

I was looking on the Internet the other day, and this article I saw grabbed my attention; I don't know whether any of you are aware of this, but Channel 4 ran a programme called 'Demolition', and they invited the public to nominate buildings they would like to see demolished. This is true – number 4 on the list was Park Hill. Park Hill was the fourth most nominated building in the country to be demolished. The Liberal Democrats on the council preferred to see the building demolished rather than restored.

All right, we have a few problems with damp, and the woodwork could do with some work, but I don't think it's that bad, do you? I wouldn't say the building's ready for demolition!

So what I want to ask you this morning is, is anyone praying for a new building for Park Hill? Which of you has been praying that God will replace the building? Because God hears and answers prayer, and he doesn't always answer the way we expect. So I thought perhaps someone may be praying for a new modern building to take the place of this old one. So who is it? Own up!

But you know, we've got to be careful what we ask God for, haven't we? God hears our prayers, but he may answer them in a way we don't expect. Be careful what you ask God for. I want us to read a story this morning, where God's people ask for something they shouldn't have.

Let's read from the 1 Samuel in the Old Testament, chapter 8 [blue Bible p. 278]. By the way, the article about Park Hill was absolutely true. Park Hill **Sheffield** – a concrete monstrosity of a building, in my opinion – **was** voted one of the buildings people most wanted to demolish. Park Hill **Sheffield**. So we're safe for the moment, at least!

[Read]

Let's look firstly where this chapter fits into the story of God's people Israel.

The chapters and events we're going to be looking at this morning and evening describe Israel's move from a theocracy to a monarchy. OK - what does that mean? Well, up until this time God's people had been led by what were called judges. These were men who governed the people by God's Word. They consulted God over decisions, and they revealed God's guidance. Theocracy. 1

We all know what a monarchy is – Israel is about to get it's first ever human king to lead them. So it's an important event. Israel is moving from God's direct rule, to having a king as their earthly leader.

Samuel is Israel's last and possibly their best judge. You will remember how he was born in answer to Hannah's prayer for a child, recorded in chapter 1. He was then dedicated to God's service in the temple in chapter 2. He received a special calling from the Lord in chapter 3 – remember how God called him one night, and Samuel showed his willingness to serve God as he said, *“Here I am.”* The people recognised him as a prophet from God, he led them according to what God wanted. And we read in chapter 4, *“And Samuel's words came to all Israel.”* Samuel was used by God to bring God's words and ways to **all** God's people.

So we come to chapter 8, and here we read of a problem that the people of God were facing at this time – a human problem – in verses 1 - 3; we see the **human** solution to this problem in verses 4 – 8; and **God's** response comes in the remainder of the chapter.

Firstly, then we see **a human problem**.

Samuel was a man dedicated to serving God and to revealing God's will to the people. But there came the time – like it does to us all – that he became old. Being concerned that his people Israel continue to hear and be led by God's will, he wants to put in place the means for this to happen. He doesn't want God's people to be left alone without someone to relay God's will to them. So he appoints his two sons Joel and Abijah to be his successors.

Some commentators say Samuel was a bad parent, as his sons didn't follow in his ways. I don't think this is right. **All through his life**, Samuel knew God, heard his voice, and knew what God wanted for his people. Samuel wouldn't have appointed his sons as his successors if he hadn't seen the right qualities in them, if he hadn't thought they were the kind of men God wanted to succeed him. Some say he was blinded to their real characters because they were his sons. I don't believe that's the case. While our children are in our care, we can nurture and mould them. But once they have flown the nest, we can't control them any longer.

I think whatever went wrong with Joel and Abijah happened **after** their appointment. And I think it's a problem that **all** of us face to some degree or another as we live in this world. It's a **human** problem we see here, and it's not just a problem for Samuel's sons. What do we see?

Verse 3; “*But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.*”

I don't know about you, but I think I've heard enough recently about members of parliament and their expense claims for this and that – from pence for a bath plug, to multiples of thousands of pounds for their mortgages. **I've** heard enough. OK – the media has made more out of it than needed to be, perhaps, but the human problem is there – corruption. Without the rule of God, without the Holy Spirit living in you, without the knowledge of what is right and wrong in **God's** eyes, chaos ensues because everyone has their **own** agenda; each person will do what is right for him or her.

Joel and Abijah were not so different from most people, because this is a human problem – by nature man is selfish, greedy, inconsiderate, out for what he can get. These people you've seen on telly apologising - are they sorry for what they've done? Or are they just sorry they got found out?

