

# ***“When You Don’t Know What’s Next”***

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***Just because you don’t know what’s next, it doesn’t mean God is in the dark.***

***1 Samuel 8:1-22***

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***Now!***

When we first visited our son in Hawaii almost a decade ago, the first place he took us to eat was da Cove Health Bar and Café near Diamond Head and Waikiki. Phil said we should try the acai bowls. We did, and I was hooked. Side by side, I’d take an acai bowl with bananas, honey, granola, peanut butter, and berries over an ice cream sundae. And it’s “health food.” Other than leaving our grandson Arlo (and his parents), the hardest thing about leaving Hawaii is waving goodbye to acai bowls.

You can imagine my excitement when Jack Wysong, Corinth member, told me he had leased the property on the corner of Hwy 127 and 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue to Palm Berries. Acai bowls a half-mile from Corinth! The business opened this past Friday, and I planned to get acai bowls for lunch for Linda and me. I arrived at 11:30 to beat the lunch crowd, but I didn’t. Parking lot and store overflowed. I didn’t think I could wait an hour, even for an acai bowl, so I drove away, sadly. I did have one other option, I suppose. I could have walked into the store and demanded, “Everyone, get out of the way! I’m the pastor of Corinth. I’ve had acai bowls at Diamond Head. I want *my* acai bowl *now!*”

The problem in 1 Samuel 8 is not that the people want a king. They actually needed a king. Moses had given instructions in Deuteronomy 17 about choosing a king. He was to be a fellow Israelite who prioritized God’s laws over military strength and alliances through marriage to multiple wives.

Since Moses gave those instructions, the people had lived for centuries in the land without a king. The lack of central, strong leadership had proven to be a problem.

The book of Judges ends with the summary statement, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25). The entire book of Judges was a setup for a monarch, even a dynasty. The cycles of idolatry spiraled downward – even to the horrible account of rape and abuse and civil war that closed that era.

If the elders had simply asked Samuel for a king, for the right kind of king, in God’s way and time, we wouldn’t have had Samuel’s or God’s harsh reaction. Instead, they *demand*ed a king like other nations, and they wanted him *now*.

### ***History repeats (1-3)***

Chapter 8 begins, “When Samuel grew old...” How old? We don’t know. His predecessor Eli lived to be 98 even though he was blind and overweight (1 Samuel 4:15,18). Samuel’s probably not quite that old since he doesn’t die until the first verse of chapter 25. Some suggest his “old” is about my age, mid-60s. Old, right.

Several decades, maybe half a century, have passed since “the boy Samuel” heard the voice of God in the temple. Raised by Eli, Samuel had become a respected and honored prophet of the LORD (3:19-21), contrasting sharply with the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of Eli’s sons and of all Israel.

In the intervening chapters, Israel engaged multiple times with a people known as the Philistines along the Mediterranean Sea. How and when the Philistines settled there is a point of scholarly debate, but they become the chief threat to Israelite security during the time of Samuel, Saul, and David. Goliath was a Philistine.

In chapter 4, the Israelites lost a key battle with the Philistines. Four thousand Israelite soldiers died. They made the desperate but ill-fated decision to take the ark of the covenant into battle from the temple in Shiloh, to which it never returned. This greatly encouraged the soldiers and terrified the Philistines. Sometimes, though, fear turns into survival rage and the Philistines prevailed. That day Eli’s scoundrel sons, apparently accompanying the ark of God, died in battle. When Eli heard that the ark was captured and his sons were dead, he fell, broke his neck, and died (4:18).

1 Samuel 5 and 6 record a series of judgments on both the Philistines and Israelites for disrespecting the holiness of the ark. Nobody seems to fully understand its true purpose. They treat it like a magical mascot. The ark finally rests in a new home back in Israel, at a place called Kiriath Jearim (“city of forests”) about nine miles west of Jerusalem – in other words, between Jerusalem and Philistia. It will remain there for two decades until King David takes it to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel.

Samuel is absent from the stories of conflict with the Philistines over the ark in chapters 4-6. The ark’s arrival back home begins a process that leads to a spiritual revival in Israel (7:4). Samuel gathers the people together at nearby Mizpah (“lookout”), where the people confess their idolatry and honor Samuel as their new leader (7:6).

