

COPING WITH REJECTION

1 Samuel 8

Dr. George O. Wood

Today we're in 1 Samuel 8. The theme is "Coping with Rejection." "When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. 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.'

But when they said, 'Give us a king to lead us,' this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. 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. 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. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do.'

Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. 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. 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. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain

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and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. 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.’ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. ‘No!’ they said. ‘We want a king over us. 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.’

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. 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’” (1 Samuel 8:1-22, NIV).

There are seasons of life—stages. As we live in those seasons, we often keep under the delusion that the next season or stage will be better than this one. When Samuel grew old—how quickly that happened.

I came across a little reading, “How to Tell When You’re Getting Old”: “You know you’re getting old when you know all the answers, and no one asks you any questions. You’re getting old when you sit in a rocking chair and can’t get it going. You’re getting old when your knees buckle, and your belt won’t. You’re getting old when you feel like the night before, and you haven’t been anywhere. You’re getting old when you get winded when you’re playing chess. You’re getting old when you’re seventeen around the neck, forty-two around the waist, and 125 around the golf course. You’re getting old when you decided to procrastinate but never got around to do it. You’re getting old when you finally get to the top of the ladder and realize it was leaning against the wrong wall. You’re getting old when dialing a long distance number wears you out. You’re getting old when the best part of the day is over when the alarm clock goes off.

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You're getting old when you burn the midnight oil at 9:00 p.m. You're getting old when a fortuneteller volunteers to read your face. You're getting old when the gleam in your eye is the sun hitting your bifocals. You're getting old when you see a pretty girl walk by, and your pacemaker opens the garage door. You're getting old when you sink your teeth into a steak, and they stay there. You're getting old when your back goes out more than you do. You're getting old when you really look forward to a dull evening."

Samuel grew old. That's the problem. Four times in the first eight chapters of 1 Samuel, Samuel is mentioned as growing. It's a wonderful verb to have associated with your name—growing. In 1 Samuel 2:21, "The boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD." In 2:26, "And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men." In 3:19, "The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground." Now, in 8:1 it says, "Samuel grew old." It would be natural to expect that such a growing person as Samuel would be accorded by the Lord a pleasant retirement for his lifetime of service. But as chapter 8 will tell us, and surprisingly so, some of the greatest tests of life will come to us when we are old. Some of the greatest tests will come for those of you who are now retired and old. Some of the greatest tests for you who are younger will come when you are old. As we look at 1 Samuel 8 today under the theme "Coping with Rejection," we want to locate three elements of rejection that were present in Samuel's experience. Then we want to look at three strategies he employed to cope with the rejection. There are three things he did that are an example for each of us as we face rejection, or as we face any down time really.

I. First, Samuel's sons repudiated his ways.

He had two boys—Joel and Abijah. When you think back to the origin of Samuel, you remember that he was brought up in the home of a priest named Eli. Eli was a godly man who had two sons

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who were real hell-raisers. They were away from the Lord—people who had an ordination card in their wallet and acted like the devil all week long—Hophni and Phinehas. Samuel had grown up seeing what a terrible thing it was for Eli’s sons—not sharing Eli’s heart for God. Déjà vu. His lifetime goes by, and now he’s got kids almost like Eli’s. And he surely didn’t intend it to be that way. Their very names, Joel and Abijah, suggest that Samuel had a wonderful intention for their life. In Hebrew society, parents gave their children names that had meaning. “Joel” means “Yahweh” or Jehovah is God.” And “Abijah” means “Yahweh” or “Jehovah is my father.” Every time Samuel called his little boy Joel, he was saying, “Jehovah is my God.” Or Abijah, “Jehovah is my Father.” Through their very names, he was trying to instill in these children something about the character and love of God for them. They now were living in a way that was far from what their names meant. They did not walk in the Lord’s way. They did not walk in Samuel’s way. I can’t think of anything more distressing than to be old and to have your kids not follow your way if you love the Lord. Samuel had boys that didn’t walk in his ways. To Samuel’s credit, when he appointed them to office, he appointed them to a frontier town—Beersheba. He did not appoint them to a major administrative center, but on the south of the country out on the rim of the desert. Maybe he did that because he knew these boys needed to be tested for a time. He probably didn’t know what was in their heart.

