

## 1 Samuel 11:14-12:25

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#### *Setting the context (1 Samuel 1:1-11:13)*

Friends, for the next four or five weeks we are going to take a look at a section of the book of 1 Samuel.

Now since we are starting at chapter 11, I thought that we might start by taking a flying run through the book of Samuel.

The book starts with a woman in deep distress.

Hannah is barren and she knows God alone can resolve her problem.

And so she takes her situation to God.

She calls out to him.

And he hears her cry.

He opens her womb and the boy Samuel is born.

1 Samuel 3 tells us that the nation of Israel is in deep distress.

As God's people they are people who live by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

But the word of God is rare.

They are in a famine of the word of God.

But again God acts.

He calls Samuel and enables him to hear his word and speak his word.

And the word of God flows from the mouth of Samuel.

And all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, knew that God had broken the famine.

God had filled their spiritual bellies.

They had a trustworthy prophet in their midst.

And the word of the Lord came to all Israel.

In chapter 4 the nation of Israel is again in deep distress.

They are surrounded by the technologically advanced nation of the Philistines.

They engage them in battle.

They lose in battle.

And the loss is devastating.

The Ark of the covenant is captured, Eli the priest dies, and Israel grieves that God's glory has departed.

But over the next two chapters God is at work yet again.

Outside the boundaries of Israel...

Without the armies of Israel...

And without any human assistance...

God exposes the gods of the Philistines as non-entities.

And God humiliates the people of Philistia who had trusted in them.

Then, in chapter 7, under the leadership of the judge Samuel, God leads his people in a massive defeat of the Philistines.

But all of this washes over God's people.

And in chapter 8 they approach Samuel and request a king.

They express their desire to no longer be separate.

They ask to be like the rest of the nations and have a king.

Samuel warns them of the consequences.

Kings need armies and wives and armies and infrastructure.

Kings are characterised by taking.

But God will allow them their king.

And in the succeeding chapters God chooses their first king, Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin.

God empowers him with his Spirit.

And through him, God rescues his people.

And so we come to the closing verses of 1 Samuel 11.

Please look at them with me.

For these verses set the context for our passage for today.

*<sup>14</sup>Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship."<sup>15</sup>So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.*

Here is where the request for kingship ends.

It ends with Samuel bringing the people together in something that looks like a covenant renewal ceremony.

Saul is made king in the presence of Yahweh.

And Saul and the Israelites rejoice greatly.

However, I want you to notice a striking omission in this last sentence.

Samuel's name is noticeably absent from the list of those rejoicing.

He had been unhappy with the request for a king.

And it seems as though he may still be unhappy.

And this, I think, sets the context for chapter 12.

### ***Examining the participants (12:1-11)***

- Samuel

The first eleven verses of chapter 12 focus on three participants.

In verses 1 to 5 we meet Samuel.

And the focus of Samuel's speech is his own ministry as a judge.

The first seven chapters of Samuel were clear:

God was king over Israel.

God always met his people's need.

Israel did not need any king but God.

Now Samuel presses the point home clearly.

In 1 Samuel 8, he made the point to Israel that kingship was all about taking.

A king modelled on kingship among the nations will be a king who takes sons and daughters, the best of the fields and crops.

He will take male and female slaves and the best of Israel's cattle and flocks.

He, Samuel, has been very different in his leadership.

His leadership has not been about taking.

In a lifetime of ministry he has not taken anyone's ox, or donkey.

He has not defrauded or oppressed the people of God.

Nor has he taken bribes.

Samuel asks the people and the king to validate his claims.

And they do.

It is clear.

Samuel the judge has been true and honest and faithful.

- God

In verses 6 to 11 the focus falls on the other two participants – God and Israel.

Samuel surveys Israelite history, starting with the exodus.

That history has been one where God has been spectacularly active.

He rescued from Egypt.

And he rescued all the way through the time of the judges.

God's nature has been clear.

He has been faithful to the covenant he made with his people.

- Israel

But then the focus shifts to the third participant; the nation of Israel.

And the key verse is verse 9.

For there we are told that ‘they forgot the Lord their God’.

Their nature was one of sinfulness.

They broke the covenant and did not act as though God was their God.