Enough time has passed that the Philistines have forgotten their former lessons. They attack again, and this time for the first time Samuel is involved in conflict with them. After he sacrifices and prays (7:9), thunder from heaven causes panic among the Philistines and the Israelite soldiers rout them in battle (7:11). That's when Samuel sets up the Ebenezer ("stone of help") monument and this ends the Philistine threat during Samuel's lifetime (7:13). He sets up a judicial circuit (probably like a court of appeals) in three towns while he lives most of the time in his parents' hometown of Ramah. All of this is in the central area of Israel, now known as the "West Bank."

That's all a prelude to chapter 8. Remember, Samuel is "old." He's not going to live forever. Further, history is repeating itself. Samuel has two sons. He obviously intended to raise them in the fear of the Lord, because he named the first one "Joel" (Yahweh is God) and the second "Abijah" (Yahweh is my Father). He had delegated judicial authority to them at Beersheba, a long way from Samuel's oversight. There his sons gained a reputation for dishonesty, bribery, and corruption.

### ***A legitimate concern (4-5)***

It's not hard to see why the people wanted a king. It was a legitimate concern in Israel. Under Samuel we have seen a period of spiritual faithfulness resulting in national security. The people not only remember Eli's sons but centuries of similar problems under unfaithful or inconsistent leadership. They don't know what's next.

The "elders" (4) – who may have had a judicial or political role or both in the various tribal areas – gather for a summit at Samuel's hometown of Ramah. They may have been influential and wealthy. They stated the obvious ("you are old") and the well-known ("your sons do not follow your ways") and confronted Samuel. Translated literally they said: "Now appoint a king to judge us like all the nations."

It's a demand, not a request. They're not asking God (or Samuel) for direction. They don't know what's next, and they've decided what they need and they want God (via Samuel) to get it done. Further, they demand a king *now*. And it's not about a king like Moses had described in Deuteronomy 17. Kings were not only common among the nations, they were men of absolute power who offered identity and unity under a common god, a predictable political and judicial system, and military strength. Perhaps most importantly, a royal dynasty meant that you always knew who was on deck for leadership. Kings groomed their sons to follow them. There would be generational consistency. So many problems solved, the elders thought, if we can just have a king "like all the nations." But God had wanted a holy, peculiar people.

### ***Samuel talks to God (6-9)***

Samuel is "displeased" (6). More literally, "the matter was evil in Samuel's eyes." He seems to take this personally. In chapter 7, Samuel is said four times to have

“judged” Israel (7:6, 16, 16, 17). Samuel hears this as “We don’t want someone to judge us like you have. We want a king to judge us like all the nations.”

But Samuel doesn’t complain to *them*. A man of prayer, Samuel turns their demand into a conversation with God. “He prayed to the LORD” (6). God talks back.

I paraphrase God’s response this way: “Samuel, you need to listen to them. Don’t take this personally. They’re not rejecting you; they’re rejecting me as their king.” This is where I think a surface reading of this text can go awry. It sounds like the request for a king at this moment in time is the choice of monarchy (rule of a king) over theocracy (direct rule of God). I don’t read it that way. I see Deuteronomy 17 and the rest of 1 Samuel and so much of the Psalms as an affirmation of the principle of kingship in Israel. God knows people need a human face and voice of leadership. I don’t think God favors monarchy over democracy or a republican form of government or any other system. It’s never about the system. It’s never about the power.

Notice verse 8. What God says is this: “As they have done from the day I brought them out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you.” This is just the latest example of a pattern that dates back centuries to the time of Moses. Whether they have a strong spiritual leader (Moses), a strategic military leader (Joshua), or a series of charismatic political figures (the judges), they never can get the idea that behind any of those human leaders there must be a loyalty to God alone and a consistent obedience to his laws. You can be faithful to God in anarchy or totalitarianism, and you can reject him in any system from communism to democracy. It’s not about the human system. It’s about who’s really in charge.

So God says again to Samuel: “Now listen to them...but warn them about the freedoms they are yielding and what this king will ‘claim as his rights’” (9).

### ***What the king will take (10-18)***

Remember that in Deuteronomy Moses had said a king must not acquire great numbers of horses or appeal to a superpower like Egypt to grow their military arsenal. That’s what kings of the nations do. He must not take many wives or enrich himself. That’s what kings of the nations do. He must revere God’s laws and stay humble. That’s not what kings of the nations do.

Samuel tells the people what the king will take in exchange for leading and judging them. Samuel’s speech is his version of Lord Acton’s maxim, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” A king reigns, a king claims, a king takes. They all do. This is normal kingly behavior.