Just having that sub-appointment brought out three terrible qualities. They turned aside after dishonest gain, they accepted bribes, and they perverted justice. Some children don’t serve the Lord no matter how well their parents have done. Some have looked at the biblical text here and thought to fault Samuel. They said, “He was really at fault because he appointed his sons as judges, and he shouldn’t have.” Nowhere does the text say that he knew that his sons were evil before he appointed them. It appears to be a product of their having been in that office. If he had

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appointed them, and he knew they were wrong, Samuel was then in the wrong. Or if he appointed them against their will. Some have suggested that Samuel was a typical parent who forced his child to follow in his footsteps. “If I’m a prophet, you’re going to be a prophet.” Or, “If I’m a pastor, you’re going to be a pastor.” Then Samuel would have been at fault. Kids can’t be forced to do what they’re unwilling to do. They can’t be forced to marry who we, as parents, want them to marry. Nothing is said in the text about Samuel coercing these boys into anything. They grew up and now they perverted justice, accepted bribes, and went after dishonest gain. Only the Lord can decide the fault—whether it was Samuel’s or theirs. From the text, it appears that he was simply a father who had done his best and his kids turned out bad. It was nothing against him—that was just the way it was. It had to hurt, though. He was rejected by his kids.

II. The second element of Samuel’s rejection was that the people who respected him and served in leadership under him wanted him to step aside for new leadership.

In the Orient especially, there is honor to age. Samuel is at that point in life where he is really due honor. He is obviously in the charismatic position of “Leader of the Nation.” By charismatic, I mean that he was not elected—there was not a regular office called “Leader of Israel.” But simply by utter force of his personality, he occupied that position. It was unique. Now he was being called upon to step aside. The elders were logical in coming to Samuel. They realized that someday Samuel was going to die, and someday his sons would think they would be in positions of authority. There needed to be an orderly transfer of power. That’s understandable. But to come to Samuel and say “You are old.” Now that’s harsh. They could have softened it a little bit. No, they say, “Samuel you are old, and your sons are losers. So get somebody else to take over when you’re gone.” Couldn’t they trust Samuel to do that? If Samuel really loved the people as his whole life demonstrated, couldn’t they have trusted him to do that? Why did they have to lay

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all this stuff on the table? He's got to feel a measure of rejection. He could have said, "I've done my best all these years, and this is the thanks I get?"

One of the very real things about life is that there's always someone standing in line to take your position. Even though we think we're indispensable, it's true that "God buries his workmen, but not His work." Samuel was hurt. He felt rejected because he had to face this matter of new leadership. I think the third element in Samuel's rejection is an underlying issue. It's not stated explicitly in the text, but I think it's there.

III. The third element of rejection comes in the fact that he couldn't do anything over again.

Time was against him. There was this sense of "I don't have any more time. What's done is done. My kids are grown. I don't have time now to have another family and raise them, so they can take over for me." You cannot order time to stop. It keeps right on moving. Samuel may have looked at God and said, "This is not fair. Here I've devoted my whole life to you. Now my kids have turned out this way, the nation is asking me to step aside, and I can't do anything over. It's not fair that Moses began his career when he was an old man. Now that I'm an old man, my career is ending." One of the things we all have to do is realize that a lot of things in life aren't fair. We just have to get through those kinds of things without getting bent out of shape over them.

One of the great marks of Samuel—and I think why he's one of the real heroes of the Bible—is that the godly and spiritual side of his character shined. That's what crisis does to us. Crisis reveals if there's anything in us that's like God. Therefore, crisis will make or break us. If it makes us, it will be because something of the personality and character of the Lord shines through us on those occasions. One of the great marks about Samuel is what ultimately seems to

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really bother him is not simply the personal rejection, which had to be keen and painful. But what really bothers him is that the people are getting out of line with God's will. That's what displeased Samuel.

They said, "Give us a king to lead us. Let's be like the other nations." In an ultimate sense, God was able to take the desire of the people and translate it down the road to David—and to David's seed, Jesus Christ. And that worked out all the way for the good. But what was wrong on this occasion was the motive behind desiring a king—they wanted a king to be like all the other nations. And all the other nations divided the civil and religious functions—the political and religious divisions of the state were divided. God had appointed a nation in which there was no centralized government—each person would know how to do right on their own. It was a society in which there was no police force, and there were no prisons. There was no elaborate legislative, judicial, or executive machinery set up to operate the government. Each person, informed of the Lord by His written will and the living Spirit of God, was to walk in a manner that was appropriate. Matters of dispute were to be worked out in a neighborly fashion. The nation, from God's point of view, was meant to give the world religious leadership—not political leadership. Israel was to be remembered, not for its prime ministers, but for its prophets. Israel was saying at this moment in its existence, "Make us like everybody else!" Isn't that the struggle we go through? Young people want to test the limits of their parents' rules in a Christian household. "Why can't we do this? Everybody else on the block does it!" There's a difference to being God's people. It's a higher calling, a higher privilege, and a higher responsibility. A higher ethic and code of life is demanded.

