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*I Spy God on the Move:
Standing Tall, Falling Hard*
1 Samuel 8

For those unfamiliar with the song, that's the 2014 hit from Echosmith entitled 'Cool Kids.' Catchy, right? There's a sentiment in there that I think we can all identify with. Most all of us, at some point or another, have wanted to fit in, and the way we think that will happen is if we are like the cool kids. This week's chapter of The Story is all about how Israel wanted to fit in with the other nations; they wanted to be like the cool kids.

This year we are journeying through the whole of the Bible, using a resource called The Story. We started a couple of months ago at the beginning in Genesis and we'll end up in June at the very end in Revelation. So far, we've seen God create the world, but then watch his creation turn their backs on him. We've seen God hatch a plan to rescue his beloved creation through the family of a man named Abraham, a group of people known as the people of Israel. God has chosen them and blessed them so they can be a blessing, he's given them a land to call their own, and he's called them to live differently so the world might know he is the one true God.

Sadly, the people of Israel haven't always done so, and they've got themselves into a bit of a cycle where they forget the Lord, worship other gods, and the Lord hands them over to one of the surrounding nations who oppress them until they cry out to the Lord. At this point, God, in his mercy, has continued to raise up man after man, and one woman, who have acted as judges for Israel and led them to victory over their oppressors and a return to worshipping the Lord. The last of these 'judges' that God raised up was a man named Samuel, and today I want to focus on what will prove to be a very significant conversation between the elders of Israel and Samuel towards the end of his life. Grab a Bible or pull up the Bible app on your phone and turn to 1 Samuel 8. [page 232 in your pew Bibles]

¹ When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. 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 walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

So Samuel has grown old and unlike the judges before him, he does something unprecedented. All the other judges died and left Israel without a judge, because God was the one who appointed judges. But Samuel goes ahead and appoints his

two sons as judges. And sadly, as we so often see in the Bible, the sons turn away from the ways of their father and are corrupted. But for those of you with prodigal children, I want you to take heart! Even godly leaders in Israel struggled with children who were prodigals. Well, the elders of Israel see that Samuel has taken on the power to appoint judges and that his sons are terrible judges and so they think: why can't he appoint other roles too...?

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 walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."

Remember the song? 'I wish that I could be like the cool kids.' Well, here it is. The elders say: 'Hey, Sam. You're past it, and your sons are terrible at their job. And we're really not sure this whole having a judge thing works. All the other nations have kings and they keep oppressing us because we don't have anyone who can really lead us. Could you do us a favor? Can you appoint a king to lead us?' Of course, Samuel is pretty disheartened by this, as you can imagine.

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. ⁸ As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do."

Samuel is all downbeat, but the Lord says to him: 'Look. They aren't rejecting you as judge. They're really rejecting me as King. Just as they've been turning to idols all the way along, they're turning to an idol again. You see, I'm their king; they have a special relationship with me. Really, they're rejecting my kingship and asking instead for a human king. It's idol worship, that's what it is. Now hear them out, but warn them what having a king would really be like.' So Samuel told them what God said, and he told them what the consequences of having a king would be.

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 do: 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 plow 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 menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle 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, and the LORD will not answer you in that day."

Basically, it would be like this country would be if Britain had won the war of independence. I mean think about it, if we'd won, sure, you'd have to pay a few more taxes, but your taxes would go on things you really need... like a Royal Family, who do the tough jobs no one else wants to do... like being driven around in a really nice car... while waving. So, I think you as Americans can sympathize a little with Samuel here. Unfortunately, the people of Israel had made their minds up...

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. ²⁰ Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."

'I wish that I could be like the cool kids. 'Cause all the cool kids, they seem to fit in.' The people say, 'Yeah Sam. We hear you. But we don't care about all that. What we want is to be like everyone else. We want a king to lead us. We want him to go out before us. We want him to fight our battles!' So, Samuel goes back to the Lord.

²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²² The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king." Then Samuel said to the men of Israel, "Everyone go back to his town."

The Lord, always the perfect gentleman, says to Samuel: 'So be it. Give them a king.' As we've seen before, back in the garden, in the wilderness, and again and again in the book of Judges, when God's people want to go their own way, God warns them of the consequences, but then lets them do what they want. But yet, we know that God's heart is saddened.

And we see the consequences of this decision played out. Israel lives for the next 500 years under a long line of kings. And all that Samuel said came true, and worse. Some of those kings were good and only did what Samuel said would happen. But others went further. Others turned away from God and lead Israel into dark places in their history. They lead the people to worship the very same gods of the people they had driven out of the land and some even lead the people in the sacrifice of their children. Eventually, God exiled his people so they could learn what they truly needed to learn.

The real issue here in all this king stuff is what the Lord said to Samuel back in verse 7: 'it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.'

