

SAMUEL'S FAREWELL

1 Samuel 12:1-25

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“Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king” (1 Sam. 12:24-25).

Whenver a great leader comes to the end of his career, his final address to his followers is always both interesting and important. This is especially true for the great leaders of God's people in the Bible. The book of Deuteronomy presents Moses' final words to Israel, after which the great Deliverer and Law-Giver went up atop Mt. Nebo to look upon the promised land and then die. His successor, Joshua, gathered all Israel to issue a challenge that still rings in our ears: “Choose this day whom you will serve,” whether the false gods of their fathers or the true God of Israel. “But as for me and my house,” Joshua concluded, “we will serve the LORD” (Jos. 24:15). When Paul passed through Ephesus for what he knew would be the last time, he gathered the elders to meet with him. The apostle reminded them what a true ministry is like – “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:20, 27) – and warned them against wolves that would enter the flock and tear apart the sheep (Acts 20:29-30). Most important is the final address of the Lord Jesus Christ to his disciples at what we call “The Last Supper.” There, Jesus drew their attention to the work he was about to do in dying on the cross for our sins (Mt. 26:26-28), and he gave them instructions to guide them during the years of their service as apostles (John 13-16).

Considering these examples, we can see a general pattern to the farewell addresses of the Bible's great men. Most of them seek to

recap and summarize their ministries, which they also vindicate as faithful to the Lord. Added to this is a charge for those who carry on to remain faithful in their own faith and practice. In response, it is common for the people to express remorse at the loss of their leader, and to express a need for intercession with the Lord that can only ultimately be met by Jesus Christ himself. This is the very pattern reflected in the final address of the great prophet and judge Samuel, as he prepares to hand over the leadership of Israel to the newly consecrated King Saul.

SAMUEL'S MINISTRY VINDICATED

It may seem strange that as exalted a figure as Samuel would need to vindicate his years of ministry. But when we remember the kind of leadership the Israelites had previously received and the general depravity of the wider ancient world, we should not be surprised. Ministers today who follow one who fell into sin will often find themselves held under unfair suspicion. Samuel had replaced Eli and his wicked sons, so concerns about the exploitation of his office and personal immorality would not have been unexpected.

Samuel therefore began, "Behold, I have obeyed your voice in all that you have said to me and have made a king over you. And now, behold the king walks before you" (1 Sam. 12:1-2). The point of this statement is that Samuel was not ill-disposed towards the people. He was not unyielding and unwilling to answer their requests. Even though he considered the request for a king to be an insult to himself, and even more importantly an insult to God, and though he warned the people about what a catastrophe this request would bring (1 Sam. 8:11-17), he was willing to do his best to make the demanded arrangement work. Moreover, when the Lord commanded Samuel to anoint Saul as king, an action Samuel found distasteful, the great judge and prophet did not hesitate to act in obedience to the Lord. In fact, Samuel's role in enthroning King Saul shows just how disinterested he was in personal gain, for Saul was his own replacement. For centuries, Israel had relied on the judges whom God would raise up to meet particular needs, rather than on a regular dynastic succession. Saul was the last of these judges, and at the

request of the people and the will of the Lord, he comes to speak his final words as he departs from the executive leadership of the nation.

Samuel also points to his manner of life: “I am old and gray; and behold, my sons are with you. I have walked before you from my youth until this day. Here I am; testify against me before the LORD and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you” (1 Sam. 12:2-3).

Samuel knew that people tend to resent and distrust those given great authority, for the simple reason that such leaders so often misuse their power. “Power corrupts,” said Lord Acton, “and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” So Samuel challenges the people to testify if this could be said of him. “Here I am,” he declared, “testify against me before the Lord.” If Samuel had cheated anyone; if he had demanded unauthorized payments in order to perform his services, if he had used his position to harass his opponents, such persons could come forward now and disgrace his whole life in ministry. The failure of anyone to come forward with a charge against Samuel testifies to his extraordinary godliness, and it reminds all Christians of the value of a clean record and a good name. Could we stand before the church and give anyone the opportunity to speak against our integrity? If we could not, then we should remedy our spotted reputation and immediately turn to the Lord seeking an upright and honest heart.

