

Monarchs and Motives

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to God's Word, and our reading for this evening is 1 Samuel chapter 8, which, if you have one of the visitor Bibles, is on page 230, 1 Samuel chapter 8, and we're reading the chapter, and Andy will be preaching a bit later on this chapter.

1 Samuel 8, verse 1. 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.

[1 : 25] And Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, Obey the voice of the people and 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 implements of war and the equipment of chariots.

[2 : 37] 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.

But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, No, but there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.

And when Samuel heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, Obey their voice and make them a king.

[3 : 57] Samuel then said to the men of Israel, Go, every man, to his city. Amen. May the Lord bless his word to us this evening.

May the Lord bless his word to you.

It makes it more helpful. If you're Presbyterian, you can keep your eyes open. But think for a moment what that moment is. Think about what you're doing in that moment.

Who's there. And how you felt. Got something? Now, a quick question. Is God evidently present in that image in your head?

Was it because of an awareness of God's presence and his keeping that you feel so secure in that image that crops up in your mind? I imagine for most of us that wasn't the case.

[5 : 28] We're all friends here. So I'll share with you what I pictured in my mind. And I know some of you in the congregation will rip into me royally for this.

But it's for the sake of the gospel. So here we go. I pictured myself as a five-year-old little boy. Just after having a nice warm bath.

I've just been dressed into a nice warm pair of pajamas. The fire is on in the living room. It's lovely and warm. And I've just had a lovely cup of warm milk.

And I'm tucked up on the sofa cuddling into my mum. Adorable. I know. What can I say? I'm a mummy's boy. But God isn't in that picture at all, is he?

Not evidently so. And I think life is tough as a Christian because we know that we should seek our security and our safety in God alone.

[6 : 30] Yet our hearts desire far more tangible securities. Perhaps for you it's money. You find yourself always checking your bank account on your mobile phone.

And you feel better about life if your bank balance looks healthier. Or perhaps you're that person who finds their security in their relationships.

You feel most safe, most at home, with your nearest and dearest around about you. Or perhaps you're like me. You're the controller.

You think that if you have all your fingers in all the pies, not just controlling your own life, but the lives of those around you, then nothing possibly could go wrong in life.

If you like, micromanaging has become your impregnable defense mechanism. Well, tonight's passage is all about where we seek our security, where our wayward hearts go to find tangible securities in this world.

[7 : 36] We often talk about how scripture reveals God to us. But equally, it also reveals our hearts to us as well.

And God doesn't inform us about what we're like, show us our failings to make us feel bad ourselves. But he does so in order to transform us and to change us and help us to rely on him rather than other things.

So let's look at what Samuel has to say about our wayward hearts and how we seek security. Now, it's been some time, hasn't it, since we've been in 1 Samuel.

It hasn't been in for a month or so. So it'd be helpful to have a quick recap of where we are in the story. Israel's history has been full of ups and downs.

At the start of the book of 1 Samuel, we found ourselves in really dire circumstances. The people of Israel were under the judges, under the leadership of Eli and his despicable sons, and things weren't going well at all.

[8 : 39] But with the birth of Samuel, there came a glimmer of hope. And in Hannah's song, she prophesied that a king would come and bring blessing to Israel. And indeed, under Samuel's rule, things had gone a lot better.

God had cleared out the deadwood of the old leadership. And under Samuel's leadership, things hadn't been perfect, but things were certainly looking up, especially when we get to chapter 7.

Israel, the people of God, were on the ropes. The enemies were going to defeat them because of their sin. But Samuel pleads with the people, and miraculously, their hearts turn back to God, and God fights the battle for them and brings great success and blessing.

But now, where we pick up the story, some years, perhaps decades, have passed. And as is the habit of God's people, memory of what God has done for them is slowly dissipating.

And new concerns, new insecurities are creeping in. So let's pick up the story. Here's the problem. Verse 1. There's a leadership crisis in Israel.

[9 : 54] Verse 1. When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his first one 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.

Samuel is old, and his sons, who he's employed to help him with the job of judging the people of Israel, well, they're utterly wicked.

