

KING?

1 Samuel 8:4-9, 19-22

Although we don't normally realize it, everything we do is chocked full of choices. Our morning routine is probably carried out as much by habit as by anything else we do, but those habits resulted from choices made at one time or another. Something as simple as brushing your teeth involves many choices. Whether to use a soft or hard bristle brush, the brand and flavor of toothpaste, the method of brushing (back and forth or up and down), and whether or not to floss are choices that we have made at one time or another. Most of our choices do not seem to have lasting significance, although, in the above example, how we treat our teeth can determine how long we will have them and how much trouble they may cause us to have. Occasionally, we come across choices that have lasting and even eternal significance. These choices need to have careful consideration in the decisions we make.

The most crucial choice that anyone will ever make is whether to commit his or her life to God through Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The eternal destiny of each one of us depends on that choice. In our study of the nation of Israel, we see them coming to great decision points on a number of occasions. The decision to leave Egypt, the decision to accept the Ten Commandments, and the decision NOT to go into the Promised Land the first time are examples of tough choices that had important consequences. We can remember the story of how Joshua called the people together and challenged them to choose whom they would serve as he said, "Choose ye this day, whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Later on during the time of Samuel the people came to another significant decision point.

The ability to be able to choose is highly valued by most of us. However, along with the privilege of choice, we find that our choices have consequences. If we embrace the freedom to choose without accepting the accompanying responsibility and accountability, then we have a formula for chaos. We see struggles related to freedom going on between nations, within societies, in the work place, and even in families. No matter how free a society is, limits have to be imposed to prevent individuals from ignoring responsibility for their actions that harm the society or other individuals.

Within families children strive to get more freedom. Parents are faced with balancing "how much freedom to give" with "how responsible the child will behave" with his or her freedom. A five-year-old child may want his own car; however, he is not capable of accepting the responsibility that such freedom would bring. Older teenagers may also want a car so that Mom or Dad doesn't have to take them where they need to go. A parent may be reluctant to provide a car because he or she doesn't want to give up their control over the teenager. Another reason might be fear the teenager will not be responsible with the new freedom. If the request is granted, then the teen should realize all the responsibility he must accept along with the car. Complete freedom might carry responsibility for car payments, insurance payments, paying for all service and repairs, and buying gasoline. Faced with such responsibility, a young person might opt for less freedom and fewer responsibilities.

As the nation of Israel matured, the people started to exercise their desire for more freedom of choice in the kind of government they had. They had been sort of a loose confederation of tribes and really had much freedom since there was no central government. Their laws were the Ten Commandments and the law of Moses. They had no elections and no royal families. Natural leadership of the older people in the communities was a way of life for them. On a national level, there was a succession of judges that provided a means to settle

disputes and render judgments in difficult cases. Sometimes the judge was also the high priest of the nation. Such was the case of the last two judges Israel had, Eli and Samuel.

A King Demanded – 8:4-5

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah; ⁵and they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.” 1 Samuel 8:4-5 (NASB95)

This was not the first time the people of Israel demanded to have a king rule over them. The first time was when Gideon was judge and God had defeated the Midianites with Gideon and his 300 men. You may recall that the people of Israel had wanted to make Gideon the king of Israel; however, he refused pointing out that they already had a King in heaven. He didn't want to take on the presumptive role of being a king without specific instructions from the Lord. As it turned out, one of Gideon's sons named Abimelech tried to make himself king and he killed all but one of the other sons of Gideon. He lasted as king/judge about three years before he was killed.

Eli's sons had served as assistant judges under Eli and Samuel's sons were doing the same thing in his later years. As we know Eli's sons were killed in the battle in which the Ark of the Covenant was stolen by the Philistines and Samuel was the last judge in the history of Israel.

In every other case of the judges, sons did not become a judge of Israel just because their fathers were judges. The fear that this would happen with Samuel's sons apparently prompted the elders to intervene as Samuel grew older.

