

# 1 Samuel 8

## A passion for self rule

### Republics and Identity

In 1998 and 1999 a series of critical meetings and events happened within Australia.

The culminated in a national referendum where every Australian of voting age was required to express their views and desires about whether Australia should be a republic.

They were events that had been brewing for over 100 years.

And all of sudden they were at the top of the agenda.

Australians were voting on whether our head of State would be the Queen or someone else.

In other words, we were deciding whether we wanted someone to be our head of state because she was born the Queen of England or whether our head of state should be someone who was Australian, who lives in Australia, and who is elected by Australians to do the job.

In other words, we were deciding on some incredibly fundamental changes to our national life.

These changes would require us to rewrite our constitution and reorganise some of the way our government functioned.

The changes being contemplated would not be huge in terms of these changes.

But they would be huge in terms of our identity.

They would mean that we were breaking free from our colonial past.

They would mean acknowledging that we were our own nation, independent of the nation that had given us birth.

We were finally our own people, free from the apron strings of the mother nation.

You see, in many ways, the process we here in Australian went through in 1999 might have issued in one of the most significant changes in our whole 200 year history.

Things would never have been the same again for us.

Well, today we are going to take a look at another nation grappling with a similar level of change.

However, there is something very special about the nation we are going to look at.

It is the nation of Israel.

They are not a colony of the British nation.

No, the nation of Israel is a nation chosen and called by God.

They are God's special people, his holy nation, his special possession.

They were called into existence by him.

He is their God and they are his people.

So, let's see what happens.

Let's take a look at the changes that they are envisaging in this special part of the Bible.

You see, my opinion is that as we take a look at them and what they are doing we will learn some incredibly valuable things.

We will learn some deep things about God.

And we will learn things about ourselves.

The actions that the Israelites taken and God's interaction with them will tap into some very deep aspects of what makes the Israelites tick.

And I will argue that the ancient Israelites and we have many things in common.

And I will also argue that God's response to them has much to teach us.

So, let's get underway.

## 1 Samuel 8

### ***Some historical and political background***

And to make a start, I'd like to give you a brief historical and political framework.

The story of the people of God up to this point is quite clear.

God called Abraham.

He told Abraham that he would make his a great nation, that he would give him a land, and that he would bless him and make him a blessing.

Abraham had a child called Isaac.

Isaac had two sons called Jacob and Esau.

Jacob became the father of twelve sons and a daughter.

God also gave Jacob another name.

He called him 'Israel'.

Anyway, Jacob and his sons eventually ended up in Egypt in slavery.

They became twelve tribes and quite numerous.

In the end they cried out to God to rescue them from slavery and from Egypt.

God did exactly this.

He brought them out of Egypt.

He bound them to himself in a covenant.

And he brought them into the promised land which they slowly began to conquer.

At the time of this story the nation of Israel was a loose tribal confederacy.

Sometimes they worked together on things.

At other times, they lived together in tribal groupings and just got on with life.

God ruled over them through people called 'judges'.

These judges were people that God gave his people to help them defeat their enemies and also to bring them justice and stability.

Samuel was one such judge.

And in the chapter immediately preceding our chapter, God had used Samuel to help the people of Israel defeat their latest enemy – the Philistines.

So, this is the historical and political background to our chapter.

The nation of Israel is God's special nation.

God rules over them and uses human people called judges to exercise his rule.

And at this point in history, Samuel is their judge.

And they are feeling a bit under pressure because of the technologically and militarily powerful Philistine nation that is on their borders.

With this in mind, let's turn and see what happens in this chapter.

### ***What happens***

- **A request**

Most of the chapter we are looking at consists of speeches that involve the people of Israel, Samuel, and god.

However, the chapter begins with a few verses from the narrator of the story where he gives us some background information and sets the scene for what happens.

Let's listen to what he says:

*<sup>1</sup> When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. <sup>2</sup> The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. <sup>3</sup> But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and*

*perverted justice.* <sup>4</sup> *So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah.*  
[1 Samuel 8:1-4 - NIV]

The narrator is clear.

Samuel's situation has echoes of that of his predecessor, Eli.

He is old.

His sons are depraved and corrupt.

And this is made worse by the fact that Samuel has done something inappropriate.

Normally judges were appointed by God himself.

But Samuel has attempted to make a dynasty of his family.

He has appointed his sons as judges.