In response to Samuel’s plea, the people had no option but to respond positively: “They said, ‘You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from any man's hand’” (1 Sam. 12:4). Samuel pressed his case, calling both the Lord and the newly anointed king, Saul, to certify his faithfulness, saying: “‘The LORD is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.’ And they said, ‘He is witness’” (1 Sam. 12:5). In this way, Samuel was setting the people up to confess their own sin before the Lord. For, as John Woodhouse comments, “The vindication of Samuel meant the indictment of the people,”¹ since they

¹ John Woodhouse, *I Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 215.

acknowledged that they had no cause other than unbelief for their demand that Samuel be replaced by a king.

The young Scottish minister, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, is famous for having said that the most important gift that he could give his congregation was his own personal holiness. The reason for this is that we are greatly encouraged to believe the gospel when we see its power at work in the lives of others. Faithfulness as Christians is not important merely for ministers, but also for parents. Our children will learn from our conduct whether God is truly the sovereign over our lives and if the gospel of forgiveness is truly our rule for faith and life. Thomas Carlyle said of his poor, uneducated father, that he was more prouder to bear his pedigree than he would to be the son of a duke or a king: "for what is the glory of mere rank or accidental station compared to the glory of Godlike qualities, and of a character which reflects the image of God Himself?"²

The writer of Hebrews stresses the value of following the example seen in the lives of godly elders: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7). Any mere man is bound to have weaknesses and failures, but our faith should be an example to others. The faith of spiritual leaders and their faithfulness in ministering to the flock should be held before all Christians, and the world as well, as a strong encouragement to faith.

THE LORD'S CAUSE PLEADED

The purpose behind Samuel's vindication was not his concern over his own legacy or reputation. Rather, Samuel set forth his own trustworthiness as a preamble for his main concern: Samuel wanted the people to remember what a great and faithful God they served and had offended through their request for a king. This was another purpose in citing God as a witness to his own integrity; having spoken of the Lord as witness, Samuel elaborates on the Lord's faithfulness to Israel:

² William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 185.

And Samuel said to the people, “The LORD is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. Now therefore stand still that I may plead with you before the LORD concerning all the righteous deeds of the LORD that he performed for you and for your fathers” (1 Sam. 12:6-8).

Samuel begins with the exodus, reminding Israel that their forefathers went into Egypt and were wrongfully enslaved. But they cried out to the Lord “and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your fathers out of Egypt and made them dwell in this place” (1 Sam. 12:8). Those words summarize all the great miracles involved in the exodus, Israel’s journey from bondage in Egypt to lordship in the land of promise. “But,” Samuel laments, “they forgot the LORD their God” (1 Sam. 12:9). The result of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness was God’s chastisement, giving them over to oppression at “the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab” (1 Sam. 12:9-10). As it was true then that unrepented patterns of sin led to God’s stern discipline, so it is also true now for Christians (see Heb. 12:4f). Yet the people “cried out to the Lord” again, saying, “We have sinned, because we have forsaken the Lord and have served the BAals and the Ashtaroth” (1 Sam. 12:10), with the result that God saved them again. In the days of the Judges, God sent such heroes as Jerubbaal (Gideon), Barak, and Jephthah – and finally Samuel himself – so that the Lord’s faithfulness in saving his repenting and believing people cannot be questioned. Most recently, the people had faced the threat of Nahash the Ammonite. Instead of trusting the Lord, they had demanded that the Lord provide them a king. (Verse 12 confirms that it was fear of defeat that prompted Israel to seek a human king.) This is clearly seen as an act of unbelief and sin: “you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ when the Lord your God was your king” (1 Sam. 12:11). Their demand for a king was a rejection of the Lord as king. Therefore, given God’s consistent pattern of judging and chastising the idolatry of his people, we can see God’s relenting to their request for a king as a form of judgment: God not so much provided a king as the Lord gave the people over to their sin and its consequences: “And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold, the LORD has set a king over you” (1 Sam. 12:13). So long as Saul lived and reign, he would remain “the

other king”, while God prepared us through history to receive the one true king.

