



## **Closeness with God**

**1 Samuel 8:1-22**

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If you'll allow me, I'm going to continue on a theme that we've been using at Washington Street this summer for this morning's sermon. To begin, I want to offer a quick recap to make sure we're all on the same page ... and I mean quick recap. (I promised that my sermon would be shorter than usual – a sermonette if you will – though I didn't indicate by whose standards I meant when saying shorter ... you all know that short at Washington Street is not the same as short at Roberts. Amen?)

A quick recap: our summer quest at Washington Street is to map out the arc of the universe using the Biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. We're looking at the greater intent of God from a macro level instead of digging in to any one story deeply. By zooming out and getting a broader perspective, we're helping ourselves better understand how all the individual stories fit into the greater scope of God's will for creation and humanity.

So far, we've looked at the beginning, where God created an intimacy with humanity so that we might share in the work of God in the world by being part of the creating process and offering care over the rest of creation. We looked at how humanity distanced itself from God, and how, in great displeasure, God brought the flood with the thought of starting over. Only, the flood didn't bring about a change in humanity – instead, it brought about a change in God, who set the rainbow in the sky as a reminder that flooding creation does not reverse its sinful ways.

We then looked at how the story narrows in on the people Israel, as God set in place a covenant that defined God's role as Lord, our role as God's people, and defined Israel's vocation of being a blessing to all nations. Finally, following the establishment of the covenant, God gave the commandments through Moses to help the people Israel live faithfully into the covenant that had been established.

This morning, we're going to look at the broad landscape of Israel after they arrived in the Promised Land.

The people Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before they reached the edge of the promised land. It then took another 25 years before they had taken over all of those who were already living in that land, so that they could make it their own. So, for roughly 65 years, the people Israel depended on God for manna, for water, for health, for safety, for security, and for guidance. Anytime something went wrong, anytime they were lost, anytime they had need ... they cried out to God, and God responded, righting the wrong, giving directions for the path forward, and fulfilling their needs.

As they settled in the Promised Land, as they left the nomadic ways of living and built homes and towns for themselves, there were judges set over the people to ensure they lived according to God's will. In

Judges 21:25, we are told that in those days, “there were no kings in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Yet, you and I both know, that some people don’t know right from wrong in their own eyes. And so the judges were appointed to ensure that what the people thought was right in their own eyes was indeed *right by God*. The judges made sure the people upheld their end of the divine covenant; they ensured the people lived according to the commandments; the judges were set in place to help maintain God’s desire for the people Israel – to hold the people accountable to being faithful and just.

The judges offered guidance and judgement for over 300 years. Samuel is one of the last to serve as a judge over the people Israel, and we encounter the end of his term in 1 Samuel 8. Samuel had been a good judge – a faithful and just arbiter of God’s covenant and commandments. When Samuel became old, he made his sons, Joel and Abijah, judges to follow in his footsteps. But Joel and Abijah were not like his father – they turned aside, and took bribes and perverted justice. ... Samuel’s sons took money so that they might rule a certain way on specific cases. Can you imagine such a thing happening in the justice system?

The elders of Israel were displeased with the way Samuel’s sons were serving, so they went to Samuel and said, “Look, we’re done with the judges. It was a good run; it worked for a while, but it’s time for a new way. Give us a king to govern us, like the other nations.”

Samuel was shocked – dismayed even – at the request. It’s a revolt against Samuel and his very identity as a judge. Our English translation says that the request “displeased” Samuel, but the Hebrew word here, the word רָעָה (raw-a(t’), carries with it a feeling of greater evil. As Francesca Aran Murphy writes in her commentary, “We cannot downplay the evil of the desire for a human king.”<sup>i</sup>

Being as concerned as he is, Samuel takes the request directly to God, and the Lord heard him. The Lord told him in response, “you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” Samuel does just that.

From verse 10 to 18, Samuel lays out all the evils of having a king. He doesn’t tie any pretty bows on the package, but tells them all the ways a king will reign over them.

The king will *take* your sons and they will serve in *his* military. The king will *take* your sons, and they will be forced to plough *his* ground and reap *his* harvest. The king will *take* your daughters to serve in *his* quarters. The king will *take* the best of your fields and vineyards and give them to *his* courtiers. He will *take* one-tenth of your grain and vineyards to give to *his* officers. He will *take* the best of your cattle and donkey and put them to work in *his* fields. The king will *take* all that he wants and use it to serve *his* purposes.

The king will take, and take, and take, and take – and once he’s taken, he will use all he has taken of yours to serve his desires.

You will, Samuel says, be slaves of the king. Nothing you have will be yours, for the king will take at his leisure to serve his well-being.

