

1 Samuel 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Samuel chapter 12 And Samuel said to all Israel, 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, and I am old and grey, 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.

They said, You have not defrauded us, or oppressed us, or taken anything from any man's hand. And he said to them, 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. 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. When Jacob went into Egypt, and the Egyptians oppressed them, then your fathers 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. But they forgot the Lord their God. And he sold them into 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. And they fought against them, and they cried out to the Lord, and said, We have sinned, because we have forsaken the Lord, and have served the Baals and the Ashtoreth. But now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, that we may serve you. And the Lord sent Jeroboam and Barak and Jephthah and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you lived in safety. And when you saw that Nahash the king of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, No, but a king shall reign over us, when the Lord your God was your king. And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked. Behold, the Lord has set a king over you. 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. 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. And 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. And Samuel said to the people, Do not be afraid, 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. For the Lord will not forsake his people for his great namesake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you, and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. 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 Samuel chapter 12 is a chapter where three parties are placed on trial in a sort of legal scene.

[4 : 0 0] They are in Gilgal to make Saul king and to renew the kingdom. And perhaps we should think of the kingdom here, not just as the new kingdom of Saul, but as the kingdom of the Lord, but now with Saul as his vice-guerrant. Gilgal was the place where they were first circumcised when

they entered the land for the first time in Joshua chapter 5. It was also where they celebrated the Passover.

It was a place of national dedication back then, and now it is a place of national dedication again, connected with the deep covenant memory of Israel. Samuel puts himself on trial first.

He wants Israel, witnessed by the Lord and by their king Saul, to confess to the fact that he acted righteously in all of his dealings with them. He didn't wrong or oppress them in any manner.

Samuel described the oppressive behaviour a king would adopt in chapter 8 of 1 Samuel, but here he makes very clear that he has never behaved like such a ruler, and the people confess to his innocence of such wrongdoing. The people acknowledge that they have no charge to level against him, and Samuel emphasised that the Lord and Saul are their witnesses in this acknowledgement. Saul is still going to be active as a prophet, but he will no longer function as the judge of Israel, as he has been doing to this point. Samuel will be ministering for many years to come. He will, for instance, anoint David, probably a couple of decades later.

[5 : 22] Samuel moves on to declare the righteous deeds of the Lord, the ways in which the Lord was faithful in his covenant dealings with Israel, even in Israel's unfaithfulness. He recounts the history of Israel, from Jacob's descent into Egypt, to the Exodus, to the entry into the land, and then the various deliverances under the judges. At each point, God showed his faithfulness to the covenant, even as his people were unfaithful. He continually delivered them, he brought them back, and he restored them. After seeing all of these deliverances in the time of the judges, when they saw Nahash the Ammonites starting to get territory in Israel, the Israelites lost their nerve and demanded a king. The suggestion here is that the threat of the Ammonites and Nahash preceded chapter 8, and was the immediate cause of them asking for a king. They wanted a king like the nations to go out in battle before them, because Nahash the Ammonite was causing trouble for them on their eastern border. Part of the irony, of course, is that the Lord delivered them from the threat of the Ammonites, by Saul, but Saul acting more as a judge than as a king. Saul had not yet been anointed. The Lord their king was quite capable of raising up deliverance from the Ammonites for them, even without them having a king to lead them into battle. Recounting the history of redemption, as Samuel does here, is an important element of covenant renewal events. Israel stands back from the immediacy of time, and reflects upon the way that the Lord has brought them to this point.

The Lord has given them the king that they requested. What's more, he hasn't abandoned them on account of their sin in the request, but has graciously incorporated the king into the covenant order, allowing for them to enjoy blessing, even in a situation that originally arose on account of their sin. God's grace can continue to reach people, even in situations that they have brought themselves into, through their own sinful failings and disobedience. The Lord gives them the sign of thunder and rain at the time of the wheat harvest. This is extremely unseasonal weather, like having snow in July, perhaps. Israel was very dependent upon the blessing of the rain in its proper seasons, and this is a sign of God's rule over the land, and the Israelites' dependence upon him, and the sin of rejecting such a king for another. If the Lord can control the elements themselves, why can't they trust him to deal with a threat like the Ammonites and Nahash? Samuel and the Lord then have put themselves on trial and been vindicated, but Israel has been proved to be unfaithful.

The people request Samuel's intercession, and Samuel reassures them that although they have sinned seriously, they can still go on to serve the Lord and be blessed by him. However, they need to learn not to turn aside to empty things, putting their trust in idols and kings. They should look to the Lord. The Lord and Samuel have both been faithful, and both will continue to be faithful to Israel.

The Lord will not forsake his people. He has put his name upon Israel, and he is determined to make them a people for himself. Samuel, on his part, will never cease from interceding for the people, as Moses interceded for them in the Exodus. He will also teach and guide them. Samuel will continue to act as a father figure to Saul, and then later on he will anoint David. The people must also move forward in faithfulness. They must bring to mind the works of God on their behalf in the past, and serve him faithfully with all of their hearts. If they don't do so, they will swiftly be destroyed.

A question to consider. What can we learn from the grace that God shows to his people in this chapter?