Instead of addressing their concern that a person be found with acceptable character to succeed Samuel as the chief judge they went well beyond that point to wanting a king. What they failed to take into account was that with a king, the son of the king would automatically follow his father to occupy the throne. They were, in effect, limiting the pool of capable people from “anyone in the nation whom the Lord might choose” to the “eldest son of the king” which was giving up a lot of freedom and limiting their possibilities. Either they were insincere in their stated reason for wanting a king or they had failed to think through the consequences.

The leaders of the people sent a delegation to Samuel to make him aware of the problem his sons were causing. It could have been that he did not realize what was going on since they lived in Beersheba which was a long way away from Ramah. Many times the parents of errant children are the last to know. The elders had serious concerns and they brought a proposal to Samuel. First of all, they recognized that he could not continue on forever in his role of judge in Israel. Next they realized that a judge would have to be honest and moral even as Samuel was; however, Samuel's sons were not that way. The main idea of their proposal was that they wanted a new form of government, one that would be like all the nations around them.

To their credit, they had legitimately recognized and complained about a wrong that was being done. The problem came from their prescription of a worldly solution to the problem. We find ourselves doing the same thing today. We can see problems around us, but instead of trying to find God's solution and God's way, we turn elsewhere and try to apply our own remedies. A lot of well-meaning people sincerely think this is what God wants us to do. You hear things such as, “After all, God did give us a brain and expects us to use it.” True, God does want us to use our brains; however, the way we are to use it is in finding and following His will. The desire to be like others is typically called the herd instinct and it is natural for dumb animals; but, we are not dumb animals but are made in the image of God.

If we really used our brains, we could figure out that the majority is usually wrong. People are trying today to force us into more and more governmental influence in our lives that

will lead us closer to a socialistic form of government like others have. If they would but look around, they would see that it really doesn't work anywhere. The elders of Israel could have looked around at their neighbors and determined that their own form of government was really the best if they would just obey God.

People always fear change. They imagine that the worst will happen and there is a lot of anxiety when people think change is going to occur. This is why emotions are so on edge during election seasons. The situation that Samuel faced with the elders is not too different from what is happening on the national scene in the politics of our day. While we have two main voices clamoring for change in the way things are done, both sides seem to be in agreement that what has been happening in the past has not worked. The proposed solution to the problem is to completely change the system rather than analyze what has caused the present system we have to "not work" properly.

In the case of Israel, part of the problem was people being allowed to be in positions of power who were not honorable and noble people. There were people who were not properly trained and did not follow the established recommended procedures that God had given them. In some cases, the problem was with the people not being faithful and not being properly informed about what was expected. Failure to follow God's word, God's commandments, and Godly principles always results in disaster. The nation of Israel had been through fifteen cycles of falling away from God, oppression by outsiders, restoration by a judge, and then forgetting what they had learned. If learning is supposed to come by repetition, then they had proven themselves to be terrible students.

How well do the experiences of Israel parallel what we have seen in our nation's history that have brought us to a point that "the people" are demanding that we toss out everyone associated with the present system and try something new like a socialistic or an imperialistic dictatorship? Those appear to be the two choices that are on the table at this time. Where are the voices that are calling out to identify the problems that have caused the present system to fail and fix those problems?

Every one of us can prescribe the only remedy that needs to be applied. George Washington observed that "Religion and morality are the essential pillars of civil society." We have obviously abandoned that principle. John Adams stated "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion . . . Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." The solutions to our present day problems are fairly simple. Without repentance and turning back to God, no form of government will work.

An interesting trait of human nature is that people would rather have less and have a choice rather than having more with no choice. In order to gain a choice, any excuse will do. This decision to go to Samuel was not a spur of the moment thing with them. They had talked about it among themselves and finally got up enough courage to go to Samuel with their request or demand for the nation to have a king as the other nations did. The elders stated two reasons for their request: the first was dissatisfaction with Samuel's sons and the second was a desire to be as other nations were. The people had a legitimate concern about the sons of Samuel; however, the desire to be as others are was not a valid reason for change. God had raised up leaders in the past and He would do so again if the people would trust Him. They took another approach and determined for themselves what would be best. This is typical of what we do in our own lives. We see a potential problem and come up with our own solutions without regard to the will and purposes of God.

