

“Longing to Return to Slavery in Egypt”
1 Samuel 8
March 3, 2019
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pr. Nicoletti

We return to First Samuel again this evening, picking up in chapter eight. Last Sunday we considered the pattern of Israel’s growth. Of course, one key piece of information in the midst of all of that was that they *did* grow, and that God delivered them.

The Philistines had gathered to attack Israel, and Israel responded in faith – they cried out to Yahweh their God, and he fought their battle for them – he won the victory on their behalf.

In chapter eight, some time has passed since that battle. And we will soon discover that several things have changed since chapter seven.

And so, with that in mind, we turn to First Samuel chapter eight:

^{8:1} When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ² The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. ³ Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.

⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah 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.” ⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to Yahweh. ⁷ And Yahweh said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. 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 other gods, so they are also doing to you. ⁹ Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

¹⁰ So Samuel told all the words of Yahweh to the people who were asking for a king from him. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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 his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵ He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but Yahweh will not answer you in that day.”

¹⁹ But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, “No! But there shall be a king over us, ²⁰ 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.” ²¹ And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of Yahweh. ²² And Yahweh 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.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

If last week in chapter seven we had an encouraging picture of Israel growing in the Lord and depending on him more faithfully, then here in chapter eight we see a picture of spiritual decline.

The first appearance of decline actually comes in the first three verses as we are introduced to Samuel's sons. And our disappointment comes in two different forms. First, we read that Samuel's sons, Joel and Abijah, are not walking faithfully. They do not walk in their father's ways. As one commentator points out: "Though Scripture never explicitly blames Samuel for the conduct of his sons, the text makes an implicit comparison with Eli." [Leithart, 69]

This is the first disappointment, but a second follows close behind: Despite these shortcomings Samuel still seems to have appointed his sons as judges. Unlike the priesthood with Eli, there was no assumption that a judge's son would himself become a judge. And even if there was, their conduct should have disqualified them from service. So one commentator reminds us: "the Torah explicitly says those appointed to office must reject bribery. When Moses set up judges and elders in Israel, he selected men who were free from love of money." [Leithart, 71] But Samuel has failed to follow the commands or example of Moses. Samuel has appointed his sons as judges anyway. Instead of looking for the best men to lead, Robert Alter notes that Samuel "oversteps his mandate as a judge [...] by attempting to inaugurate a kind of dynastic arrangement." [Alter, 41]

This failure on Samuel's part is what opens the door for the request that the elders make for a king, in verse five. As we will see, Samuel's sons were not the real source of the request – but they did provide the opportunity for the request.

And the request is a bad one – God says so in verses seven and eight. The question is: Why? What is so bad about Israel's request here?

It's not obvious on its face by looking at the words of their request in verse five. They say: "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." The request for a king was not in itself a rejection of Yahweh. Jacob's prophecy regarding Judah all the way back in Genesis 49:10 makes it sound like God intends to bring a king from the line of Judah – it speaks of the scepter not departing from Judah, of him being a ruler who receives tribute and obedience from the people.

Similarly, Hannah's song in First Samuel 2:10 refers to God having a king set up in Israel.

And Deuteronomy 17:14-20 says that Israel may have a king once they are settled into the land.

So, the problem doesn't seem to necessarily be the idea of having a king.

Some have pointed out that the problem is found in the phrase "like all the nations" in verse five. But even that is at least ambiguous at first, because that phrase also comes from Deuteronomy 17:14-15 where Moses says "When you come to the land that Yahweh 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 whom Yahweh your God will choose." [Davis, 84] Moses uses that phrase to describe Israel requesting a political structure like the other nations, once they have settled into the promised land, and he does not point out any problem with it. We might even wonder if the elders maybe got the phrase from Deuteronomy.

So, we know something is wrong with the request based on how God responds in verses seven and eight, but we don't yet know exactly *what* is wrong. To clarify that we need to look at the whole

conversation, which will provide more of a window into what lies behind Israel's request. [Firth, 116]

So, let's do that. We've already looked at Israel's request in verse five. In verse six we read that Samuel is displeased and prays to God. And then God responds in verses seven through eight. There, God, says to Samuel: "Obey the voice of the people in 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."