These elders that come to Samuel are not the first, nor will they be the last, that can expertly diagnose the problem. Samuel's kids are rotten. There's going to be real problems when they get

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ready for a transition of leadership when Samuel is gone. Who's going to call the shots? The nation is going to disintegrate. They've diagnosed the problem. But in solving a situation, you must do two things equally well. You must not only diagnose the problem, but you must come up with the right solution. I am a much better problem identifier than I am a problem solver. I can look at anything and tell you what's wrong with it. But the problem is, I don't have the solution. That's where we all have struggles. That's where these elders had struggles. They came up with a very unwise solution. And Samuel couldn't bring those early days back. That was the third element of his rejection. How did he deal with the rejection? In three ways. The first way I give is going to sound so trite and common, and it's just what you'd expect the pastor to say. It's the foundational point in dealing with rejection, and the point we often miss. And probably when we miss it, it's why we have such a difficult time handling rejection.

IV. The first thing Samuel did—he prayed.

When the whole thing came down on him, what was his instinctive response? He went to God and started talking about it. He started talking about his inner life and his situation. He prayed. There's really deeper significance to that than just a statement. The deeper significance is that Samuel knew where he stood with his sons, and he knew where he stood with the leaders of Israel. But where did he stand with God? Praying helps us sort that out. Sometimes, when we come to the Lord, He will say, "A lot of the fault falls on you. Are you going to deal with that? Repent of those wrong actions, wrong attitudes, and wrong words. Are you going to repent?" And when we repent, we find our identity is restored. In Samuel's case, his kids were down on him, his nation was down on him, but he found out God wasn't down on him. That was a great illumination. He discovered he had a friend in God.

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Anytime we're involved in a situation—whether it's rejection or any other kind of loss—we can, through prayer, establish an advocate in the Lord. He's a friend. Prayer helps us know that. If we spend sixteen hours a day dealing with tangible things, then only five minutes a day dealing with God, is it any wonder that tangible things are two hundred times more real to us than God? Point taken! Prayer restored Samuel's confidence. It stabilizes his feelings. How they need to be stabilized! When we're going through a time of rejection, our feelings are bouncing off the wall. Prayer, for Samuel, helps maintain a proper perspective.

As Samuel prays, he discovers that God is his friend and counselor. God does three things for him. When we come to the Lord and begin praying to Him, what's His response to us? Not only does Samuel talk to the Lord, but the Lord talks to Samuel. Is there an audible voice? Or is it kind of like how He speaks to you and me? I've never heard the audible voice of God, but when I'm praying, I begin having thoughts I know I didn't put there. I think that's the Lord speaking to me. When your heart is in tune with the Lord, the Lord profoundly directs your impressions through life. What does the Lord do in His talking back to Samuel in the time of prayer? Three things.

A. First thing, God empathizes with Samuel. God empathizes with us. In verses 7–8, God says, “I understand. I feel for you. I'm going through the same thing.” He tells Samuel, “They're not really rejecting you. They're rejecting Me. I've gone through this a lot longer than you. I know what it's all about, Samuel.” Don't we all receive help a lot easier from people who know exactly what we're going through? If we've lost a loved one, and they've lost a loved one? They somehow make a lot more sense and connect to us when we're going through a period of grief. More than someone who comes in saying, “Let's see what sin in your life caused this,” or “Let me give you the six steps I've just been reading in a book on how to get through grief.” We want

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somebody to come alongside saying, “You’re worth something! I know how you feel. We can’t explain everything, but I know exactly where you’re at.” God empathizes with him.

The Book of Hebrews points out that Jesus has been tested in all points, like we have. Certainly one of the points he was tested on was rejection. He was rejected by men. He was rejected by the lack of approval, the lack of affecting, and the lack of recognition. Jesus experienced all those things, so He knows what we’re going through when we’re rejected. He empathizes with us.

