

Israel Demands A King

In our series of messages based on the stories of 1st Samuel ... stories of faithfulness and failure... Darrell helped us understand the story of the Ark of the Covenant last week. The ark was a symbol of God's presence and Israel's reliance on God, but the Israelites tried to use it for their own purposes, even as they neglected their relationship with God. It's the same when we try to control life by putting everything neatly in a box, but leaving no room for God. Darrell challenged us to put God on top of our own "life boxes," for without God over all, our lives begin to descend into chaos.

The nation of Israel was to be like no other nation on earth. *"You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own,"* Lev. 20:26. Their obedience to the commands of God was to show that God is close and hears their prayers, and that they are to live by righteous laws (Deut. 4:6-8). You may recall two weeks ago that I ended my message by quoting from 1st Peter: *"As you come to him, the living Stone ... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood..."* 1 Peter 2:4-5. Christian people have a calling to be God's witnesses in this world, through their words and deeds. The world should see something different and better in us.

Though intended to be examples to the world of what it means to be guided by God, we Christians sometimes fight the Lordship of Jesus in our lives and so diminish our witness. Israel rejected the lordship of God, demanding instead to be led by a king like all the nations around them. It only brought them more troubles. This is a cautionary tale for us today. Rejecting the lordship of Jesus Christ, and becoming just like the peoples around us, can only bring sorrow upon Christians and the Church.

The Choices We Make

You recall that Samuel was born in a time of moral decay in Israel *"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes,"* Judges 21:25. They were a free people under God – a confederacy of tribes with no central government, united by their common allegiance to the God who had freed their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. Samuel was their religious and moral leader, exhorting them to attend to God as he upheld the law equally for all, that's what kept them free. But the people strayed, including Samuel's sons. Samuel had appointed his sons to help him judge Israel, but they did not walk in his ways—they took bribes and perverted justice. Though he was a good

Judge and leader, his sons' behavior fostered disillusionment among the people of Israel. Leadership makes a difference.

Why didn't the Elders of Israel simply ask Samuel to remove his sons from their position? Maybe it was because they had other motives and Samuel's age and his immoral sons, were just excuses to express their true heart. They pressed for a king. Why would they want an earthly king when God was their King? The answer is found in verse 20: *"Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."*

1) They yearned to be like the rest of the world. I can't help but think of the child who says, "But everyone else is doing it!" Following the crowd instead of God, will always lead downhill.

2) They wanted someone else to fight their battles and do the work of staying free. Again, I am reminded of the one who complains, "Why should I have to do that? It's not fair!" When enough people complain that safeguarding freedom is too much work, they will surely lose it.

So the Israelites made a choice ... they wanted a leader they could see. Maybe they looked at the Philistines and saw organization and power, then looked at themselves and were scared. They thought having a king like the Philistines would make them safe and secure. Never mind God.

Let's pause and reflect on this a moment. What kind of choices are you making? Do many Christians consider themselves good with God, even while they make choices that reject the Lordship of Jesus? Do you live a life that reflects His guidance? Or do you merely ask Him to bless what you want to do or think is best? What are you teaching your children by your example?

When most people feel a need in their lives they want to take matters into their own hands – before asking God. And, that is just what the Israelites did by demanding a king. They were placing their trust in the things of the world. It seems to be our human nature also to want power, money, and possessions, believing these things will bring us contentment and security. It's amazing what people will do or what they will sacrifice in order to get it.

Samuel was upset that the people were rejecting him. But the Lord told him, *"Listen to the people and everything they say to you. They have not rejected you; they have rejected me as their king,"* 1 Sam. 8:7. God understood what was really happening: His Lordship was being rejected. Christians, this is not just a tale from long ago, it is relevant today. We need to beware of looking for loopholes in our faith that allow us to remove the Lordship of Jesus from our lives. Without Him as our Lord chaos creeps in. There's also a word here for us as people of this nation. It seems to me that American life has become overly politicized and our media overly focused on national government and national political figures. Could it be that many Americans are expecting and trusting a national government to provide for their needs and wants and to do the hard

work of preserving our freedom? And is that because people have fallen away from a serious and genuine trust in God?