Rejection Declared – 8:6-9

⁶ But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. ⁷ The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them. ⁸ “Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day—in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also. ⁹ “Now then, listen to their voice; however, you shall solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will reign over them.” 1 Samuel 8:6-9 (NASB95)

Samuel was a great leader and a great person; however, he was subject to being hurt when he felt rejected by people. Samuel saw this request as a rejection of himself and his leadership. The elders were very careful to not criticize Samuel’s way of governing; however, there was an implied criticism of the way he had reared his sons. It may have been that Samuel had tried to do too much himself as prophet, priest and judge of Israel. In doing so much, he may have not paid enough attention to his family responsibilities. Many people have difficulty balancing multiple responsibilities and those things that are less urgent get left undone even though they may be the most important things to do.

Even though Samuel was hurt, he did not argue with the elders. He turned to God for guidance. God provided insight to Samuel that showed the root cause of the request that they should have a king. Humans are inherently rebellious and do not want to submit to any authority. It is in such rebelliousness that we find the root of sin. If anything describes the Adamic nature of fallen man, this one characteristic sums it up very well. The problem with such choices that grow out of rebellion is that the new choice would likely lead to less freedom than what they had before.

Samuel could have tried to figure out a compromise or demanded that the elders repent. He could have become angry and done many other things, but he turned to the One to Whom he was responsible for direction. This is exactly what we should do when we are confronted with disappointment or rejection. This is a great lesson for us. We cannot assume we know everything about the situations in which we find ourselves. We need insight that is beyond ourselves and we get that by turning to God. God saw beyond the obvious and realized that what the people were rejecting was His Lordship.

God’s answer to Samuel is truly frightening. If we approach God with a rebellious spirit asking for something that is not best for us, we just may get exactly what we ask for. God said to Samuel, “Let them have their king, it will teach them a lesson, but first warn them of the consequences of their choice.” God recognized this request as the culmination of all the rejection that had been going on since the people left Egypt. The seed of rebellion was there and now it was finally bringing forth fruit. Samuel told the people what it would be like to live under earthly kings. Their sons and daughters would be pressed into the service of the king. Everything they had or earned would be taxed. The king would take the best of what they had and use it for his own purposes. Sounds, like the system we have today!

The real challenge in dealing with people who want to do things their own way is to give them enough freedom to experience and learn but not enough for them to destroy themselves. If we were dealing with our children, then we would give them opportunities to try different things and warn them of the consequences. A really wise child would listen and then follow the advice of his or her parents. Most children want to make their own choices so strongly they will ignore the advice and then learn lessons the hard way.

God was willing to let Israel learn the lesson of how costly having a king can be by letting them experience it. God had Samuel warn them of the cost of such a choice.

Rebellion Determined – 8:19-22

¹⁹Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, and they said, “No, but there shall be a king over us, ²⁰ that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

²¹ Now after Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the LORD’S hearing. ²² The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and appoint them a king.” So Samuel said to the men of Israel, “Go every man to his city.” 1 Samuel 8:19-22 (NASB95)

It was predictable. It didn't do any good to tell them the truth of the matter. They already had their minds made up and did not want to be confused with the facts. This is so much like the way we still operate. We get something in our minds to do and in spite of the fact it may be harmful to us, we will continue to carry out the plans we started. What they saw were the positives of having a king. Notice that not only did they want to be like the other nations, but they also wanted to have someone to do everything for them instead of having any responsibility themselves. “We want a king to fight our battles for us.” This sounds very much like the cry today, “Let the government do it.” They would not accept being different. They envisioned having a king who would be a majestic person whom they could admire; he would be a great military leader. They refused to see the downside of their choice.

We need to keep in mind that our choices have consequences and we would do well to check out the consequences before we make the choice.

Just as a loving parent does not abandon a child because he or she makes a bad choice, God does not abandon us when we make the wrong choices. God calls us to come back to Him and to continue to serve Him. The problems come when we fail to realize the loving forgiveness of our Heavenly Father and do not return to Him in obedience and faith. If we continue to go away from God, then we have no chance of surviving. God has not changed. He still calls for us to reverence Him and to serve Him in truth with all our hearts.