Does that sound familiar at all? Sound like something else we've come across in 1 Samuel? It doesn't sound too dissimilar, does it, to how things were under Eli, old Eli and his two despicable sons.

But the only difference here is that we're not told that Samuel is complicit in his son's sin. He doesn't seem to be informed about what's going on and how they're judging the people probably 140 miles away from where he is.

[10:59] But either way, there's a massive problem. And the people of God recognize that they need good leadership if things are going to go well for them as the people of God.

And yet Samuel, well, he's on his way out. He's not going to last much longer. And his sons, well, they're an absolute disaster. God's people are left at a point where they're feeling very insecure once again about the future.

What would the future hold? Were they destined to plunge into another terrible tailspin? Or was there a sensible and practical way to solve the problem?

Well, God's people do indeed come up with a solution, a very sensible and legitimate solution. But their motives behind that solution are very dodgy indeed.

The whole leadership crisis flags up the true state of the hearts of God's people. And it isn't a pretty sight at all. So let's see what this passage has to say about their hearts and our hearts.

[12:09] And our first point for this evening is this. Our hearts seek substitutes. God's people ask for a king, verse 5. They say, behold, Samuel, 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. And the great thing was for God's people that Moses had said way back in Deuteronomy 17 that they could have a king like the other nations when they came into the land.

Back in Deuteronomy 17, God had preempted his people's request for a king just like all the nations around them. And Moses said this. When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me.

You may indeed set a king over you. So it seems like a no brainer out with old Samuel and his dodgy sons and up the monarchy.

I mean, what could possibly go wrong with substituting one hereditary governance system for another? But was it really all that simple?

[13:28] Well, it was absolutely fine for Israel to have a king like all the nations. But it wasn't permissible for their king to be like the kings of all the other nations.

Let me explain. They could have the same form of governance as the nations around about them. But that governance had to look and behave very differently indeed.

Let me continue that reading from Deuteronomy 17 to give you an impression of this. Moses says, you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose.

One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you who is not your brother. Only he must not acquire many horses for himself.

And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away. Nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver or gold. And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law.

[14:39] Approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life. That he may learn to fear the Lord his God. By keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and doing them.

He must be a king of God's choosing. A king who pleases God. Not a king that Israel would naturally choose.

Who is no different than the pagan kings around about them. He mustn't be a foreigner. He mustn't be dependent on his own abilities or his military might. He mustn't acquire many wives or be overly concerned with wealth.

But rather, he must fear the Lord and keep his statutes. Keep God's people trusting in their ultimate king. Not in himself or his abilities.

But is that what God's people ask for? Is that what's driving their request? Are they concerned with getting a king who will help them to follow God and trust in him alone?

[15:48] The answer? Not at all. It's not just that they go about solving this practical problem without giving reference to God at all that's the problem.

They want this solution because it rids them of needing God altogether. They want a substitute for God. Verse 20 gives us further insight into verse 5.

They say, But consider for a moment how they've been judged so far in the story and who has fought the battles for them.

So far, Samuel has been judging them under God. He hasn't lauded it over them. He has led them by helping them honor God and turn to him in repentance and rely on sacrifice.

And ultimately to rely on God as their judge and king. And the well-being of the nation has not hinged on clever governance, but on their obedience to the Lord.

[17:19] When they forsook the Lord, well, their enemies mauled them. But when they held true to him and depended on him, then the Lord fought the battles for them and brought them great victory and success.

But God's people were tired of that. They didn't want that any longer. They wanted to take back control. They didn't want to have to depend on God coming good for them to bring victory and blessing.

They wanted to be the champions of their own fate. It's a repeat of Eden, isn't it? We want to be God. We want to be in charge and have utter autonomy over our lives.

That's what makes us most secure in this world. Not trusting in an invisible God. Why would you do that when you can have tangible securities in front of your eyes?

A king who you can look at and see, who has military might at his disposal. Surely that brings more security than trusting in an invisible God to come good for you.