Yahweh basically says in his response that Israel's request for a king is parallel to the way they rejected him and Moses in the wilderness. And as we remember the story of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings of Israel, we can remember that those rejections of Yahweh and Moses at that time often took the form of Israel wanting to return to Egypt.

Peter Leithart, commenting on this text, makes this claim – he says: "When the elders of Israel said they wanted to be like the nations, they were saying that they were tired of being Israel. Thus, the final result of this request would be that Israel, instead of 'serving Yahweh' ([as they did in] 7:4), would become slaves to the king ([as Samuel says in] 8:17). In a reversal of the Sinai covenant, Israel was heading back to Egypt to be ruled by a king with chariots and horses. As the people had wanted to return to Egypt in the wilderness days of Moses, so again in Samuel's time they wanted to return to 'Egypt' instead of accepting Samuel. Israel said, as it would say many centuries later, 'We have no king but Caesar.'" [Leithart, 72]

Leithart is making some strong claims here. Is he right? Is all of that sentiment contained in Israel's request in verse five?

We get a better picture by looking at verses ten through twenty. In these verses the Lord, speaking through Samuel, describes the kind of king he knows Israel is asking for, and Israel affirms that that is their request. And it's in the distinction between the kind of king that the Lord had told them they *should* desire, and the kind of king that they *are actually asking for* that we see the problem with Israel's request more clearly.

Before we look again at verses ten through twenty, we should look at the kind of king God said Israel should seek when they request a king.

In Deuteronomy 17 Moses writes:

¹⁴ "When you come to the land that Yahweh 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 Yahweh 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."

(The concern here, it should be noted, is not the race of the king, but that the king be a believer, one who is part of the people of God.)

Moses goes on:

¹⁶ "Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since Yahweh has said to you, 'You shall never return that way

again.’¹⁷ And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.

¹⁸“And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests.¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear Yahweh his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, ²⁰ that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.”

The king described by Moses was to be a humble servant of God. He was to be a humble servant towards Israel. He was to rule Israel in a loving and sacrificial way, not in a selfish or self-centered way. He was, all things considered, to be a picture, a representative of Yahweh ruling his people, and he was to do that by ruling them in a gracious way, the same way Yahweh ruled them. That was the kind of king Israel was to desire.

But the Lord knew that that was not the kind of king Israel was asking for in our text tonight. He knew what they really wanted, and he spells it out in verses ten through eighteen. Take a look at those again. The key word that comes up again and again is “take”. The kind of king they are asking for will *take* their son and daughters for his own purposes, He will *take* their best land for his servants. He will *take* their grain and wine. He will *take* their servants, livestock, and flocks. And Samuel tops it all off at the end of verse seventeen, saying “and you shall be his slaves.”

Samuel here does not describe a king whose character is like the one Moses describes in Deuteronomy 17 ... he describes instead a king whose *character* is like the kings of the nations around them ... a king whose character sounds more like Pharaoh than like the faithful king who reflects Yahweh’s character – so much so that Yahweh says that as they were slaves in Egypt so they will now become slaves of this king they are asking for.

If Israel’s heart was in the right place – if they wanted a king who would mirror Yahweh their God, then their response should have been “That’s not what we want! Give us a king like Moses described instead!”

But that’s not their response. In verses nineteen through twenty we read: “¹⁹ But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, ‘No! But there shall be a king over us, ²⁰ 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.’”

Rather than repudiating the kind of king Samuel has described, they embrace it. If not geographically, then at least socially, politically, and spiritually they really did in some sense want to return to Egypt.

And worse, they add one more important thing at the very end. They say in verse twenty that they want a king who will: “go out before us and fight our battles.”

