

Israel Asks For a King

Passages: 1 Samuel 8:1–22

John 19:1–16

There are a lot of personality tests on the market, but one of them, called the “Big Five”, evaluates personality according to five key continuums:

1. **Extraversion vs. introversion:** Characteristics such as ‘excitable or calm’, ‘talkative or quiet’, ‘assertive or withdrawn’ are plotted on this continuum.
2. **Agreeableness vs disagreeableness:** This continuum plots levels of ‘trustworthiness’, ‘altruism’ and ‘kindness’.
3. **Care-free spontaneity vs. conscientiousness:** This continuum measures whether a person is ‘thoughtful or impulsive’, ‘goal-directed or haphazard’, ‘neat or messy’.
4. **Contentment vs. neuroticism:** This continuum measures whether a person is emotionally stable or anxious, positive or negative, level-headed or irritable, happy or sad.
5. **Open to new experiences vs. closed:** On this continuum, characteristics such as imagination, insight and personal interests are analysed.

Today, I want to focus our attention on just the third continuum in the list: **care-free spontaneity vs. conscientiousness**. Of all the three continuums on the list, psychologists tell us that this one tends to change as people grow older. As we mature, we generally move from the ‘carefree spontaneous’ end of the spectrum towards the ‘conscientious’ end of the spectrum. In other words, growing older (‘maturing’) involves leaving behind some of the care-free spontaneity of childhood and taking on a far more ordered, goal-directed, predictable and responsible lifestyle!

I bring this up because I’m convinced that today’s story from **1 Samuel 8** can best be understood from this perspective. It’s the story of Israel’s movement from childhood to adulthood; from care-free spontaneity to a more mature conscientiousness!

You see, for over a thousand years, God insisted that His people, Israel, live as His children...on the care-free spontaneous end of the spectrum! When He brought Israel to birth in the call of Abraham, God would always say to His people, "Just follow Me and don't worry! Just follow Me and let me carry your burdens. Just follow me and let me make all the decisions for you." And so, just like a child, Abraham spontaneously left his homeland and trusted God. His son, Isaac, also trusted God in the same way...as did Isaac's son, Jacob. And when a famine struck their Land, they all went down to Egypt, trusting that the Father would provide for them.

Four hundred years later, when it was time to leave Egypt, God called Moses to have this same child-like faith. Standing before the waters of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army quickly on their heels, Moses simply lifted up his staff...like some sort of a child's toy... and the seas parted. Then, for forty more years, the people of Israel had to trust God like a Father as He led them through the desert. Finally, as God settled them back in the Promised Land, He again asked them to show child-like trust as He subdued the nations ahead of them and set up Judges to govern them. Needless to say, these Judges had no permanent office in Israel! They came and went according to God's timetable. All God required of His children was that they wait and trust their Father.

Indeed, for almost 1000 years, the Israelites were asked to live like children... to play happily in the Father's kindergarten of care-free spontaneity!

Now, of course, we may look at this period of Israel's history as 'heaven on earth'! But think again! Wouldn't it wear thin over the course of 1000 years? I mean, at some point in time, don't all children feel the need to grow up? Don't all children want to eventually make their own decisions? Don't all children want to eventually be given a certain degree of responsibility and autonomy from their parents? **Was God ever going to allow Israel to mature and take some responsibility for her own actions?**

As I said, I think that this is, essentially, what today's story is all about. It's a story of the tension that comes between children and parents as the children grow up! Let's take a look at **1 Samuel 8:1–5**.

“When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel’s leaders (judges).² The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba.³ But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah.⁵ They said to him, ‘You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.’

The first thing to notice here is that Samuel is already on the path towards helping Israel become more mature and make decisions for herself. In the past, God always chose Israel's Judges. But instead of waiting for God to raise up a judge, Samuel has decided that, from now on, Judges will come from his family line! In other words, Samuel is moving Israel towards order and predictability rather than spontaneity!