B. The second thing, the Lord asks Samuel to act responsibly. This is not overtly in the text. It is implicitly there. He asks Samuel to act responsibly. He says to Samuel, “You cannot do anything about someone else’s choices. They’re free to respond to you as they’re free to respond to Me. I made them, not as slaves, but as sons. You must act in a way that does not deprive other people of their freedom. You can’t coerce your will on other people.” There’s a simple way of approaching it from 1 Samuel 8. The Lord answers Samuel’s prayer without ever trying to resolve the question philosophically—He resolves it theologically. He just said, “I made people as sons, not slaves. They’re free to act. They can make choices even if it’s against My choice.” What happens in this particular context is the Lord is telling Samuel, “Act responsibly! You can’t fly off the handle. There are more things to consider here than defending your own ego—defending your own turf, defending your own rights.”

C. The third thing, the Lord requires Samuel to trust Him, even when Samuel can’t understand or see what God is up to. It requires trust. Samuel had every right to be confused. “Lord, the kingship is not in Your will. How then can You tell me to go out and institute it?” The Lord does to Samuel just what He does to us. He doesn’t explain Himself. It’d been real nice if God had said to Samuel, “I know you’re confused, so I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. You’re going to select Saul, and then you’re going to have to replace him. You know that son you’ve looked for

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all your life—the one that would really walk after your way? I've got him. He's out there. He's not quite grown up yet. If the people hadn't asked for a king, I'd given them my own king. But since they asked prematurely, they'll get Saul for a while. It's going to work out great." It'd be nice if God would do those things. But He doesn't. So He says to us in the middle of our pain, our frustration, and our rejection, "Trust Me." Jeremiah and Lamentations express that truth of His faithfulness at a time when they're not seeing a demonstration of it. One of the great messages of the Bible is God saying to us, "I want you to trust Me. You don't have to understand. Just trust Me on this one." That's hard to do. That's what He's asking us. So Samuel prays. In prayer, he learns that God empathizes with us—that God asks us to act responsibly and that He requires our trust even when we don't see what he's up to. That's the beginning of the resolution of rejection. Pray about it.

V. Another thing Samuel does in coping with rejection is he stays in balance.

That's easy to say but hard to do. When you're rejected, you're knocked off your feet. Anybody who's been rejected on a serious level knows that it almost renders you incapable of dealing with life. You're emotionally out of it. For some of you here at church today, it was a difficult thing to get here. You're at a point in your life where it's hard to face people. It's hard to stay in balance when your emotions are working on you, and you've been rejected. Samuel does this marvelous thing of keeping his emotions in check. He couldn't have done it had he not prayed first. He didn't try to manipulate the elders of Israel into a decision by playing on their sympathy. We all have strategies for winning arguments. Samuel had a right to say anything. And he had a right to do a power number on them. Instead, Samuel was able to deal with the whole issue objectively. He was able to deal with these people who were hurting him, without rancor. That is a high level of spirituality to get to. I'm not sure Samuel got there overnight. He had to work out a lot of his

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feelings in the process. Ultimately he got there, and he was able to talk to them without rancor.

He was able to logically and reasonably analyze the consequence of their actions. They could see those consequences themselves without having to deal with all the off-the-wall emotional feedback that Samuel could have given them.

Verses 10–18 layout the consequences of having an organized state or central government—whether it’s a monarch or federated republic. Since Samuel is a prophet, a seer, it’s not surprising that he would see the consequences of having the kind of governmental system that the people wanted. He sees that five things are going to happen. They’re happening in government today. Your sons are going to go to military service, verse 11. Large segments of the population are going to work for the government, verses 12–13. Property and income are going to be confiscated by the government, verses 14–17. The average person in America works till the end of May to pay their tax bill. The rest of the year is ours. That’s confiscation by the government. Then fourth, compulsory duty of all citizens will be impelled by the state. There are certain functions you have to do—certain laws you have to live under. Then you’re impotent as a citizen to deal with the government, verse 18. You’re not going to like it, and you’re not going to be able to do anything about it.

Government does give us security, stability, and order. So it’s good thing. But the choice for Israel was not like our choice. It was not a choice between having a government and having no government. It was a choice between a monarchy and a theocracy. A theocracy where the prophet, the priest, the person really in contact with the living God is the leader. The leader is the God of Sinai and the God of Calvary. The world has never seen that kind of model of government. We don’t know what it would be like. God never got the chance to put His plan into operation with Israel. They were too determined to do it like everybody else. So we missed

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whatever it was that God had in mind. But we do know Israel was called, not to the political leadership of the world, but to the religious leadership. Samuel's perceptions are still valid. They had a mission to fulfill spiritually.

