

1 Samuel 11:14-12:25

Introduction

Some very notable speeches have been made in history.

Think of the 28th August 1963. Martin Luther King Jr., speaking on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D. C. ‘I have a dream...’ Who hasn’t heard those words?

A few years before that, on 20th January 1961, JFK’s inaugural address. ‘Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.’

Winston Churchill, speaking in Parliament on 4th June 1940, in the face of a possible Nazi invasion. ‘We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.’ Powerful words.

There are many more great speeches of history.

And this speech, here in 1 Samuel, is one of them.

It’s a farewell speech. Samuel isn’t about to disappear just yet. He’ll continue as a prophet. But he’s retiring as Israel’s leader. And his speech, recorded here in chapter 12, marks a pivotal moment in Israel’s history. This is the point at which the monarchy begins.

And the context in which this speech is given is a call for renewal. That’s our first heading: A call for renewal.

A call for renewal

Please look down with me at the final verses of chapter 11.

Verses 14 and 15.

Then Samuel said to the people, ‘Come, let us go up to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.’ So all the people went to Gilgal and made Saul king in the presence of the LORD. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the LORD, and Saul and all the Israelites had a great celebration.

This is a time of renewal.

But what exactly is being renewed?

At first glance, it looks as though it’s the human kingship of Israel that’s being renewed. But that’s problematic because Israel hasn’t yet had a human king. Saul will be the first. He has been anointed for the role in private. And he’s been selected publicly. But he hasn’t yet been made king.

So, what is being renewed?

To renew something is to repair what's broken.

And perhaps the location helps us here.

Samuel calls the people to go to Gilgal.

That's the place where the Israelites camped when they first entered the promised land. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, they paused before going any further. All the men were circumcised because that hadn't been done in the wilderness. The sins they had committed were put aside. And the covenant with God was renewed.

And that's probably the best way to understand what's going on here in 1 Samuel.

In the chapters that came before this, the people had rejected God as their King and had asked for a human king like the nations around them. And whilst God had granted their request, all was not right in their relationship with him. They had sinned.

So, here, we're probably to understand that it's God's kingship that's being renewed.

Saul *is* made king. But that's done in the presence of the Lord, with sacrifices and fellowship offerings.

He is made king under God's kingship.

And that explains what follows, which is a kind of trial.

A renewed relationship with God can only come about through the admission of wrongdoing.

When a relationship breaks down it cannot be repaired by ignoring what's wrong and pretending it's not there. It needs to be dealt with. And it's the same with our relationship with God.

So, I've put as the next heading: Who is the guilty one?

Who is the guilty one?

Samuel begins in chapter 12, verse 1: **'I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you...'**

And then he steps before them as the first defendant.

'Tell me if I have done any wrong,' he says.

In chapter 8, he had warned the people that a human king would take, take, take. Do you remember? He said to the people, 'This is what a human king will do to you... he will take,

he will take, he will take.’ And he begins his speech by asking Israel to testify against him if *he* has taken.

Look at the end of verse 2.

‘I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these things, I will make it right.’

And they confirm that he has done no wrong. They have no complaint against him.

In verse 4, they say, **‘You have not taken anything from anyone’s hand.’**

Samuel has been honest and faithful as the leader of Israel.

So, next, it’s God versus the people. Who has done wrong? Who will be vindicated and who will be condemned?

Verse 6.

Then Samuel said to the people, ‘It is the LORD who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your ancestors up out of Egypt. Now then, stand here, because I am going to confront you with evidence before the LORD as to all the righteous acts performed by the LORD for you and your ancestors.’

I’m glad I wasn’t there. It’s like being called to the headmaster’s office at school. Or as Sir Alex Ferguson put it, slightly less delicately, it’s ‘squeaky bum time’.

Samuel surveys Israel’s history from the time of Jacob right up to the present day. And his point is clear: throughout their history, God had been consistently faithful, while the people had been consistently unfaithful.

God had rescued the people from slavery in Egypt and had given them the promised land. He had settled them in the land in which they were now standing.

But what had they done?

Verse 9: **‘But they forgot the LORD their God...’**

As a result, God had handed them over to their enemies, to discipline them. And when they had cried out to him for mercy, he had sent deliverers to rescue them, so that ...end of verse 11 **...you lived in safety.**

God had been consistently faithful.

But they had been consistently unfaithful. Most recently, when Nahash king of the Ammonites had come against them, they had rejected God as their King and had asked for a human king instead.

Verse 12.

‘But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, “No, we want a king to rule over us” – even though the LORD your God was your king.’

They hadn’t cried out to God to save them. They hadn’t trusted in his protection of them. Rather, they had sought a new way of doing things that didn’t depend on God at all.

And don’t we so easily do the same!

When crisis comes, or when life simply isn’t the way we want it to be, rather than looking to God, we take things into our own hands. Rather than trusting in God’s care and protection of us, we look for a solution that doesn’t depend on God at all. We try to be our own saviours. We’re not so unlike the Israelites here.

Nonetheless, God had graciously given the Israelites the king they had asked for. And now, Samuel gives them two options for how to proceed.

Verse 14.

‘If you fear the Lord and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God – good! But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors.’

