



“Asking”

Text: 1 Samuel 8:1-13, 15-20, 11:14-15

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When I first saw my son after bootcamp, he jokingly said to me that the Navy was a good place for him, because he didn't have to think. He was told by his superiors, by a system set in place, when to get up, when to go to bed, when to eat, when to work, what to wear. Of course, he was kidding, but this does make life easy in some respects. I have met and worked with people who find comfort in order placed on them, whether it be in jail or in a rehab center. The onus of making decisions is off of them and they can rest from the chaos that has been their lives. Plus, if any problems come up, they can blame the system; they weren't in charge. A convenient excuse for not taking any responsibility for their lives.

I recently saw a video of people at a political rally giving their thoughts on whether this country would benefit from having a dictator or a king instead of a president leading the country. It was disheartening to hear people say that they approved of a dictator or a king because “the country was such a mess that someone strong was needed to clean it up and put order back into society.” But, if that were to happen, they seem unaware of the negative consequences that having a dictator or king over them would have on their lives.

In some sense, this is quite similar to what we find in this passage in Samuel. We are told that the Elders go to Samuel and demand that a King be appointed. Right now!! They rightfully have their grievances. Samuel has become old and his two sons who are judges do not walk in his ways. They do not follow Samuel's example of leading with honor, wisdom, compassion and righteousness. It turns out his sons have turned aside justice for dishonest gain and bribes. They are not fit to lead. And since there is no response to this accusation, we can assume that there is truth in this statement, but Samuel knows that taking a King is also not the way to go. Not at this time.

Many people are painfully aware that things would be far better in their lives if they had made wiser decisions. It is especially frustrating to realize what they are going through now is the result of one poor decision in their lives. And this is the juncture where Israel is. They are pushing for what they think is best for them instead of looking to God for what is best for them.

This is what we now find the Israelite people doing to Samuel as they seek to go against God's will. He's old. His sons are corrupt. We want to be like other nations. But for some, their calls for a king are not so pure. For some of the people calling for a King, they know that they will profit from that. They have gained power and want to solidify that power which they know will happen under a King. They want a King like other nations have, we are told, and they have seen how that has been; how the upper class has benefited. But for others, they have found life hard and feel that a King will change things and that their lives will then be made easier; that somehow with the balance of power shifted from judges to a King, that the King will have their interests at heart and life will get easier. They don't understand that their lives will become extremely more difficult when they are at a mercy of a king not designated by God, but rather a King that is focused on his own self-interest. They should know this, as Samuel tells them this; but they don't listen.

The Elders bring their arguments and excuses for why they need a King, but the thing that hurts Samuel the most is that they leave God out of this decision making process. They aren't looking to God for the solution to their problems, instead they make excuses for why they need a King.

A number of years ago a radio news series about honesty in America talked about excuses. The commentator said that people use three types of excuses when guilty of wrongdoing.

The first is outright denial - a rejection of any involvement. Sometimes this is done even though the person is obviously guilty.

The second is the "It's not my fault" excuse. The person looks around for someone he can blame - a spouse, a friend, a colleague, a lawyer.

the third form of excuse is the "I did it, but" approach. In this instance the person blames circumstances for their shortcomings. Either they've been struggling with some illness or the assignment wasn't clear or they had transportation issues.

Anytime we want to justify a course of action we wish to take we come up with a list of what we think are logical arguments which are often really nothing but excuses to do things the way we want to do them. We do mental gymnastics to justify our wants, even when we know we are wrong. This is what the Elders are doing with Samuel. They know they are wrong, especially after Samuel gives the reasons why they should not have a king. And, a main argument against a King is exactly the reason they say they need one - to be like other nations.

Israel was never meant to be like other nations. They were to be different from them, better than them.

It is easy to see how our country is emulating Israel from so long ago. Claiming God, while turning from what God desires for us. People acting under the name of God, but not under the rule of God. For to act under the rule of God would be to show leadership with compassion for the good of all.

The Elders, as we see in this passage, are acting from human desire, not from any reflection of what God would want. They are demanding and short-sighted. It must have been so hard for Samuel to have this situation arise, but Samuel does what he has always done. He goes to God in prayer. He seeks God's guidance. And God tells Samuel to not take their rejection personally. It is God they are rejecting. God is still pleased with Samuel. He has Samuel inform the people of what life will be like under a King and he does that, but they still demand a king. God then tells Samuel to do as they ask and they will then have to deal with the consequences.

So how does this scripture help us in our lives today? I think on a national level it shows that if the group mentality is to sin, to turn from God, to look first to satisfy greed and power, than we are limited in what we can do. However, what we can always do, first and foremost, and should always be doing is what Samuel did, and that is to pray; to stay steadfast in prayer. Samuel prayed for the nation. Prayed for the people to come to their senses. He prayed to God for wisdom as he tried to talk to the people. Most of all, he remained faithful to God and continued to conduct himself as the man of God he had always been. Despite his prayers for the people and his listing all the things that will happen if they get a king, they do not listen and keep demanding to have a King. God finally gives them what they demanded and what was told to them happened: their freedoms and liberties were taken.

So that is the second point I'd like us to think about this morning - the importance of reflecting on what we ask for in prayer. Is what we are asking in line for what God would want for us or are we insisting on having things our way? How are we to know the difference between our wants and what God wants for us? I think that starts with the reminder that God made us to be different from the rest of the world. We are to stand out - stand out for our compassion and goodness, for our love, for our selflessness, for giving and not for greediness. Next, is what we are asking for the glory of God and God's children? Are we praying the way Jesus did when he asked the cup to be removed from him in the Garden of Gethsemane, but ended the prayer with not my will but thy will be done?

It is not wrong to ask God for help, but it is how we ask. Are we asking with an openness to God's answer, even if it is different from the one we want? If not, if we continue to ask while demanding it to be our way, then we need to be aware that God might just say yes and then we will have to deal with the consequences from that.

The people of Israel rejected God in this moment and in so doing they ended up suffering the consequences of that decision. We may not feel like we are rejecting God when we insist on our way, but that is in a sense what we are doing. Saying, "I know what is best for me." In those instances, we must deal with the fallout from those decisions. It doesn't mean that God has abandoned us in that moment. God is always there to carry us through our most difficult times, but God doesn't always stop us from our worst inclinations.

Israel could have avoided much trouble if they had done the following, which we are taught in the scripture. First, we are called to humble ourselves before God. We are to come before God in humility. Second, we need to ask God to show us God's will for our lives and we need to be open to the nudging of the Holy Spirit to the direction we should go, even if that is different than what we had imagined for ourselves. And that is the final step: we need to trust God when that answer comes, even if it isn't what we wanted. It is hard to trust sometimes, but that is what we are called to do - to walk in faith and that walking in faith entails trusting God no matter what the answer to prayer is.

Jeremiah 29: 11 reminds us that God has a plan for us. A plan that includes a future that is good and full of hope. Let us not be like the Elders who came before Samuel, impatient and demanding; but let us come like Samuel who remained faithful, who always tried to show justice and mercy, compassion, and, who most of all stayed close to the Lord through prayer. Always seeking the counsel of his Lord and Savior, first and foremost. Amen.



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