Man's heart is by nature wicked, Jeremiah says, “*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond a cure.*” [Jeremiah 17:9]. The human heart is deceitful, and there is no cure. Man is a fallen creation, neglecting God and therefore sinful. The 17<sup>th</sup> century preacher Thomas Watson had great gifts in illustrating God's word with colourful pictures. He said “*The heart and sin are like two lovers who cannot endure to be parted.*” And that sin “*is a pollution. It is to the soul as rust is to gold, as a stain to beauty. It makes the soul red with guilt, and black with filth.*” Can't be clearer than that!

This is the state of the human heart. Like so many before them and since, when Joel and Abijah were given power, they abused that power, they followed their own agenda, they accepted bribes and perverted justice. They stopped following God and followed their own sinful desires.

But “There but for the grace of God go I”, we often say. Their problem was a very human problem, a temptation for all of us. Have you been there? Have you fallen to temptation? We all have a go at the politicians, because we feel they should know better because they're in positions of authority. But they're only human just like everyone else. Without God they're just like everyone else – far from God and his good and righteous ways, open to all the devil's evil ways of sin and corruption.

Where are you this morning? Are you following your own agenda? Or do you know the undeserved love of God? Do you know what God's will for you is?

Do you know that you are a new person because Jesus has paid the price for your sins and so now you are living the way **he** wants you to? This way leads to heaven – living in God’s presence forever.

Or are you out for what you can get? Are you at the mercy of Satan who wants you to spoil and corrupt everything that God in his love has created? This way leads to hell – separation from God forever. Where are you?

Joel and Abijah reveal the human problem. Without God to guide and lead, there can only be self-seeking. How we **need** God in this world today.

The elders of the twelve tribes of Israel see the problem in verse 4 and come to see Samuel. They say, in verse 5, *“You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”*

We see here the **human solution**.

The elders are at first to be commended here. They recognise that the way Samuel has led them in recent years has been good and beneficial to God’s people. We read in chapter 3, verse 20 that *“all Israel from Dan to Beersheba [that is from the very north to the very south] recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord.”* They know that Samuel has been faithful to God and his word, and as a result the people have been blessed by God.

So good on them! They recognised that the way Samuel’s sons were leading was nothing like Samuel’s leadership, they recognised Joel and Abijah’s corruption, and they recognised that something had to be done. So they have come to.

They are right in coming to God’s representative to ask him for a solution – in this they show they want to recognise God’s part in reigning over them. They come to **Samuel** to ask for a solution. But Samuel is now old, so they see that **he** can’t be the answer to their problem. His sons have become corrupt, so there is no way **they** can be part of the solution. So they come to Samuel to ask for a king. Rather than each tribe having its **own** leader, perhaps a king over them all will bring success.

Firstly we have to say that having a human king wasn’t of itself wrong. Having a king wasn’t wrong. In Deuteronomy chapter 17 we find Moses talking of this very eventuality. He says, *“When you enter the land your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, ‘Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,’ be sure to appoint the king the Lord your God chooses.”*

So God and his servant Moses saw that the day would come when God's people would have a human king. There was nothing wrong in God's eyes with that.

So why do we read in verse 6 here that their request **displeased** Samuel? And as we read on, God was clearly displeased with their request too. Why? If asking for a king is not wrong?

The clue is in what we have at the end of their request in verse 5, we read, "*now appoint a king to lead us [OK so far], such as all the other nations have.*" [Oh, oh!]. Mistake. This was why what they were asking for was displeasing to Samuel, but more importantly displeasing to God.

Twofold. Firstly their motivation. They don't just ask for a king, they ask for a king "*such as all the other nations have.*" All around them they see that the other nations have a king over them, and they seem to be successful in battle because of it. They want a military king so that they can be victorious in battle, just like the other nations. (As an aside - this wasn't just a one off – remember that when Jesus entered Jerusalem the week before he was crucified, they cried Hosanna! because they thought **he** was coming as their military king, to lead them to victory in battle. They wanted a king who would lead them to victory in battle.)

You see, these are the people of God. They failed to see that here – they wanted a king like all the other nations. They **can't** have a king like all the other nations – because God's people are not **like** any other nation. Listen to what God says to them in Exodus, chapter 19, "*Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*" Exodus 19:5,6.

Their motivation is wrong. It isn't **right** that Israel envies its neighbours. It isn't **right** that they want what the nations around them have got. These are God's **chosen and special** people. They are a holy nation. They have a place in God's heart like **no** other nation – they just aren't **like** any other nation. They fail to see that – that's what displeases God.

But are Christians today any different? The apostle Peter writes in his first letter to the church, "*.. you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*" 1 Peter 2:9.