[18:22] And therefore, I think it's not surprising, is it, what God makes of this, makes of their request in verse 7. He says to Samuel, obey the voice of this people in all that they say to you.

They have not foremost rejected you, but they've rejected me from being king over them. And this is the way they've always been, verse 8.

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 of other gods, so they are also doing to you.

God says, don't be surprised. This is the story of God's people. And it's our story too, isn't it?

In many ways, we are no different to God's people back then. Human nature hasn't changed. Our hearts still seek substitutes for God today.

[19:26] Just think for a moment how regularly you try and solve your own problems and don't seek God at all to help. Here's a confession for you from me.

I nearly started writing this sermon without even praying beforehand. Such is the perversity of my own heart. We think we can do anything ourselves.

We can think we can fix anything if we put our minds to it. We don't need help from anyone else, certainly not God. If we say the right things, then we can sort out people's problems.

If we do the right things, then surely success is guaranteed. And wouldn't it be so easy for us to do that collectively as a church family?

The new restructuring in the church would be a perfect opportunity for us to solve our own problems, but in the process, ditch God at the same time.

[20:28] We've identified a problem. Church growth has been somewhat static for a while. We think, we know the cause, that our church structure is somewhat clunky and things could be done better.

And that is the case. But like the king issue, our restructuring could be utterly sensible, be an utterly legitimate solution to the problem, and yet done in such a way with such motives that are utterly godless.

We've got to be careful. Our church structure isn't our keeper. The Lord is. And that goes for every good thing in life, the things that are sensible and seem wise.

They are only good things, so as far as we don't substitute them for the Lord. We go about things wisely. We do sensible things, but we trust the Lord.

We trust in him, not our endeavors, not our creations. Secondly, our hearts hate holiness.

[21:39] And what I mean by that is not being particularly pious, but rather our hearts hate being set apart for God and him alone. Obviously belonging to him and standing out against the world.

For naturally, we want to be just like the world around us. That's where we think security is found, by fitting in. Children are renowned for this way of behavior.

My daughter's accent becomes more or less Glaswegian, depending on her surroundings. I remember being very shocked at a birthday party from a girl at a nursery that Lucy knows.

Lucy desperately wanted to introduce us to her friend. And she came up to us and took the car and said, this nasal harsh tone, Mommy, this is my friend Penny.

And some people find that very endearing, that kind of accent. But needless to say, in the Ritson household, we'd rather she spoke slightly differently. And when she is at home, well, she knows to ask pleasantly for a glass of water.

[22 : 48] Like Daddy says, her accent changes based on her circumstances. She just loves to fit in. And we're all big kids in a way, aren't we?

We all long to fit in even now. We don't grow up all that much. Israel had been given extraordinary privileges.

But they would trade them all in to fit in with everyone else around them. Security in their eyes came by a blending in, not standing out, not being set apart for God.

And yet, what other nations had been dramatically rescued, like Israel from slavery, as their God bludgeoned their enemy into submission for them? What other nation had been faithfully led through the wilderness by a fiery pillar?

What other nation had the privilege of hearing God thunder real words from atop a mountain and claim them as their own and promise to fight for them?

[23 : 52] None. But yet, these unique privileges were so easily overlooked. God's people found themselves saying, verse 20, No, we shall have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations.

With a king, we will finally be up to speed, just like everyone else. We'll fit in. After all, we're living in the modern era. It's the Iron Age. We must have structures that are compatible with the demands of a new era.

Sound familiar? Yeah. I hear that talk all the time today. We might not want kings like the other nations around us today, but there are other ways we're tempted just to fit in and look like the pagan world.

Why should I miss out on watching that TV drama that I want to watch? Because I'm a Christian. I know I'm supposed to be distinct. Philippians tells me I should set my mind on that so that it's noble and praiseworthy.

But everyone else is watching it. And I don't want to miss out. I don't want to be the only person in the staff room on Monday who has nothing to comment on the thing.

[25 : 06] Why be so careful about our romantic relationships? All my mates at uni are sleeping with their girlfriend. Nothing disastrous seems to be happening. So do I need to take God's command so seriously?