With this background we hear the elders of Israel put their request in verse 5:

<sup>5</sup> [The elders] said to him, "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." [1 Samuel 8:5 - NIV]

Now the version of the Bible that I have read to you has a footnote that says that the word that is translated 'to lead' is actually 'to judge'.

Let me tell you what I think is going on here.

I think that the elders see what Samuel has done.

He seems to be a bit unsure that God can be trusted to go on appointing judges.

And so Samuel has taken things into his own hands and tied judgeship down by making it dynastic.

Rather than being dependent upon God's choice, it is dependent upon what family you are born into.

And the elders are not sure that this is the best way ahead.

My guess is that they think that if changes are to be made that move to a more permanent institution then appointing a king would be a better way to go.

After all, the surrounding nations have kings and this seems to work.

The proposal by the elders is much more radical than Samuel's proposal.

It implies a new constitution and identity for the nation.

No longer will they be a loose tribal confederacy ruled by judges.

Now they will be a true State, ruled by kings.

- Samuel's response

So, there is the request.

Now let's see what Samuel makes of it.

The narrator lets us into his response in verse 6:

<sup>6</sup> *But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD.* [1 Samuel 8:6 - NIV]

Notice again that the words 'to lead' occur.

Again, my view is that we should read it as 'to judge'.

Now, I want you to notice what the narrator thinks it is that displeases Samuel and what he tells the Lord.

He is not so much displeased about the fact that the model of kingship being proposed is a kingship 'like the nations'.

After all, the book of Deuteronomy hinted that this was okay (Deuteronomy 17:14).

And I'm not even sure that Samuel objects to the idea of kingship either.

My own guess is that Samuel objects to the fact that the elders are rejecting his proposal.

In other words, they are rejecting having judges.

And it is this that displeases him.

This is what rests in his mind.

And it is this that he inevitably reports to the Lord.

- God's response

The next verses tell us about God's response.

Listen to what God has to say in verses 7 to 9.

*<sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. <sup>9</sup>Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do." [1 Samuel 8:7-9 - NIV]*

The first thing that God does is tell Samuel that he hasn't listened properly.

By implication God is telling Samuel that he is reacting emotionally and not really hearing what is being said.

He has not heard and passed on their comments about his corrupt sons and the problem this poses. What's more, he has not heard and passed on their comment about a kingship 'like the other nations'.

The second thing that God does is to tell Samuel that if he had listened properly and thought about it accurately that he would have interpreted it very differently.

The point is that he, God, had been their ruler throughout their history (cf. Judges 8:23).

He had been their king.

And he had expressed his rule by rescuing them when they called upon him, by appointing judges over them, and by caring for them in a multitude of ways.

Their request is not a rejection of Samuel.

It is a rejection of God and his rule.

Appointing a king to judge them is tantamount to saying that they want a king to rescue them and rule over them instead of God appointed judges.

And this rejection of God and his rule is nothing new.

It has been going on for centuries.

His experience with his people has been nothing a long story of trouble and faithlessness.

The implication of verses 8 is clear.

The request for a king is nothing short of yet another act of idolatry in a long series of acts of idolatry.

And then verse 9 brings the surprise.

God tells Samuel to listen to their request.

In other words, God has denounced their request for a king as nothing but an act of rejection and idolatry.

But he grants their request.

And he tells Samuel to spell out its implications to them.

- Samuel's speech

This brings us to verses 10 to 18.

There are a few things to notice in the speech.

First, they are wanting to appoint a king because of what he will give them.

God wants them to know that kingship is more about the self interest of a king.

Kingship is about a king taking.

And so these verses are full of references to what the king will 'take'.

Second, the elders of Israel have short memories.

They have forgotten the painful memory of their last experience of kingship under Pharaoh in Egypt.

In Egypt kingship meant slavery.

And having a king will be a return to slavery.

This is what verse 17 is saying when it mentions slaves.

To choose to have a king will metaphorically mean a return to Egypt.

And the third implication is that their dynamic and immediate relationship between God and his people will disappear.

Since the time in Egypt, the people of God simply had to call upon God and he would hear them and rescue them.

This immediacy will be gone.

This is what verse 18 is about.

Notice the deep irony and sadness in it.

Israel is about to forfeit something precious and doesn't even seem to notice.

Listen to the verse:

*<sup>18</sup> When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day." [1 Samuel 8:18 - NIV]*

Let me read it to you in a slightly more literal translation.

*<sup>18</sup> When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from your king whom you have chosen for you, and the LORD will not answer you in that day." [1 Samuel 8:18 - NIV]*

- **Aftermath**

So, there is God's response.