Fantastic words, **heart-warming** words. They echo the words in Exodus.

If you are a Christian you know that because you know Jesus as your Saviour, you know your eyes have been opened to the truth. You know God has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

But you see, it has to go further than having your heart warmed. God has chosen you; you are **his** child; you belong to God. What does the world have to offer you that is better than what God has to offer? Too often Christians are too firmly rooted in the ways of this world.

I have to search my heart, I have to examine my motives – am I still driven by the ways of the world? Do I want what everyone else has got? Am I envious of those around me?

We are God's people so that we can sing the praises of the one loved us, who died for us, the one who saved us. We can't **do** that if our eyes are fixed on earthly ways.

Israel took their eyes off God. They wanted a king like all the other nations. Let's not fall into the same trap – all worthwhile and lasting blessings come from **God**, let's not search anywhere else.

The other reason why the elders' request displeased God is the manner in which they make their request. They recognise the problem, they see that Samuel and his sons can't be the solution. They come to God's representative. So far so good.

But they have **already decided** what the solution to the problem is going to be. Having a king like all the other nations, they think will be the answer. They have made the decision already. But you see, you can't do that. The human problem can't be solved with a human solution – this must come from God. We can't come to God telling him how we want him to answer our requests. How can we presume to do this?

God **does** hear our prayers, he **does** answer our prayers, we can tell him what we'd like, but we can't come to God and **tell** him how to answer.

We have to be careful what we ask God for, so that we don't displease God. John in his first letter tells us how to make our requests to God; he says, "*This is the assurance we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything **according to his will**, he hears us.*" 1 John 5:14.

But how do we know that we are asking according to God's will? Only by getting to know God – his character, his desires – and this only comes by the word of God [Bible] and the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts.

**This** is how we are to come to God, making our requests, praying for things that we know will please him, and then leaving God to answer in his way, in his time.

The elders bring their **human solution**. But what is **God's response**?

In Chapter 7, God had given Israel a great victory over the Philistines. Yet by chapter 8 they seem to have forgotten what God has done for them. They forget what God's power has achieved for them. They are not convinced that God's power is sufficient. God says they have rejected him in v. 7, just like their ancestors had done ever since he brought them out of slavery in Egypt. They look to find security in a human king, rather than in following God's path. When are they going to learn?

'They' or should I say 'we'? When are **we** going to learn? There is nowhere we can find full security – we may look to our family, friends, our jobs, education, money, property, our home, our pension. Only knowing God, knowing Jesus has paid the price for our sins, knowing his Holy Spirit is at work in us to make us fit for eternity in heaven, **only this** gives true security. Do you know God? Then you are his treasured possession, you are his now and forever. True security.

God is unhappy at their rejection. But he grants their request. Before doing so, he tells Samuel to warn them of the consequences of their request for a king – v 11–17 – consequences for their children, for their possessions, for their work and produce. If we had more time, we would see in future chapters that all the things talked about here did happen under the king.

The people remained obstinate and refused to listen, they said, "*No, .. we want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.*" Verse 19,20. "*The Lord answered, 'Listen to them and give them a king.'*"

Surely we can see ourselves here, can't we? When we want something so badly, nobody's negative advice is going to stop us. Our minds are made up, no matter what the consequences.

But we see here God's wonderful long-suffering and grace.

Having a king is the people's choice, it will bring consequences, but God doesn't leave them to their own devices – he will provide for them. He wants the best king for them and he continues to be involved in the process. He is their God, they are his people.

We have the ability and responsibility to make decisions and choices, and we have to live with the consequences of the decisions we make. God starts where we are. God accepts our choices, and moves us forward giving us new choices to fulfil his purposes. That's what we see here: God loves his people, despite their rejection of him: he is still sovereign, he is still in control of them as a nation, he will still provide salvation for them.

So we've seen the human problem, and we've seen that a human solution will never be enough, it will always be temporary. The only lasting solution will come when **God** provides the solution.

We read in Isaiah chapter 9, *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever.”*

God's permanent and everlasting solution is in Jesus, the Son of God, King of kings. True, just and righteous government comes only when we recognise that Jesus is God's provision of a king.

So we have to end this morning asking ourselves some challenging questions.

Are we still part of the human problem? We don't need to be – God has provided a way out – to be born again, made a new creation in Jesus.

In times of difficulty, do we look for a human solution? If we do, we will never find a lasting solution.

God's way brings perfect solutions. God is loving, long-suffering, compassionate and gracious and will lead his people home, to everlasting life with him. What a glorious prospect.