

**STUDIES IN SAMUEL No. 14** April 30, 2000 1 Sam. 12:1-25

**Text Comment**

- v.2 “my sons are here with you” Remember, it was the unworthiness of Samuel’s sons that was one of the reasons given for asking for a king. This is perhaps Samuel’s own wistful glance at what might have been. [Alter, *Com.*, 65]
- v.3 Remember, Samuel, in 8:8-18 has described how the people will be treated by their kings. Kings will “take...and take...and take.” Samuel did not take. “Take” is another of those key words or leitworts. The king will “take”; Samuel did not. And they have to reckon later with how things might have been had they stayed with the Lord and his judges.

Moses makes a very similar defense of his integrity in Num. 16:15.

Interestingly, different cultures have different metaphors for things. In the West justice should be “blind.” We represent justice a statute of a woman with scales in her hand and a blindfold covering her eyes. But in Hebrew thought, a judge who shuts his eyes is not one who is impartial, but one who refuses to see the truth of the matter and refuses to protect those who are in the right.

- v.5 Samuel is casting his entire speech in the form of a case made by a prosecuting attorney.
- v.6 What follows, through v. 15, is a resume of Israelite history, demonstrating how God had delivered his people whenever they turned to him in faith and repentance. You find such summaries all the time in the Bible, in the NT as well.
- v.7 “Righteous acts” is right, since the following recital of God’s acts includes both his discipline of his people and his deliverance of them.
- v.11 The “dismal and recurring pattern of apostasy – oppression – repentance – deliverance in the book of Judges is miniaturized here.” [Gordon, *Com.*, 128]
- v.12 The suggestion here is that the Ammonite threat was already in Israel’s mind when she asked for a king, a point not made clear until now.
- v.13 Elsewhere (10:24) Saul is chosen by the Lord. Here is the people’s choice. A more negative assessment of the situation. Both, of course, can be true, with the choice being made for different reasons by the Lord and the people. In any case it is clear both that the Lord acquiesced to a sinful request on the part of the people and that the ambiguity of Saul’s calling will remain a feature of the narrative throughout the account of Saul’s reign.

- v.15 VV. 14-15 are like the blessings/cursings section of a covenant. It is interesting that the NIV's "good" at the end of v. 14 does not occur in the text. It is a contextual rendering, supplying what is implied. There may be something ominous, however, in there being no specific mention of the blessing that would come from Israel and her king's obedience to God.
- v.17 The wheat was harvested in May/June (The agricultural basis for the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost) which was the early part of the dry season. Thunder and rain at that time of year would be unusual.
- v.18 Clearly, in the context, this "sign" is not only a vindication of Samuel's authority and divine calling, but the Lord's displeasure with Israel, as the next verse makes clear. That Israel speaks to Samuel of "your God" is an admission of her guilt.
- v.22 Israel has sinned, but there is still hope, provided that she remains faithful to the Lord and does not compound her sin of asking for a king with the practice of idolatry. As often before, for example, in Moses' intercession for Israel, God's election of his people is the basis for hope for the future.
- v.23 Samuel is not "retiring." He will be replaced by a king as the supreme ruler in Israel, but he will continue to perform the functions of that office that would later be known in Israel as "the prophet." In fact, we have here, in v. 23, the job description of both ministers of the Word in Israel: prophet and priest, from now on to be exercised separately from the offices of state.
- v.25 Even the "elect" cannot presume on the blessing of God if they are themselves unfaithful to him. Amos 3:2: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth. Therefore I will punish you for all your sins."

Now, in its context, chapter 12 continues the account of the transition from judges to kings in Israel. *Indeed, chapter 12 formally marks the end of the period of the Judges in Israel's history.* What is more, the chapter links the early failure of Saul to act against the Philistines to what is to come. As Phil Long of Covenant Seminary writes in his book, *The Art of Biblical History*, [218]:

"Samuel's tone in chapter 12 suggests that the experiment of kingship...must yet stand a test." And he suggests that that test is related to Saul's first and original charge, which was to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines.

It sets the question before us: will Saul prove a faithful king, will the people find in having a king the advantages they imagined they would have? Will Israel have taken a step forward by forsaking Samuel and entrusting themselves to a monarch? That is the question of chapter 12 and it is answered in the following chapters.

But the chapter finishes with a ringing call to faithfulness to the Lord. In fact that summons is given three times in the Chapter, indicating that if in Samuel's chief point (v.

14, vs. 20-21, v. 24) the people are summoned to it themselves, irrespective of what their king may do. And, taken together, the chapter's various points present us with the ambiguity in the Bible's viewpoint regarding the people of God and her human leadership.

1. It is clear that leadership is hugely significant to the church's spiritual life and prosperity. We will see this over and over again in Samuel/Kings/Chronicles. The kings lead Israel astray repeatedly; a few of them bring Israel back to the Lord. And so with prophets and priests. As the leadership goes, so goes Israel. That is the Bible's general rule. Rarely, if ever, will the church remain healthier than her leadership. The prophets, kings, priests, and elders lead and Israel follows.
2. There is a remnant always, however, that remains faithful even when the leadership is corrupt. Obadiah and the 7,000 in Ahab's day; Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna in the day of the Lord's birth. The Lord will not leave himself without a witness in his church even when its leadership is profoundly corrupt. We see this also throughout church history.
3. Sometimes the wickedness among the people has become so deep-seated, so fixed, that even godly leadership cannot overcome it. Josiah and Manasseh, after his repentance, are examples of this. There was so much downhill momentum that it was too late to reverse direction.

