

## *A Substitute God*

1 Samuel 8:1-18

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This morning we turn to the book of 1 Samuel, chapter 8, verses 1-18, as we continue in this series of *God & Governance*. But before I get there I want to thank you for the good discussions that I've had with some of you since last week. I want to thank you for your reflective comments, the way in which you are engaging with this subject. I recognize that in an audience of this size there might be some—perhaps many—who think we have no business speaking on such things. And perhaps some of you were here last week that wished we were not preaching on God & Governance. I hope to change your mind.

But one thing I want to state clearly, and that is you can disagree with God's word; you can certainly disagree with me. But I do want to take the opportunity to state again publicly and as clearly as I can possibly be: I will *never*—as long as I have the opportunity with this Session to guard this pulpit—I, nor anyone preaching from it will tell you whom to vote for. I will not be accused of telling you who or who not to vote for. That is not what this series is about.

This series is about asking the question: What role does the gospel play in the life of the Christian and then how is the Christian to engage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century living in the United States with this whole subject of God and Governance. It would taking our heads and placing them in the sand if we didn't in some way try to ask the question, "How, then, should we live."

With that said, I want to let you know that in July we're going to have a Q&A, because not all the questions you have, nor not all the things we're thinking about and praying about can be discussed in this space. So we're going to do a Q&A after the worship service, downstairs, and it will be in the community room. We'll have an opportunity there to have an hour-long discussion. We hope to encourage discussion, because based on the discussion I had last week, many of you are thinking about these things. And I'm grateful and you're grateful that we're at least talking about it. If there is one thing I will say positively, the gospel is absolutely big enough to house our differences of opinions and perspectives. What unites us is greater than what divides our opinions: that is, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we ask this morning that the Lord would enable us to go back to the Old Testament, to go to a crucial place where Israel said they wanted a king. And what does that say to us; how does it instruct the way in which we engage in these matters. Again I will say that last week and this week in many ways are setting the table, as it were, so that we can go deeper throughout the summer.

1 Samuel 8:1-18.

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain.

They took bribes and perverted justice.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a

king to judge us like all the nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” [ESV]

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me.

Now Heavenly Father, we ask that you would, by your Holy Spirit, teach us what it means to live by the gospel in this day and in this age by enlightening our minds and opening our hearts to what you are doing with the nation of Israel. We are not Israel. This is not a theocracy. We recognize that, O Lord. But there are things for us to learn here. And we pray that you would help us to feast upon your word so that we might be more trusting and more rooted in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, so as we go about living our lives and as we go about engaging in the work you have for us, we might please you. Teach us how to live. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.

You’ll see in your outline this morning—I wanted to keep it as simple as possible—first, “The Reasons” for why Israel was asking for a king and then the underlying “Reality,” the reality of what was going on inside their hearts which they could not see or would not see, but because it is written for us in the book of Samuel, we are able to see it. So, “The Reasons” and “The Reality.”

“The Reasons.” The reasons are clear and altogether absolutely understandable and justifiable. Let’s look at them briefly. First, Samuel was elderly. Because he had advanced in years he was not able to oversee the civic needs of the nation. He was not able to provide the kind of leadership that was necessary for that kind of role for that kind of nation and for God’s people. And so they simply said to him, “Hey Samuel. It’s time for retirement.” That is understandable because they were surrounded by nations with kings who ruled over the people. They were surrounded by nations who wanted to fight them. So they were concerned. What would it mean if they had someone who was of such an age that he would not be able to provide the kind of critical strategy in leading necessary for Israel. That’s the first reason.

The second reason is that Samuel placed these two sons—as with the judges—over Israel. The problem was they were corrupt. When placed in power . . . perhaps when they came into power, maybe they were not corrupt, but as we understand about the nature of powerful and powerful positions very easily pride can come in. The luxury of being placed with such influence, access, respect can easily go to anyone's head. And so instead of leading righteously and with justice, with character and clarity, they decided to use their position to leverage it for their own ends and for their own good. So the nation rises up and says, *Hey, they do not walk in your ways.* Meaning *They do not walk in your ways, Samuel,* meaning: They don't walk in the Lord's ways. Israel and the elders that were speaking to Samuel were completely justified in pointing this out. This is not the way God intended. He intends for his leaders of his people to reflect his character. This is the way that God set it up. Samuel's sons had failed to do so. So not only was Samuel old, he now has sons in control who were only interested in padding their own pockets.

But there was also a third reason. And this reason was this, as it states there in the text: Now appoint us a king to judge us like all the nations." This, too, was completely justified in asking. The reason for it is because it was Biblical for Israel to ask Samuel for a king.

