

1 SAMUEL 8 GIVE US A KING

What would you do, if you went to the moon? What would you do, to be sure you returned safely?

I have been reading a detailed description of the first moon landing. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin had hundreds of safety procedures in place for the first moon landing and the first moon walk.

Yet they did not have a procedure for this: when they climbed down from the lunar module and stepped down onto the moon's surface, what if the lunar module door shut, then locked or stuck, and they could not get it open again?

The door was designed to not do that, but if you were Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, wouldn't you want to make sure about that? Wouldn't you want to get something and stick it into that opening, so the door would not shut? If it did lock or stick, they would be doomed to death.

Not to second guess the courage or wisdom of these great men, but I am sure I would take great care, to be sure that I could grasp onto what I most needed, on a fearful and uncertain journey.

The first moon landing was a fearful and uncertain time. Israel lived in a fearful and uncertain time. We live in a fearful and uncertain time.

What is this chapter about?

Is it about the proper form of government? "No kings!" No.

Is it about the proper level of taxation? "Low taxes!" No.

It is about the human heart. It is about how we live before the glorious God of the universe. It is about how we, like the Israelites, are tempted to forget or even reject the one path to safety and surety in this world of fear and uncertainty.

As we think about these words, let's think about what Israel does, and what God does, and how we may learn and grow from this story.

WHAT DOES ISRAEL DO?

To start with, SHE FEARS.

Let's remind ourselves where we are, in the story of God's people in the Old Testament. They are in the land God promised. But all is not well. We call this the period of the judges, when Israel lived through the painful cycle we noticed two weeks ago.

Israel would sin. Israel would then be enslaved. Israel would then cry to God for deliverance. God would show mercy and free Israel. Then after some period of silence, the cycle would start again.

The book of Judges ends with these haunting words: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."

Then comes Samuel. He leads Israel well. But Israel fears. Why?

* Samuel is old. He has led well, but he will leave soon.

* Samuel's sons are corrupt. They accept bribes and bring injustice.

* The land is in disorder - maybe even chaos - as everyone does what everyone wants to do.

* Other nations seem to be prospering, and they have kings.

Israel fears. There is much to fear. There is much to fear, for us.

This has been called "The Age of Fear". We would say we lived in a sort of "Age of Fear" when the Americans and Soviets were aiming nuclear weapons at each other, and this is a new "Age of Fear", after 9/11.

As one writer describes it, "In ways subtle and profound, Americans now perceive the world as a perilous and even malicious place, where innocent people going about their lives can be suddenly gunned down or vaporized by a collapsing skyscraper."

And those words were written before bird flu, and Iran's nuclear program, and Virginia Tech.

We have these fears as we look at our world, and we have these fears as we look at our lives. Disease. Financial struggles. Crime. Rejection. Failure. Disaster. Shame.

What does Israel do with her fear? SHE GRASPS.

She reaches out for the answer to her fear and uncertainty, but she reaches out in the wrong direction. The elders go to Samuel, and they ask Samuel to appoint a king.

Is it wrong to have a king? No. In the book of Deuteronomy, God tells the people that they will want a king. He urges them to appoint a king from Israel, who does not acquire a lot for himself, and who follows God's law.

So the issue is not the king. The issue is the hearts of the Israelites. They want to be like the other nations, and they are looking to the king to provide what only God can provide, in a world of fear and uncertainty.

"Give us a king!" Give us a king, and we will not fear. Give us a king, and we will have

certainty. Give us a king. That is what we need. That is what we cannot do without. In her fear, Israel grasps for a king.

What about you? What about me?

We live in a broken world. All is not well. We feel it globally, and we feel it personally. We long for something or someone to fill the holes in our fearful hearts and our uncertain lives.

Think of...

* The young woman, who has known only abuse and neglect. She grasps for a young man, who promises good things, to overcome her fear of loneliness.

* The young man, who cannot stand the pain of today or the prospects for tomorrow, who grasps chemicals, to overcome his fear of more pain.

* The middle-aged man, who realizes the years are racing by, who grasps an immoral relationship with a younger woman, to overcome his fear of aging.

* The middle-aged woman, whose family life is slowly crumbling, who grasps after perfectionism, where she must do all, and be all, flawlessly, to overcome her fear of failure.

* The older person, who is lonely, and who grasps the comfort of a talking box, 24 hours a day, to overcome the fear of isolation.

* The church, whose message is not popular, which grasps for trendy programs and unique techniques, to overcome her fear of insignificance.

We fear. We grasp. Like astronauts on the moon, we have hundreds of safety procedures, to help us face the fear and uncertainty of this difficult world. But are we reaching out for the one place, the one person, who gives the safety and security we need?

In this story, Israel grasps and fears. WHAT DOES GOD DO?

To start with, HE SEES THEIR HEARTS.

The elders of Israel go to Samuel, and Samuel goes to the Lord. Samuel seems a bit hurt by all of this, but he need not take it personally. "It is not you they have rejected," says the Lord, "but they have rejected me as their king."

They have rejected me. In a world of fear and uncertainty, they want a king, because they do not want me to be their king, says the Lord.

God sees your life. God sees your heart. God sees when you are grasping for safety and security, in someone or something, other than him.

He sees when you think you will be just fine, because your retirement portfolio had a good second quarter.

He sees when you believe all will be well, once that relationship is where you want it to be.

He sees when you check the doors, not for the first or even the second time, but for the third time, because you must know your locks are in place.