He will take your sons to serve in his army. Their lives will be expendable, because that’s what military is all about. He will also take your sons to plow his fields,

reap his crops, and serve his military complex. He will take your daughters to serve his domestic needs.

You'll still grow your own crops, but he will take the best of them to provide for his bureaucracy. He will take your servants and animals for his own use. You will functionally be his slaves if you give him absolute authority. He will even take your faith, because God will answer your prayers with silence. You got what you asked for.

### ***Have it your way (19-22)***

Samuel's warnings fall on deaf ears. The leaders will not be dissuaded. "No!" they say. "Give us a king! He will lead us. He will fight for us."

God tells Samuel for the third time, "Listen to them." Samuel sends everyone home, and we'll pick up the story there next week and beyond. The rest of 1 and 2 Samuel and into 1 Kings fulfills God's words. Saul is the kind of king they think they want. He leads them into battle, but he fails the heart test. They get precisely one king who's a man after God's own heart, but he's followed by Solomon who multiplies riches and wives and leads them astray.

But again, the problem is not asking for a king. It's demanding a king for all the wrong reasons and in all the wrong ways. God says, "Have it your way."

### ***Applications***

What are the lessons for us when we don't know what's next? When things have been stable, but we realize change is coming and the future is uncertain, what does 1 Samuel 8 teach us through negative and positive examples?

*First, define the enemy.* The Philistines to the west were not the Israelites' primary problem. If the Philistines had vanished overnight or permanently withdrew into their ocean front condos, the Israelites' worries would not be over. There were other nations to the east, south, and north.

The enemies were not the real enemy. Fear was the enemy. Envy was the enemy. Conformity was the enemy.

We too tend to put our trust in politicians – either the ones in power now or the ones we used to have or the ones we can elect the next time around. We think our lives are in the hands of doctors or hospitals. We believe our financial security is up to employers or family members or financial advisors. There's nothing wrong with participating in the democratic process or going to see a doctor or having a job placing your money in the hands of a bank or investment firm. What's wrong is believing that a human being or institution with power can prevent disaster or resolve every situation.

1 Samuel 8 teaches us that human beings will always fail us, and are always subject to abuse of the power we entrust to them over our lives. They are necessary and helpful protectors and providers, but they are fragile and prone to blind spots.

*Take it to the Lord.* As he has been before and will be again, Samuel is our model. When people reject him, he talks to God. When he doesn't know what's next, he talks to God. When the people don't listen to God's warnings, he talks to God.

He could have written "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." "Are we weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care?... Do thy friends despise forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer." Samuel models for us that we don't have to take responsibility for others' poor choices or try to fix everything for them. Prayer is not doing nothing.

*Recall what God has said and done.* Every situation is unique, and it's always risky to pick a random verse or Bible story and apply it to your moment and time. On the other hand, there are clear biblical themes and Scriptures that show us how God operates and what he says.

In this case, someone should have been reading Deuteronomy. Of course they didn't have Bibles in print and on their phones so maybe it wasn't that accessible. We have no such excuse. Studying Scripture properly and humbly will avoid so many pitfalls. Take advantage of today's opportunity to connect in Bible study groups, Sunday School classes, and more starting now. My Sunday School class will focus this fall on how to understand and study the Bible. It's not too late to join me.

What the Israelites did have, and what we have, is recent experience that should have let them know that demanding a king wasn't the answer. God isn't very responsive to demands that he does specifically what we're asking and does it now. Praying, "Lord, I know what I need and I'm one of your children. If you're God you'll do this for me" is about as effective as Pastor Bob walking into Palm Berries and saying, "I'm the pastor of Corinth Reformed Church and I need an acai bowl immediately." Why should we think God likes it when we talk to him that way?

*Trust the God of the next.* What I love most about this story is that God not only gives them a king; he uses this event as a key moment in his greater story of redemption. They'll go through Saul and then get David. David will hardly be perfect, but he will have a heart for God. Every subsequent king will be measured against the plumb line of David. And David will be the ancestor of the Messiah, Jesus.

Ordinary life teaches us there's always a next. I went back to Palm Berries at 5:00 and picked up our first Hickory acai bowls. The Carolina Panthers start their "next" today. The images of 9-11 remind us how horrible and terrifying was that awful day. But there was a next. How much more so with God! Just because you don't know what's next doesn't mean God's in the dark. Choose to trust him. He's the God of the next. Amen.