

Be Careful What You Ask For

1 Samuel 8

Bellevue Baptist Church

October 18, 2026

Today, we turn to the book of 1 Samuel, which represents the next major chapter in Israel's development as a nation. For the last five weeks, we've been studying the period of the Judges, a time when God raised up leaders to settle disputes, confront enemies, and deliver his people from oppression. But today, we come to a turning point in Israel's history in 1 Samuel 8. The people are about to move from *longing for a king* to *demanding a king*.

Samuel, the last of the judges, is growing old. He has appointed his two sons to serve as judges, but unfortunately, they have proven to be poor choices for leadership. They are corrupt, dishonest, and nothing like their father.

And so, in the midst of this leadership crisis, the elders of Israel come to Samuel and essentially say, "We are sorry, Samuel, but your sons are not leadership material. We want a king. It's time to give us what we want." And what unfolds in this chapter is an incredibly relevant lesson for all of us, because it shows us the danger of getting what we want. Let's jump into the passage and see how this plays out.

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges over Israel. 2 His firstborn son's name was Joel and his second was Abijah. They were judges in Beer-sheba. 3 However, his sons did not walk in his ways—they turned toward dishonest profit, took bribes, and perverted justice.

4 So all the elders of Israel gathered together and went to Samuel at Ramah. 5 They said to him, "Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Therefore, appoint a king to judge us the same as all the other nations have." 1 Samuel 8:1–5

Now, when I read this passage, I have to confess that I find myself on the side of the elders! If I had been alive back then, I think I would have wanted a more stable form of government, too. Remember how the book of Judges ended? It was a mess! In fact, the final verse says this: In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him. Judges 21:25

That is a recipe for national disaster. The whole nation seemed to be drifting into chaos. And now Samuel, who has been a faithful leader, is getting old. And the two sons he has appointed to succeed him are corrupt! They're taking bribes, twisting justice, and using their positions to line their own pockets.

I think I would have been sitting in that elders' meeting with my hand raised, saying, "I'm ready to try this king-on-the-throne model. It's got to be better than what we've got! And those two boys of Samuel couldn't lead their way out of a paper bag. Who's next?"

As leadership guru John Maxwell has said: everything rises or falls on leadership. In fact, in one of his best books, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, he describes what he calls the Law of the Lid. The idea is simple: Every leader has a certain level of leadership ability that places a lid on the potential of the organization.

Imagine a leader whose ability is a 9 on a scale of 1 to 10. That leader will generally have the ability to attract, develop, and retain other capable leaders that score high also: 7s and 8s, and those on the way to becoming 9s and 10s. They will want to work under that leader, because they want to learn and be challenged. High performing people want to be challenged.

But take the opposite situation. Let's put Joel and Abijah at the top of the organization. If they are both 2s on the scale of 1-10, they will draw 1s and 0s, because strong leaders generally don't want to spend their lives following someone they don't look up to, no matter how nice they are. And these two guys weren't even nice.

Maxwell's point is that if you want to grow the organization, you've got to grow the leaders. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

And when the elders of Israel looked at Samuel's two sons, they didn't see a 7 or an 8. They saw a couple of 2s! Maybe a 3 if they could tie their own shoes. And the future did not look bright.

You've probably heard that old definition of insanity: Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Well, the elders of Israel didn't want to keep repeating the same mistakes. They were looking at their situation and saying, "This isn't working. Something has to change."

And here's what makes this story especially interesting: It wasn't necessarily wrong for Israel to want a king. In fact, hundreds of years earlier, God had already anticipated this very moment. Listen to what Moses told the Israelites in Deuteronomy 17:

When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, take possession of it, live in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations around me,' you are to appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses. Deuteronomy 17:14–15

So the idea of a monarchy wasn't some wild invention that caught God by surprise. He had already made provision for Israel to have a king. And that's what makes this passage so fascinating. The elders had a reasonable concern about the future and they were proposing a solution that God himself had anticipated.

So what was wrong with their request? Well, as we're about to discover, the problem wasn't simply what they wanted. The problem was why they wanted it.

Look again at the last phrase of verse 5. The elders said, "*Appoint a king to judge us the same as all the other nations have.*" Did you catch that? They weren't simply saying, "Samuel, we need leaders with higher leadership numbers!" They were saying, "Samuel, we want to be like everybody else." And there's the problem. God had called Israel to be different from the nations around them. They were his chosen people, set apart to display his glory to the world. He had delivered them from Egypt to live different kinds of lives. He did not want them to be like all the other nations.

But somewhere along the way, they started looking over the fence at the nations around them and started thinking, "Why can't we have what they have?" Instead of celebrating what made them different, they began to resent it.