That last phrase should strike us, and we should note at that point that there was a reason why the author of First Samuel placed this story immediately after the story we read last week in chapter seven. Because we have just read in chapter seven how Yahweh fought Israel’s battle for them. We have just read of his miraculous decisive victory against their enemy, the Philistines. In chapter eight Israel says they need a king to fight their battles, but we know that they already have one who can defend them far better than any human king can! [Leithart, 71]

We realize then the foolishness behind Israel's requests. In verse five they said they need a king because they don't want to be ruled by Samuel's sons who are more interested in their own worldly gain than in the welfare of the people. Then Yahweh points out that they are requesting the kind of king that will be interested in his own worldly gain over the welfare of the people ... but Israel raises no objection. In verse twenty they say they need a king to fight their battles when in chapter seven we just saw Yahweh fight their battles for them. The reasons Israel is giving for needing a king may have been either a delusion or a fabrication – but in either case they did not reflect reality.

Israel was seeking a substitute for Yahweh. One commentator writes that Israel's request is “fundamentally” just “a new idolatry.” [Firth, 116] Another says, “it is simply the old idolatry with a new twist.” [Davis, 84]

Israel's turn is one away from the Lord, and towards a substitute. It's a turn from the living God and towards an idol – a turn from living like God's people and towards living like slaves back in Egypt.

This is the problem in Israel's request. This is what the Lord is responding to in verses seven and eight: Israel is tempted to return to the slavery of Egypt, because they did not believe that the Lord would provide and fight their battles.

That is what we see in this text: Israel is tempted to return to the slavery of Egypt, because they did not believe that the Lord would provide and fight their battles.

And as is usually the case, Israel in the days of Samuel was not unique in this tendency. We can have the same problem.

We too are tempted to return to the slavery of our old idols because we do not believe that the Lord will provide and fight our battles.

This can be true on a number of levels. It can be true of us corporately as the people of God – the church can be tempted to act like Israel does here. It can also be true of us individually – each of us can be tempted to act like Israel-as-a-whole does.

I want to focus tonight on how each of us individually can do that – how you and I can each be tempted to act like Israel does. But to do that we need to ask: What does it look like when we doubt that the Lord will fight our battles and provide for our deepest needs?

Tim Keller, whom I seem to be citing a lot this week, is helpful again here. He points out that beneath all of our idols, beneath all the substitutes to God that we pursue and devote ourselves to, there are usually one or more of what he calls “deep idols” that we are really pursuing. Four common “deep idols” that he identifies are: security, comfort, power, and approval. [Keller, 64-66]

Every human being craves these four things. Most of us have one or two that we especially crave – that we are terrified, even, of not having. We crave that thing so much that when we are worried about not having it, we will be tempted to give ourselves over to all sorts of idols in our lives.

Which of those four deep idols most motivates you? Which one do worry about not having the most?

For Israel in our text tonight, it was security. They felt they needed someone to fight their battles, to protect them. And they were afraid that they wouldn't have that security. And so, they were willing to give themselves as slaves to a Pharaoh-like king in order to get that security.

What is it for you? What is it that you desire so much that you are willing to serve something other than God as if it were God? What is the deep idol that you desire so much that you are willing to serve something *like a slave* in order to get it?

Because the idolatrous form of monarchy that Israel is requesting is, in the end, a kind of slavery. That is one of the ways it most resembles returning to Egypt. Samuel describes it as such in his warning, but Israel is willing to accept it. Israel is willing to sacrifice their sons and daughters, their fields, their food, their servants, their livestock for the protection they think this kind of king will give them. They are willing to give him their whole selves – Samuel says to them directly “and you shall be his slaves.”

They are willing to return to the slavery that the Lord had saved them from in order to feel secure.

And the fact is that we can be a lot like them. We all have our besetting sins. Maybe, if you became a believer later in life then it is the thing you trusted in to give you security, comfort, power, or approval before you knew the Lord. Maybe if you grew up in the church it is that thing that has always beckoned to you, calling you to trust it rather than God – claiming that *it* will give you real security; *it* will give you real comfort and pleasure; *it* will give you real power; *it* will give you real approval and acceptance.

And sometimes, even after we have come to faith in Christ, when we have come to know the Lord, much like Israel in our text, we can find ourselves again in fear that we will lose what we most crave, whether it's security, comfort, power, or approval.

