

Group Notes

Text: 1 Samuel 8

Israel's Struggle

Context and Background

Context: The books of 1-2 Samuel have been called some of the most honest historical writing in existence. The books chronicle the transition of the Israelite people from a loose confederation of tribes to a group of people led by a single monarch. The present text provides the events that served as the hinge between Israel as a loose confederation of tribes and Israel as a united nation. During the life of Samuel, Israel suffered a string of military defeats at the hands of the Philistines. One such defeat resulted in the loss of the Ark of the Covenant, Israel's most prized possession (1 Sam. 4). During this time of upheaval and uncertainty, Samuel's influence rose. His influence eventually led the Israelites to turn back to God (1 Sam. 7.2). Up to this point, Israel was struggling with the influence of culture around them (1 Sam. 7.3). When Israel turned to the Lord, under Samuel's leadership, God in turn delivered them (1 Sam. 7.7-17), thus fulfilling His promise to bless His people should they follow Him (Dt. 28.1-14). In 1 Samuel 8, the people's allegiance to God is tested. The people find themselves once more on the brink of chaos and anarchy. In this predicament, they are forced to choose between two paths forward: trusting God or self-reliance. The Israelites choose the path of self-reliance and in many ways symbolically return of their days of bondage in Egypt. Thus, the question that comes to the foreground concerns God's response and presence. Where is God and what will He do as His people choose their own way, a return to bondage rather than continuing to follow Him?

Background (Kingship): God's original plan for the governance of His people was that of a theocracy, rule by God Himself. We see this implied in the opening chapters of Genesis as God alone has authority over people. This theocratic desire of God is first stated explicitly in the Mosaic Law. God plainly asked for the sole allegiance of His people (Dt. 6.13; 10.12; 13.4; 28.1). This allegiance was meant to be more than religious, but was meant to be that of a subject to a king (Num. 23.21). Even though God's desire was to reign directly over His people, He recognized that eventually Israel would desire some form of human government (Dt. 16.18-17.20). God was not opposed to this desire insofar as human governance did not hinder Israel's relationship with God. That is, any human government was to point people to God as the sole leader, or in other words, to facilitate God's theocratic rule (Dt. 17.18-20). In modern settings, separated millennia from the possibility of religiously organized people groups, the question of governance remains crucial. Paul insists that one should maintain the view that God is still in sole control, somehow working through secular governments (Rom. 13.1-7). However, one should not make the mistake of equating human governance with God's reign. Such views have resulted in great tragedies and atrocities. One need only consider the German Church's view of Adolf Hitler. Rather, Jesus made it very clear that God's ultimate desire is to be the sole-leader of our lives. That is, God's ultimate desire was and is to be king, above all human forms of governance (Lk. 9.23-24; Matt. 22.15-22, 34-40).

The Text

History repeats itself (1 Sam. 8.1-3): Samuel has served as the prophet-leader of Israel for many years, traveling throughout Israel, pointing people back to God (1 Sam. 7.2-17). As Samuel approached the end of his life, the question of leadership for the future needed to be answered. Samuel's answer to this very real issue was to appoint his sons as the future leaders. The trouble was that like Eli's sons, Samuel's sons did not follow God. Rather, Samuel's sons perverted justice, accepted bribes, and leveraged their authority for their own gain. The troubled and sordid history of life under Eli's sons and the judgment their behavior brought about would still have been part of the memories of many in Israel (1 Sam. 2.12-3.21). With Samuel's sons in charge, Israel stood on the brink of returning to moral and social chaos once more, the very thing Samuel has led them from (Judges 21.25; 1 Sam. 7.2-17).

A choice between two paths (1 Sam. 8.4-21): The Israelites find themselves in a dilemma. With Samuel aging and his sons not of his caliber, they stand the very real chance of returning to social and moral chaos by allowing Samuel's sons to remain in power. They must choose how they wish to move forward as a nation. Two obvious choices stand before them. They can turn to God, asking for His deliverance or they can solve the problem of leadership on their own. The first choice is an acknowledgment of God's desire to be the sole-leader of His people, and this choice has a positive track record in the immediate past with God's movement to deliver the people from the Philistines when they cried out to Him as their leader (1 Sam. 7.7-11). The second choice also has a track record, though not a positive one (See the book of Judges). Basically, the Israelites are faced with choosing between submitting to God and relying upon Him and relying upon themselves. They choose to rely on themselves and request that Samuel appoint a king, like the nations around them. Some have noted that God had already permitted the request for a king by His people (See *Background: Kingship*). However, what is important to note is the motivation for this request. The people want to be like the nations around them. They choose their own solution, to rely on the wisdom of the day, rather than to rely upon God. Samuel is displeased as he recognizes the nature of their choice. God reminds Samuel that the people are not refusing Samuel but are in fact rejecting God's leadership, something they have done throughout their entire history. God instructs Samuel to remind the people of the outcome of their choice. By choosing their own way they will be returning to bondage, slavery in their own land. It is important to note the mention of Egypt in the text (1 Sam. 8.8). God had previously delivered the people from Egypt and now they are returning willingly to slavery, Egypt if you will (1 Sam. 8.17). The people respond by affirming their decision. It is a decision based on the desire for comfort. They would rather have the promise of comfort and safety of a king with slavery than the perceived uncertain future of relying on God. God responds graciously by granting their request. God's response displays His character of faithfulness, leaving room for His future redemptive movement among the people of Israel.

Application: In life we face choices every day. At the end of the day, each and every choice we make rests upon one of two foundations, a desire to follow and rely upon God or a desire to be self-reliant. God's ultimate desire is that we rely upon Him, allowing Him to be the sole-leader of our life. The reality is that the path of self-reliance seems much easier. What we do not often realize is that self-reliance often involves an exchange, an exchange of freedom for bondage. Yet, we readily make the exchange for what we perceive to be security and safety. While this choice breaks God's heart, it does not mar His love or devotion to us. God remains with us, even as we distance ourselves from Him, making room for Him to work redemptively in and through our rejection of Him.

Finding God in the Ordinary

Discussion Guide 3

1 Samuel 8.1-22a

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- Would you describe yourself as a self-reliant person? Can you elaborate?
- Optional: What, if anything from the sermon, encouraged, challenged, or really made you think?

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

Setting the Stage: *“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.” Thus begins one of Robert Frost’s most famous poems, a line that is more of a commentary about life than a casual Fall walk. Life, according to Frost, consists of choices, choices that when you boil it down are really two in number, too which I say, “Phooey!” Life consists of a plethora of choices. I mean, I go to Wegmans and I have at least fourteen types of mustard to choose from. I have at least 200 channels on the television. Let’s not mention countless variety I have to choose from every time I choose my next bottle of shampoo. Two choices? Certainly we have more than two. Then again, maybe Frost wasn’t talking about shampoo or television. Maybe, he was talking about something much deeper, something much more fundamental to life itself. Maybe, life when you boil it down is much simpler than we make it. Could it be that the paths in life before us are really two in number? Jesus seemed to think so. The question is, which path will I follow? Will it in the end really make a difference?*

- Read 1 Samuel 8.1-22a.
- What dilemmas did the Israelites face?
- Imagine you are an Israelite. What options do you have?
- How did the Israelites solve their dilemmas? What were the outcomes?
- What dilemmas do people face today? What options do they feel they have?
- What dilemmas, if any, do you find yourself facing?
- In these instances, what would relying on God look like? What would relying on yourself look like?
- What, if anything, makes relying on God difficult in your circumstances? Can you elaborate?
- What encouragement / strength do you need to rely upon God?

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)