I wonder how often we do the same thing. We look at the lives of people around us, what they own, what they've accomplished, how they live, and suddenly what God has provided for us doesn't seem quite good enough.

This leads us to the first of three warnings that emerge from 1 Samuel 8.

1. Beware when you find yourself longing for what others have.

That's exactly what was happening here.

I remember reading *Shoe Dog*, the fascinating story of Nike founder Phil Knight. In the book, Knight describes the resentment he sometimes felt toward his father, who wasn't particularly supportive of his dream of becoming an entrepreneur and launching his own running shoe company.

His father was much more concerned about appearances, about maintaining a certain image in the community, about being what other people considered "respectable."

"In many ways my father was a conventional Episcopalian, a believer in Jesus Christ. But he also worshipped another secret deity—respectability. Colonial house, beautiful wife, obedient kids, my father enjoyed having these things, but what he really cherished was his friends and neighbors knowing he had them. He liked being admired."

That story stuck with me, because I recognized something of myself in Knight's father. There are times in all of our lives, when we want something for no other reason, than it raises what we perceive as our approval rating in society.

How often have I wanted something, not because I genuinely needed it, or because God was leading me toward it, but because I wanted to be admired? I wanted to be respected. I wanted to have what other people had so I could feel like I measured up. And that's a dangerous way to live. Because comparison has a way of making us dissatisfied with things we were perfectly content with until we noticed what somebody else had.

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:6,

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. 1 Tim 6:6

Think about that. Paul is saying that the truly rich person isn't the one who has everything everybody else has. It's the person who is enjoying their walk with God and has no need for external validation. When we want what God wants for us, we experience a kind of wealth the world cannot provide.

But Israel hadn't learned that lesson. They were looking at the nations around them and saying, "It's time that happened for us. It's time we get what they've got."

And they said this to Samuel, point blank:

6 When they said, "Give us a king to judge us," Samuel considered their demand wrong, so he prayed to the LORD. 7 But the LORD told him, "Listen to the people and everything they say to you. They have not rejected you; they have rejected me as their king. 8 They are doing the same thing to you that they have done to me, since the day I brought them out of Egypt until this day, abandoning me and worshiping other gods. 9 Listen to them, but solemnly warn them and tell them about the customary rights of the king who will reign over them." 1 Samuel 8:6–9

Now, did you notice God's response? He essentially says, "Samuel, give them what they're want, but ahead and warn them of what's about to happen, because of human depravity...help them understand what they're getting themselves into."

Which brings us to a second principle:

2. Beware when you're convinced you know what's best. (vv.10-19)

Israel is about to discover that getting what you want and getting what's best for you are not always the same thing.

For the sake of time, let me summarize Samuel's response. He essentially says, "Listen, I want you to know exactly what you're getting yourselves into. There's no false advertising here. You want a king like all the other nations? Well, let me tell you what comes with having a king.

"First of all, he's going to take your sons and put them in his army. They'll fight his battles, drive his chariots, and serve as his soldiers. Then he's going to take your daughters and put them to work in the royal palace, cooking his meals and making his perfumes. He's going to take your best farmland, your vineyards, and your olive orchards and give them to his own officials. He's going to tax your crops and your livestock to support his government. He's going to take your servants and your animals and put them to work on his projects. And eventually, you're going to find yourselves serving the very king you thought was going to serve you!

"And one day, when you've had enough, you're going to cry out to God to deliver you from this king you demanded. But by then, you're going to have to live with the consequences of your decision." Now, did you notice the word that keeps showing up in Samuel's warning? Take. Take. Take. Take. The people wanted a king who would give them security, stability, and prosperity, but Samuel warned them that this king would spend much of his time taking things away from them. They were so focused on what they hoped to gain that they hadn't stopped to consider what they might lose.

And this is why it's so important, when we're making big decisions in life, to surround ourselves with godly, objective people. The Bible tells us that there is wisdom in an abundance of counselors. It's vital that we bounce our big ideas off people who aren't emotionally attached to them. People who can see both the pros and the cons, the opportunities and the risks.

I can't tell you how many times in my life I've come up with an idea that I was absolutely SURE was brilliant. I mean, I was convinced that if we could just pull this thing off, it would be the greatest invention since Wi-Fi! And then I'd run it by a few trusted friends, fully expecting them to be as excited as I was. Instead, I'd get blank stares. I was expecting green lights to go off in their eyeballs, and all I saw was red! Why? Because they weren't emotionally attached to the idea. They could see things I couldn't see. While I was dreaming about all the possibilities, they were noticing all the problems.

And I'll tell you, that's always a letdown. Nobody enjoys having cold water thrown on an idea they're excited about. But I've learned something over the years: It's far better to be disappointed by an idea that never happened than to be stuck living with the consequences of one that did.