And we begin to doubt that the Lord will provide for us. We begin to doubt that he will defend us against the things that threaten us. We begin to doubt that he will fight our battles for us.

And then we start to think about those idols. Slavery to them starts to seem appealing again. We start to believe that they will provide for us and defend us in ways that the Lord will not.

But, of course, the truth is different. The truth is that such idols will never really give us what they promise. The truth is that instead, like the king described by Samuel, those idols will enslave us, and take, and take, and take.

David Foster Wallace, in a commencement address he gave at Kenyon College in 2005 addressed this very thing. He was speaking at a secular college, and though his writing had often touched on the question of God, most people didn't view him as a religious writer. Nonetheless, in that speech he encouraged students to pursue some kind of intentional spiritual worship. He told them it was important to do this, and he explained it like this – he said: “Here's something else that's weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.” And, he explained, the great benefit of pursuing some sort of intentional spiritual form of worship is that, as he put it, “pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and

sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already – it's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

“Worship power – you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart – you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

“The insidious thing about these forms of worship,” he goes on, “[...] is that they are unconscious. They are default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the world of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self.”

Wallace is of course describing idolatry here – the different things that we give ourselves to as slaves in an attempt to meet our deepest needs.

What does the slavery of Egypt look like for you? What do you start to turn to in a desperate attempt to get security, comfort, power, or approval? As Wallace says, it could be money that you trust in for one or more of these things, or sex, or prominence, or achievement, or your own efforts at control over things in your life. Or something else. What are you afraid of? And what are you willing to serve to keep that fear at bay?

And can that thing you serve really help you? Or are David Foster Wallace, and Samuel, and (for that matter) Yahweh, right? Will they *take* rather than *give* as they make you their slave?

What then is the alternative? If a Pharaoh-like king would not really give Israel security, what would? If neither money, nor sex, nor prominence, nor achievement, nor your own control will be able to give you security, comfort, power, or approval, then what will?

The answer, obvious throughout First Samuel eight is that the Lord will. Only God is able to do this.

The Lord is the only one who can provide for our deepest needs and fight our battles that frighten us the most.

In First Samuel eight, it is obvious that only Yahweh can provide Israel with true security. But his provision does not stop there. Only the Lord can provide the deeper comfort we need now in this difficult life, and only he can provide the comfort of paradise for eternity. Only he can give us power over sin, brokenness, and death, in this life, and in the life to come. Only his approval can fill our thirsty souls in a way that all the human applause in the world never could.

The Lord is the only one who can provide for our deepest needs and fight our battles that frighten us the most.

That is what we need to know. That is what we need to believe.

Unfortunately, Israel failed to believe it. Unfortunately, we often fail too. How do we believe these truths where we have so often failed?

We see three things that Israel should have done in this text. Three things that we should do when we face a similar temptation. Let's look at them briefly before we close.

First, Israel should have remembered the Lord's past provisions for them.

We've already pointed out that the Lord had just provided for Israel and fought their battle in First Samuel seven. When Israel felt that their security was threatened, that is what they should have remembered.

And so with us. We spoke about this last Sunday evening, and we talked about how Samuel tried to set up a reminder for Israel, but we too need to remember the Lord's past provision for us and defense of us.

On a day-to-day scale we need to remember when he has protected us, comforted us, empowered us against the spiritual forces of darkness, and given us a sense of his love and approval of us in Christ.

And on a larger scale we need to remember the security, comfort, power over sin and death, and divine approval we have in the gospel, which can supply more than any idol or Egyptian overlord ever could.

So first, we need to remember.

Second, we need to hear the Lord's warnings. The Lord does not leave us to identify and avoid spiritual dangers on our own. He warns us again and again where the path of idolatry and spiritual slavery leads. He does this throughout his Word. He does this throughout the history of his people. He does this through his church. He warns us where sin leads both in this life and in the next. In his speech David Foster Wallace listed where the path of each of those idolatries brings us, and he said rightly that on some level we already know the perils that those idols lead us towards.