This prompts an observation. One is that whenever we turn aside to our own schemes and plans, or the world’s schemes and plans, as opposed to God’s, we are heading for trouble. Such an abandonment of the Lord is seldom explicit: it is not merely that we become drawn in by some worldly strategy or approach to ministry or personal growth, but also that we lose confidence in God’s Word and the methods taught there. Whenever this happens we are heading for disaster, because God’s way is the true and right way and also because God actively punishes the unbelief and disobedience of his people.

If we find that such a departure from God and his Word has happened, what should we do? Samuel answers for us:

If you will fear the LORD and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well. But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king (1 Sam. 12:14-15).

This is a remarkable statement, and remarkably encouraging to us. Samuel is saying that even though they had sinned in choosing Saul, and even though Saul’s kingship is an affront to the Lord, yet if they and King Saul will humble themselves before the Lord and resolve to renew their fidelity to him, and if they and the new king will really “follow the Lord your God,” then the Lord would be gracious to bless them. They would have to be serious, though, and God would not be fooled. Notice how thorough and definitive the language is: they must *fear the Lord*, *serve* and *obey his voice*, they must not *rebel* against his commandments, and they were to *follow the Lord* and *obey the voice of the Lord*, then God would make the new kingship – for all the unbelief, idolatry, worldliness, and disobedience behind it – a success that would bless the people.

This same principle holds true for us. What happens when we find that we have made a bad decision, and even if we realize that we have fallen into sin and rebellion and have put ourselves at odds with the Lord? The Bible teaches that God allows us to start right where we

are, humbling ourselves and confessing our sins, trusting in the Lord and calling on his name, and recommitting ourselves to new obedience in fidelity to God's Word.

Sometimes a Christian will find that he has made an unwise decision in accepting a job, but he cannot now go back on his decision. What should he do? He should turn to the Lord, walk in fear and obedience while trusting God's promises, and God will be willing to give his blessing to us even in our bad job. The same is true if we make a poor decision in moving to a certain city, in attending a certain college, joining a bad church, or even entering into a foolish marriage. In some cases, we can overrule our prior decision and go back; in other cases, we cannot. So what should we do? We turn to the Lord precisely where we are, humble ourselves before him and his Word, and begin walking in faithfulness to the Lord. We can be certain, even when there will be difficulties, that God's blessing will be upon us and his help will be ready at hand.

There is no situation and no problem in which a Christian cannot be blessed by God's mighty help, if we will turn to the Lord in sincere faith, humble ourselves before him as our Lord and God, and renew our commitment to walk in his Word. This is the all purpose solution to every Christian problem, and it works because God is so gracious and ready to receive his erring children so as to put his blessing upon our heads. Repentance, faith, and new obedience are the way forward for every Christian from wherever they are, good or bad, right at this moment. David expressed this principle in Psalm 28:7, which begins with a statement of renewed reliance on God's saving power, which expresses faith in him, receives God's help, and therefore responds with joyful thanks: "The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him."

On one occasion when I was evangelizing among Moslems in Africa, I was challenged by an impoverished woman as to the power of the Christian God. She demanded that before I witnessed the gospel I perform a miracle to persuade her. I replied that I was not aware of any power to perform miracles, nor do I need to do so. Rather, I came bearing the good news of God's forgiving grace through his Son, Jesus Christ. She responded that her people were poor, sick,

downtrodden, and oppressed: they needed a God who would solve their problems. I answered that if she believed in Jesus, she would still have all those problems. But her greatest problem – the holy God’s wrath upon her sin, for which her soul would go to hell – would be remedied by the atoning blood of God’s Son. Moreover, she would become a dearly beloved child of God, and God would take upon himself the duty of caring for her. If God did not change her conditions, then he would give her the power to endure them cheerfully, and God our Father would ensure that everything she truly needs would be provided. But in order for this to happen, she must renounce the false God Allah, she must humble herself before the true God in repentance and faith, and she must walk with him in sincere obedience, lest her Father find it necessary painfully to discipline her in his holy love. This explanation was followed by a long conversation in which I explained the good news of salvation through Jesus. By God’s grace the woman believed, along with a number of her friends who were there, and they made the significant public statement of joining us for worship at the nearby Christian church.