We know this because of an important passage in the letter of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 17:14. This is God speaking to His people through his servant Moses, speaking about what would be the case for the nation of Israel, for God's people. This is what it says:

<sup>14</sup> 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," <sup>15</sup> be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. <sup>16</sup> The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." <sup>17</sup> He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

<sup>18</sup> When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from priests, who are the Levites. <sup>19</sup> It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees <sup>20</sup> and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel. [NIV]

The elders of Israel were completely justified in desiring a king and asking for one because God had already placed it in his word through his servant Moses to the people. So there you have it. Israel is looking at their leader, the prophet Samuel and his sons, and they said we don't have what we need. We see the other nations. We're reminded these were the elders of Israel; they knew Deuteronomy 17. This is what they desire.

So where's the problem? The problem is in the reality of what was going on just underneath the surface of their requests. You've heard the reasons. Now let's look at "The Reality" underneath those reasons. First and foremost among them it is stated for us in the text, which requires just a small amount of elaboration. Verse 7: "And the Lord said to Samuel, 'Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.'" So how does that square up? If the people of Israel were told and foretold that they were to have a king, but now that they asked for one they were rejecting God, it is because in some way, shape, or

form in the way in which they approach the whole issue, they got it completely backwards. It's there, right there if we're willing to see it.

They didn't go to Samuel and say, *Hey Samuel, it's time to go to Florida. What we're asking for you to do is, will you pray with us and go before God and ask him—because you are old—Lord, what would you have for your nation Israel?* That is a completely different approach. Instead they go to Samuel and say, *Hey, Samuel, you're old. Time to go. Your sons are disobedient. So now we want a king.* Because, you see, that's what Samuel did. Samuel went before the Lord said, *Lord, what would you have me do?* See the leaders of God's people, the elders of Israel, should have come before Samuel with open hands saying, *Will you go to prayer for us? Will you mediate for us and ask what would the Lord want?* No, they went with what they already wanted. And in so doing they were rejecting God as king, and oh, what a king he is.

In my own personal reading I came across this psalm this week. I don't have time to read it all, but just a couple of the highlights. Psalm 136.

Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for his understanding made the heavens. He made the great lights—the sun to govern the day, the moon to govern the night. He struck down the firstborn of Egypt, brought Israel out from among them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. To him who divided the Red Sea, brought Israel through it. He who swept Pharaoh and his army away in the Red Sea. He who led his people through the desert. He struck down kings, he killed mighty kings. He gave us a land as an inheritance. He is the one who has remembered us in our low estate. He freed us from our enemies and gives food to every creature.

And this is Psalm 136, and the psalmist writes all of these things as a great catalog for the people of God to hear, and the people of God are to respond. This is what scholars call an antiphonal psalm, where the worship leaders in the temple would declare all the things that I just read to you, and then the congregation on the other side were in dialogue. Antiphonal means two sides in dialogue with one another. So the leaders say this is what God has done, and then here's what the people of God do in response. And if you go back and you read Psalm 136, it is like the deepest bass of the deepest song keeping the deepest rhythm of all the world. And the people of God were simply to say:

His love endures forever.  
His love endures forever.  
His love endures forever.

God is their king. He loved them in their disobedience. He freed them from their slavery. He enriched them out of their poverty. And all he asked was, *Come to me. I am your God, and you are my people.* He is the king.

But instead of coming with outstretched hands and asking, *Lord, what would you do for us?* they came like the parable of the prodigal son to the father with closed fists and said, *Give me my inheritance.* Do you see? And the parable of the prodigal son teaches us—when the prodigal son looks at the father and says, *Give me my inheritance,* he's saying to his father, *You are as good as dead to me.* And when they go before God and go before Samuel here, they say, *Give us a king.* They were saying, *We don't want you as king. You are as good as dead to us until we need you.* This was the reality lurking right beneath the surface of their requests.

Secondly, the reality lurking beneath their request was that they had inflated the role of king to the place of idolatry. Because borne underneath this request was fear and envy and self-determination.

They were fearful—what if Samuel was too old, and we are attacked? What if we lose our strategic place because his sons are padding their pockets? They were sick of seeing it, and they said, *Enough of that. Now give us someone who will give what we want.* But here is the absolute pinnacle, the top, the zenith of idolatry, and it is this: In asking for a king, Israel committed the deepest sin that is beneath all sins—they saw the corruption outside of themselves, they saw it in their leaders, they saw the problems with Samuel and with his sons as somehow they were separate from them, but the reality is their leaders were a reflection of their own corruption.

Isn't that what the passage says when God tells Samuel to give them what they want? He says to him, "According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you." [v. 8] Their idolatry had blinded them to their own sin to the degree that they believed that the corruption was outside of them and that their only problem was they needed a righteous king and that would fix it. But God said no. And here they are, whoring after all the idols of their nations around them and saying, *Nothing's wrong with us. We just need a good king like all the other nations.* God says no. You have inflated king to the point of idolatry that you fail to see your own sin.