But the elders of Israel have problems with Samuel's suggestion, and you can understand why! You can almost hear them arguing: “Your sons are just as bad as Eli's sons... and we know what God did with them! You are old, Samuel. You may die any minute! Still, you suggest that we take your corrupt sons who are likely to die at the same time you do! There's certainly no stability or predictability in that!”

And so, the elders of Israel suggest a better idea—“Why not a **king!**”, they cry. After all, a king would offer a strong, stable, and predictable centre of political leadership and authority to people who otherwise had to depend on an unseen God for leadership. Furthermore, the idea of a king conjured up the promise of efficiency and organisation to a nation that, relying on care-free spontaneity, had tended to lurch from one crisis to the next.

All the elders seemed convinced that Israel was ready to grow up and become a nation like all the others! Getting a king of their own would be the political equivalent of their ‘debutant ball’!

At least, that is what they **thought** was going to happen! They **thought** they were maturing; they thought they were leaving behind their childhood; Israel was convinced that she was ready to make this move from care-free spontaneity to conscientious nationhood. But was she?

Look at **verses 6–7**.

⁶ But when they said, ‘Give us a king to lead us,’ this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.

If you read this passage through the lens of a child going through growing pains and transitions, you’ll see that Israel’s rejection of God as their king finds its parallel in the way teenagers reject parental authority. There is a basic tension between God, the father, and His teenage child, Israel. On one hand, the teenager thinks she is ready to make decision for herself. She wants to create her own systems and organisations and she honestly believes she will be far better off because of it! God, on the other hand, knows that his child still hasn’t grown up enough to make decisions for herself.

So, what’s the father to do? The only solution is to give her what she wants...and to let her learn from her mistake! Indeed, many years earlier, God had already prepared Israel for this eventuality by giving her some instructions as to what the king should be like. Back in Deuteronomy 17, God said to Israel;

¹⁴ When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you... and you say, ‘Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,’ ¹⁵ be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses. He must be from among your fellow Israelites... ¹⁶ The king, moreover, must not acquire

great numbers of horses for himself... ¹⁷ He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold... ²⁰ and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left.

Overall, these were **positive instructions**. (“These are the things you must pro-actively do to make sure your new king does what is best for the nation!”)

But, here in 1 Samuel, Israel is on the brink of choosing their king. At this point in time, God lets them have **the negative side** of the argument!

Listen to **verses 10–18!**

¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, ‘This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: he will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for 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 groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle^[a] and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.’

Notice the word ‘take’!

Of course, it’s hard to reason with teenagers...particularly when they think they know it all! So, what does God do? He simply steps back and lets the people say, ‘No!’ ...‘**We want a king over us.**’ He allows them to make this important decision. He lets them have what they want. He gives in to their teenage demands!

Now, some people will say, “But why did God give them a king when He knew it wouldn’t work?” I think there’s a pretty good answer embedded in the story! **It’s all about growing up.** It’s about God allowing his children to begin the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood, gradually taking responsibility, making choices and building a society based in the foundations they learned from their Father. Sure, they wouldn’t always get it right...but they would learn.

And, you know, even in the areas where they failed, the beautiful thing is that God such a great Father that he never let His child’s failure fall to the ground unused. Rather, He always turned it into an instrument of His incredible grace!

Think about this demand for a King! Sure, Israel wasn’t ready for kingship-- she wanted a king simply because that’s what the other nations had! (Teenage jealousy and peer pressure is all that it was!) And yet, despite all the failures that would follow, God would graciously steer His children to a beautiful end. **Israel would eventually have the greatest king the earth had ever seen--** the Lord, Jesus Christ. Unlike all the other kings of this world, this King Jesus would come, not to **take**, but to **give**—as the Scriptures say, He came **“to give His life as a ransom for many!”**

This is what the Father, in His grace, was able to do even as He watched His child, Israel, struggle through her difficult teenage years!

Let’s pray.