

Title: We Think We Know What's Best.
Text: 1 Samuel 8.1-9
Theme: We think we know what's best
Series: 1 Samuel
Prop Stmt: When we think we know what's best, our solutions tend to add to the problem.

Many of you know the feeling. Your heart feels like a bass drum. You can feel your pulse throughout your entire body and no matter what you do, you can't seem to get it to relax. Your adrenal gland is working overtime keeping you on edge. It's a panic attack. It's that feeling that life is or is about to go really bad and you are out of control. But, what if the solution that you come up with only makes things worse? The story of this chapter is like the story of the OT and the story of your life. It's like this: You are trying to cut down a mighty oak tree with a wooden spoon or spatula, while God offers you a chainsaw. But you don't want to do it his way. You want to do it your way. You think that you know what's best.

Read Text:

Under the preaching of Samuel, the nation of Israel experienced a revival. We need to understand how unbelievable the event of chapter 7 really was. With no army and no weapons, Israel defeated their arch-enemy and perpetual nemesis, the Philistines. If you were betting on this battle, the odds could have easily been 1 in a million chances for Israel to win. This is like a Red Sea moment. The only way they could win was if God himself fought against the Philistines, and that is exactly what happened. Israel gathered at Mizpah in order to repent of her sin and renew herself as the people of God, only for the Philistines to use the opportunity to attack. We do not know if the Philistines decided to attack because they were threatened by Israel coming together and assumed that a religious event would result in a military movement or if the Philistines saw this as an opportunity to attack because they had a target-rich environment. Israel had no standing army. She really didn't have a means to defend herself. This was a great opportunity for the Philistines to get them all at one time. It didn't work out that way. Israel threw herself at the mercy of God and really trusted in God to deliver her and God did. He routed the Philistines and the result was a major defeat for the Philistines and a major victory for Israel and Samuel. If Samuel can pray to God and God responds by defeating an army with terrifying thunder, well, you'd better not mess with Samuel, right? But, the other thing to note is the fact that Samuel's ministry was national and not tribal. Samuel preached, judged and ministered from north to south. Plus, he was from the tribe of Levi, which had no allotment of land. Samuel had a national appeal not simply tribal. Not since the days of Joshua had there been a leader who so effectively unified the nation. The military victory of chapter 7 was not spearheaded by one tribe, all shared equally in the victory since it was God who caused it.

The judges had limited influence. They could not impose a tax on the people and neither could they impose a draft for soldiers. If you can't tax or draft, you aren't going to have too much practical authority. And because the nation was divided up by tribes, it was, well, tribal. In other words, it was easy for the people in one tribe to think that unless the problem affected my tribe, I didn't care. So, Israel was a people, but it really didn't function all that much like a

nation. She did not have a king, army, national government, or her own currency, but she used to at least have the tabernacle at Shiloh. Now that was gone and the Ark was in Abinidab's house over there on the hill. Seriously, what kind of an arrangement is that? How do you expect the other nations around you to take you seriously when you have no practical means of organizing yourself and doing things that nations do? There is no capital city, government buildings or palace. You claim to worship the God who created the heavens and the earth whose throne is, at least for now, over in Abinidab's house. You don't even have a place where you gather to worship him. Israel acts like she is embarrassed of her situation. But, there is more to it. Israel feels threatened. She lives surrounded by enemies and does not like the idea that she is constantly vulnerable to them.

I. **The problem of insecurity** (1-9)

The Philistines were a people who were better trained for war and had better weapons. Part of the reason why they were able to have such a lasting oppression over Israel is that they made certain that there were no blacksmiths in Israel. Therefore, Israel could not make her own weapons for war and if she needed any farming tools, she had to purchase them or get them repaired from outside of her country, which usually meant relying on the Philistines. For the last 150 years or so, Israel lived under the oppression and the constant threat of the Philistines and Israel was tired of it. Therefore, the victory that Israel experienced in chapter seven was massive. For the first time in a very long time, Israel had some freedom, some wealth and some respect. But, there was a problem.

A. **The immediate problems** (1-3)

Continuity and Unity

The immediate problem was the fact that Samuel was getting old and at some point, he was going to die. The first immediate problem was the problem of continuity. Who is going to be our leader after Samuel? What is going to happen to us? This is what I mean by the problem of insecurity and it is a problem that every nation, people, state, city, school, company, business, family, and even church has to deal with. Who is going to be our leader? Who is going to protect us? Who is going to provide for us? Who is going to help us know what we should do when problems arise?

The problem of continuity reveals the problem of protection. When there is a change in power, that change is usually violent. That is the history of the world. Therefore, when someone, particularly if that person is a dictator, dies in office, or is sidelined by illness, everyone knows that this is the time to attack because no one knows who is in charge. This is the time for the enemies to pounce, therefore this is the time for the people to be terrified. Peaceful transitions of power are actually rather unusual. Our form of government was designed to mitigate this as much as possible without creating a monarchy and we take peaceful transitions for granted. But, what would happen if we had a president who refused to leave office? What if we had a group of people who refused to recognize the new president and thought his election was

illegitimate and decided to take matters into their own hands? What if the joint chiefs of staff agreed with them? Do you realize how close we were to utter chaos one year ago? There is no guarantee that something like this couldn't happen here. It is rather unusual that it hasn't yet. Peaceful transitions are unusual and people do not like insecurity. We tend to pride ourselves on being the land of the free and the home of the brave, but we will give away more and more of our freedom in order to be protected. That really is a big deal.