Now, in this case in Samuel we are speaking not only of the government of the nation but of the church, for the two were combined. We must think today, of course, about the government of the church only. The state is no longer combined with the church..

Let me briefly draw some lessons for us from 1 Samuel 12.

**1. The church's health lies primarily in her faithfulness to the Lord and his covenant, not in the form and structure of her government.**

Whether if in a judge or a king is not the key, but whether God's people are faithful. The change in form of government, Samuel is saying, will not change that fact. I am a Presbyterian by conviction in the sense that I feel that the broad outlines of Presbyterian church government are biblical. I do think, to be sure, that those broad outlines leave an immense amount unsaid and unstructured and any number of different arrangements of detail could be defended in consistency with general principles. For example, Francis Turretin, the Swiss Reformed or Presbyterian theologian of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, held that there would be nothing unbiblical in having over the church as a whole – what we would call the General Assembly – a President with significant powers, so long as his office and those powers were exercised at the pleasure and subject to review and control by the church's eldership. Most American Presbyterians would have nothing of that, but it is certainly biblical in the sense that one could find a precedent for it in biblical history, in the king or high priest or apostle, for example. In the OT, elders were organized in ascending ranks of authority, over tens and over hundreds and over thousands. In American Presbyterianism it has been a shibboleth to keep church government egalitarian and democratic. Every elder has the same authority as ever other elder. That is a key

point for American Presbyterians. Well, I wouldn't say that our American Presbyterian system is unbiblical, but I certainly wouldn't say that it is the only possible version of church government of which that could be said!

But what the Bible teaches us and church history confirms a thousand times over is that no structure of government will protect a church from unfaithful men and unfaithful people. God himself set up prophets, priests, kings, and elders, and over time those officers took Israel straight to hell.

I suppose any thoughtful Christian, who loves his soul and the souls of his children, would say, as I would say, that, no matter that he is a Presbyterian by conviction, he would rather be ruled by an Episcopalian bishop like J.C. Ryle or Edward Bickersteth or Reginald Heber – the missionary bishop of Calcutta and author of the hymns “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “The Son of God goes forth to War” – than by a session or Presbytery or General Assembly of mediating or downright unbelieving and gutless Presbyterians, and church history has shown us plenty of those. We would rather be in a church pastored by Anglican Henry Lyte or Baptist Charles Spurgeon than one pastored by a great many who now occupy Presbyterian pulpits but who have no reverence for the Word of God, no firm faith in the gospel of Christ, and whose sole interest seems to be to keep current with the latest fads in trendy religious circles. If the choice is between Charles Wesley and an unfaithful Presbyterian, let us all be Methodists. If the choice is between Luther or Jacob Spener and an unfaithful Presbyterian, let us all be Lutherans. We don't forbear to read J.I. Packer because he is an Anglican, or John Piper, because he is a Baptist.

The fact is, Presbyterian church government, *as a system*, hasn't saved the Presbyterians from unbelief and idolatry throughout the history of the Presbyterian Church. A striking example is furnished in the history of English Presbyterians in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were the largest party represented at the Westminster Assembly. The Westminster Confession of Faith was a Presbyterian document. A few years later they suffered persecution when Charles II was restored to the throne and Presbyterian pastors were ejected from their pastorates. And a generation later there was hardly any believing Presbyterianism left in England and there has been hardly any ever since. Think of it, the Presbyterians nearly ruled England in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Now, I'm not sure you could find 10 evangelical Presbyterian churches in England and what there are, are all tiny. The Scottish church was and remained a Presbyterian church, but through most of its history it has been a church of nominal Christians and unfaithful ministers. Most of the real spiritual life in Scotland over the last 300 years has lived *outside of the Church of Scotland!*

And, of course, in our own land, the name Presbyterian is now a burden to bear for evangelicals like ourselves. To be a Presbyterian means, in general, to favor abortion, to teach that all roads lead to God, to be enthusiastic about trendy new diversions in theology – goddess theology, gay theology, feminist theology, and the like – and to be intolerant of virtually no one except those who maintain the historic doctrine of the Christian, not to say Presbyterian, Church.

Perhaps our only comfort is that no other form of church government, as a system of church government, has protected orthodoxy and spiritual fidelity any better over time. An evangelical Methodist could say the same thing about his Methodism, an evangelical Lutheran about his Lutheranism, an evangelical Baptist about his Independency, and so on.