Everyone else is jumping on this LGBTQ bandwagon. Can we not do that as a church too? It might even lead to more people coming through the door because people will think we're so welcoming and warm and kind.

Can we not just be like everyone else? I could go on and on with the examples. But the point is our hearts are naturally avert to holiness.

But when in Israel's history had blending in proved a positive thing? Adopting idol worship like the nations around them was absolutely disastrous for them.

And back in chapter 4 when they treated God just like a token, a lucky charm like the other nations around them, what had happened? It led to great defeat and battle. It was equally as calamitous.

[26 : 09] And look at the state of the churches around us who are giving in to prove same-sex marriage. And giving up on the gospel just to become mere social hubs. To become what the world wants them to be.

To be no different to the surrounding world. What's happening with them? Are things going well? Folks, if we want real security in this world, it doesn't come from being up to speed with the world around us.

It comes by trusting and obeying Yahweh, who has heaven's resources at his disposal. Well, thirdly and finally, our hearts forsake wisdom.

Notice how gracious God is in verse 9 onwards. He agrees to give his people what they want, but not without giving warning to them first.

He knows that this early foray into monarchy isn't going to end well for them. But he doesn't want them to go into it uninformed. He graciously warns them.

[27 : 17] And from verses 10 to 18, God fills them in, in what life will be like under a king of their choosing. And the long and short of it is this.

A king of their choosing will take, take, and take again. He will take all that God's people hold dear. Verse 11.

Sons will be conscripted into the army. Verse 13. Daughters will be taken to work as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. Fields and vineyards will be taken, verse 14.

And taxes. Have you ever heard of those God's people? There will be plenty of those under this new king of their choosing. Livestock will be taken too.

And some of you will even become slaves. God says that this will inevitably happen if they're granted a king of their own choosing.

[28 : 18] Verse 18. The Lord doesn't hold back, does he? It's a warts and all description of what will be. And yet, how do God's people respond to this?

Verse 19 and 20. They want a king so badly that reason goes completely out of the window. Our hearts naturally hate wisdom. We just don't have an ear for it. We want to take in only information that confirms us in our behaviors that we already have.

And we want to reject information that confronts us. That's why we gather around ourselves friends who are just like us. We want to live in an echo chamber. We want the same voice that's coming back to us to be the same as the one that's going out from us.

We don't want wisdom. We want approval. Because that's where we think security lies. I think these verses also flag up the age-old education fallacy too.

[29 : 26] Whenever the government comes across a problem in society, they think the answer to it is always more education. If drugs and alcohol is a problem, educate kids on the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol.

If teenage pregnancies is a problem, educate people on contraception. If obesity is a problem, educate on healthy eating and exercise. That's all good.

But the truth is, we can be very well informed about something that is detrimental to us, but still desire it so desperately.

Is that not true? And I forget that truth all the time. When faced with difficult pastoral situations in the church, I think the answer to the problem is just to tell people what the Bible says and what God asks of them.

And things will be fine. But the truth is, more often than not, people already know what the Bible says on such an issue and know what's demanded of them. They just don't want to do it.

[30 : 28] We desire things that are detrimental to us all the time. And it's easy to condemn people who are like that, but I'm just the same. I'm no better.

And if verse 8 is to be believed, then this has been the case for God's people all through the ages, including all of you in the pew. This is the way we've always been.

We're like that child, aren't we, who's so desperate to get their hands on that golden yellow fruit in their parents' drink. Most parents will have this experience.

The child has their eyes set on a lemon in a soft drink, and they think this is what they want above all things in the world. And they'll keep incessantly asking you again and again for it, no matter how much you warn them that it doesn't taste like any of a fruit.

It's bitter and you're going to hate it, but the child wants it nonetheless. And what does the parent do in that situation? Well, they do exactly what God does here in verse 22.

[31 : 37] You give them what you know they will not like. You give them the lemon that they asked for. For sometimes, only the bitter taste in your mouth will ever teach you the lesson that you need to learn.