And then he gives them the warning, and this is the final reality underneath their requests. They believe that their reasons for wanting a king would be the answer to their future. But because of their idolatry they fail to see that what they were asking for is something they should be very careful in asking. As someone once told probably many of you, and certainly it's been told to me: Be careful what you ask for, you might just get it. And guess what they got? They got the candidate of all candidates. They got a candidate in Saul who was handsome, he was righteous, he was strong and not afraid of war. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, the most warring of all the tribes. The man knew how to lead an army. He understood the military, you see. And he would be a righteous man seeking after God's own heart, and they've got the candidate. And you can go back and you can read 1 Samuel 8-30, and you will see exactly what happens. He goes from being the ideal candidate, to being the ideal king, to being somebody who would be deaf to Israel, because he would do just like the others before him. See, lurking beneath their justifiable reasons was unjustified denial of their own sin and their own idolatry. The Lord had said to them, *I am your God; You are my people. I am your salvation* but they said no.

So how do we apply this? Well, the good news is we're not Israel. We're no longer in a theocracy. No nation-state in the world has a privileged position in the eye of God. But what is clear, one of the things we can learn from is that while we can't conflate Israel's condition and state with our condition as the United States of America, what we can do is we can begin to ask this question: How have we, like Israel, sought substitutes for God? How have we possibly allowed the spirit of our age to so infect our motives and our thoughts so that we unwittingly have become idolators to the power of politics. So just a couple of points of application this morning.

We know we have allowed politics and government to become an idol in our lives when we allow fear to trump faith. [There is no double meaning in that. <laughter> I just realized that as I read that, I promise.] When we allow fear to trump faith. Meaning this: We know we are allowing fear to transcend and overcome our faith when the news, the headlines, and the breaking news makes the gospel seem small and inconsequential. When the gospel seems so old and dusty, but the breaking news of a primary and a presidential election or the need to complete the Supreme Court seems more real and more existentially a threat than the sin of our own hearts which required the giving of our Heavenly Father of His Son—when our fear existentially experienced begins to make the gospel feel like it doesn't do enough. But we've already heard the testimony this morning that the faith of a small church in the mid-1980's sent a missionary and his family to Tokyo where there were fewer than

.05% Christians, to plant a church to seek those who were lost, and one of those young men is here this morning. What that tells us is the gospel is never small and the story is never old, because politics and breaking news never saved a single solitary soul. It cannot forgive us. It cannot make us right. It cannot make us happy. Let us be aware of where our fear is in relationship to our hope in the gospel.

Secondly, when we allow our faith to be so united to public policy that they become conflated as one. What begins to happen when the gospel becomes conflated with anything else—gospel and family, gospel and politics, gospel and work, gospel and arts—when it becomes conflated with any of those things, guess what loses out? The Gospel. Because all of those other things are good and right and important, as is governance. But it is tangential to the gospel for the Christian. The gospel will always lose out. The gospel must always influence how we engage with all of those things, but we must check our own hearts to ask: Have we allowed at times for the faith of Christianity to be conflated with any state, any politic, any policy? We must be careful because the enemy lurks as a lion, seeking whom he may devour.

As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*—a very important thing for us to be reminded of—in the 25th letter he says, My Dear Wormwood, the real trouble about you is this, that they see Christianity by itself, but we must encourage them. We want them to see Christians and to see Christianity as something tied to something else. As he says, Christianity—and. You know, Christianity and the crisis, Christianity and the new psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and the spelling reform. If they must be Christians, let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some passion with Christian coloring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing. The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart. (And by the Same Old Thing he meant the gospel.) Convince them that that's just an old story that has lost its power, but seek to unite Christianity to something else.

And I'm way out of time. I apologize, but I end with this. We must be aware of fear that overcomes faith, faith united to anything other than the gospel itself. We are foolish—if you are a professing Christian—we are foolish if we believe that the problem with the world is out there. The problem with the world is a reflection of our own brokenness. And what we worship at the center of our faith is a Savior who came to die for my sin and your sin. And my sin and your sin is never solo. It has ripple effects on relationships, it has a ripple effects on our neighborhoods, ripple effects on our cities, on our region, on our governments, and all that we do. It's so easy to wag the finger but forget that the mirror is a far wiser teacher, and the gospel is the mirror for our own souls, and it is a wise, yet loving teacher that leads us to humility. And the Lord in His kindness that leads us to repentance says to everyone, all of us, that we turn to Him in our weakness, in our sin, and that he will have mercy and give us grace, and then give us the wisdom to know how we ought to live. May the Lord enable us this morning as we come to the Supper to apply these things as we turn to him anew this morning. And to be renewed by the gospel that is center with Jesus as our Savior and nothing else, for he is God and there is no substitute.

Let's pray. Now Heavenly Father, we pray, feed us by this meal, but feed us by your word that we might walk in your ways, not with clenched fists asking you for things, but rather with open hands and saying to you, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Lord, help us to be aware of our own idolatry that we might not be overcome with fear or placing Christianity with anything else, but that we might come to you anew and ask you for wisdom, as we ask you for salvation. In Jesus' name. Amen.