Consequences

Jesus did not come to take away our free will to make decisions, even if they are not good ones. The Israelites made a choice for an earthly ruler and God instructed Samuel “... *you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them.*” We ask for things without thinking about the consequences. In a word, we think we know better than God. But the things of this world always come with a price tag.

So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who asked him for a king, saying, “*This will be the behavior of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons ...*” and then he listed all the things a king would take from them: their sons and daughters to serve him, a portion of their grain, grapes, olives, sheep, and goats to feed him. Samuel warned them: “... *you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day.*”

You’ve heard it said be careful what you ask for, you just might get it. Have we considered the price tag? Will it come at the cost of a vital relationship with the only One who can bring order out of chaos ... that is, the living Christ Jesus? If we ask for and live for the things of the world, we could get them while we run the risk of forgetting who we are: children of God. The Israelites forgot and let God have the slop from their lives. Our faith should be in the God who created us, not in the creation itself – including kings or political leaders or government. Again, a word here for us in this nation: the warnings Samuel gave to Israel about the cost of having a king, could just as well be a warning to us as we place more and more of our lives into the hands of government and politicians. This quote has often been attributed to Thomas Jefferson, though I’m not sure he actually said it. Nonetheless it’s very like something he might have said and is relevant today: “A government big enough to give you all you want is big enough to take all you have.”

After Samuel’s sober warning to them here’s the Israelite leaders’ closing argument: “*No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations...*” All the warnings didn’t matter. It didn’t matter to them that they were forsaking the protection and provision of the Creator himself, trusting instead in a flawed human. What mattered to them was the fact they thought that they lacked something that the other nations had. The grass looked greener on the other side.

Let me tell you a little story: Some wild ducks were taking their annual northward journey when a flock of tame ones came into view in a barnyard far below. Leaving his friends in flight, one of the migrants landed and mingled for a short time with those on the ground. After eating some of their corn, he flew

away. Soon, however, he returned, this time remaining somewhat longer. The safety of the farm and the plentiful supply of food were so appealing that he lived among the domestic birds all summer. When autumn came, he heard the cries of his former companions as they headed southward. He felt a strong desire to join them, but his added weight from eating so much kept him from flying very far. So he settled down and stayed all winter. In the spring he again heard the familiar call of the migrating flock. His eyes gleamed, and he began to flap his wings but made no real effort to fly. That fall the sound of the wild ducks only caused him to raise his head, and from then on he paid no attention at all.

God help us if we become like that ... God help us all the more if we've already become like that. Instead let us place God first in our lives, in the center of our lives, so that we can live lives that are blessed, and free, and touched with His glory.

Last Thoughts

1. Trust God, not sight – How often do we feel that we must have a big bank account in order to feel safe and secure. Here's what Jesus said when tempted that way: *"... man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD,"* Matt. 4:4 (Deut. 8:3). Yes, we have responsibilities for ourselves and our families. But let not all those responsibilities and tasks crowd out time for God. Give him your time and He will give you His provision.

2. Trust God's timing, not others' plans – We will have a building, organization, teams, etc. in God's timing. Just because others have things or other churches have this or that, doesn't mean God isn't doing something among us. We don't have to be like all the others. The same is true for you personally.

3. Confess your own sins – Sadly, in almost every area Christians, those who attend church, are equally as sinful as those who don't attend. Premarital sex, abortions, divorce, financial mismanagement, you name it, are rampant among Christians. Are we salt and light in our communities and neighborhoods? Could it be that we want government to legislate what we fail to teach and model?

Let us not grow weary in seeking after God, studying His word, and putting His word into practice in daily life. That is where we encounter the living presence of our Savior. We must worship our loving Creator, not the things of this world. Ours is not to become like all the peoples of the world. Ours is to share the truth of God and the saving grace of Jesus Christ with all peoples.

"For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well," Matt. 6:32-33.