But he's not done ... let us not forget, Samuel concludes, if you chose to have a king for yourselves, don't expect the same cry and response that you've received from the Lord, for the king does not care if you cry out. The king will just as readily take your voice.

Samuel lays it out: Is this really what you want?!

The elders heard what he had to say, and responded, "We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

Now, I promised this would be a sermonette, so I can't go on for too long. And honestly, if we are objective enough in listening to the text, I don't know that a preacher has to dive too deep to make the connections of this text to the greater witness of God in the divine arc, nor in the way this text ties in to our modern discipleship. But can I have a few minutes to make this plain? Can I have just a little bit of time to lay out these connections, both great and small?

From the Exodus to the selection of King Saul, the first in the line of Israel's kings, when the people had need, to whom did they turn? When the people were starving in the wilderness, to whom did they beg for food? When they were thirsty, who did they ask for water? When the people were being attacked by other nations, to whom did they cry out for safety?

That's right ... God, God, and God. And who provided manna, water, and safety? God. God. And God.

As Francesca Murphy writes, "We cannot grasp why the elder's request is evil to God and to Samuel unless we appreciate that establishing a human king would be in some sense a displacement of the kingship of God over Israel."<sup>ii</sup> By desiring a king, the people were desiring someone *else* to be the one who would provide for them.

God has no desire to give up the role as the head of Israel – as the provider and sustainer of Israel. Which is why God doesn't so much support Israel having a king, but God permits it none-the-less.

And what happened with the kings to rule (42 kings and one queen to be exact)? Beginning with Saul, there were 43 royal leaders who served from 7 days (you heard me, *7 days*) up to 52 years. No matter how faithful we think they were, no matter how just they tried to be, the kings fizzled out. The last king, Zedekiah, ceased his tenure when Babylon destroyed the Jerusalem temple in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE.

See, the people wanted a king so that they could be like the other nations. They wanted the same kind of militaristic power they saw in other nations. They wanted a king who would provide the kind of earthly security they witnessed in the kings of surrounding nations. They wanted a king who would, and I quote, "go out and fight our battles."

But earthly kings don't fight battles, they take the people of their land and send them out to fight the battles for them. Earthly kings don't offer national security, aside for securing their own well-being.

Kings, even kings as faithful as King David, are still prone to the sin of flesh and selfish desires, which turn them away from the greater will of God.

Ultimately, “The demand for a king ... is at its heart a repudiation of the unique covenantal relationship between God and Israel and a rejection of the divine call to carve out a society founded on justice and holiness.”<sup>iii</sup> The desire to have a king was a desire to pit themselves against the other nations of the world, even though the divine covenant was established so that they might be a blessing to the other nations of the world.

Israel forgot that, while wanting to be like the other nations of the world, *they were not like the other nations of the world*. Israel was in a covenant relationship, gifted and called to serve a unique purpose amidst God’s created humanity. “When we lose sight of who we are, we neglect our calling.”<sup>iv</sup>

And again, I don’t know that it needs to be laid out this plainly, but let’s talk about the legacy of Israel in the Judeo-Christian landscape. If you follow the narrative of the New Testament scriptures, if you claim Christ as Lord, you are placing yourself in the legacy of Israel – among the people who are covenanted to the one God – Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. And among that body of faithful believers, you are accepting the covenanted responsibility to be a part of sharing God’s blessing among the nations. That is part of who we are.

Which means, just as the Israelites should have recognized in 1 Samuel 8, no matter how good it looks for the security and well-being of your nation, you cannot serve both God and king. You cannot desire an earthly king-ish leader to be your savior – for we have a Savior, and his name is Jesus. In our quest toward faithfulness, one cannot choose government over covenant – one cannot choose an earthly king over God.

The divine arc for humanity is greater than any one nation. It was greater than Israel. It is greater than America. The greater arc – from creation to revelation – is for the well-being of all of God’s created humanity. ... That we might share in this greater arc, Samuel calls us away from desiring kings. The scriptures show, kings will never prioritize God’s will. And God has already shown that anything for which we have need, God can and will provide.

In the greater arc of the universe, in the grandeur will of our Lord, we are called to worship and serve but one Lord, God and Savior of us all so that we might share God’s glorious blessings with the whole of God’s created humanity. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Francesca Aran Murphy. *1 Samuel: Brazos Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Murphy.

<sup>iii</sup> Clair Mesick. “Inured to Injustice – 1 Samuel 8:4-20.” June 4, 2018. [www.politicaltheology.com](http://www.politicaltheology.com). Retrieved July 27, 2023.

<sup>iv</sup> Mesick.