

1st Samuel Chapter 12 Samuel's history lesson

[Please note : English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

The coronation of a monarch is, by all accounts, a very special time - a joyous occasion which brings communities together. It's an opportunity for reviews and previews - many important statements are made about the past and about the future, setting the tone for the period of time that lies ahead. The people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, together with many more nations around the world witnessed such an event for the accession of King Charles III following the death of his mother, the long reigning Queen Elizabeth II.

Chapter 12 of 1 Samuel was similar but with a much greater historical significance for Israel. When the new king acceded, there was no change in the dynastic rule but in the last days of Samuel, the Children of Israel were at a great turning point in their long history as God's chosen people. They were embarking on a historic break with the past: a change of rule from a theocracy to a monarchy which became of vast importance in the succeeding generations. Samuel is using the inauguration of the new king as an occasion to set the tone for the period of time which was before them.

For our consideration today, we will look at the chapter under four main headings.

- Firstly - A review of the prophet's integrity (verses 1 to 5).
- Secondly - A rebuke of the people's ingratitude (verses 6 to 12).
- Then, from verses 13 to 19
 - A reaffirmation of the penitence invocation.
- And fourthly in verses 20 to 25
 - A reassurance of the priest's intercession.

In the first 5 verses of 1 Samuel 12 we see how Samuel put himself out for scrutiny before the nation and challenges them to lay charges if he has been guilty of any area of his public life.

Section 1- A review of the prophet's integrity

Reading from the ESV:

Verses 1 to 5:

“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 my 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."

We read about at least two other prominent people in the history of the Children of Israel who were confident of their moral standing that they were prepared to put this up to scrutiny:

Jacob's self-defence against his father-in-law Laban (Genesis 31)
and Moses before a rebellious people (Numbers 16:15)

Here, Samuel is addressing the elders, the heads, the judges, the officers of all the tribes of Israel and significantly, the new king also. (1 Samuel 11:15). It is a solemn lecture given at the time when Israel was rejoicing greatly, and it counterbalanced their then-present rejoicing with what were to be their future responsibilities. Samuel is an older statesman whom many of the people there at the gathering would have known very well as spelled out clearly in verse 2. The Judges had ruled Israel for some 500 years and Samuel had been a circuit Judge for some 50 years or so (1 Samuel 7:16). On this occasion, and in the first part of his discourse, it is Samuel's own record in office and not of his discredited sons that he is asking the people to judge. His sons were also present at this auspicious occasion but, like the sons of Eli before them, had not followed their fathers' example, "they did not know the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:12,17; 1 Samuel 8:2b-3).

In verses 3 to 5, Samuel draws attention to aspects of conduct which mark true leadership and authority for those in public office. He has kept his hands clean, in accordance with the law of Moses, in matters of extortion, self-enrichment, perversion of justice, oppression and bribery. And in a way, he could say "which of you convicts me of sin?"

Samuel uses two significant expressions in verse 3: "here I am" and "before the LORD." We have here not just someone who is confident of his credibility in the matter which he is expressing but someone who is truly a man of God. Since the first time Samuel answered: "here I am" and "speak, for your servant hears", we know this about Samuel's life: "the LORD was with him and [He the LORD] let none of His words fall to the ground" (1 Samuel 3:4,10 & 19) and (1 Samuel 3:19). Here, Samuel receives the endorsement from the people, before the LORD and before the new king.

Saul was a people's choice, "from his shoulders upwards he was taller than any of the people" (1 Samuel 9:2), but Samuel is also careful to give the new king his proper place as "The LORD's anointed", the first-time we see this term which means Messiah (verses 3 and 5). So, on integrity, Samuel was before all men blameless.

The Apostle Paul similarly was at pains to declare his integrity when he wrote to the Thessalonian Christians (see 1 Thessalonians 2:3-10). Christians, especially Christian leaders, must be people of honesty and integrity (see 1 Timothy 3:2,5,7). They are exhorted to: "Walk worthy of their calling" (see Ephesians 4:1).

Section 2 – A REBUKE OF THE PEOPLE'S INGRATITUDE

Samuel looks back to prove that throughout their history the LORD God had been righteous and had remained faithful in all His dealings with them. He delivered them by the leaders whom He raised up in times of danger when they cried to Him but that the people had been faithless and disobedient throughout.