And Samuel summarises the history of God’s people during the period of the judges.

He rehearses the characteristic cycle.

Israel would forget God.

God would give them into the hand of an oppressor.

They would remember God, repent of their idolatry, and cry out to him for assistance.

And he would respond in faithfulness.

He would raise up judges and rescue them.

And the end result was that they would live in safety.

The portrait of these verses is clear:

Samuel has been a good and faithful judge, truly representing God.

God has been faithful to his people.

But the people have been characterised by sin.

***The Nahash episode (1 Samuel 12:12-13)***

- Expectations

And with this we move into verses 12 and 13 and the Nahash episode.

Now there are some differences between how this episode is described here and how it is described a chapter or two earlier.

But I don't want to focus on this.

Rather, I want you to notice what Samuel's speech is doing.

It is very cunning, very clever, and very damning.

Nahash is a cruel foreign oppressor.

Now, if he is oppressing Israel then the cycle of the judges would seem to indicate that Israel had forgotten God.

And the normal expectation would be that Israel would repent of sin and call upon God for deliverance.

But look at what Samuel says in verses 12 and 13.

*<sup>12</sup>But when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, 'No, but a king shall reign over us,' though the LORD your God was your king.<sup>13</sup>See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the LORD has set a king over you.*

- Reality

Can you see what Samuel is saying.

He is saying that the expectation created by the book of Judges would be that the incident with Nahash would be repentance and crying out to God for deliverance.

But reality was very different.

There was no repentance.

No acknowledgment of sin.

No calling out to God.

Instead, sin is added to sin.

Israel did not cry out to God.

Though their own history showed a king was not necessary...

Though their own history showed them that God was their king...

Though their own history showed them the pattern that they should follow...

They spurned God and asked for a king.

The indictment of these verses is clear.

Israel has grossly sinned.

But despite this sin, God gave them a king.

Though they were faithless, he remained faithful.

### ***Covenant and Kingship (1 Samuel 12:14-18)***

- Things to note

Now with this we arrive at verses 14 to 18.

Look at verses 14 and 15.

They are full of the language of Deuteronomy.

They are full of covenant language.

Now look at verse 16.

The language of taking a stand is the language of a courtroom and therefore of covenant indictment.

Now look at verses 17 and 18.

Thunderstorms are practically unknown at harvest time (May-June).

They put crops at risk.

But thunder is the sort of thing that accompanied the giving of the covenant at Sinai.

Thunder is therefore a further reminder that a covenant breach has occurred.

Now the last thing to note in these verses is Samuel's refusal to separate the king from the people.

He talks about 'you and the king' or 'you and your king'.

- What's going on?

Can you see what is going on here?

Samuel is making it clear that kingship comes from a sinful disposition.

He is making it clear that God has taken kingship on board.

He is going to incorporate kingship into the covenant.

But Samuel is also making clear that kings are under the same constraints as the people.

Just as Deuteronomy 17 had said, kings are one among the people.

And kings are subject to the covenant in the same way as everyone else.

Kingship has no independent existence.

It is subject to all the same constraints and boundaries.

And lastly, both God and Samuel are making clear that the old style leadership still has a place.

Kings may come and go.

But God is still the king.

And his prophets are still his covenant representatives.

They are those who will provide checks and balances on kingship.

### ***Aftermath (1 Samuel 12:19-25)***

It is this theme that continues in verses 19 to 25.

The people acknowledge the truthfulness of what Samuel has said.

They have added to their sins the evil of demanding a king.

But Yahweh is still committed to the relationship.

Samuel is still committed to his role in they relationship.

And the key issue for them and their king is that they are in covenant.

And covenant has obligations.

And it has blessings.

And it has curses.

## What hope is there?

Friends, I want to wrap thing up today by doing some reflecting on what we've seen in this passage.

You see, there is something spectacularly sobering about this account, isn't there?

Can you see it?

You see, this passage represents a fundamental theological turning point in Israel's history.

As early as Genesis 17 kingship has been on view for God's people.

But now it is a reality.

And in 2 Samuel we will see the Davidic kingship sewn into God's covenant relationship with his people.

But for all its glorious hope, 2 Samuel 7 hints at the same issue that this passage hints at.

