

1 Samuel 8. Safety First

The people of Israel ask Samuel to give them a king. God tells Samuel, *“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”* (v7).

I got up one morning to get breakfast and switched on the radio and was tuned into a nonsense trivia quiz about fruit. They asked one man, “What is a small juicy fruit and a language spoken by many people in China?” He thought for a minute and hesitantly said, “Lychee.” Shortly after this one of the comperes, not sure how to answer, said, “I no speak Lychee.” In 1 Samuel 8 we hear the language spoken by all the people of Israel through their elders, their leaders. It was not Hebrew or Lychee or even Mandarin. In the ears of God the language of the people is the language of rebellion.

I was once organizing a party to go to a Pakistani restaurant and spoke Urdu with the restaurant owner. I don't get to speak Urdu often. But the people of Israel had not stopped speaking the language of rebellion. In verses 7-8 God reflects, *“They have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods.”* I can speak Urdu but English is my heart language. Some of you can speak Cantonese or Mandarin or Spanish or French or German, but perhaps your heart language is also English. Rebellion is the heart language of God's people in the Old Testament. From the time of the Exodus onwards the Israelites constantly rejected God and it is this very problem which is highlighted in this chapter.

Rebellion against God is not just the language spoken by Israel in the Old Testament. It is the one language spoken by every person on the face of this earth. We can all speak this language fluently when we want to. Sometimes, like the Israelites, we say something, do something or strive for something which expresses rebellion against God but we can't see that it is.

The Israelites felt they had three justifiable reasons to ask for a king. The first two reasons are stated in verse 5 when they tell Samuel, *“You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”* Why did the Israelites think it was reasonable to ask for a king?

1. Samuel was getting old and, they thought, would soon be incapable of leading them.
2. His sons were corrupt so they would need to find someone else to replace Samuel.
3. God had previously indicated it was OK to ask for a king. He had promised Abraham and Sarah he would produce kings from them. Through Jacob he promised that a king would come from Judah's family who would rule the world. Further, Moses himself told them in Deuteronomy 17, *“When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, ‘Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,’ be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses”* (vv14-15).

In 2003 the people of California voted. They didn't want Gray Davis. They wanted a hero to champion their cause, someone who knew how to protect them from terrorists. They wanted the king of action movies to rule over them. They ignored Schwarzenegger's reputation of being a womanizer. The morality of Arnold Schwarzenegger was irrelevant to the people of California.

The people of Israel had all cast their vote. They no longer wanted Samuel and his admittedly corrupt sons to rule over them. They wanted a king to rule over them. Samuel warns them about the social abuses that will follow the appointment of a king, but they refuse to listen. All that matters is that they have someone leading them who knows how to protect them from their enemies.

God answers prayer. So be careful what you pray because are you sure that you will like what you get when God answers? Ray Stedman recalls what happened to Dr. William Evans, the pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian Church. His eight year old daughter came home and said, "Daddy, I want to get some ball-bearing skates. All the other children have ball bearing skates and that is what I want." He said, "But dear, you have a pair of skates." She replied, "Yes, I know Daddy, but they are not ball-bearing skates. They are roller-bearing skates. They won't go as fast as the others will." He said, "I'm sorry. You'll have to make do with the roller-bearing skates. We simply can't afford to buy any others." But she still insisted. That night she left him a note: "Dear Daddy, I still want the ball-bearing skates." Later he found yet another note pinned to his pillow. So he went and bought her the ball-bearing skates. She was delighted. She put them on, rolled out of the gate, down the pavement and round the corner. That was the last time Dr. Evans ever saw her well and alive. As she went around the corner, the skates were too much for her. She slipped and fell down, hitting her head on the pavement. She died in hospital that night. "Since then," Dr. Evans said, "when I want something of God and it seems as though he is not willing that I should have it but I keep crying out for it, the Spirit of God reminds me, 'Are you asking for ball-bearing skates?'"

The people of Israel asked God not merely for a king, not merely for some skates if you like, but for a particular kind of king, ball-bearing skates that they could not control. Samuel warned them that the kind of king they wanted would make their sons and daughters serve him and take the best produce in the land for himself; that he would oppress them. But they refused to listen. They insisted, "No. We want those ball-bearing skates. We want that king."

Are you asking God for ball-bearing skates, for something that will end up causing you great grief? For example, it's one thing to ask God for a wife or a husband. But it's another thing when you end up telling God that you must marry this person and no other. Don't let your insecurity and stubbornness lead you into marrying an unbeliever or a flaky, wishy-washy Christian.

1 Samuel 8 is a very disturbing chapter. Here are an insecure people who put safety first, not God. Here are a people unable to trust in God for their protection. Here are a people who put their trust in a new security system, the system of monarchy or kingship. Here are a people who refuse to listen to their national security advisor, Samuel, and in so doing reject God himself.

Insecurity causes some Christians to close their ears to God's warnings about the dangers of loving money and the good life. They end up not being available for the Lord's work. Insecurity leads to the rejection of God's will and the consequences are disastrous.

Are you feeling insecure? Well then, this is a dangerous moment in your life. For it is when we feel insecure that we often end up putting our trust in something or someone or some system for our security instead of putting our trust in God.

When the people asked for a king Samuel was displeased and so was God. God

through Samuel warned the people that they would end up wanting to be rescued from the king they insisted on having to rescue them. But in verses 19-20 we read: *"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, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."*

A man goes to the doctor and complains that his elderly wife can't hear him. "How bad is it?" the doctor asks.

"I have no idea," the husband says.

