

## **Following the Nations**

### **1 Samuel 8:1-22**

What's the ideal leader look like?

- George Bush? Kevin Rudd? Helen Clark?
- Bill Gates? Rupert Murdoch?
- Martin Luther King? Germaine Greer?
- Darren Lockyer? Ricky Ponting?

Where do your ideas about the ideal leader come from? Who are the leaders you really admire? Does the picture of an ideal leader change over time? For example, think of the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky affair. His leadership survived. He's still in demand as a speaker. But would his leadership have survived if that had happened 50 years earlier?

At the end of 1 Samuel 7, we have a picture of the leader Samuel. His leadership's described as that of a judge – not the sort of judge that wears a funny wig and a fancy robe and sits in court all day, but as one of those figures we find in the book of Judges. These aren't judges in the way in which we usually think of the term. They're people God uses to deliver Israel from their enemies and lead them to follow the true God rather than turning aside to idolatry. That's the sort of story we find in 1 Samuel 7.

### **The Leadership Problem**

As we turn the page to chapter 8, we again find that quite a bit of time's passed. Verse 1:

*When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. The name of the firstborn was Joel [meaning Yahweh is God] and the name of his second was Abijah [meaning Yahweh is father].*

How much time's passed isn't certain – it all depends on

how you define the word *old*. Yet, with the aging of Samuel, we again have the leadership question raised. God provided Samuel for Israel and Samuel provided good leadership for them – but, like all the other leaders before him, he too will die. Who'll be leader then?

For reasons known only to himself and God, Samuel tries an experiment. He appoints his sons as leaders. They may not have been full-blown leaders. They may have only been supposed to exercise certain functions under Samuel's supervision. Maybe Samuel's aged bones didn't travel as well as they used to and he's just delegating some of his functions. Whatever, the fact remains that Samuel introduces his sons as his successors.

Now, that was something that was done with the priesthood in Israel – that was a hereditary position. Priests had to be born into the right family. That was the only way you could be a priest. But that wasn't the case with other leaders.

- Moses doesn't appoint one of his sons as his replacement.
- Joshua doesn't appoint his son.
- The judges don't appoint their sons.

In Judges 8:22, the offer's made to Gideon:

*The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us – you, your son and your grandson – because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian".*

Gideon rejects the offer:

*I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you.*

*The Lord will rule over you.*

After Gideon's death, one of his sons does try to take leadership and that proves a disaster.

So why does Samuel appoint his sons as judges? We don't know why. Whatever the reasons, it was a big mistake. Verse 3:

*But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.*

They don't really live up to their names. Instead of honouring God, they were corrupt and dishonest. Instead of using their position to serve the people, they used it for their own advantage. They sought to line their own pockets, rather than providing true justice. Instead of leading Israel towards God and God's ways, they led her away from the sort of lifestyle God describes in the law. They remind us very much of Eli's sons. Where was Israel to find security and peace and justice now Samuel was getting old and his sons were no-hopers?

## **The Request**

This time, the elders object. Verse 4:

*So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They 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".*

Now, at one level, you'd like to give these guys the benefit of the doubt. You think to yourself: Perhaps the elders have learnt their lesson this time. With Eli's sons, they don't act. They simply put up with their wickedness. This time they do act. They say they won't put up with the wickedness of Samuel's sons in leadership. They want Samuel to institute other steps to solve the leadership question.

And their request looks quite reasonable. They look at leadership in their world. People are moving out of the

Stone Age into the Iron Age. A king could establish Israel. A king could build stable political structures. A king could organise the nation into a real nation. A king could raise a standing army. There could be stable and predictable centres of political authority. A king would give the nation a visible and tangible expression of their unity. A king would provide strong, dignified and predictable leadership. "After all, this is the Iron Age," they may have said. "All the other nations have kings. You can see what it's done for them. They've become efficient. They've become prosperous. They've become secure. They've become strong. We're still bouncing around from one crisis to the next. Give us a king." It all sounds very reasonable – and, no doubt, the elders could make a very good case for their request.

In some sections of the church today, this request has a very familiar ring to it. The church is struggling. It's moving from one crisis to the next. It's being left behind in a world that's going from strength to strength. It's no longer at the forefront, setting the agenda for the world to follow. Everyone simply thinks the church is irrelevant. We need someone to lead us out of this mess and put us back on the world map. We need a strong, dynamic leader like Bill Gates or Kevin Rudd. We can find a good case for finding some corporate or political model and asking God to give us a leader like that – a leader who'll be able to bring us out of the wilderness and make us a force to be reckoned with in our society.

Did you notice the stupidity of the elders' request? Ask yourself: What's the main benefit of the monarchy? What's the advantage of kings over other systems? Why not ask for an elected president? The main benefit of

kings is that they're hereditary. When one king dies, you don't have to have a fight as to who'll be the next leader. You don't need an election. You don't need a military coup. You simply put the eldest son on the throne. At least, that's the theory. Samuel, your sons are not suitable to be leaders in your place. Please provide us with a system where the son becomes the next leader.