The words of warning come to us. But we often we don't listen. Often, we don't really hear them. When you hear the warnings from Scripture about what sin does in our lives, when you hear fellow Christians warning the people of God in general or you in particular, when you hear stories of people whose lives have been left in ruins by these idols, do you really listen? Do you really hear?

Or do you scoff – either because you think that the outcomes are exaggerated, or because you think that it's something that will never threaten you?

Samuel spelled out to Israel exactly where their sin would lead. The words entered their ears, but they didn't hear it.

We need to *hear* the warnings about sin that the Lord sends to us.

Finally, we need to trust the discipline of the Lord, in our lives and in the lives of others.

After Israel fails to remember, after they fail to hear the Lord, the Lord tells Samuel to give them what they asked for.

Why does he do this? It's not because he's abandoning them – it's not because he has given up on them.

We might get that impression from verse 18, when he says, “in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but Yahweh will not answer you in that day.” But even that condition seems to be temporary – not permanent.

Yahweh here, at the end of this passage, is disciplining his people. He is still at work to draw them to himself, and he is doing that now by giving them what they ask for.

Because what they've asked for will not give them what they think it will. They should know that, and God has tried to warn them of that, but they are persisting, and so now the Lord is letting them see for themselves. They will experience, in time, what it is like to live under a Pharaoh-like king – a king who takes rather than gives, who makes promises but does not keep them. And it will be painful for Israel. But apparently it is what Israel needs to experience if they are to come back again to the Lord.

Sometimes God disciplines his people by giving them what they ask for, that they might see it for what it is, and return in repentance to the Lord.

When he does that to us, we need to be willing to receive the lesson – to see how wrong we were and to confess it to the Lord and those we have hurt, and then to redouble our efforts to remember the goodness of the Lord going forward.

When it happens to those we love, we need to trust in the Lord's care of them, because he is able to bring them back to himself when we are not.

This point has lots of applications. Let me mention one. I think this is something to especially keep in mind if you are the parent of a child who has walked away from the Lord.

That is, of course, a heart-breaking position to be in for any Christian parent. It's agonizing. And you can feel helpless and alone in your pain. You go over various things. You try to determine what happened, what went wrong.

If that is you, then I think our text gives you something to hold on to.

Now, I don't know the future, or what the final outcome will be for your child – and I'm not looking to offer false hope. Sometimes covenant children walk away, they stay away, and in the end, they never come back. And it's tragic and heartbreaking.

But sometimes covenant children are like Israel in our story here. They are enticed by worldly idols. They fail to remember all that the Lord has done for them. They fail to hear the warnings that you and others give them.

And then like Israel here, God gives them what they want. And as I've said, that can be an act of judgment that they do not turn back from, in some cases. But in others, giving them what they want is not judgment so much as discipline. In those cases, God is not done with them ... so that even giving them what they want is a tool he is using to bring them back. Because they will see that the idol they have gone to serve cannot deliver them. It cannot provide what it promised.

Instead it has enslaved them. And then, like the prodigal son, they may be ready to have their eyes open to the only one who can truly provide for them and defend them.

Our text tonight is a reminder that God allowing his people to have the idol they ask for is not necessarily the end of the story. Our calling may be to accept his discipline for a covenant child and pray earnestly that the Lord would use their current idolatry as a form of discipline – that like Israel, he would use it to bring them back to himself.

That is the hope we can pray for those we love. That is the hope we can hope in for ourselves.

Brought together, our text reminds us that when *we* begin to fear, when we begin to feel vulnerable, we need to remember the Lord's past provision, hear his warnings about the empty promises of the idols that entice us, and, when we do fail, we need to accept his discipline so that we may grow closer to him.

We live uncertain lives in an uncertain world. Little is permanent. Little is sure.

Except for our God. Our God has given his son to die on the cross to secure our eternal safety. He has taken the punishment that we deserve so that we might have the pleasure of eternal joy. He has conquered our deepest foes. In Christ, he has showered his love and approval on us even when we did not deserve it in the least.

When trouble comes, let us not turn to the flimsy promises of Egypt and the pathetic claims of our worldly idols. Let us trust in the only One who has saved us, and the only One who can.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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