glory to the world. The last chapter has shown that he is more

than capable of defeating their enemies by himself. With him as their Ebenezer, their helper, they need nothing else.

So, this is a complex matter, fraught with ambiguities.

But what is clear is that the decision the people make here is a bad one. And that's because they ask for the wrong kind of king, which will become clear as we work through the passage.

As we do so, we'll see that, for us today, this passage exposes the essence of our own human nature and points us to our need of Jesus.

So, let's look at it together. And our two headings are two serious mistakes that the Israelites make. Firstly, they reject God as their King. And secondly, they abandon their identity as God's holy people.

So, firstly then, the Israelites reject God as their King.

The Israelites reject God as their king

The chapter begins by telling us that Samuel is now an old man and has appointed his sons as Israel's leaders. It's not clear whether that was a legitimate thing for him to do. But what *is* clear is that they're not up to the job. They're dishonest. And they accept bribes.

So, the elders come to speak with Samuel at Ramah.

Verse 5.

They said to him, 'You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.'

As we've already observed, a good case could be made for doing that. Nonetheless, Samuel takes it as a personal affront and prays to the Lord about it.

And the Lord's answer is key.

Verse 7.

And the LORD told him: 'Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.'

That's the problem here. The Israelites are rejecting God as their king.

And it's not a new problem.

In verse 8, God says that it's what they've been doing since the day he rescued them from their slavery in Egypt.

It's a form of idolatry. They are forsaking God as their king and giving their allegiance to a human king in his place. They want a human king to go out before them and fight their battles rather than having God as their warrior-king, as he has been in chapter 7. They want a human king they can see rather than a divine king they can't see.

So, God tells Samuel to warn them what such a king will be like.

They hope that a human king will benefit them and serve their interests. That he would give them victory and peace.

But run your eyes down verses 10 to 18 and see how many times the word 'take' crops us.

Verse 11.

...he will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses...

Verse 13.

He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

Verse 14.

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants.

Verse 15.

He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants.

Verse 16.

Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use.

Verse 17.

He will take a tenth of your flocks...

It's shocking!

Human kingship will be characterised not by giving but by taking. A human king will take, take, take...

And the result is there in verse 17.

...and you yourselves will become his slaves.

Human kingship would mean a return to the slavery they had experienced in Egypt, from which God had saved them. Choosing a human king would mean going back to Egypt!

That's the choice they're faced with!

And this time there would be an important difference.

Look at verse 18.

Samuel says, **'When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.'**

Previously, when the Israelites had groaned and cried out to the Lord because of their slavery in Egypt, he had heard their groaning and intervened to rescue them. He had raised up Moses.

The same was true during the days of the Judges. When they cried out to the Lord because of their oppressors, he had intervened to rescue them. He had raised up a Judge to deliverer them.

The same was true during the lifetime of Samuel. In chapter 7, when he had cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, God had intervened to save them again.

But now, if they reject God as their king and give their allegiance to the idea of human kingship instead, that will change. In the day when they cry out to him, he will not answer. He will not save them.

Samuel is warning them that they are about to forfeit something very precious indeed.

And verse 19 is heartbreaking.

But the people refused to listen to Samuel.

What does this teach us?

Well, surely, it exposes the absurdity of the human heart.

From the days of Adam and Eve we have thought that we know better than God. Even when God warns us where our rejection of him will lead, we still think we'll be better off without him.

By nature, we are all just like the Israelites. We want to tread our own path, ruling ourselves, rather than having God rule over us.

And the picture of what this self-rule will look like is horrific. It's a picture of kings who will take rather than give. Who will enslave and exploit.

To reject God's rule in favour of self-rule is to choose life in a world in which people harm, brutalise and enslave others. And do it for their own gain.

It's what we see throughout history.

And it's what we still see on our TV screens today, and in our news feeds, and in the pages of our newspapers.

This is what life looks like in a world that has rejected God as king. It's a world in which people take and exploit.

But into this world, God has sent a snapshot of what *his* kingship is like.

That snapshot is his Son, Jesus Christ – the most loving and compassionate man who has ever walked the earth.