And that's exactly the kind of wisdom Samuel was trying to give the people of Israel. He was saying, "Before you rush into this, let me show you the other side of the equation." But the elders weren't interested in hearing it.

19 The people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We must have a king over us. 20 Then we'll be like all the other nations: our king will judge us, go out before us, and fight our battles." 1 Samuel 8:19–20

Did you notice anything odd in that last statement? All three items they wanted their new king to do, were actions God had already promised to take on. God had been their judge. God had gone before his people. God had fought their battles. They were, unknowingly, putting a person in the place of God.

3. Beware of God-replacements. (v.19)

Whenever we do that, we are opening ourselves up to disappointment. There is no person that can take the place of God in your life.

A few weeks ago, I had a special time of prayer for all the single adults in our church. We have many wonderful people in our congregation who are single. Some believe God has called them to a life of singleness, while others are hoping and praying that God will bring someone special into their lives.

And one of the temptations that single people can face is the belief that once they find that special person, their deepest needs will finally be met. Life will finally feel complete. Now, I'm certainly not suggesting that every single person thinks this way, but if you are one with those kinds of thoughts, let this Scripture be a clear reminder: There is no person you can marry who can be for you what only the Lord can be for you.

Marriage is a lifelong commitment between two sinners. And while we bring incredible joy and companionship into each other's lives, we also bring our baggage! Our insecurities, our selfishness, our weaknesses, and our bad habits. One of the healthiest things a husband or wife can do is release their spouse from the impossible burden of being everything to them.

And here's another place where I think we can make this mistake: our children. As parents, we love our children more than we can put into words. We want them to succeed, to make wise decisions, to grow up and live meaningful lives. And there's nothing wrong with any of that. But sometimes, without even realizing it, we begin looking to our children to give us something that only God can give us.

We begin finding our identity in their accomplishments. Their successes become our successes. Their failures feel like our failures. We need them to make good grades, get into the right schools, choose the right careers, marry the right people, and make decisions that reflect well on us.

And when they don't, we're not just disappointed for them. We're devastated, because somehow we've tied our own sense of worth to the way their lives turn out. And think about the pressure that puts on a child! Now they're not just trying to figure out who God has created them to be. They're carrying the additional burden of trying to make Mom and Dad feel successful, secure, and significant. That's a weight no child was ever meant to carry.

One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is the freedom to grow into the people God has called them to be, without feeling responsible for our happiness. And the same principle applies to our friends, our pastors, and our leaders.

Sometimes our greatest disappointments with people come from expecting them to do things that only God can do. And that's what Israel was about to discover. They wanted a king who would solve their problems, provide their security, and fight their battles. But no human king could ever carry that kind of weight.

Only one King could do that, and he wouldn't arrive for another thousand years.

A Single Christian Asks:

Sometimes I feel like my life won't really begin until I get married. How do I change that way of thinking?

A few weeks ago, I shared a concept on our podcast called the hedonic treadmill. It's a term psychologists use to describe something fascinating about the way the human mind works. The word hedonic comes from the idea of pleasure. A hedonist is someone who pursues pleasure as one of life's highest goals. And if you want to see a picture of someone chasing happiness through the things of this world, just read the book of Ecclesiastes.

In Ecclesiastes 2, you meet a man describing his pursuit of happiness through accomplishments and pleasures. He built houses, planted vineyards, accumulated wealth, and surrounded himself with entertainment. He had everything a person could possibly want. And yet, when he looked back on it all, he concluded that it was like chasing the wind. None of it had brought him lasting satisfaction. That's the hedonic treadmill.

Human beings have this tendency to spend their lives running after the next thing they believe will finally make them happy. We have a destination in our minds, a goal or a dream, and we tell ourselves, "Once I get there, I'll finally be able to relax. I'll finally be content."

But the strangest thing happens. We get there, and almost immediately, another destination appears on the horizon. It's a human problem.

Hundreds of years ago, during the Romantic movement in European literature, writers began using the image of a mysterious blue flower to symbolize the deep longing of the human heart. The blue flower represented something beautiful, something wonderful, something we desperately wanted but could never quite reach. It became a symbol of our yearning for a kind of fulfillment that always seemed just beyond our grasp.

And I think that's a remarkable picture of the human condition. We spend our lives reaching for that blue flower. We think we'll find it in a relationship, a career, a beautiful home, or financial security. And while those things may be wonderful gifts from God, none of them can completely satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart.

Because we were made for more than this world, in its present condition, can give us.

And that's exactly what the apostle Paul describes in Romans 8:

"For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. Not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits, we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." (Romans 8:22–23, CSB)

Did you catch that? Paul says that even Christians, people who have the Holy Spirit living inside them, still experience this deep groaning. There's an ache that doesn't completely go away. Not even in marriage. Is it good to be married? Of course, if that's God's will. But be careful putting too high of expectations on it.