I will be 62 this year. I am not going to be your pastor forever. Part of my responsibility is to help prepare you for the time when I transition out of this role. Now, I am not making any announcement and besides having a general idea of what they could look like, there are no plans. But, I started talking about this several years ago, because I know that this is a big deal and I want to be responsible and wise in this. Transitions are not easy. The problem of continuity then rolls into the problem of unity. If the people do not like the next leader, then things start falling apart. People complain, get disgruntled, fight, protest, etc. Look at how that is already seen here at the beginning of chapter 8.

Samuel understood the problem of continuity and tried to take matters into his own hands and appoint his sons to be judges. He tried to address the problem of continuity by making the role of judge a dynasty which created a problem of unity. No judge in Israel had ever done this before. After Gideon's success, some of the people wanted him to do that and he refused. He knew that would be a disaster. One of his sons, Abimelech tried to capitalize on this when his dad died and killed his brothers and anointed himself king. Well, that didn't go so well and Abimelech ended up getting killed and things were even more disunified.

In this case, Samuel appoints his sons to be judges, but they are corrupt. They took bribes and perverted justice. It is stunning, isn't it? In chapter 12 when Samuel gives his farewell speech he challenges his audience to point out one time when he has ever taken a bribe or has abused his authority and took something that didn't belong to him. They all agree. He has been a model of integrity. I wonder if his sons grew up with a measure of financial hardship and became bitter because their dad saved the nation but the nation didn't really provide for him like they could have or should have and these boys were going to get what they thought they deserved. That is speculation on my part, but it is certainly possible.

There are multiple reasons why bribing public officials is bad, not the least of which is the problem of disunity. If, in this case, a judge takes a bribe, then that means that the law is not being applied evenly. This destroys unity. One of the foundational issues for the unity of a nation, a government, a church, a family, a football team is this issue of the rules are evenly applied. We are all in this together. If anything, the leaders live according to a higher standard, never a lower one. When a judge accepts a bribe, then the law is perverted. The law is not applied consistently. The person with the money or influence gets preferential treatment and the unity is broken and morale is destroyed.

Samuel was a good leader, but he was not going to live forever and he created a major problem by appointing his sons. The text does not keep talking about this (other than v.4), but we need

to keep this in mind that Samuel's blind spot and his decision to take matters into his own hand by appointing his sons, contributed to this growing concern and potential crisis for the nation. They knew that Samuel would die and they knew that the Philistines would likely attack and they knew that no one was prepared to step into the vacuum of leadership when Samuel died. But, there was a bigger problem.

B. The deeper problem (4-9)

All of the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. This is telling. Normally, Samuel is the one who goes to the various regions of Israel in order to lead them, now the leaders are coming to him and they are coming together as one to him. This fractured, splintered, tribal people have come into agreement on this: You are old. Your sons are no good. We need a king. They do not ask Samuel his thoughts on this, they demand a king. And they demand a king who can judge them "like all the nations" (5b).

Oh man, there is so much going on here, that we need to hit pause and just stop the story so we can take all of this in. There is no getting around it. Samuel has been kicked in the gut. You are old. It's true, but life under Samuel has been really good. The Philistines did not dare step foot into Israel while Samuel was in charge. Israel had it really good under Samuel. This conversation does not sound like it's too affirming and appreciative does it? Then comes another gut-punch. Your sons don't walk in your ways. This is true also. But, taken together, Samuel is feeling rejected. I say that because of how the Lord responds to him. After all that Samuel has done, and this is how he is treated...this hurts. Now, the fact is, both of these statements are true. Samuel is old and his sons do not walk in his ways. This time, the people have experienced enough benefit from stable leadership, that they have no intention of returning back to how things used to be. These elders have come together in Ramah and they present a unified demand. Appoint for us a king. This means that they already met together and had this conversation, perhaps several times, trying to figure out what was going to happen after Samuel dies and what they should do. Why didn't they just wait for Samuel to die and then make their own king? Well, you can imagine how that would go. For one, there was the immediate problem of continuity and the problem of unity. If Samuel died without a leader in place, it is pretty clear that their enemies would attack. After all, the Ammonites attacked almost immediately after Saul was made king and the Philistines not long after them. Besides, what tribe would the king come from? Whatever tribe the king comes from is going to get special treatment and will likely be the region for the capital city. There is no way these elders are going to agree on that. So, in spite of the obvious tension this conversation would bring, the problems of not having the conversation would be greater, so they demand that Samuel appoints for them a king. A king "like all the nations." This is the real problem.