No, our hope lies not in our system, our structure, but our faithfulness to God, his word, his covenant, pure and simple. The Judges didn't keep Israel pure and the kings would not either, as history would prove. *And so the chapter ends not with an appeal to keep the form of government pure, but to remain faithful to God as his people.*

## **2. Second, all of us must live out this faithfulness to God *in medias res*, in the middle of things.**

You never get to start absolutely over from the beginning in the Christian life. You have to take up where you are, with the situation as it exists. In v. 19 the people cry out for forgiveness with God and that God would spare them the consequences of their evil choices. They are in fact so aware of their guilt that they ask Samuel to make these prayers for them, feeling as if, having been so foolish, they had no standing to make requests of God. But, fact is, there was no going back. They couldn't take it all back and accept Samuel's sons as their next Judges. The Lord had confirmed Saul their king, even if the request that led to Saul's investiture had been sinful on their part. In any case, it isn't clear that having Samuel's sons would have been any better. A Jewish targum (commentary) on 12:2 adds the additional information that, by this time, the sons were reformed. But that is probably wishful thinking long after the fact, not history.

And so, on they went into a situation that was muddy and not clear. And so must we. We carry with ourselves many of the accumulated sins of our church fathers, many of their bad habits. We have, ourselves, the burden of situations that should have been dealt with long ago but were not and cannot now be fixed. In a hundred ways that is so. You have churches with elders who never should have been elders, but they are and have been for years. Righting that ship is no easy business. Churches have ministers who should never have been brought into the ministry, but they have, and getting them out, even if it were possible, and in many cases it is not, would be an extraordinarily destructive process, leaving the peace and the unity of the church in tatters.

What is there to do but move on in faithfulness to the Lord as best one can in any situation. That is the story of the faithful in the Bible and their story ever since.

Let me give you an example, something, I think, of a paradigm for life in the church and for the good and the bad that is always mixed together in the government of the church.

You remember the name "Marcion." Marcion was an early Christian heretic, famous for his chopping up the Bible, his denial that the God of the OT was the father of Jesus Christ, his anti-Jewish/OT polemic, the OT not fit reading for a Christian, and so on. But when Marcion first arrived in Rome, in A.D. 140, he was given a friendly welcome.

Perhaps folk hadn't heard much of his views and, in any case, Marcion was a very wealthy man and upon his arrival in Rome he gave a huge donation to the church. Tertullian puts it at 200,000 sesterces. A new book on the Greco-Roman world calculates that sum as equivalent to about \$8 million today. The church was, at that time, purchasing land on the outskirts of the city for its burial grounds and real estate in the capital was terribly expensive. So perhaps they took the gift and didn't ask too many questions. They should have taken greater care; after all, Marcion's teachings were known and could have been investigated, if only anyone had cared to do so. But, later, when it became unavoidably obvious that Marcion was a heretic, and, worse, was convincing others to embrace his heresy, the church was forced to act.

When the church leadership finally looked into Marcion's teaching it was clear that he must either repent or be excommunicated. But Marcion was far from repentance. But what could the church leaders do? They had taken the \$8 million and already spent it. Well, they did the only thing they felt they could do. They took up an offering, excommunicated Marcion, and with his excommunication, handed him back all 200,000 sesterces! They had made a grave mistake; they fixed it as best they could.

Problem was, by this time, Marcion's teaching was well and truly established, even in Rome itself. And, well-funded as he was, he was able in the years that followed to establish many more churches of his type in the Roman world. He planted churches, Tertullian said, "as wasps make nests." [Cited in W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 215] The church's government got it partly right at the end, but their early failure did incalculable damage and there was no going back and fixing that! How many times has *this* happened in the church's life. Errors on the part of the church's leadership that perpetuate sin and weakness, that cannot be fully undone even when they are acknowledged and repented of.

[Another example: we American Presbyterians are, by and large, a middle class church. It stems in large part from our insistence on an educated ministry. There were more Presbyterians in the US at the end of the Revolution than adherents of any other denomination. But that soon changed and largely because of the Presbyterian commitment to ministerial education. A man would be sent back to Europe for theological training and by the time he arrived home there would be three Baptist churches in his home town! And so it continued. We never had as many pastors as churches, never nearly as many as we needed. And our standards made it virtually impossible to penetrate certain segments of society. There are few Hispanic Presbyterian churches, for example. And there will be few more if we insist that a man have four years of college and three of seminary before he can pastor a church. Too few can afford to do that in many Hispanic communities; too few have the educational culture to do that. But, do we believe that all Hispanics should be Baptists or Methodists or Pentecostals? We have structural problems in the Presbyterian world that will be very difficult to fix. Our church law requires the meeting of standards that virtually guarantee that we will not penetrate large segments of the society. It will be no easy thing to fix that! It is our history, our spiritual culture. It is deeply embedded in the way we think. And every church has such problems.]

There are many things in life that one wishes one could go back and do again. But it is impossible. Nor is it necessary in the world of God's grace. So Samuel doesn't cancel Saul's coronation and suggest that everyone go back to chapter 8 and begin again. He says simply, "now you will have a king. Be faithful to God. If you are not, no king will help you and, by implication, if you are, no king can really harm you either.

Much attention as we may rightly place on church government from time to time, it is important to remember, that it is hardly the chief thing contributing to the welfare of Christian people. Their faithfulness to God – that is what counts. That is *always* what counts. Let ministers, elders, and people, all hear and believe!