## **The Idolatry**

But that's not the worst of it. Verse 6:

*But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. 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. 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 now to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do."*

Israel already had a King, namely, God. God's their true leader. God brought them out of Egypt. God established them in this land He gave them. God provided human leaders for them when it was necessary. God gave them His word – His instructions for how they're to live as His people. They had it written down for them.

Yet, this people rejected God's leadership over and over again.

- They grumbled and complained their way through the desert of the Sinai peninsula.
- They refused to enter the land because ten spies reported about the giants that lived there.
- Time and again during the Judges period they

turned away from God's word to pagan idols. Now, they're not satisfied with what God's done for them in terms of the leaders He's given. They want a king to rule over them – to make them strong and stable like the nations round them.

They thought the issue was a question of leadership – get the right kind of leader and we can become a strong and secure nation and hold our heads up high when we all gather together for the Olympic Games. We can win our fair share of gold medals on the world stage. They'd missed the point. The real issue was how they treated God. As one of Israel's later kings wrote:

*Righteousness exalts a nation,  
but sin is a disgrace to any people.*

The real issue's whether they're prepared to live under God's word – to live the righteous and just lives God called them to live. For what's it matter how many gold medals you win if the God who created you and holds you to account is not pleased with you? God didn't want them competing on the world stage on the world's terms. He wanted them competing on His terms.

God had called this people to be different.

- Out of all the nations of the earth, He made them His treasured possession.
- Out of all the nations of the earth, He gave them His precious law – describing to them how life's to be lived.
- Out of all the nations of the earth, He made His covenant with them that, through them, God would bless all the other nations of the earth.

Their lives were to declare the glory of God – not some fake, made-up idol, but the real Lord of heaven and earth.

They kept failing to live up to their calling in the past. Now, in their request for a king, they fail again. They don't want to be different – they want to be like all the other nations. They're tired of the old way God's given them – the way of trusting His word – they want a new way.

Now, please note, it's not that God's against kings. If you sift through the Old Testament up to this point, there are several hints that kings were in God's plan for Israel.

- When God makes His promise to Abraham, it includes hints that kings will be descended from him.
- Jacob, in blessing his sons before his death, prophesies that the sceptre belongs to Judah (Genesis 49:10).
- Balaam, in his fourth oracle about Israel, likewise refers to a sceptre (Numbers 24:17-19).
- The law itself makes allowances for kings in Deuteronomy 17. It even mentions kings like the nations – although the sort of king it describes is quite different from the kings of the nations.
- Even the opening chapters of 1 Samuel hint that God's taken the initiative in moving Israel towards the monarchy.

The elders could've pointed to these passages to support their arguments – except, of course, for the ones in 1 Samuel. But they didn't – because their concern wasn't for God's word and what God may or may not have wanted, but to be like the nations around them. They wanted to follow the pattern they saw working around them – not God's pattern of being different and submitting to God as King. Their idolatry was to trust in a form of government rather than to trust God.

## **Idolatry's Cost**

God has Samuel tell them about the sort of king they're asking for in verses 10 to 18. I'm not going to read those verses in their entirety to you now – I want simply to highlight the refrain that keeps popping up.

- Verse 11: the king will take your sons.
- Verse 13: the king will take your daughters.
- Verse 14: the king will take the best of your fields.
- Verse 15: the king will take taxes of your produce.
- Verse 16: the king will take your servants and your animals.
- Verse 18: 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.

This is the king you've asked for – a king like the other nations – a king who'll take and take and take. Even relatively good kings are like that. If the king should choose to abuse his power, it'd be even worse.

It's a sharp contrast with the sort of king described in Deuteronomy 17. Back there, God warns them to make sure they get the right sort of king.

- A king who won't accumulate great numbers of horses for himself.
- A king who won't take large numbers of wives.
- A king who won't accumulate lots of money.
- A king who pays attention to God's law and takes it to heart.

God warns them about kings who take and take and take – but they don't listen. They want a king like the nations to give them peace and stability and security – things which, in reality, only God can supply.

I want us to pause and ask: Is it possible to find the sort of king God talks about? You've heard the saying:

Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely. We recognise the dangers that come with leadership positions – especially when those positions involve real power. Our own systems of government have inbuilt factors in an attempt to prevent such abuses of power.

- We have an upper house as a house of review to prevent the lower house simply doing what it wants.
- We have a judiciary that's totally separate from the parliament and which seeks to interpret the law in an impartial fashion.
- We have elections every three or four years so that we can get rid of governments that become too abusive.
- Our politicians are subject to the laws of the land in the same way we are.

And so it goes on. We recognise this inbuilt tendency in humans to abuse power for their own selfish purposes and we seek to guard against it. The Bible calls that inbuilt tendency sin. There's that within us that tends towards selfishness and self-centredness.

So, is there any hope for finding the sort of king God talks about – a king who has authority and won't simply abuse that authority for himself? Can we find a king who won't take and take and take? Even when we get to David – a king after God's own heart – we find a king who builds a sizable administration that puts a burden on the people. We also find a king who takes Bathsheba for himself and then takes the life of Uriah.

