



1 SAMUEL 7:3-8:22

The Allure of Lesser Lords

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER – MAY 7, 2017 (AM)

INTRODUCTION

God had planned to give *Israel* a *king*. And it was a clear and captivating plan. Moses wrote: Deu.17¹⁴ “*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,’* ¹⁵*you may indeed set a king over you whom the Lord your God will choose. ...* And he proceeded to describe such a *king* (Deu.17:15-20).

At this point in Israel’s history, however, where we’ve come to so far in Samuel’s record, *there (is) still no king in Israel* (Jud.17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). But a compelling figure has arisen in *Samuel*, born in answer to the earnest prayers of his mother. And God is speaking through him to His *people* once again (3:19-4:1a). So, something is happening!

We’re looking at 7:3-8:22 this morning. In 7:2, *all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord for some twenty years! Why?* It seemed to them that *the ark of the Lord* wasn’t working for them the way they wanted it to, and they couldn’t figure out why. It surely wreaked havoc on *the Philistines* while it was in their land, causing them great discomfort (5:6) and humiliating their god (5:3-4)! But when *the ark* was miraculously returned to *Israel* (6:7-9), God’s judgment also fell on *the men of Beth-shemesh* for not respecting *the ark* (6:19-20). So, the *people* didn’t know what to do. *The ark* was sent off again, and tucked safely away in *Kiriath-jearim*—an Israelite city, but populated mostly by Gentiles (Leithart 61)—at *the house of Abinadab*, under the care of *his consecrated son Eleazar* (7:1). So, *Israel lamented after the Lord* (7:2).

At some point in time, then, for reasons not recorded, *Samuel* stepped up and invited the *people* to (*return to the Lord* (7:3), to lay aside whatever it was that stood between them and Him. That’s where we pick up the story today. Let’s consider 1Sa.7-8 under three headings.

THE LORD FORGIVES HIS PEOPLE AND DEFEATS THEIR ENEMIES – 73-17

What we see here as c.7 opens is a reminder of the cycle that was so prominent in the book of Judges: 1) *Israel* would fall into sin, 2) which would lead to oppression by some foreign group. 3) They would repent and return to *the Lord*, and 4) He would forgive them and defeat their enemies through one of His appointed judges. We've seen the oppression from *the Philistines* in cc.4-6, and even some manifestations of God's deliverance. But the cycle of sin in *Israel*, whatever that sin was, had not yet been broken because *Israel* still *lamented after the Lord* (7:2).

Now, here in 7:3, we discover the problem. They were again caught in Canaanite idolatry. ³... *Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroath from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."* Ashtoreth was the female goddess of fertility, love, and war. And Baal, whom we'll meet in v.4, was *the corresponding male god* (Baldwin 84) *of fertility and (storms)*. He was *believed to be the son of Dagon, god of grain* (Youngblood 86). These Canaanite gods were appeased by all forms of *sexual indulgence* and other rituals that were abominable before God and forbidden in His Law. ⁴*So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroath, they repented, and they served the Lord only.*

So, ⁵*then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you."* ⁶*So they gathered at Mizpah and...* proceeded to renew their covenant with God. They confessed their sin with fasting (7:6). And I believe the clearest evidence of the sincerity of their repentance is seen in the next verses. ⁷*Now when the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. They (attacked)! And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. They weren't dressed for war!* ⁸*And the people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines."* There it is! In the midst of their need they didn't run home to get their swords and shields. Didn't start carving spears out of sticks. They turned to the man of God and asked Him to pray for their protection. It might have been better yet if they just called out to *the Lord* themselves. But at least they knew where to turn!

This is one of the surest signs of genuine repentance and faith: when we feel threatened or frightened or vulnerable or confused or weary—or worshipful or joyful or pleased—we call out to *the Lord!* We recognize that He is our protection and strength! That's what *Israel* did! ⁹*So Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. And Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered*

him. And, listen to this: ¹⁰As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion—the storm God was against them!—and they were defeated before Israel. ... Israel cleaned up afterward (7:11) militarily, but the Philistines were already defeated—so much like Hannah had mused (2:10, *The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. ...*)—defeated without a battle! ¹³So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴The cities that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath, and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. And, get this: *There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.* Israel's suppression of the Philistines earned peace with other groups who didn't like them either (Baldwin 87).

Samuel set up a stone (7:12) monument to remember this battle, and called it Ebenezer (*stone of help*), remembering the place where Israel suffered a humiliating defeat (4:1-2). *The Lord*, their rock (2:2, ... *There is no rock like our God.*), had met them in their need! Defeat had been reversed! Israel was back on track in their relationship with God! Idolatry was put away! Repentance and faith returned! ¹³... *And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.*

THE LORD'S PEOPLE REJECT HIM AS KING – 81-22

But time moved on. And when the day came for Samuel to name successors, we glimpse feet of clay: ⁸... *he made his sons (Joel and Abijah [2]) judges over Israel. ...* ³*Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice—no better than Eli's sons.* ⁴*Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, where he lived (7:17),* ⁵*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,"* just like Moses had said would happen. ⁶*But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord.* ⁷*And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for—and these are some of the saddest words in the story—they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. God intended Israel to have a king. Hannah had sung prophetically about the greatness and glory of the Lord's king (2:2). But that would be Deu.17¹⁵... a king... whom the Lord your God will choose, in Moses' words.*

Israel's eyes were set on a *king* of their own choosing—a *king* who would satisfy their desires, a *king to judge (them) like all the nations* (5), not this strange, regional-judge system where their leaders got instructions from an invisible deity. They wanted the right kind of governmental system, and the right kind of leader. And *right* was determined by what they observed all around them. It seemed to work just fine for other *nations*. Why wouldn't it work for *Israel*—especially when Samuel's wayward *sons* were their only alternative?