And I think that is what God's people reading this book, many years later, under a fairly crumbly monarchy, were supposed to learn. Things weren't going well in Israel again, and the king in David's line hadn't brought the security and the safety that they so longed for.

And the temptation for God's people was just to blame it on something else. Maybe we should have a different king. Maybe we should have a different way of doing things. Well, no, this chapter tells us the king is not the issue.

The problem is the state of God's people's hearts. Things have gone so badly in Israel, not because they have a monarchy instead of a republic or the wrong family in power.

It has gone wrong because their hearts are utterly wayward and they've forsaken the Lord and gone after a substitute. God has given them what their sinful hearts longed for, and it turned out not to deliver what they hoped it would.

[32 : 59] And I think that's terrifying. The scary thing is that God often gives us what we desire, and that should trouble us.

I wonder how many mercies we've overlooked when God mercifully hasn't given us what we so desire. How many mercies have we overlooked?

God is incredibly merciful, isn't he? And the pinnacle of his mercy is not just that sometimes he doesn't give us what we wrongly desire, but that he gives us that which we would not naturally desire at all.

Something that we would not choose. He gives us a king of his choosing, not ours ultimately in the Lord Jesus Christ. He gave us that king we would not naturally choose.

Not a king who, like the king of their choosing, takes, takes, and takes everything that's dear to us. But a king of his choosing, who gives, and gives, and gives again for the sake of his people.

[34 : 04] Our hearts may seek substitutes and be avert to holiness and forsake wisdom, but the wonderful news of the gospel is that God is greater than our hearts, and he sometimes overrules.

That's the good news. God has given us a king who, we're told in Isaiah, had no obvious majesty that we would desire him or choose him. He's not head and shoulders above the rest like Saul was. He's not outwardly impressive. Instead, he's a king who forsook his own majesty, that he might make us secure in him forever.

He gave us himself, that we might have all that we truly need. He isn't some kind of regal leech. He wants to take from us again and again and sap us of everything. He's a king who's willing to sacrifice himself for his people, that his people might have eternal security in this life and in the next, what we truly need.

[35 : 04] And so he asks us this evening, will we seek our security in him alone? And that's going to look differently for all of us, isn't it?

These truths, they come to our hearts and our mind, but it's expressed differently in our weeks and our actions. And it might look for some of you, if you're that person who seeks your security in money, perhaps you know you've got money in your bank account and you're actually quite comfortable, but you never pick up the bill because you like seeing that bank balance looking healthy.

Perhaps for one week or the rest of the month, you could always pick up the bill for your pal. Perhaps this Christmas when we're buying presents, we could decide to match how much we're spending on gifts and give that money to a charity that we're affiliated with here at the Tron. Maybe that would help you to seek security in God alone. Or perhaps you're that person who seeks all their security in their relationships that I was talking about at the beginning. Perhaps because you are eternally secure in the Lord Jesus, you could open up your home this Christmas, invite others in with all their mess and all their chaos, knowing that you're eternally secure in Jesus and things are going to be okay.

[36 : 30] Or perhaps if you're the controller like me, you'll do what I've done this week in response to this. And that is before you send out a text or an email trying to influence someone, trying to bring success and security to your ministry, to your work life, to your family life, that you could just stop and pray just for 10 seconds beforehand, just to recognize that the security and the safety I long for in this world comes inevitably through Jesus and what he has done for me, not my ability to move people to do what I want.

Could we do that? Well, let's pray. Let's pray. Father God, we confess to you this evening that our hearts are so wayward.

We feel often like a patient under the scalpel when your word is opened. we realize that our hearts are far dirtier and grubbier than we ever imagined.

But Father, we thank you that you're greater than our hearts. We thank you that you're merciful.

And we thank you that you've given us the Lord Jesus, though we would never naturally desire him or long for him.

You've given us the king that we need, a king who can deal with our sin, a king who can give us ultimate security. And we pray this week, Father, that that would be on our minds and in our hearts and it would affect the way that we live.

[38 : 13] And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.