Whatever our circumstances – whether we seem to be on top of the world or under its foot – we have just as much reason as that poor African woman to believe in Jesus Christ. Israel’s biggest problem was not Nahash the Ammonite and his threat to put out all their right eyes, but rather the Holy God who threatened their souls with just condemnation for their sins. Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). Moreover, the way for us to lead joyful, pure, and godly lives – lives that have real significance in this world and in the next – is to come to God for his Fatherly care and devote our lives in faith to him through his saving Son.

This was Samuel’s message to Israel, as it is the Bible’s message to us. The Bible does not say we will have no troubles. Jesus said, “In this world you will have tribulation.” But he added, “Take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33). Yet, if Israel would refuse Samuel’s offer – “if you will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against he commandment of the LORD,” then not only would God’s blessing be forfeited, but “the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king” (1 Sam. 12:14-15).

Israel was God's covenant people, by God's choice and not there's, so whether they had a king or not they still came under God's covenant rule. The same is true for believers, who are all called to Christ by God's sovereign grace just as Israel was: we may live foolishly or faithfully, but we cannot live without the holy and almighty government of God over our lives. God's hand will be upon us for blessing or be against us in unpleasant discipline, but God's hand will never be removed. How much better, then, for Christians simply to resolve to fear, honor, trust, and obey the Lord, then under whatever circumstances we find ourselves we can be confident of lives that bear the mark of peace with God and the joy of the strength of the Lord.

SAMUEL'S INTERCESSION SOUGHT

Unlike me, Samuel did have power to perform miracles, and he judged this farewell address to be a good time for a demonstration that would place an exclamation point on his message:

“Now therefore stand still and see this great thing that the LORD will do before your eyes. Is it not wheat harvest today? I will call upon the LORD, that he may send thunder and rain. And you shall know and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the LORD, in asking for yourselves a king.” So Samuel called upon the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day, and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel (1 Sam. 12:16-18).

First, Samuel reminded them that it was a time of year when no strong rains fell, and then promised a miracle that should set a seal on his call for their repentance. He then called on the Lord and a violent thunder storm immediately came upon them, “and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel” (1 Sam. 12:18). I do not know if Samuel enjoyed going out from his rule over Israel in such style, but his point was well made. He was not, after all, departing completely from the affairs of Israel. Though no longer a ruling judge over the people, he remained a prophet of the Lord, and therefore one who spoke with authority and power to both people and king.

The terrified people responded by calling on Samuel to intercede for them with God: “All the people said to Samuel, ‘Pray for your

servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king” (1 Sam. 12:19). Here was a sincere confession of sin, if not one that had been readily given. The people acknowledged that their whole history was one of disobedience and rebellion, and that they had entered into the ungodly line by asking for a king like all the other nations, in the place of God. Better late than never, we say! They did the right thing in confessing their sin, and also in asking Samuel to mediate with God on their behalf.

On the one hand, the plea for a mediator indicated a great problem. We need a mediator to speak on our behalf with a lord from whom we ourselves fear judgment. Notice that the people spoke to Samuel, referring to the Lord as “your God,” and that instead of going to the Lord in prayer themselves, they asked him to “pray for your servants to the Lord” (1 Sam. 12:19). This is practically a quote from the lips of Pharaoh, after God had broken his will through the angel of death that slew his firstborn son. Finally Moses and Israel would be permitted to leave Egypt, and Pharaoh approached Moses for a favor. “Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone,” Pharaoh ordered, and then asked, “and bless me also” (Ex. 12:32). Pharaoh had no basis for approaching God himself and no standing in God’s presence, so he had to ask someone who did have God’s favor to pray to God for him. Now all of Israel, through their own idolatry and wickedness, had degraded themselves to the status that Pharaoh occupied before God’s wrath, and they could only ask the man of God in their midst to pray to the Lord on their behalf.

Samuel responded as all of God’s servants respond with an earnest plea for spiritual help, and he sets an instructive example for how we should respond to non-Christian people who ask our spiritual help. Samuel was more than willing to pray for them: “as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you,” this being the duty of any man of God. But he offered more, “and I will instruct you in the good and the right way” (1 Sam. 12:23). This is precisely how we should answer unbelieving family and friends who ask for our prayers: “I will pray for you, but I also want to tell you how you may have the right to prayer for yourself.”