"Well, please test her. Stand 20 feet away from her and say something. If she doesn't hear you, get closer and say the same thing. Keep moving closer and closer and repeating the comment until she does hear you. That way we'll have an idea of her range of hearing loss."

So the man goes home and sees his wife in the kitchen chopping up vegetables for dinner. From 20 feet away: "What are we having for dinner?" No answer. From 10 feet: Same thing. From 5 feet: Same thing. Finally, he's standing right behind her: "What's for dinner?" She turns around, looks at him and says: "For the FOURTH time, BEEF STEW!"

The Israelites are very like this man. They treat Samuel like this man treated his wife. The man thought his wife had become deaf to his words. The Israelites think Samuel is getting past it and is no longer able to meet their real needs as they perceive them. That's why the chapter starts by stressing, *"When Samuel grew old."* It is true, Samuel is indeed an old man. But the people of Israel have got it all wrong. They are like the man who thinks the problem lies with his wife. In reality it is the husband not the wife who has the problem. It is the husband who cannot hear. In the same way, the issue is not that Samuel is getting old - in fact, despite his advanced years it turns out he is good for something approaching another 20 years of effective service before he finally dies. The problem is that the people refuse to listen to Samuel. When Samuel expresses his displeasure to God in prayer, the Lord responds, *"Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected as their king, but they have rejected me as their king"* (8:7).

There is one key question to which we must get the right answer: What was wrong with the people's request? What was it about the people's request for a king that involved the rejection of God?

Some think the people were like athletes who jump the gun; that God always intended to give the people a king and so they should have waited until he provided them with one. But this view can't be right. Deuteronomy 17 makes clear that it is OK for the Israelites to decide for themselves when the time is right to install a king and say, *"Let us set a king over us."*

So what was wrong with their request for a king? Some say the problem was wanting a king "like all the other nations." In verse 5 the people ask: *"Now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."* In verses 19-20 they say to Samuel, *"No! We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations."*

But that can't be right either. Yes, God certainly wants his people to be different from all other nations. But in Deuteronomy 17 Moses said that it was alright for the people to say, *"Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us."* So this desire to have a king like the other nations in and of itself is not a sufficient reason for saying the people's request for a king was evil. Our basic question remains unanswered. What was wrong with the people's request?

The core problem is summarized in verse 6: *"But when they said, 'Give us a king to lead us,' this displeased Samuel."* The evil of the people's request is expressed in one word, the word "lead", or better "judge", that is, "Give us a king to *judge* us", as, for example, in the AV and NASB. The first time this word is used in 1 Samuel is at the end of Hannah's prayer, hooked on to that prophecy about a king: *"It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the Lord will be shattered. He will thunder against them from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed" (2:9-10).* Now notice this very carefully. The Lord is the King of Israel who rules them through his own anointed or chosen king. It is the Lord who judges the ends of the earth, that is, who deals with his enemies and removes the threat they pose.

Keeping this in mind look at 8: 19-20 more carefully: *"No! We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to judge us and to go out before us and fight our battles."* What do the people want? They want a king to act as judge, that is, a king who will deal with their enemies and remove the threat they pose.

We get a bit more light on the situation which lay behind the people's request when we get to 12:12: *"But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, 'No, we want a king to rule over us' - even though the Lord your God was your king."* There's the proof in black and white. The people rejected the Lord as their king when they asked for a king to act as judge and deal with the threat posed by the Ammonites and remove it.

Let's go back to our core question: What was wrong with the people's request? The answer is, they thought that by installing the system of monarchy, by having a king, they would be safe and secure from their enemies. The evil of their request lay in their failure to trust God to rescue them from their enemies and protect them. Samuel's sons may have been corrupt but Samuel had given them names which expressed what all Israelites needed to believe with all their hearts. His first son was named Joel, meaning "God is King." His second son was named Abijah meaning "God is my Father." When they asked for a king to be the one who would make their nation secure they were rejecting God as their source of security. They were trusting in the adequacy of a human ruler, a system of monarchy like other nations had. The central issue is this: **what makes you feel safe and secure?**

In Luke 19 Jesus tells a parable concerning a man of noble birth who goes to a distant country from which he will return after being appointed as king. Before he goes he entrusts ten minas to each of ten servants, expecting them to increase the treasury which he will use to exercise his reign upon his return. However, we are told that "his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king' ". Jesus, of course, is alluding to himself, knowing that God's people hate him and reject him as their king. The parable ends with the enemies of the king being killed. The path to ultimate insecurity involves rejecting the Lord's rule over our lives. When the Israelites requested a king they were actually rejecting God's rule over their lives. They were looking elsewhere for their sense of safety and security. That's the central issue for you and me. What do you depend on for your sense of safety and security? A secure job and a secure income? Marriage? Having a family? Money in the bank? A good stock of assets? Having your own home? A good reputation? Academic or professional success? Deep down in your heart what are you really asking for?

There was nothing wrong in the Israelites asking for a king as such. There was everything wrong in their motivation for doing so, because it expressed their lack of trust in God. There is nothing wrong with us asking God to help us in our jobs and home life. We all want safety and security. But there is everything wrong if our hankering after money, reputation, marriage, family, success, whatever, is an expression of an underlying lack of trust in the Lord to care for us. It was the ultimate King who urges us, "Seek first the dynamic rule of God (the kingdom of God) and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Let each of us ask the Lord to search our hearts and minds. Let us place our lives unreservedly in the Lord's care, obeying him, doing and going wherever he leads, whatever the cost, simply trusting in him for our safety and security.