Only Jesus can bring us into the life we're ultimately longing for.

A Good-Hearted Skeptic Asks:

If God knew Israel's decision would end badly, why didn't he simply refuse to give them a king?

This same question could be asked about countless situations in Scripture. If God knew the serpent was going to deceive Eve in the garden, why didn't he just kill the snake? If God knew Pharaoh was going to be so annoyingly stubborn, requiring ten plagues before he finally let the Israelites go, why not skip the frogs and the bugs and go straight to the tenth plague? If God knew Herod was going to order the slaughter of the little boys in Bethlehem, why not give Herod a high-octane heart attack before he ever issued the order? And if Jesus knew Judas was going to be the rotten egg in the dozen, why not replace him immediately rather than allowing him to stay on the team and eventually become a traitor?

These are fascinating questions. And I don't pretend to understand all the reasons God allows human history to unfold as it does. But here's what we do know: God, in his infinite wisdom, has chosen to accomplish his purposes through the unfolding of human history. He allows people to make real decisions, sometimes terrible decisions, and yet he remains sovereign over the entire story.

And God is never in a hurry. The Bible says that in Galatians 4:4, that when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son. Think about that phrase: the fullness of time. Not a moment too early. Not a moment too late. It's almost like an actor standing backstage, waiting for his cue. And at precisely the appointed moment, the Father said, "Go." And Jesus entered our world. He took on human flesh, stepped into the brokenness of our existence, and willingly subjected himself to all the pain, sorrow, rejection, and suffering that come with living in a fallen world. His first coming was to reveal the Father, demonstrate his love, and accomplish our salvation through his death and resurrection. His second coming will bring the final defeat of evil and the restoration of all things. And all of this unfolds according to God's perfect timing. The Old Testament is filled with promises made. The New Testament reveals those promises being fulfilled.

And this brings us back to Israel's demand for a king. God allowed them to have what they wanted, even though he knew the heartbreak that would follow. Israel would discover again and again that no human king could provide everything they needed. But God was also doing something extraordinary through the monarchy. He was preparing the way for a King unlike any other. A King who would not take from his people, but give himself for them. A King who would not use his power to enrich himself, but humble himself to save others.

Listen to how Paul describes him in Philippians 2:

"Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even to death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7–8, CSB)

And then Paul tells us what happened next:

For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow ... and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9–11

Do you see the contrast? Samuel warned Israel that their earthly king would take their sons, their daughters, their property, and their wealth. But when the true King finally arrived, he came not to take, but to give. He gave his life.

And that's the King we all need.

A Student Asks:

Why should I listen to adults when I feel like my friends understand me better than they do? They know what it's like to be my age, and sometimes I feel like older people just don't get it.

In 1 Samuel 8, the people of Israel reject the wisdom of Samuel, an older man who had faithfully walked with God for decades, and they insist on getting what they want. They end up paying a steep price for refusing to listen.

Interestingly, there's another story later in the Old Testament that illustrates this same principle. It's found in 1 Kings 12. A young man named Rehoboam became king of Israel after his father, Solomon, died. Early in his leadership, he faced a big decision. The people were exhausted from the heavy demands his father had placed on them, and they wanted to know if their new king was going to make life easier or harder.

So Rehoboam went looking for advice. First, he talked to the older men who had advised his father. They encouraged him to lighten up, show the people some grace, and lead with a servant's heart. But then he went to his buddies, the young men he had grown up with. They said, "Man up! Get tough. Show 'em who's boss!"

And Rehoboam listened to his friends, which was a disaster. His harsh leadership caused the kingdom to split apart.

One of the most dangerous things you can do is surround yourself only with people your own age who see the world the same way you do.

Now, I'll confess that I have a personal interest in this question. I have children who are in or moving into their twenties, which I believe is one of the most important decades of a person's life. And I am regularly reminded by my kids that my way of thinking is a little out of tune with their generation. I've been called an "old head" and "Unc," more times than I can count. I get it. I was their age once and I miss the feeling of knowing everything.

But lo and behold, this week, one of our sons texted Lynley and I, asking if we had any “concerns” about a decision he was getting ready to make. I said, “Absolutely, I have concerns, and I laid them out in four consecutive texts, each a paragraph long. Ending with expressing my appreciation for being included in his decision-making process. He didn’t have to ask me.

Students, I think 1 Samuel 8 and 1 Kings 12 both say the same thing: be careful when surrounding yourself with people who always tell you what you want to hear. Some of the most valuable voices in your life will be those who love you enough to tell you what you *need* to hear. You don't have to learn every lesson the hard way. Sometimes wisdom means learning from people who already have.