These are the conditions of the renewed covenant. Everyone is involved, including the king. He isn’t excluded. The king and the people alike must choose either obedience to God or rebellion against him. It’s one or the other. Will they continue in their sin? Or will they repent and renew their allegiance to the Lord?

It should be a no-brainer. But in case there’s any lingering doubt, Samuel makes it really easy for them.

Verse 16.

‘Now then, stand still and see this great thing the LORD is about to do before your eyes! Is it not the wheat harvest now? I will call on the LORD to send thunder and rain. And you will realise what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the LORD when you asked for a king.’

It’s the time of the wheat harvest. Heavy rain will cause costly and long-lasting damage. And since it’s the dry season, unseasonal rain could only be an act of God.

And we're told: **Then Samuel called on the LORD, and that same day the LORD sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the LORD and of Samuel.**

The Lord is allowing his people to experience the fear of his anger. He's doing that to turn them from their sin.

Sometimes that's what we need.

Sometimes we need God to open our eyes so that we can see our sin for what it really is. I can find it very easy to excuse my sin. To shrug it off. To minimise it. Even to deny it. Sometimes we need God to do something that enables us to see how ugly and offensive to him our sin really is. And sometimes we need to be allowed to feel the holy fear of his judgement that the Israelites experienced here.

And I think that can be especially true of the sins that we feel very comfortable with.

I feel most comfortable when I'm wearing jeans and a T-shirt. I've got T-shirts that I've owned for as long as I can remember. And I'll very happily get up, put one on, and spend the day in it. I love those old T-shirts. But when I put them on, they're so comfortable and so familiar, I'm completely blind to all the holes in them. And the frayed collars. And the grease stains. I'm so comfortable wearing those old T-shirts that I don't notice all the holes and threads unless someone points them out to me. Only then do I realise how worn out they are, and that they really just need throwing away.

And I think it can sometimes be the same with the sin in our lives. There are some sins that we're so used to, and so comfortable with, that we can be completely blind to them unless God does something to point them out to us. That's what we need God to do. We need him to open our eyes so that we can see our sin and turn away from it.

It's no bad thing to pray to God and ask him to open our eyes to see the full reality of our sin and how much he hates it.

That's what Samuel's praying for here. That's the purpose of the thunder and the rain.

And it has the desired effect.

Verse 19.

The people all said to Samuel, 'Pray to the LORD your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king.'

In the verses that follow, Samuel gives them words of comfort, which is our next heading.

Words of comfort

Verses 20 to 25 are full of grace.

Samuel tells the people that they don't need to be afraid.

He doesn't pretend they haven't sinned. **'You have done all this evil;'** he says, **'yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart.'** He isn't minimising what they've done.

But God is gracious and merciful, and committed to his people.

They don't need to despair.

When we become aware of our sin, we can get hung up on it. Perhaps we keep going back in our minds and replaying our failings over and over again. We keep re-living something we've done, beating ourselves up about it and making ourselves more and more miserable.

But God doesn't make us aware of our sin so that we will go about wallowing in guilt. He certainly doesn't do it so that we give up hope and turn away from him completely. He makes us aware of our sin so that we might turn back to him with renewed commitment.

That means turning away from our idols.

Verse 21.

Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless.

An idol is something other than God that we put our trust in to make life good, or to stop life being bad. Something like a human king, or money, or a special relationship, or a career, or our popularity with our friends, or whatever else it might be.

Idols have got to go, Samuel says, because they're useless. They can't ultimately deliver what we want them to deliver. They'll only ever let us down.

Rather, we should commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the God who will never let us down.

Verse 22.

For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own.

God has decided in eternity past to have a people of his own. And he will never go back on that decision. His whole reputation is wrapped up in it. He sent his Son to die on a cross to achieve it. And he will never reject those who have come to him in faith.

Awareness of our sin should drive us back to Jesus and to his cross. We are all unfaithful to God. Don't kid yourself that you're not. Our sin is great. But God's grace in Christ is greater still. He will never reject his people.

And if God refuses to reject his people, how can Samuel reject them?

So, in verse 23, he promises to pray for them.

As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.

We have someone far greater than Samuel praying for *us*. Jesus is at his Father's side in heaven, interceding for us, continually pleading the benefits of the cross on our behalf.

When we sin and mess up, he is our advocate at the Father's side.

And if we listen to him, he will teach us what is good and right, so that we might live the lives we were made for.

Conclusion

This is a watershed moment in the life of Israel. The people have a choice to make.

Verse 24.

But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil both you and your king will perish.

And we have the same choice.

We should consider what great things the Lord has done for us in Christ. The blessings he has lavished on us. The glorious future he has secured for us in a world made new. And we should fear him and serve him faithfully with all our heart.

But we must also hear the warning. When we become conscious of our sin, if we refuse to come to Christ, and refuse to turn from the evil we do, we can be assured of the judgement that will inevitably come.

Sin destroys our relationship with God. It brings under his condemnation. But in Christ that relationship is restored. And it is renewed daily, as we cling to his cross, turning from our sin and following him as our King.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please help us to see our sin and to grasp how repulsive it is to you, so that we might turn from it. Though our sin is great, we thank you that your grace is greater still. Please comfort us with the assurance of your forgiveness through faith in the cross of Jesus. And please help us to live in wholehearted commitment to you. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.