The New Testament gives us a glimpse of two men in

conversation – Pontius Pilate and Jesus. Pilate, as the Roman governor, represents the ruling power of that time. In John 18:33, he asks Jesus:

*Are you the king of the Jews?*

Jesus answers him:

*My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now My kingdom is from another place. You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.*

Jesus is God's King. How does Jesus come into His kingdom? What's the nature of Jesus' rule? He says:

*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*

He's not the one who takes and takes and takes – but the One who gives. He's not a king like the kings of the nations. His leadership's different from the leaders of this world. The gospel says there is a king worth having – but He's not the type of king who follows the normal patterns of all the other kings of this world. He's the sort of king who serves His people.

How's this King provide justice? How's this King put things right? He does it through His death.

- In His death, He satisfies God's justice in relation to us.
- In His death, He pays the penalty for our sin.
- In His death, He suffers for us the right and just judgment of God that we deserved to suffer.
- In His death, He meets the demands of a holy God on our behalf.

He puts things right with God for us. And He prepares us to live truly under God's rule. He prepares us to live in God's kingdom – where true justice is always done and where there's true peace and security. He prepares us to be holy and blameless before God – a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.

## **The Decision**

The pull of the surrounding nations is strong. Verse 19:

*But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said, "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."*

They refused to pay attention to Samuel's warning – and, since Samuel spoke the words of God, they refused to listen to God's warning. Instead of trusting God – instead of following His word – they trusted the tried and true methods of the nations around them.

God called them to be different – that's the basic meaning of the word *holy*. The human race as a whole turned away from paying attention to God – that's one of the big results of what happened with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. If you looked at the nations around Israel at the time of Samuel, you could see plenty of evidence of that.

- None of them wanted to know about Israel's God.
- They each made up their own gods and shaped idols to represent those gods.
- They each made up their own rituals that were part of how they honoured their gods.

A major thing that flowed on from that was that their lifestyles did not meet God's standards.

Israel's supposed to be different from them. God – the real God – had revealed Himself to Israel. God had rescued them from their slavery in Egypt. God had told Israel how He invented life to be lived. God asked them to trust Him – to trust His word that He'd given them. He wanted them to believe His way truly was the right way to live – the best way to live – and to act on that belief. God wanted them to live under His rule – for He knew that's what's best for them. But the pull of the surrounding world was too strong for their sinful hearts. Instead of trusting God, they wanted to be like everyone else.

The challenge to be different – to trust that God knows best – continues to be a challenge for us. Even as Christians, we don't like to stand out from everyone else.

- We want the same sort of houses they want.
- We want the same sort of lifestyles they want.
- We watch the same movies they watch.
- We aspire to worldly success just like them.
- We want our children to get ahead in the same way they want their children to get ahead.
- Just like them, we envy those with the top-paying careers and all the money.
- The lure of the advertisers gets to us just like them.

As long as we fill our minds with the values of this world so we'll struggle to be different in anything other than a superficial way. The pull of the idolatry of materialism's very strong in our culture. We even think of heaven in materialistic terms. We struggle to believe that life's not about getting the most toys or the biggest bank account or the biggest canoe. Yet God calls us to trust Him when He tells us life's not about those things. We ask in return: Who wants to stand out in the middle of a perverse generation?

## **Church Leadership**

But let's come back to the issue of leadership. No one suggests we should have kings in the church today. Monarchies aren't as popular these days. How does God choose to rule His people today – the church? Depending on which church you're in, you may answer it differently.

- If you're in a Presbyterian Church, you may say God rules through the elders. They're the leaders the New Testament says should be appointed in the church.
- If you're in an Anglican Church, you may say God rules through the bishops and archbishops. God's established this orderly hierarchy through which He rules His people.
- If you're in a Baptist Church, you may say God rules through the majority of the people. God's given His Spirit equally to each of us and together we decide how God rules us.
- If you're in a Pentecostal Church, you may say God rules through the pastor. He's the charismatically gifted leader of the church and the rest of the congregation shouldn't question his authority.

And maybe we could debate back and forth as to which of those systems was closer to the judges and which was closer to the monarchy – and ultimately we may miss the point.

God rules His people the way He's always done it – by His word. In the long run, God's quite able to use all sorts of different types of leaders and different leadership styles. The problem in Samuel's time wasn't kings as such – God's able to use them in His purposes – the

problem was their rejection of God and His rule. They wanted to rely on a specific form of government rather than rely on God.

That can still happen today in a whole variety of ways.

- Some are tempted to rely on techniques that have worked so well in other places rather than rely on God.
- Some are more interested in getting the techniques right than they are in pursuing righteousness.
- Some aren't satisfied with God's word as He's revealed it and want something better that's more up-to-date and relevant and not quite so demanding.
- Some are even tempted to rely more on their own prayers than they are on God.

There's nothing wrong with checking out techniques that have worked elsewhere or trying new innovations or starting new programmes. God's able to use all those things. The problem comes in two main areas.

- When we're more interested in getting the techniques right than in getting righteousness right.
- When we trust the techniques rather than God.

God continues to rule His church today through His Word. The issue isn't the style of leadership. God can use all sorts of different human leadership styles. The issue's whether we're prepared to give that Word the pre-eminence it should have – and whether we're prepared to submit every aspect of our lives to it (both as individuals and as a church).