He sees when you lash out at the person who threatens your reputation, because you think you would die, if anyone thought ill of you.

He sees their hearts. He sees your heart. He sees my heart.

Then HE WARNS OF THE COST.

The elders of Israel ask for a king. Samuel consults with the Lord, then much of the chapter consists of Samuel's warning to the Israelites. He says, "These kings cost you." Especially...

* They will cost you your loved ones. Those kings will take your sons and use them for war, and they will take your daughters and use them to serve.

* They will cost you your livelihood. Those kings will take a tenth of your grain, and a tenth of your flocks, so they can do whatever they want.

This cost will increase and increase, says the Lord through Samuel, until finally, "you yourselves will become his slaves." You will be enslaved to those kings. If you choose to make someone or something your king other than the Lord of the universe, you will be a slave to that king.

God knows that when we follow any other king, the cost will be so high.

This is so true.

What is the cost, of the "king" you call work? What is the cost, when all you really care about, is what you produce, and what you earn, and what level you reach, in that company?

What is the cost, of the "king" you call pleasure? What is the cost, as you sit in the dark, when everyone else is asleep, and gawk at the fantasies created by people who know what men want to see?

What is the cost, of the "king" you call reputation? What is the cost, when you show one face to your friends, and another face to your family? What is the cost, when you live a lie?

What is the cost, of the "king" you call materialism? What is the cost, when your soul is given over to getting? What is the cost, as you bow down and worship the god who says your life is valuable because of your abundant possessions?

He sees their hearts. He warns of the cost.

Now a surprise. HE GIVES THEM THE KING.

The Lord says to Samuel, "Listen to them and give them a king." He allows them to get what they want.

God will do this. We say, "I must have this!" I must have this pleasure. I must have this person. I must have this control. I must have this power.

Maybe we think, "If it's not good, God won't let me have it." But there are times when God will give us what we demand - and he will give us many of the results of what we demand.

Think of the rest of the story. If you read the rest of the Old Testament, you will read about a lot of kings!

Some are good, and some are bad. But more are bad than good, and the evil kings lead Israel away from the Lord.

There is an ironic twist here. In fear and uncertainty, Israel said, "We fear the nations! We need a king!" So she got a king. And what happened?

The kings led Israel away from the Lord, and the Lord brought what she most feared. Israel rejected the one who could give her safety and security, so she lost that safety and security.

He may give what you grasp. But if you reject him, you will lose what you are seeking, for you are grasping after what only God can give.

But here is the good news. God not only sees their hearts, warns of the cost, and give them their king. HE STICKS WITH HIS PLAN.

Indeed, the kings come. First there is Saul. Then there is David. And through David, comes the Savior God has promised, named Jesus.

This is the wonder of God's grace! He will use even our bad choices, to fulfill his plan to bring us back to himself.

As one writer writes, "Despite Israel's (sin) in requesting a king, the Lord was positively at work to achieve his ultimate purpose..."

"The Lord, like a master chess player, achieves his objective despite human plans and policies."

Israel rejects God. But God sticks with his plan. His plan is to send a man who is more than a man. He will live the life his people cannot live, and die the death they cannot die, so they can live with God forever.

Praise God that he sticks with his plan! If left to ourselves, we will surely reject God as the Israelites did. We love our kings! But in his glorious grace, he takes graspers like us, and he grasps on to us, and he brings us to the King named Jesus, who removes the curse of our rejection of God, then returns us to peace with him, and eternal life.

So what do we do, in light of what God has done?

If he sees my heart, I must admit my rejection of him.

What "kings" do I want, as I come to worship him today, in a world of fear and uncertainty?

Do I want a problem-free life? Do I want a chemically-induced fog in my brain? Do I want excitement? Do I want stuff?

I say, "Lord Jesus, I have other kings in my heart. Some are not bad in and of themselves, but they are bad kings. Some are just plain bad.

"Because of Jesus your Son, have mercy on me, for rejecting you as king. Be the king of all of me."

If he warns of the cost, I must accept the costs of my rejection of him.

God's mercy is real, and it is great. But now, he will give me the results of what I have wanted. My call, by his mercy, is to accept this, and to see how his mercy will help me through this.

I have destroyed my body with "king" alcohol. I accept the costs, and I seek God's mercy to help me do this.

I have shattered my family with "king" achievement. I accept the costs, and I seek God's mercy to repair this.

I have wrecked my testimony to Jesus, with "king" anger. I accept the costs, and I seek God's mercy to undo this.

Yet as well, if he sticks with his plan, I must attempt to grasp only him.

Just before this chapter, we read of Israel defeating the Philistines, and of Samuel putting up a stone. It is called "Ebenezer", which means, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

How do you need the help of the Lord today? If Jesus is your King, you have that help.

You are tempted to seek hundreds of other helps. But like the astronauts on the moon, you have to be sure of the one place, the One Person, who will be your help.

Grasp him. And if you think you cannot grasp him, cry to him to help you to grasp him.

Cry to him, “Lord Jesus, I am in a place where no other ‘king’ can help me. The fear is too great. The uncertainty is too great.

“Help me to grasp onto you for help. Help me to pray to you, even each moment. Help me to seek your wisdom, in each situation.

“Help me to always remember and never forget, that you will help me in ways I cannot see now, but will not miss when you do it.

“I have had hundreds of kings. In my fear, and in my uncertainty, help me to grasp you.”

Thus far the Lord has helped us. So far will the Lord help you.

How do you need the help of the Lord? No other king will do. He is your help. Grasp him.