Verses 6 to 12:

"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 Baals and the Ashtaroth. But now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, that we may serve you.' And the LORD sent Jerubbaal 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."

In this Samuel is drawing upon an important historical connection, he himself is one of a long line of God-appointed leaders, "men of God" – for about 600 years, with Samuel for the last 50 or so. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews later recounts them as those "who through faith, conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises" (Hebrews 11:32–34).

Samuel starts this history lesson at the point where the people were just becoming a nation, the point at which Jacob went down to Egypt at the invitation of his son Joseph. He reviewed Israel's history from Moses to his own day, showing that it was the LORD who had chosen Moses and Aaron to take the people from the oppression they were under. The LORD had heard the cry of the people who had been subjected to hard labour and other oppressive measures. Samuel uses expressions such as "stand still" and "plead" to provide evidence of how gracious the LORD exercised his sovereign authority to the enduring good of Israel. Samuel pointed out that their wickedness and their going after foreign gods resulted in the attacks by the nations who oppressed them. They would have known all the details which lay behind these headlines. And in their latest show of wilfulness, they insisted on having a king.

The writer of Psalm 106 recollects these events in 48 verses and records these statements about their history.

Verse 13:

"But they soon forgot his works; they did not wait for his counsel."

Verse 15:

"He gave them what they asked but sent a wasting disease among them."

A similar history lesson is given by Stephen in the Book of Acts chapter 7 in which he refers to his fellow-Jews as those who, as their fathers did, "always resist the Holy Spirit", persecuted and killed the prophets of God, having "received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." Here, however, Samuel continued to plead with them for repentance.

Section 3 – A reaffirmation of the penitence invocation

Samuel has called for the people to repent and warned them of the consequences. He demonstrated how severe that judgement would be by praying for God to send thunder and rain.

Verses 13 to 19:

“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.””

In verse 13 the reference is to the inauguration of Saul at Gilgal (in chapter 11:15). In the people’s rejection of the Judges, they had cited Samuel’s sons as unfit for office and asked to be ruled by a king. God’s people wished to be “like all the nations”, (chapter 8:5,20). But God’s people were supposed to be “a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among nations!” (Numbers 23:9). The Apostle Paul, writing centuries later counsels Christians not to lose the desire to be different, “do not be conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2).

Samuel had been displeased but prayed to the Lord and the LORD had told Samuel that the people were not rejecting Samuel but the LORD (chapter 8:6–9,21–22). Samuel told them, from the LORD, that a king would be a burden on them and listed many ways in which this would be realised; and the LORD would not answer them (chapter 8:10–18). Saul himself, however, had made a right start by attributing to the LORD the one victory that he led over the Ammonites although, as we learn later, Saul’s reliance on the LORD did not last. Many a disgruntled man gathered to David in the cave at Adullam (1 Samuel 22 :2), and in the prophecy of Hosea , we read the LORD saying:

“Where now is your king, to save you in all your cities? Where are your rulers – those of whom you said , “Give me a king and princes”? I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him in my wrath” [Hosea 13:10-11).

There is a saying “Be careful what you ask for !” suggesting that insistence on our own way can be a costly business. The Psalmist put it like this: “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put trust in princes” (Psalms 118:9).

The people had made their choice yet Samuel, having complied in the will of the LORD to give the new king his proper place. Samuel was not going to neither allow them to suppose that there was nothing blameworthy in their desire for a king, nor let them forge ahead in this new regime of government without warning them of what lies ahead of them. We see this in verses 14 and 15. The people and their king would be blessed if they obeyed the LORD. If they disobeyed, the hand of the LORD would be against them. These were the terms and conditions of the covenant, simplified.

We are told in verse 17 that it was harvest time when this inauguration meeting was taking place. This would have been around mid-May to mid-June when rain was never seen. By praying for God to send thunder and rain, Samuel demonstrated how severe God’s judgement would be. Rain at this time of the year was not only unheard of but would have disastrous consequences on crops in the field and any produce that has been harvested. The people’s wilfulness and wickedness had to

be recognised. “And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold, the LORD has set a king over you” (v.13). Note: the king also here is not without blame! The LORD demonstrated His anger against their sin. He did so as the One with almighty control of the weather: “ even the wind and the waves obey Him” (Luke 8:25). We see also here the LORD was with Samuel and let none of His words fall to the ground, as not at any time before, not now and therefore for ever! “The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and His ears toward their cry” (Psalms 34:15).