In Christ, God himself has entered our world to rescue us from ourselves.

He does not take but gives... at great cost to himself.

He comes into our world to give his own life.

And he does so to save us from the punishment that our rejection of him deserves.

What Jesus does on the cross is not the action of a cruel tyrant, who exploits his subjects. It's the action of a gracious and forgiving king, who always has the best interests of his people at heart.

This is a king to love and delight in, whose rule is easy to embrace.

The invitation of the gospel is to turn back to God, to ask his forgiveness for rejecting him, and to live from this point onwards with Jesus as your Saviour and King.

And that means living as he did. He said, **'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'** (Mark 8:34)

To live with Jesus as your King is to abandon a life of taking, and to live a life of self-giving for the good of others.

When we cry out to God through faith in Jesus, he promises to hear us, to save us from the consequences of our sin, and to bring us back into loving relationship with him.

If you haven't yet done that, please can I urge you to do so. Take time to find out about Jesus. Please do speak with me after the service and I would be delighted to help you do that.

Don't make the same mistake as the Israelites who rejected God as their king. We make the same mistake today by rejecting Jesus.

That's the first warning of these verses. The second is not to abandon our identity as God's people, as the Israelites did.

And that brings us, more briefly, to our second heading.

Here's the second big mistake the Israelites made: they abandoned their identity as God's holy people.

The Israelites abandon their identity as God's holy people

Turn back one page and look again at verse 5.

Do you see what the elders say?

'You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, *such as all the other nations have.*'

And look again at verse 19.

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. 'No!' they said. 'We want a king over us. Then we shall be *like all the other nations...*'

But God hadn't called them to be like the other nations. He had set them apart *from* the nations.

When he had rescued the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, he said to them, **'I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.'** (Exodus 6:7)

That idea is right at the heart of their covenant relationship with God.

They belonged to him. They were his special possession.

And that meant being a holy nation.

When God gave the law to the Israelites, through Moses, he said to them, **'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'** (Leviticus 19:2)

To be holy means to be set apart or distinct or other.

They were to be unlike the other nations because they were to be *like God*. And that was to be evident in how they lived.

So, when they say here that they want to have a king to be *like* the other nations, it's a complete denial of who they are.

They were called to be different and distinctive. Instead, they want to conform and fit in and be like those around them.

And our calling is the same.

The apostle Peter says to his Christian readers: **But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.** (1 Peter 2:9)

In Christ, we inherit Israel's status as God's special people.

In Christ, we are his holy nation.

We are set apart.

Jesus described his followers as being in the world but not *of* the world.

Our lives are to be different and distinctive, shaped by our obedience to God's word. We're to be a light to the nations, declaring the praises of our God.

And yet we find it so easy to be conformed to the ideas and conduct of the people around us. Like the Israelites, we may even desire it.

We would be much more popular if we lived like the people around us, copying their lifestyles.

We would be more welcome if we conformed to their thinking, approving the things they approve without asking what God thinks.

Life would undoubtedly be easier if we accepted their values and priorities.

That's very attractive.

But to do so would be to abandon our identity as God's holy people... called to be different... called to be holy as he is holy.

And it would be to abandon our mission to reveal his glory to the world.

Conclusion

Every day we make decisions. We do that as individuals. We do it collectively as a church. And while some decisions are clearly more important than others, no decision is insignificant. Every decision we make can fundamentally change how we think of ourselves and how we behave.

Friends, these verses are here so that we might learn from the Israelites. Don't make the mistakes they made.

Give yourself wholly to God as your king. Abandon the quest for self-rule that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Trust wholly in the good and loving rule of the God who made you, who gave up his life on a cross for you.

And don't be conformed to the thinking of the people around you. Live an unashamedly distinctive life as one of God's people, in obedience to his word, and for the glory of his name.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please forgive us for the times when we have gone our own way, thinking we know better than you. Please help us to trust in the goodness of your rule and to devote ourselves to following your Son, Jesus Christ. And as we do that, please help us to live distinctively different lives that bring you glory. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.