Samuel was able to stay in balance in the midst of rejection. His inner relationship with the Lord helped him to keep his cool—to see things as they really were and not poison the waters with unchecked anger and self-pity. He stayed in balance. Another thing about Samuel that was remarkable in coping with rejection, and it has to be done by us if we're to get past the rejection phase of life...

VI. Samuel adjusted to the new realities.

There were new realities. He couldn't go on anymore assuming that everything was going to be ok. There were some problems that were there, and they weren't going away. He had to deal with them. He couldn't go back to the assumption that he was going to train his sons. He was going to have to appoint a king. He was going to have to adjust to new realities.

That's the way it is with life. Something happens to us, and we wish it could have been different. We can spend a lot of time thinking how we could have made it different. But ultimately, all of that dealing with the past is not going to get us on with life. We'll simply get stuck there. We must turn our eyes toward the new realities in our lives. I must now accept those new realities and get on with it. Get on with life.

Samuel could have said, "I don't have any reason to live anymore." That's exactly how we feel when we've been rejected. "I don't want to live." It's understandable. But at the same time, there are new realities present in life. We must address those new realities if we're going to come out of it healthy. We must look at what those new realities are. Instead of looking at the past and saying, "I worked hard and nobody appreciated it" or "God is letting other people have their

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way, even though they're in the wrong, and I'm in the right," we must say, "Forgetting those things which are behind, I press on toward the mark of the upward call in Christ Jesus" (see Philippians 3:13-14). That's adjusting to new realities—looking forward.

I have a motto, "The opposing force becomes the lifting force, if faced at the right angle." It's like a glider—an airplane. The opposing force is the wind. But if it's faced at the right angle, it becomes a lifting force. That's what God wills for us. That's what He wants for us in those moments when we are being struck hard by life. And the Holy Spirit is saying, "Don't get stuck here."

One of the really exhilarating things about this particular passage of Scripture is that Samuel's story doesn't end with 1 Samuel 8. If it ended here, we'd probably be really depressed. There's more to it. But Samuel doesn't see it at this particular moment. He doesn't see that his greatest days are ahead. We never see that when we're going through a down time. The shades of life are drawn, and the way looks black. There doesn't seem to be any reason to be hopeful about what's out there. That's especially true when you're old and you say, "It's all old, and I can't go back and live it." But what Samuel doesn't know, and God has in mind, "Samuel, your great days are coming—the days when you're anointing kings, and you're getting to know that son you always wanted to have. Not your biological son, but your true spiritual son. Those days are ahead of you, and you're going to shape a nation. And you're going to be the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. You've got a pivotal role to play." We need to understand, just because this moment is bad does not mean that it's the way things are going to conclude.

If Samuel had not adjusted to his new realities, if he had not kept his balance, and if he had not prayed—it would not have turned out so well. He would have gone home, crawled into a hole, pulled the shade over his cubicle, and retreated from life. He would have never found David, and

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he would never have established the kingdom. But he prayed, kept his balance, and adjusted to new realities. And God brought him through to a marvelous vista of opportunity and service.

You cannot change the past. What's over is over. It has happened, and it cannot be undone. You cannot unscramble an egg. It's impossible. But the actions you take today will shape tomorrow.

That can be changed. So, today you and I must pray. We must stay in balance, and we must adjust to the new realities of life. The best is yet to come—the last of life, for which the first was made.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we thank You that You are there to affirm us in our difficult times of life. There are friends, here today, who are fresh with the feeling of rejection. We want to take a moment, Lord, to collectively pray for one another. We pray for those who've been wounded in life. We believe, Lord, that Your plans for us are not for evil but for good. We pray that You will help us. If we have gotten stuck, we pray that You'll help us come out of that place where we're stuck. We pray that You will give us the insight and the power to turn our back on the past and to look towards the future. We also pray, Lord, for parents who feel very worthless to you and to others because their children have not turned out yet the way they have wanted and prayed for. So Lord, I pray that You will sustain them as You sustained Samuel. I pray that You'll help people to not take on blame and guilt where it does not belong on them. Where blame and guilt do belong, I pray You will cause them to know an inward freedom that results from Your forgiveness. I pray that You'll heal relationships. I pray that You'll help rejected parents or rejected people deal with the problems of life—not with an off-the-wall emotion, but with a calm which can only be explained by the fact that they have met with You. Give to us, not the work of the flesh—which is anger, rage, envy, quarreling, jealousy, and strife. But give to us, instead, the fruit of the

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Spirit—which is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, mercy, and self-control. Give us this. We thank You for the encouragement of Your Word today. In Jesus' name, Amen.