From the beginning of Israel's delivery from slavery in Egypt, they had been a different kind of nation. God had chosen them as his own. He had called them into a special relationship with him, and he was their king. They weren't supposed to be like the other nations, because they were supposed to reflect the reality that it is

God who is ruling and reigning over them, not man. They were chosen to show the world who the one true God is, and to show the world that the one true God is their king.

So when they turn around and say, 'we want to be like the cool kids, we want to have a king,' what they are really saying is: 'God, we don't want this special relationship with you anymore. It isn't working out for us. We want to go our own way. We want a man to lead us; we don't want You to lead us. We want a man to go before us into battle; we don't want you to go before us. We want a man to fight for us; we don't want you to fight for us.' One commentator put it this way:

...what they hoped to do was exactly to throw away their special status as the chosen people of God in order to identify themselves with the nations of this world.

'Throw away their special status.' They were saying: 'God, I know you chose us and all, but really we don't want to be special. We just want to be like everyone else.'

My own story is a very similar one. I always struggled with wanting to fit in, with wanting to be like everyone else. In high school, I wanted to be like one of the cool kids so I tried hard. I tried to listen to the right music. I tried to be the best at sports. I tried to sit with the right kids at lunch. I threw away friendships that were holding me back... all to try and fit in.

The worst of it though, was that to really fit in, I needed to hide and ignore my faith. The kids in high school I wanted to be like weren't Christian, and their behavior certainly wasn't. They were into drinking and chasing after girls and viewing pornography and cussing, and I so desperately wanted to fit in. So I hid my faith from them. I got into the same things they were into. I made a name for myself in drinking more than others. I looked at the same magazines they did, and not for the articles. I used the same language they did. I chased after girls like they did... all because I wanted to fit in, to belong. But in the process, I rejected my special relationship with Jesus. I pushed him back. I said, 'I don't need you running my life. I've got this.' And like the perfect gentleman he is, he said, 'There you go.'

It all came to a head after one night of drinking where I had my brand new cell-phone stolen—a significant thing for an 18 year old. I woke up the next morning feeling entirely empty. Like everything I had been chasing after was worthless. Like none of it mattered. And that morning, my parents sat me down, and I'll always remember what they said to me. 'Ellis, you can't follow Jesus and be one of the lads. You need to choose. If you believe in Jesus and follow him, that affects your behavior, and you can't be like them. But if you don't believe in Jesus, then go ahead.' And the next thing they did was say: 'We don't care if you're hungover, you're coming to church!'

That morning, as I was standing there singing the songs in St Aldates church in Oxford, the church I would have my formative spiritual years in, meet my wife in,

and get married in, I had a 'come to Jesus' moment. I realized that none of this fitting in mattered. I realized that the harder I tried to belong, the more insecure I felt. As the words of the songs we were singing were washing over me, I recognized that Jesus had called me into a special relationship with Him... that I belonged to Jesus and I didn't need to approval or acceptance of my peers. And because Jesus wasn't ever going to reject me or cast me aside because I wasn't cool enough, I was free to be who he made me to be. I was secure as a child of God.

The truth is that we all do the same thing as the people of Israel. Time and time again we say to God, 'Actually, I want to fit in with everyone else here, so just take a back seat while I do what I want.' And every time we do that, every time we believe the lie that if I was more like the world, I would be happier, we push true happiness further and further away. The scarlet thread in this story is that just as God was Israel's true King, Jesus is our true King. And the truth is that true happiness is found not in fitting in or belonging to this world, but in recognizing that we belong to Jesus, and he will not leave us, nor forsake us, he will stand by us, he will lead us into battle, he will go before us, he will fight for us, because he is our true King, and we need not look to any other to find our identity.

During our pre-marriage prep, Rachel and I met with the man who would marry us. His name was Alan Ramsay. He said something to Rachel and me that will stick with us our whole lives, 'Be courageous in your marriage. Don't be like everyone else and seek after the things everyone else seeks after—marriage, kids, career and a house you own. Be willing to listen to God and go where he wants you to go, do what he wants you to do. Take risks and be courageous.'

Where do you need to be courageous? Where are you seeking to fit in with the world? Where are you believing the lie that fitting in with this world is going to bring you security and happiness? Is it in your finances? Your sexual relationships? Your workplace?

Church, God has called us and chosen us to be his own. But he hasn't called us so we can just fit in and be like everyone else. God has chosen us to show the world who God is and to show the world that He loves them. We are his ambassadors in this dying and hurting world. We are not called to fit in, to belong, because we already belong to the only one that matters. We are called to be different. We are called to be courageous, to stand out in a crowd, to be history makers. So, church, don't be like the people of Israel and choose to be like the world. Be like the people God has called you to be, and instead change the world.