Now, this *displeased Samuel* (8:6). But *the Lord* told him to go ahead with it. He was to warn the *people* about the downside of the sort of *king* they were choosing. But at the end of the day, if they insisted, they'd receive just what they wanted. Look at the description (10-18). Listen, and count the number of times you hear the word *take!* ¹¹... *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. ¹²And 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 his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. In other words, the *king* will take the best of all your possessions and make them his own, then he will take a portion of your income to pay for their upkeep. ¹⁸And 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.*

Sounds great, doesn't it? At least it sounds familiar! But this is the sort of *king* we get when we just raise up one from among us that struggles with the same sorts of lusts and limitations that plague us! But somehow the *king* who was envisioned for *Israel* would be able to turn *people* from doing only *what was right in (their) own eyes!* (Jud.21:25) Even with the warning, *Israel* persisted in their own desire. In the words of Woody Allen: *The heart wants what it wants. ¹⁹... The people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, "No! But there shall be a king over us, ²⁰that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles."* Hear the irony? *The Lord* had defeated their enemy without battle! ²¹And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of

the Lord. ²²And the Lord said to Samuel, “Obey their voice and make them a king.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “Go every man to his city.” In other words: *Get out of here! Go home!*

FURTHER REFLECTION ON IDOLATRY AND HUMAN RULERS

And we’ll pick up the story from there next Sunday, God willing. But, what do we see in this passage? We see how easy it is, how almost automatic, for the human heart to drift into idolatry. It’s like we’re rooted in the soil of idolatry and stretch up toward its sunlight! It’s not just that our hearts are idol factories, as Calvin wrote, we’re so saturated in idolatry that we don’t notice it any more than a fish notices water!

As this passage unfolds, we see *Israel* just exchange one form of idolatry for another. They leave behind the *Baals* and the *Ashtaroath*, but then they approach *the Lord* as though He were an idol—present just for their pleasure! We know what’s best! If we need to be judged, we need *a king to judge us like all the nations!* (8:5)—treating *the Lord* like an idol Whom they serve just to get what they want!

The hard part is, this tendency still lives. We can turn away from the idols of this age that promise us prosperity and peace. Like *Israel*, we turn to *the Lord* in repentance and faith. We receive eternal salvation. But is it possible we too just exchange one form of idolatry for another? We know what we need to succeed, right? We know what investments we need to make with our money. We know what doctor we need to see when we’re sick. We know where our kids need to go to college. We know what team they need to play on, what curriculum will best enable their success, and what they need to fill out their résumé properly. We know what determination it takes to keep them on course, to see them through to the end.

And we know just Who to ask when we things don’t seem to be going as they should. We seek *the Lord*. We ask Him to remove the roadblocks, and level the way, as we press on to make the right calls and schedule the right meetings and.... And it is pretty hard for us to handle it if it seems like our plan isn’t going to work!

Meanwhile we serve a God who tells us that Psa.139¹⁶... *all the days ordained for (us) were written in (His) book before one of them came to be* (niv). He tells us that 2Co.5¹⁷... *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; ... the new has come.* And as part of that *new creation* we’re assured that Eph.2¹⁰... *we are (God’s) workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* And more than that: Rom.8³² *He who did not spare his own Son*

but gave him up for us all, ... will (surely) also with him graciously give us all things! He really will! He promises! And He'll also be the One who determines what is best for us to receive. But then we will receive it! He tells us that Rom.8₂₈... *for those who love God all things work together for good...*, and He determines what is *good*. Now, I'm sure each of us here can point to things in our lives that we do not believe are *good*. But when we are *in Christ*, the last two chapters of the Book (Rev.21-22) describe our eternal destination in His unshielded presence. And that is *good!*

It doesn't end here, though, does it? We're not just interested in controlling the contours of our own lives, and those of our kids. Like Israel, we know what leaders will best serve us in the elected and appointed offices of our land, right? We know who should fill the White House and the Capitol building in order to see the best outcome. We know what sort of people should serve on the Supreme Court. We know who should fill our state and local houses, and school boards, and the like. And we can tell God and others with clarity who these leaders are. And we can do that because we know the best outcome in any given situation. We know what is at stake. Or so we easily think.

Does this sound familiar? We *lament* Israel's demand for a *king*. We see clearly how they're *rejecting the Lord*, and treating Him like a Canaanite idol. But somehow we can still miss the tendency in ourselves to do the very same in our own day.

CONCLUSION

God, help us.

And He has! He has provided for us the salvation that we just acknowledged! He has made to us the promises we just recited, and many more! He can change us from the inside out such that we no longer do only what seems *right in (our) own eyes*—such that the incessant allure of lesser lords can fade from our affections, and we can say with Hannah: 1Sa.2₁... *My heart exults in the Lord... because I rejoice in your salvation.* ₂*There is none holy like the Lord: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.* ₃*Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. ...* ₆*The Lord kills and brings to life....* ₇*The Lord makes poor and makes rich...* ₈... *He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes...* ₉*He will guard the*

feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail.

10 The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. ...

This is the right response to our God, for He ¹⁰... *will judge the ends of the earth*.... He is in charge! He is in control! He is worthy of our worship, our undivided allegiance, and service all our days!