All that remains now is the closing verses of the chapter.

God has laid out the implications of kingship through Samuel.

The people hear it all.

And they choose the path of self rule and God rejection.

They don't want God to be their king any longer.

They want to be like the other nations rather than a distinctive nation joined to a distinctive God.

And they want a king to fight their battles rather than God to be their divine warrior.

Samuel takes this back to God.

He accedes and tells Samuel to give them a king.

Samuel defers the day of appointment and sends them home.

## **What can we learn**

### ***A common passion***

So, there is a chapter.

We will see as we go on in 1 Samuel that despite rejection by his people, God continues to be their God.

He grants kingship and he even ties kingship into his relationship with them.

After all, he is a God of surprising generosity and kindness.

However, what I want to do for the remainder of this talk is to reflect on what we see in this chapter and how it links in with our own inner attitudes and dispositions.

You see, I think this chapter taps into a common theme in the Bible and a common attitude amongst humans.

God's view is explained in the Bible and it is crystal clear.

All humans are created by God.

They are created to be related to God and to have God as king and ruler.

They are created to be dependent beings.

But God is also clear in the Bible that all human beings are fundamentally people who have a passion for self rule.

That is, all humans long to be independent from God.

They long to be their own rulers, taking their own advice, and dependent upon themselves.

This is our nature.

In the core of our being we are like the ancient Israelites.  
We have a passion for self rule.

### ***Hearing God's warning***

And it is to people like us that chapter 8 sends a timely warning.  
Do you remember what God said to the people of Israel about their king?  
Basically he told them that self rule is hell.  
It's about living in a world ruled by people like us who are self interested.  
It's about living in a world ruled by people who are bent on 'taking'.  
It's about living in a world where people use other people for their own benefit and glory.  
It's about living in a world where people brutalise and enslave others.  
It's about living in a world just like the one we hear about in the news every day.  
Can you hear what God is saying?  
He is saying that a world where we make ourselves kings is a world rule by people as self-centred as us.  
It is a world where God is shifted to the periphery of our existence.  
Self rule is hell on earth.

### ***Our reluctance***

So, there is the human predicament.  
It is predicament as old as 1 Samuel 8 and as old as Adam and Eve in the garden.  
We know that God is good and great and able.  
But it seems so risky to allow him to be ruler over our existence.  
Because self rule is so ingrained in our existence we think that having God rule would expose us to a life of unpredictability and precariousness.  
We are reluctant to accept God's rule because we don't know where it would lead and what God would require of us.  
In other words, we are not sure that we can trust God to do a better job of it.

### ***Can I trust God?***

Now, if this is you I want to show you God the king in action.  
You see, as the story of God's action in the world unfolds in the Bible, God tells us that if we want to see him active as king then there is one definitive act or moment in history that we can turn to.  
You see, in the Bible God tells us that his fundamental revelation of himself occurs when he sends his Son, Jesus, into the world.  
Jesus is God in human form.  
And as God he thinks as God thinks and acts as God acts.  
And what Jesus does is clear from the pages of the Bible.  
He and his Father understand that we are people with a passion for self rule.  
He and his Father understand that self rule not only brings hell on earth.  
They understand that since heaven will only be filled with those who are happy with the rule of God, then those who are into self rule are headed to hell.  
And so, God the Father sends his Son Jesus into the world to do the task of a king and to rescue us from the tyranny of self rule.  
Jesus comes into the world.  
He lives a perfect life.  
And as a true king should do, he does not take but gives.  
He gives his life on behalf of his people.  
He takes the punishment that was due to them because of their commitment to self rule.  
He dies in their place.

What Jesus does on the cross is a picture of the rule of God in action.  
God is not a cruel and distant tyrant.  
God is just and kind, generous and forgiving.  
He always has the best interests of his subjects in mind.  
He is a king to love and adore.  
He is a king that you can readily hand over your life to.

### ***What is a Christian?***

And this brings us to the question of what a Christian is.  
You see, fundamentally a Christian is someone who acknowledges the truth of what God says.  
A Christian is someone who acknowledges that deep in their being they are committed to self rule.  
A Christian is someone who acknowledges that this is hell and who wants to be free from self rule and its consequences.  
A Christian is therefore someone who turns to God and asks forgiveness for having been dominated by self rule and who accepts that from this point on they want God to be their king.  
A Christian does this by believing in Jesus...  
By accepting God's forgiveness offered in Jesus...  
And by abandoning self rule and living with Jesus as king and lord of their lives.