Secondly, Samuel reassured them of God's gracious goodwill: "Do not be afraid" (1 Sam. 12:20). We likewise have the privilege of informing people of God's kindness and love for them in Jesus Christ. Thirdly, Samuel acknowledged their sin but directed them to its remedy: "You have done all this evil. Yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty" (1 Sam. 12:20-21). Samuel was referring to the false and empty Gods, reminding them and us that we cannot follow the Lord who still pursuing the idolatries of the world, including greed, lust, pride, and malice.

Fourthly, Samuel reminded them of God's covenant promises: "For the LORD will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself" (1 Sam. 12:22). God would honor his promises of salvation primarily for the honor of his own name, so they could be sure that he would be true to all that he had pledged to them. Likewise, we can be certain that God will fulfill his gospel pledge to everyone who believes: Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24).

These are messages that we must believe for ourselves, as well as tell to others: we must remember God's goodwill for sinners through Jesus Christ, confess our sins and turn to him for salvation, and believe his gospel promises that pledge his unfailing mercy and grace to those who follow him in sincere faith. This was Samuel's final message as he laid down his judgeship, though retaining his office as prophet of the Lord: "Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king" (1 Sam. 12:24-25). King or no king was not really the issue: faith in the Lord or rebellion against his sovereign will is the single matter that decides our eternal destiny and our relationship with God during this life.

OUR TRUE MEDIATOR

With these words, the narrative of 1 Samuel transitions from its focus on Samuel to a new focus on King Saul. Samuel had been a faithful servant of the Lord, as the people attested, and a truly great man of God. Yet, when the Ammonite hoard began pouring into the eastern regions of Israel, the elders of Israel looked on aged Samuel, and on his unruly sons, and decided they needed to look elsewhere for salvation, demanding the king whom God had now given in Saul the son of Kish.

We might honor Samuel's legacy by recounting all the things that made him great. But a better way to honor him would be to look through him to see reasons why Jesus Christ is a better Savior, King, and Mediator, in whom we may find all that we need to the eternal salvation of our souls.

First, while the people asked Samuel to mediate on their behalf with God, we have the better privilege of approaching God's throne through the mediation of Jesus. For all his virtue, Samuel remained a sinner; even he could not ultimately stand before God on his own merits. Like Israel and like us, in the end, Samuel would have to take up the words that evil Pharaoh had begged of Moses: "Would you please bless me and intercede for me with God?" Jesus is no mere holy man, but he is the God-man, Immanuel, which means "God with us," God the Son who took up flesh to bring his people to God (Isa. 7:14; Heb. 2:14-17). Paul states it plainly: "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Jesus is the one completely sinless man, who does not need his own Savior before the holy law of God, and who as the Son of God is able to offer his death for the forgiveness of everyone who believes in him and calls on God's name through his salvation.

Second, Jesus is a better mediator than Samuel because he never grows old and feeble. Under Israel's monarchy, even the best of kings grew old and ultimately died, so that the people had to tremble at what awaited under the new regime. But the kingdom of God knows no such anxiety. Jesus our King, who died for our sins, has risen from the grave into eternal resurrection life. The writer of Hebrews thus exults that Jesus' priesthood is eternal, and the same is

true of his office as prophet and as king: he reigns “permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:24-25).

Lastly, while Samuel displayed a power of rhetoric and prophetic preaching that stirs the soul, and backed it up even with a striking miracle that awed his hearers, yet his words lacked the power in themselves to change the heart. How different is the Lord Jesus Christ, who speaks and preaches with the power and persuasion of the Holy Spirit. Jesus alone can say, “My words... are spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63). If we will call upon his name, the name of God’s only Son and the Savior of the world, if we will enter into his kingdom through faith, and if we will open our hearts to his living and mighty words, Jesus says that we will have eternal life. Faithful Samuel pointed us to the Lord, saying, “Fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart” (1 Sam. 12:24). Jesus, the very Lord to whom Samuel pointed, calls to us saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).