God did affirm his word with signs and wonders by the hand of other prophets such as Moses, Aaron, and Elijah. And in the formative years of the Church, “many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles” (see Acts chapter 2:43; 5:12). The miracle had the desired effect. The people confessed their sins, acknowledged their current rebellion, and prayed to Samuel to intercede for them to his God. It remains to be seen how sincere their repentance would be, but Samuel does not give up on them.

Section 4 – A reassurance of the priest's intercession

Although Samuel is stepping down from the more active duties of his Office as Judge, he is always going to be there for them, in at least one capacity that characterises a long serving man of God, that is one of always praying for them as long as he lives.

Verses 20 to 24:

“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 you 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 name’s sake, 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.””

In the final part of Samuel’s deliberation we see his life-long ministry being summed up in the way he has responded to the people’s rejection of his authority. The chief aim of his warnings was to produce a humble and repentant state of mind in the people.

Verse 20: Samuel had encouraged them to accept the situation their unbelief created. Now he instructs them with imperatives such as “fear” , “fear not” , “turn” , and “turn not.”

Verses 24 and 25: Samuel appealed to them to serve the LORD “with their whole heart” and, despite their wickedness, to serve Him in truth/sincerity. He says to them, “fear” to engender reverence in gratitude, to “consider how great things the LORD has done for you”, verse 24. They and their king would be blessed if they obeyed the LORD (verse 25). “Behold to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22).

Verse 21: Samuel counsels them with regards to the pursuit of empty things, idols – the same “empty things” which the prophet Jeremiah calls “broken cisterns” (Jeremiah 2:13) and provided the inspiration of a well-known gospel hymn:

O Christ in thee my soul has found,
And found in Thee alone.

Verse 3 of the same hymn reads :

I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,
But, ah, the waters failed!
E'en as I stooped to drink they'd fled,
And mocked me as I wailed.
(Anon).

“Fear not” – because the LORD would not reject or forsake His people because of His holy covenant and His great faithfulness. God’s purpose was to use Israel to bring glory to His name and He would fulfil this purpose. They were God’s people by sovereign grace alone. As Wiersbe observes:

“The LORD had covenanted with no other nation on earth except Israel, and Israel’s obedience to that covenant made possible their enjoyment of God’s promised blessings, including living in the Promised Land, being protected from their enemies and having fruitful fields, flocks and herds and families. If they failed to obey, the LORD would discipline them and take away their blessings.”

(W.W. Wiersbe, 2001, Be Successful - David Cook p.71).

In Verse 23 Samuel spoke not merely as a Judge but also as a Prophet and “faithful Priest” (verse 19). God would never ultimately abandon His people - nor would Samuel, despite their grieving him and their rejection of the LORD: he was going to keep on selflessly interceding, instructing, counselling, because to him, it would be a sin not to do so. The forgiving spirit and the intercessory work have marked many a “man of God.” “Time would fail me to tell you of them all” (Hebrew 11:32).

The Book of Samuel is full of prayers. His very name means “asked for him from the LORD.” Throughout his life he sought the LORD in prayer, was granted victory and vindication through prayer. As a praying man, he learnt secrets from God.

The believers in the Lord Jesus are also blessed with this intercessory priestly work. Samuel’s history lesson could be summed up as, “a review of the repetitive nature of the people’s ingratitude”, because those events of so many years ago and Israel’s sinful attitude of rebellion are relevant and life-changing challenges for all of us, even today. This is because: “the Word of the Lord remains for ever” (1 Peter 1:25). It is for all generations. The Word teaches us about the sinfulness of humans and its consequences, the necessity for faith in the Lord, and the importance of obeying Him. We have learned some lessons concerning the character of God and about the place and the power of prayer in all experiences of life.

Psalm 107:31,

“Oh that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men!” (NKJV).

“He who [brought] you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

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