Israel is not like all the nations and God has set up her government to be unlike all the other nations. In Israel, God was the king, but in the nations around Israel, it was accepted that the king was a god. What was it that so was so appealing about having a king that the elders of Israel demanded this? They said so, in so many words. The appeal of having a smooth transition of power that comes from a dynasty where the firstborn son gets to take over was so strong

that they were willing to risk what the problems would be like if the firstborn sons turned out to be idiots. Once you get a dynasty, it's pretty difficult to change horses in the middle of the race. But, insecurity and fear are so powerful that most people will give up all of their freedoms in order to avoid them.

In Israel, God was the king. In the other nations, the king was a god. That was how he legitimized his authority to do whatever he wanted to do. Think about it. On what basis can one family claim to be royalty that gets to be served by all of the other people in the nation? I can talk very freely about this in our country because we don't have a king. If we had a king, or a dictator of sorts, I could get into trouble from saying this. But, if you went to school with Prince Charles or with Kim Jong-un, and you got better grades than they did, and you were liked better than they were, and you were a better athlete than they were and you were a better musician, singer, debater, chess player, and had a better science project than they did, wouldn't you wonder why they get chauffeured to school, while you walked, why you had to wash your clothes while someone else dressed them, while you had to pay your own tuition while your taxes paid theirs, or why you would have to spend the rest of your life bowing down to them and paying for them to live in royal palaces and go on exotic vacations? Why do they get to run the country and not you or someone else? By virtue of being born into this family, are they really inherently better than everyone else? When you see the flaws, and there are always flaws, upfront, it's difficult to reconcile the idea that the king is a god or anything close.

In order for one family to stay in power there has to be a narrative that is powerful enough to compel people to sustain this, or a fear of change that keeps the status quo. After all, human frailties being what they are, dynasties run out of good will, usually sooner rather than later. But, with all of that still Israel wanted a king. They did not believe that they really had a king. Sure, they had God, but, we can't see him, and others can't see him. It's not like he can get on a horse and ride into battle, or go to the regional meeting of kings, or create alliances and treaties. But, all of that betrays the fact that the nation would rather depend on a king they could see, a king that they couldn't always depend on rather than on the God they could always depend on. They did not want to be in a position where they constantly had to depend on God.

Samuel is displeased. He is likely hurt. How do you not take this rejection personally? But he also knows that this is not going to go well. Then Samuel does what we have become accustomed to him doing. He prays. Over and over Samuel prays. Later in chapter 15 we will see when God rejects Saul as king, (the king who essentially replaced Samuel), Samuel is angry and he cries to the LORD all night. (v.11) Earlier in chapter 12 in Samuel's farewell address he says that even though he is basically retiring now that they have a king, he will never stop praying for them. I do find it interesting that nothing is said about Samuel praying before he appoints his sons as judges. But, this man is otherwise, consistently presented as a man who talks with God. I don't think that Samuel was prepared for how God responded. He said to obey them and give them what they want. They won't learn the easy way, so maybe they will learn the hard way. After all, Israel never seems to take the easy way. They always think that they know better than God and when has that ever worked for them? God said to Samuel in v.8 that this has been my experience with the nation from day one. Samuel, they are doing to you what

they do to me. In fact, this is ultimately a rejection of me. So, go ahead and give them what they want. But warn them. After all, a king who is powerful enough to protect you from your enemies is also powerful enough to oppress the very people that he is supposed to protect.

Do you see why I've entitled this series, "who should be the king?" It's all starting to come into view. We need a king who can and will defend his people, but will never hurt them or take advantage of them. We need a king who won't make people die for him, but instead will die for his people. We need a king who can draw all of the people to himself and unify them. And we need a king whose reign will last forever and who never dies. We need Jesus. You need Jesus. You make a lousy king. We all do. The story of the Old Testament is the story of people trying to find that king on their own. It is the ongoing story of our world, and the story of some of you. The story of the New Testament is the coming and the return of that king. Which part of the story are you in?

I plan to finish the chapter next week, but there are two related takeaway's that I want you to think about. We are all insecure. We are all at the mercy of things that are beyond our control and we do not like it.

- 1) We would rather come up with our own solution rather than constantly find ourselves in a situation where we have to rely on God.
- 2) We want God (through Samuel) to "help" us so we don't have to rely on God.

Our biggest enemy is not Covid, cancer, or inflation. Our biggest enemy is unbelief. I was talking with a friend of mine this week who told me again that suffering a stroke was one of the best things that had ever happened to him because it caused him to completely re-evaluate his life, which he did. Brothers and sisters, I pray for you and I pray for you to be healthy like John prayed in 3 John 2. But, I also pray for your faithfulness, your joy, your perseverance and your hope. In fact, I pray more for that than I do for your health because your faith in God is what ultimately matters. God is not going to give you as a gift something that will cause your heart to turn away from him. There are times, as we will dig into next week, when God allows you to have what you want, but it's not a good idea.

- II. The problem with our solution to insecurity (10-18)
- III. God will let you find out the hard way. (19-22)