You see, 2 Samuel 7:14 says of David:

*<sup>14</sup>I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.*

But then it goes on:

*When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings.*

Notice the words – 'when he commits iniquity'.

Can you see the problem?

The Old Testament begins by describing the nature of human beings.

And the nature of human beings is that they are sinful.

And since page 2 of the Bible the picture has been unrelenting.

Humanity is sinful.

Abraham and Sarah are sinful.

Their children are sinful.

The nation that springs from them is sinful.

And their history up until this point has been characterized by sin being added to sin.

And now we have a king who is human.

We have a king who is made of the same stuff as Adam and Abraham and Israel.

We have a king who is made of the same stuff as you and me.

Now, you tell me, where do you think this is going to end?

Well, the books of Samuel themselves go on to tell us.

Saul is a disaster.

David is not much better.

And the descendants of David end up being swept away because of sin just as Samuel prophesied.

Friends, this passage is immensely sobering.

It is immensely sobering because of the portrait it gives.

It paints a picture of human pride and idolatry.

It paints a picture of humans like us.

And then it proceeds to make sure that we know that Israel's king is of the same stuff as Israel, who is of the same stuff as Adam.

And if this king is of the same stuff then he will surely fail.

Friends, can you sense the hopelessness that lies within this passage?

Can you hear the warning?

Can you hear the ominous sound of hopelessness?

Do you find yourself asking what hope we have got?

Well, if you do, then my own view is that you have heard the passage rightly.

You see, I think that Samuel and the books named after him are relentlessly driving us to sense our helpless and hopeless situation.

But Samuel and the books named after him have also been systematically laying some solid rocks for us to stand on in the sinking sand of human sin.

Samuel himself is the child of a helpless woman.

He is the fruit of a woman who in her helplessness cried out to God.

And his books have told us that God is the God who gives his word to his people when they are in famine.

The Ark narrative tells us that God does not need humans to accomplish his purposes.

He can deliver his people without their involvement.

And even within this chapter we are told in verse 22 that the Lord will not cast away his people.

Friends, the sin of Israel looks overwhelming.

Their situation looks hopeless.

Moreover, we know that we stand with Israel.

Our sin looks overwhelming.

Our situation looks hopeless as well.

But our God is the God who helps the helpless.

He is the one who reaches out to the weak and lowly.

Turn with me to Romans 5.

Listen to the apostle Paul rejoice in this God in Romans 5:6-11.

*<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.<sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.<sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.<sup>9</sup>Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.<sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.<sup>11</sup>But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

Paul spent the first three chapters of Romans painting a picture of human sinfulness.

He then spoke of God's salvation in terms of gift and promise.

And now he rejoices in salvation being solely from God.

And given what we know from the Old Testament, it could have been no other way.

For the only way out of the deep distress of human sin was for help to come from God.

We could not save ourselves for we cannot of ourselves shed our nature.

Friends, I can not think of a better way to begin a new year than being reminded of these very basic truths.

These are the truths that have driven us here to study God's word together.

These are the truths we must proclaim to the world.

Let us grasp hold of them.

And let's listen to Samuel's advice.

Let's not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save.

For such things are useless beside the glory of him who died for the helpless and ungodly.

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Postscript (not included in sermon but helpful in commentary)

Now before we leave the story on reflect on its meaning for us, I want you to look at verse 21.

I'll read from verse 20.

*<sup>20</sup>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;<sup>21</sup> and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless.*

Look at the words used in verse 21.

Samuel talks about 'useless things'.

Now the words he uses here is the same word that is used in Genesis 1:1 for the emptiness of the world before God spoke his creative word.

It is the same word that is used in Isaiah for empty or vain idols.

Samuel's point is potent.

Samuel is hinting that they have made kingship into an idol.

Rather than depending on the unpredictability of a sovereign God, they have sought shelter in a king of their own choice.

In other words, they have sought shelter in a God of their own making.<sup>1</sup>

You see, there are other ways of engaging in idolatry than simply bowing down before an image of Baal.

Idolatry can be much more sophisticated than this.

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<sup>1</sup> Note how this builds on the themes of idolatry in the Ark narrative.